

# USING LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH AS A TOOL IN ENHANCING SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS' ENGLISH VOCABULARY KNOWLEDGE

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**Abstract:** One of the most dreaded subjects in the Nigerian public secondary schools is English language. This is because over the years, several students' ambitions have been truncated by their poor performance in the subject yet the role that English language must play in Nigeria is a very great one: as the lingua franca, language of trade and commerce, language of instruction in schools and language of politics. The language has to be learnt and used for effective communication in these spheres. It is discovered that in spite of several good textbooks available for use in Nigerian secondary schools, the dismal performances of students in this subject is as a recurring decimal. Students have challenges with different aspects of English language and find it difficult to use the four basic languages skills in the right manner. This paper looks at English vocabulary knowledge specifically as a major factor for language skills development and how Literature-in-English can revamp the fallen standard of English usage to enhance the performance of students' vocabulary knowledge. Among others, the researcher recommends that literature-in-English is taught with more seriousness in secondary schools.

**Keywords:** Literature-in-English, Vocabulary Knowledge, Lingua franca, Language skills.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

A language is a medium through which an idea, thought, opinion or viewpoint is expressed while Literature is an idea, thought, opinion or viewpoint that is expressed by language. A language is comprised of sounds, symbols, words and sentences. It is the aggregate of expression in any form--written or spoken. A language is also the medium through which literature is constituted and literature, as Brumfit and Carter (1986) claim, is an ally of language.

In Nigeria, English language occupies the position of the second language, lingua franca and language of instruction. The language is widely recognized and accepted as an important tool of commerce, science, government, social interaction among others. Obanya (1982) points out that English plays a unifying role in Nigeria because it is the only language common to Nigerians from diverse linguistics, social, cultural, religious and geographical backgrounds. Not being the first language of Nigerians, English language learners have to consciously learn to be proficient in the four basic skills of the language. . A student that is unable to communicate properly in English will definitely perform poorly in English language and virtually all other subjects.

Vocabulary is a central tool to language skill acquisition and usage. It is particularly so as without sufficient vocabulary, it is impossible the learner to understand other people or even express his/her own ideas. Thus, an extensive vocabulary is seen to aid expression and communication. Regardless of the degree of the learners' competency in grammar and pronunciation; one cannot have effective communication without sufficient vocabulary knowledge. As Wilkins (1972) asserted, without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed. Similarly, Folse (2003) points out that without syntax, meaning is hindered; but without vocabulary, meaning is impossible. Roche and Harrinton (2013) opined that the greater the learner's vocabulary knowledge, the less cognitive demands are placed on a learner.

There have been several studies establishing a link between vocabulary knowledge and the four language skills (Manzo, Manzo and Thomas, 2006; Qian, 2002; Chang, 2007; Wesche and Paribakht, 2000; Hinkel, 2004). Chung (2012) reported that vocabulary plays a crucial role in closing English as a foreign language literacy achievement gap. Ellis (1997) suggested that learning a large vocabulary is central to successful language learning and a drive of the learning of other aspects of language. Findings have established that vocabulary contributes to students' writing skills (Yonek, 2008; Scott 2004). Lack of adequate vocabulary which leads to strained expression in writing is a challenge that students face in learning L2 writing skills (Ouma, 2005). In addition, Rabab'ah (2003) explains that students often lack adequate vocabulary when engaged in L2 writing. As a result, they find it challenging to express their ideas freely and accurately in L2 writing.

From the views of researchers above, it can be concluded that vocabulary knowledge is a vital tool to learning the basic language skills; vocabulary knowledge helps students to master English for their purposes as well as enables them to express their creativity. The knowledge of words does not just involve knowing the meaning of words, but applying them in the right contexts. Considering this, it is not impossible that apart from many other factors affecting the performance of learners in English language, a very significant challenge is that learners neither have enough vocabulary knowledge nor do they apply the knowledge of vocabulary they have in the right context. Hence their dismal performances in various internal and external examinations conducted in English. To correct this wrong, it is necessary to look at how vocabulary knowledge of students can be enhanced. This paper suggests using literature in English as a tool in enhancing secondary school learners English vocabulary knowledge.

