

English Language Learning and Development of Teen Poetry in Contemporary Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

It is a known fact that English Language is Nigeria's official language. As such, it is the language of administration, banking, commerce, education, inter-cultural interaction and a host of other sectors. It is strong in education in that it is the language of teaching and learning at all levels of education, including the secondary school (level) where we have the bulk of teenagers. In most schools in the country, their ability to express themselves in poetic form has developed poetry writing in Nigeria to a level that is fast becoming comparable to that of experienced adult poets. Adopting the conventional literary analysis method, the paper examines several poems in *Beyond Limits* and discovers that the teen poets in Nigeria have developed appreciably contemporary themes of poverty, environmental degradation, man's inhumanity to man, patriotism, hopelessness as well as myriad of others which they handle with cheering dexterity. The poems are rich in commendable musicality, impressive symbolisms, appropriate figures of speech as well as good diction. Going by the depth of richness of the themes as well as poetic and linguistic devices, the paper concludes that some contemporary Nigerian teen students have adequately learnt the English Language and have hitherto used it for the development of teenage poetry in contemporary Nigeria.

Key words: Language Teaching and Learning, Poetry, Teenagers

1. INTRODUCTION

The multi-lingual and multi-ethnic stratifications of Nigeria favor the adoption of English as the official language and is employed as inter- / intra- national language in the country. According to Olagbaju (2014), English language is an important core subject in the school curriculum and a channel of international acceptability to Nigerians. Olusoji (2012) emphasizes the importance of English in Senior Secondary School curriculum, pointing out that English Language plays a strategic central role in the school system because it is the medium of instruction for almost all the school subjects (with the exception of French and indigenous languages) from the primary school to the university level. The study of the English Language entails, among others, the learning of phonology, vocabulary, grammar and the four skills of language (listening, speaking, reading and writing). The significant role of English Language in the linguistic, educational, socio-economic and cultural settings of Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. In the field of education in particular, English Language

plays a dominant role. As the language of education and by extension a subject in the school curriculum, the success or failure of formal education, to a large extent, depends on the level of competence of learners in English Language in schools. Fortunately, in contemporary time, available evidence in the way students use English, especially in poetry writing, shows that their English Language competence has tremendously improved.

The English Language Education curriculum comprises two closely related subjects: English Language and Literature-in-English. English Language is the core subject for students from primary to senior secondary level (i.e. P1 – SS3) while Literature-in-English is an elective subject for students at the senior secondary level (i.e. SS1 – SS3). English Language learning sets out to test the different skills of communication in English, using mediums of speech and writing with the aims/objectives to measure the extent to which the teaching has been realized in candidates' secondary school career. Literature is considered crucial as it is a vehicle through which sensitive expressions are given to the inner-most thought and feelings of individuals as well as the community. It is a liberal art that checks societal excesses. It expresses hope, doubts, fears, conflicts and problems that human beings experience in their everyday life. It helps the students to rise above their personal/individual cultural limitations and at the same time imbues them with insight and richer experiences from the various texts they read (Afangideh, 2009; Smith, 2010).

Poetry is one of the genres of literature. Through the use of distinct styles and rhythms, literary expressions are given intensity. Its quality, beauty and intensity of emotion are regarded as characteristics of poems. Benton (2000) defines poetry as the concrete and artistic expression of the human mind with emotional and rhythmical language. Ihiegbunam (2006) states that a well-crafted phrase or two in poetry can help students see an expression in entirely new ways which can help them to gain insight that has evaded them many times and gain new understanding and strength. Smith (2010) re-echoes the words of Wordsworth that poetry is an imaginative expression of strong feelings usually rhythmical and spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion recollected in tranquility. It is an art of employing words in such a way as to produce an illusion of imaginations and the art of doing by means of words. Poems can be songs. They can be narrative, religious or humorous in content. The over-riding idea that cuts across them is that they are mostly didactic. Poetry makes students share the imaginative life style in a great master piece so that their non-imaginative lives can be quickened. It teaches complexities of life, death and suffering which give profound joy and transform people through the provision of its entertainment (Fakeye and Temitayo, 2013).

The definitions examined above show that Literature-in-English and the English language are tools in the hand of each other. In other words, a close look at literature and language shows that the two are closely related. This close relationship is obvious because from all indications, literature presupposes language. It is

inconceivable to discuss literature without reference to language. While language is a tool through which literature establishes its existence, literature serves as a tool through which language propagates itself. The relationship between language and literature is an interdependent one; literature does not and cannot exist independent of language because language is the conveyor of literature. An understanding of the nature and structure of language would enable us to appreciate a literary work better because language and thoughts are the raw materials of literature.

2. ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

English language learning is essential in secondary schools to help students communicate effectively and persuasively in spoken and written English. All English programmes should reflect the following characteristics of language learning which apply to all levels of the curriculum:

- a. Language is used to express identity.
- b. It is essential for living in society.
- c. Language development is fostered by an environment which encourages creativity, experimentation and which provides challenges and high expectations for students.
- d. Language learning is dynamic and progressive and requires interaction and active participation.
- e. Language is best developed when students understand and control the learning processes.

One of the functions of poetry is to help us make sense of ourselves in the world. It follows that it should be an integral part of the education of teenagers who have such difficulty in making sense for themselves and the society in which they live in. The teaching of poetry develops communicative skills while students are still young and, hence, flexible. Such flexibility, including openness to the possibility of discovering something new, is of primary importance to both the reader and writer of poetry. Since it is a reflection of the world and humanity, poetry should be taught as a discipline in its own right, as likely as history, geography or biology to offer a system of revelation. One of the effects of poetry is to change how we look at the world. It metamorphoses readers into different beings. This new understanding of ourselves and our environment has an influence on what we contribute to the world. In addition to better understanding of ourselves, an exposure to the poetry of other cultures leads to a better understanding of those cultures. According to the Common Core State Standards Initiative (2010), co-authored by the Council of Chiefs of State School Officers [CCSSO] and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center], students should be able to apply reading skills to an array of texts from various time periods and cultures. Included in this range of literary texts are poetry genres such as narrative, lyrical and free verse poems, in addition to sonnets, odes, ballads and epics. The reading and language arts proficiencies required by the Common Core Standards Initiative (2010) are substantial, but poetry is uniquely suited for teaching students how to meet these expectations. In general, for

any level of students, reading and writing poetry can generate certain attitudes and understanding that are conducive to academic success, a sense of immediate achievement, the willingness to experiment and play with language, the comprehension of inherent connections between reading and writing as well as understanding of the importance of punctuation and word choice (Routman, 2001). In addition, common structural components of poetry such as rhyme and alliteration, are very useful for improving phonemic and sound awareness. As Rasinski and Padak (2008) contend, “the rhythmical nature of [some] poems and rhymes makes them easy to learn to read and fun to read again and again, which is a main method for developing basic reading fluency in children” (p. 582-3). And furthermore, poems often offer students a less-confusing, straightforward context for the practice of phonics, phonemic awareness, and language development skills by way of subject matter that appeals to their academic and personal interests (Stickling, Parson, & Olsen, 2011). Poetry, by way of its diversity of offerings, furnishes educators with texts that can help develop state-mandated reading and writing skills requirements.

Another important reason why poetry should be taught concerns the development of student’s voice and identity. Alexander and Larkin (1994) assert that reading, writing, and sharing poetry in the classroom can help students to develop their abilities and use their voices and writing to express their intimate feelings and ideas on varied topics. Poetry also provides opportunities for self-reflection and the development of a sense of social and personal identity. Students’ awareness of their identities connects them to other groups by emphasizing the shared aspects of the human experience, whether within the classroom, the neighborhood or the society in general. Along similar lines, Benton (1990) discusses the indispensable role that poetry plays in the language of a culture, arguing that poems create and reinforce social identity in exceptional ways, especially in acting as main fonts for narrative expression. Through narrative expressions, stories are told about the human experience. “The narrative imagination is our common human property; it is the way we make sense of experience” (p. 30). Benton further argues that poetry has the special ability to represent the common truth of our lives in precise ways. Poetry speaks to us about what it means to be human and where our individual identities fit within our shared experiences. In other words, “[p]oetry is unique[ly] able to embody the general within the particular, to diagnose the indwelling value within the external features” (p. 28).