## 2. LITERATURE AS A TOOL IN AN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

According to De Naplis (2002) in Fakeye and Adegbile (2014), Literature-in-English is a key school subject which refers also to the study of the arts such as drama, prose and poetry referred to as the genres of literature that authors create, so as to improve their skills in English language. Literature is an indispensable tool in language learning. Literature and language are very closely related such that without language, there is no literature. Tanvir (2010) stated that language has an important bearing on literature just as Omowoyela (1992) concluded that literature is rather inconceivable unless it is discussed under the context of language. Even with the fact that language is very much needed for literature to exist; literature is also an important embodiment of the language in which it is presented. According to Carter and Long (1991), literature supplies many linguistic opportunities to the language learner and allows the teacher to design activities that are based on material capable of stimulating greater interest and involvement than many other non-literary informative texts.

One major importance of literature is that it promotes language acquisition. Williams (1990:225) while researching on the relationship between language acquisition and literature in Nwodo (2011) observes that:

‘Since literature organizes language in the most exemplary fashion, the second language learner must be aware of the importance of applying the language of literature as a model for his own use. The teaching of literature has the practical value of enabling the student to learn about the second language as well as use it.’

According to Labo-Popoola (2010), Literature-in-English and English language are twin subjects which if taught together enhance understanding of other subjects and would also widen the scope of reasoning of students in their world view. In Nigeria, it is compulsory for students at the primary and junior secondary levels to offer literature as a subject. To show how intertwined literature and English language are, literature is not separated from English language in the curriculum of primary and junior secondary school education but taught as just one subject (English studies) in these earlier stages of education. Though according to Labo-Popoola (2010), this practice is faced with challenges of teachers having to balance the time allocation for the two aspects since no specific period is allocated to Literature in English on the time table and teachers not giving enough attention to literature aspect of the subjects as many do not even know the rationale for merging the two subjects. At the senior secondary school levels however, English language and literature are taught as different subjects and with literature being an elective subject, it is possible for a student to offer English language without taking literature. This, to some extent, has made literature to be taught without much focus on making students proficient in English language. The responsibility of ensuring students' proficiency seems to be left to English language teachers alone at this stage. This neglect results in some students performing well in literature but poorly in English language regardless of the relationship between the two subjects.

Literature came into existence as a need by people to express themselves in different forms-- be it oral or written. To be able to write therefore, knowing words and their meanings is important. Whatever is written will likely be read; giving room for increase in vocabulary knowledge and better performance in both the reading and writing skills. Just as Labo-Popoola (2010) asserts, literature improves reading skills and the horizon of the reader in terms of vocabulary and usage which invariably promotes thoughts. According to Adonis (1974) cited in Abubakar and Kaigama (2014), realization in language abilities such as speaking, writing, listening and reading largely depends on the extent of skilled and proficient teaching of literature. As Obediat (1997) in Hismanoglu (2005) states, literature helps students acquire a native-like competence in English, express their ideas in good English, learn the features of modern English, learn how the English linguistic system is used for communication, see how idiomatic expressions are used, speak clearly, precisely, and concisely, and become more proficient in English, as well as become creative, critical, and analytical learners.

Another benefit derived from the study of literature is that literature reflects the culture of people and peoples' language is embedded in their culture. As learners are exposed to literature, they are encouraged to appreciate and know about their culture and those of other people. The learners' interest in various languages is also aroused. Learners see the need to pay close attention to words that are peculiar to various cultures. English as second language users are exposed to various new English words, meaning of the words and the way those words are used in context when they read books written in English language. Their knowledge in turn makes them capable of using similar words in their day-to-day communication like in their writings, speeches etc. Just as Ur (1991) opined, literature is enjoyable to read, provides examples of different styles of writing while also being a basis for vocabulary expansion.

### **Vocabulary Knowledge:**

Vocabulary can be defined as the knowledge of words and word meanings. It could also be seen as the number of words an individual uses and understands. A student relies on the right vocabulary to use in word construction and constructing his/her thought. According to Farrat (2002), vocabulary knowledge is all about words--the words in a language or a special set of words one is trying to learn. For Stahl (2005), vocabulary knowledge is knowledge; the knowledge of a word not only implies a definition, but also implies how the word fits into the world. Ogungbile (2002) has defined vocabulary knowledge as an account of the words of a language that one knows and can use to communicate at a particular time.