Benton’s argument about the importance of poetry in the development of voice and identity is reminiscent of both Rosenblatt’s (1998) claims regarding textual analysis and Vygotsky’s (1978) ideas about the ways in which we communicate in general. Rosenblatt, in discussing the reader’s engagement with the text and its meaning, describes the idiosyncratic elements such as social, cultural, and educational histories that individuals carry with them when reading a text (1998). In turn, these shared and unique experiences can bring readers to agreement or disagreement concerning “evocation” (p. 887), as each person’s point of view affects how he or she makes meaning. Of great importance is that it is through engagement that readers connect to the author and text and construct an understanding of the text that is their own (Rosenblatt, 1998). Poetry is a

powerful reflection of diversity, teaching us to value the freedom to praise and criticize. One poet describes it as a powerful antidote against demons of power. Poetry encourages one not to impose authoritative interpretations but to develop individual responses, to be non-prescriptive and non-didactic. The inclination towards the non-prescriptive and the non-didactic fosters the values and attitudes which reinforce peaceful coexistence.

The teaching of poetry obviously has other positive effects. It is a well known fact that poetry is meant to be enjoyed. There is the need to create a lively atmosphere while teaching it. For instance, there should be active participation of the students in the lesson like recitation and dramatization. The teacher should make the students understand that poetry involves language teaching methods in teaching particular poems in order to make the lesson real. Such methods should involve the following:

Rhythm: This is a flow of some words or phrases in verse or prose determined by various relations of long and short syllables. This can be effectively used for teaching sounds in English.

Choral Reading: The teacher guides the students to read poems together in the class either in rows or in pairs. This helps the students to develop the skill of reading aloud.

Dramatization and Miming: This is when the students are made to demonstrate the roles of the character in the poem. This helps to develop the speaking skills of students.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A modern approach to language learning is based on moves around theories, two among which are behaviorist and cognitive theories of language. Both theories try to provide an explanation to language learning and present different answers. Behaviorists consider language learning as a process of conditioning and the expected goal in learning is achieved by a series of stimuli and responses. According to behaviorists, learning takes place due to the relationship between stimulus and learners' responses to it. The learner, as a result of this conditioning, will be able to give the expected response and then it can be said that he has learned. Thus, practicing the lesson should be an important activity of the language learner. Behaviorists believe that these responses of the learners to the stimulus are automatic and not a result of any deliberate thought. During 1930s and 1940s, linguists were influenced by Behaviorism and which resulted in the publication of teaching materials based on behaviorist theory.

On the other hand, Cognitive theorists say that each learner has a cognitive structure into which any new learning is absorbed. Cognitive theory is also called 'mentalistic' because all cognitive interpretation of language learning rests upon the neuropsychological base of thought. Cognitive theoreticians consider language learning as a 'meaningful process'. Cognitive theory validates Experiential Language Learning because the learner will understand the new input and connect it with previous inputs or experiences.

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted the conventional literary analysis method. Several poems in *Beyond Limits* were studied to identify and bring out their linguistic and literary features useful in discussing the development of teen poetry in Nigeria.

5. DEVELOPMENT OF NIGERIAN TEEN POETRY

Hyginus Ekwuazi (2013) also recalls Wordsworth's perception of poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings". The question that one may apt to ask is whether teenagers have "powerful feelings" or not. To this, one may also apt to answer that children and teenagers imitate the adults in all ways, one of which is expression in verse form. In Nigeria, there are great poets (living and non-living) such as Wole Soyinka, Christopher Okigbo, Niyi Osundare, Mamman Vatsa, Bayo Adebowale, Sola Babatunde, Olu Obafemi, Gbemisola Adeoti, and a host of others. These poets belong to the 'adult' category and have expressed their feelings and perceptions about life in varied degrees and dimensions that qualify them as established poets. They have their audiences and readership. The works of Bayo Adebowale and Gbemisola Adeoti are included in the reading list for the Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination. So also are the following African Poems: *Vanity, Ambush, Piano and Drums, The Dinning Table, The Panic of Growing Older, The Anvil and the Hamman* respectively by Birago Drop, Gbemisola Adeoti, Gabriel Okara, Gbanabam Hallowell, Lenrie Peter and Kofi Awooner. There are also Non-African Poems such as *Crossing the Bar, The Pulley, The School Boy, The Proud King, Birches, Shall I compare thee to a Summer's Day?* respectively by Alfred Tennyson, George Herbert, William Blake, William Morris, Robert Frost Birches and William Shakespeare. This implies that teenagers which form the bulk of students (for which the SSSCE is meant) are exposed to adult poetry over the years and are learning from it. This is in the line with the behaviorist standpoint of language learning which is to the effect that what students learn becomes part and parcel of them.

Going by the relatively good number of African and Non-African adult poets vis-à-vis richness of their profound poetic quality, it can be safely said that adult Nigerian poetry in English is already developed. However, for increasing non-stop development and success of any venture, succession is very important. Succession can only be possible if the young generation is involved in what the old generation is doing. This creates continuity. Besides, each generation has its own peculiarities, attributes and audiences. This is why we can talk of children poetry, teen poetry and adult poetry. As earlier affirmed, adult poetry is already developed. What then is the status of teen poetry in English in Nigeria? This is addressed in the paragraphs that follow.

Boulton Marjorie (1982) explicitly treats poetry in his **The Anatomy of Poetry** by discussing the physical form of poetry; the rhythm, the phonetic forms of poetry such as rhyme, onomatopoeia, internal patterns, intonation forms, the use of repetition to achieve intellectual magical effects, main types of poetry

(epic, mock epic, ballad, didactic poetry, satire, epistle, ode, lyric, epigram, verse dialogue) figures of speech, imageries and logicity. While Boulton is not the only authority on English poetry, it is of good reliance to indicate that any poem that satisfies most of the features of poetry above can be seen as developed poetry. It is on this note that it is hereby being asserted that teen poetry (as contained in *Beyond Limits*) is already a developed form of poetry in English in Nigeria due to the avalanche of at least eight positive attributes of teen poetry as explicated in the paragraphs that follow.

Firstly, teen poetry in English has become developed in Nigeria due to the fact that the poems explore contemporary themes as obtainable in adult poetry. For instance, *What a Monster You Are* (p.75) by Etikivu Mary explores the themes of destruction, homelessness, hopelessness, national calamity, hunger and sadness that pervade Nigeria of today as a result of the ravaging effect of flood which in itself is a product of carelessness on the part of the government and the governed. *Appreciation* (p 241) celebrates the theme of parental love while *My Love and Your Love* (p. 273), both by Salawudeen Dunmade, celebrate the theme of love (in its general sense). The theme of corruption is articulated in *Our Greedy Leaders* (p. 192) by Maundi Fame Gani. Education is the theme celebrated by Abdulbasir Mu'azu in *Education* (p.152) Avarice and the negative effects of wrong use of wealth are the focus of *Money* by Abdulrahim Ahmad Sokoto (p.126) and Aliyu Abdullahi (p. 146). Loneliness as a theme is the focus of *death* (p. 138) by Aliyu Abubakar Gume. Patriotism and love for one's fatherland are the preoccupation of Obadiah Emo in *Nigeria* (p. 206) while *Human Trafficking* (p.203), as the title suggests, focuses on the central issue of human trafficking which the poet condemns unequivocally.

Secondly and closely linked to the above is the issue of profound commitment to the Nigerian society by teen poets. The themes which we have highlighted above lend credence to this claim. It shows that though the poets are teenagers, they have the mind, heart and commendable commitment to the society like any other experienced adult poets. It also shows that the teen poets have started to be the voice of the voiceless as evident in their subtle attack (with their pen) on the unpatriotic acts of some members of the society which in itself is an eloquent testimony to the dictum that pen is mightier than the sword.

Thirdly the mastery of all the features of poetry including those established by Boulton (1982) is aptly demonstrated by the teen poets; a situation which implies that teen poetry is developed in Nigeria. First among the features of poetry is the physical phonic realization of rhyme as evident in several poems, one of which is "Friends" (p. 127) by Zahrau Musa Danladi which is quoted below:

We are always together

Playing, dancing, singing together

No matter the weather

We learn from each other,

Apart from rhyme, there is the poetic use of repetition as evident in “Life” (p. 123) by Abdul-Mufa’al Umar:

Life is a pregnancy

...

Life is sorrow full of horror

Life is nothing

...

Life is about schooling

Life is all about marriage

Life is a game.

The repetition of life above heightens the theme of life which the poem discusses. If not repeated, the understanding of life might have not been as clear as it is perceived by the readers.

Fourthly, Nigerian teen poetry is already developed as evident in its being replete with figures of speech which make the poems very matured as full fledged developed poems. Such figures of speech include similes, metaphors and personification. In *Home* (p. 124) by Muhammad Galadina, we have:

Home is where your tears are dried up (Metaphor)

...

Where you are handled like egg



Similes

...

Like a pot deftly moulded

In *Death* (p. 138) by Aliyu Gumel, there is “Death is a bitter thing” (Metaphor). So also in *Money* (p. 164), there are two metaphors in the first stanza:

Money is fountain of goodness

Money is the fuel in the five of evil

The Nigeria teen poetry has developed as evident in the poetic use of personification by the poets. For instance, in *Wealth* (p. 125), Aminu Maitama talks of wealth as shown below where ‘wealth’ is deified through personification:

The world seems to be your servant

...

The male love you

The female love you

...

You give people strength in life

You cause happiness to people

You cause sadness to people.

In establishing the good level of development of Nigerian teen poetry in English, mention should be made of the poetic use of rhetorical questions as well as exclamations. Examples are in *Money* (p. 146):

Not everyone will be rich! (exclamatory sentences)

If everyone is rich

} Rhetorical question

Who will cultivate the farm?

Another thing that shows the commendable development of teen poetry in Nigeria is the profound diction. The words are carefully chosen with each word matching the idea, concept or issue being expressed in verse form. For instance, in describing “leadership” (p. 136) Usman Haruna, chooses his word with great dexterity to show that a leader must be just, tolerant, courageous and honest. Death is described in *Death* (p. 129) by Bahir Maiwada as “the end of life” where “one goes alone” and “sleeps alone” with “neither bed nor pillow”. Suffice to say that Nigerian teen poets’ diction is commendably appropriate.

Closely linked with good diction is juxtaposition of unlike terms and or things to succinctly bring out their differences in a poetic manner as evident in *Death* (p. 136) by Aliyu Gumel:

If paradise, good deeds were done

If hell, bad deeds were done

Paradise is the place of happiness

And hell is the place of sadness

In the four lines above, “paradise” is juxtaposed with “hell”, “good” with “bad” and “happiness” with “sadness”, all in a beautiful attempt to place two options before the readers for them to make a wise choice that they will not regret.

In addition, symbolism is an ingredient of condensed language which poetry uses. In Nigerian teen poetry, there is the regular use of symbolism to embellish the thoughts and feelings of the poet in expressions that only the wise and intelligent will discern. Such symbolism includes:

“A crown of power” (p. 136) symbolizing authority

“Money, a two edge sword” (p.81) symbolizing good/happiness, bad and sadness.

It is part of the attributes of developed poetry that one can talk of the poetic use of paradox which is evident in the poem, *Wealth* (p. 125), when Aminu Maitana writes that:

You are not everything

But you control many things

Lastly, teen poetry has developed appreciably in Nigeria as evident in the preponderance of high sounding elevated English expressions which depict that the teenager must have had profound learning and acquisition of English Language and simultaneous exposure to varied poetic works which made them to attain a good level of expressional ability in English language which in turn makes them to use elevated diction that adds to the overall good quality poetry that is commendable. Examples of elevated ornate expressions include:

“Rivulet of charity” (p.124)

“Homes turn tributaries” (p.75)

“Black vicious liquid (p.79)

6. CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, we have seen the relationship between English language learning and development of teen poetry in contemporary Nigeria from the perspective of the relevance of the behaviorist and cognitive theories of language acquisition and learning. The teenagers who form the bulk of Secondary School Students

have demonstrated their good understanding of English language and English literary styles in the composition of various poems which form part of *Beyond Limits*. The teenagers are from different parts of the country and this confirms the national spread of the teen poets. Though they are budding poets, their own form of poetry (teen poetry) seems to have become developed having satisfied poetic features asserted by Boulton (1982). The poems constitute a unique class of the genre of literature and have good potentials to join adult Nigerian poems in due course. This vibrant succession potential is made possible by the development of teen poetry which is also made possible by adequate English Language Learning at the Secondary School Level.

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