There are four components of an effective vocabulary program. They are: wide or independent reading to expand word knowledge; instruction in specific words to enhance comprehension of texts containing those words; instruction in independent word-learning strategies and word consciousness and word-play activities to motivate and enhance learning Graves (2000). The English language is considered to have the largest vocabulary in the world (Crystal 2002). Educated native speakers of English are expected to know approximately 20,000 word families or 70,000 words (Nation, 2001). However, educated non native speakers of English know less than one quarter of the native speakers' vocabulary (Laufer and Yano, 2001). According to Colorado (2007), as cited in Mukoroli (2011), the average native English speaker enters nursery school knowing at least 5,000 words while the average English language learner may know 5,000 words in his/her native language but only a few words in English. This is the problem speakers of English language face in Nigeria. Not many speakers have enough vocabulary knowledge as required for proficiency in English language.

In English language, vocabulary knowledge is widely recognized as an essential tool because without it, language production and language proficiency would be impossible. In fact, Harmer (2001) argues that 'if language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organs and the flesh'. Foreign language teachers and learners generally measure vocabulary knowledge by the number of words that a learner knows. They believe that knowing a word means being able to know its meaning and being able to use it correctly. It is however possible to know a word but to be unable to use it. Milton (2009) cited in Alfaki (2015) states two types of knowledge (receptive and productive) involved in being able to use a word properly and effectively in a foreign language. Receptive knowledge represents the words that are recognized when heard or read. Productive knowledge refers to the word that can be called to the mind and used in speech or writing. It is crucial for the learner's literacy development that vocabulary is learned not only receptively but also productively (Nation, 2008). This implies that there is need for both receptive and productive knowledge to work together and in achieving this; it is advocated in this paper that literature in English should be taught by experienced teachers with the aim of increasing the learners receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge. A learner could be asked to read a prose, drama, or poem for instance, such a learner could come across various new words during

the reading. The teacher could guide the learner to note such new words and check up their meanings in the dictionary. Doing this, the learner has a receptive knowledge of the words since when such learner comes across the same words next time; he/she is able to recognize them. Also, during the study of literature, the teacher could guide learners to pay close attention to the contexts in which the new words are used. Then, the learner is asked to use the same words in sentences of his/her own. This enables the learner to have productive knowledge.

The growth of vocabulary knowledge is one of the essential pre-requisites for language acquisition. When learners have a great vocabulary, such learners can improve all areas of communication, which are speaking, listening, reading and writing. Several studies have been carried out to examine the way vocabulary knowledge relates to the ability to communicate in English language and in particular, the ability to perform in the four language skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Reading researchers and reviewers of reading research have reported that a strong relationship exists between vocabulary knowledge and comprehension (Blachowicz, Fisher, Ogle, and Watts-Taffe, 2006; Pearson, Hiebert and Kamil, 2007). Staehr (2008) attempted to investigate the relationship between vocabulary size and the skills of reading, writing and listening among EFL learners in lower secondary education in Denmark. He discovered that the more vocabulary learners know, the better they are likely to perform. Staehr's results indicate a correlation between vocabulary sizes and reading, which is comparable with the findings of other researches. The National Reading Panel (NRP; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) analyzed scientific studies that led them to conclude that readers' vocabulary is strongly related to their understanding of text. The ability to read and write fluently requires learners to have a lexical threshold (Laufer, 1997). Reading and writing cannot be separated from each other, the more in-depth reading they do, the more in-depth writing they do. The more reading learners do the more English vocabulary they will be exposed to. However, just as Mukoroli (2011) asserted, vocabulary teaching and learning is a constant challenge for teachers as well as students because historically there has been minimal focus on vocabulary instruction in the ESL (English as a second language) classroom. Due to this, he suggested that an increased emphasis on vocabulary development is crucial for the English language learner in the process of language learning.

#### **Enhancing Secondary School Learners' English Vocabulary Knowledge through Literature-in-English:**

Literature begins in delight and ends in wisdom (Hill 1986). Literature in an EFL class helps to build experience of learners; it develops thinking skills and students are able to reason analytically; it enlightens; it provides pleasure, etc. According to Bright and Macgregor (1970) in Adejimola and Ojuolape (2013),

'it is in literature that the student is most likely to find words used memorably with force and point. It is there that he will find words used in their widest range of context and there, he will find words passionately or delicately conveying emotions; learn to see wholes greater than the sum of their parts.'

Literature can enhance the proficiency of learners' vocabulary knowledge and English language on the long run. This is why both teachers and learners must pay a closer attention to the study of Literature-in-English. Sloan (1996) explains that in her quest to help her students become better writers, she went to the best source for teaching good writing: good books. By having students read books, poems and stories that contain interesting vocabulary, teachers can introduce new words and provide a forum for discussing them. Teachers need to study the three genres of literature: drama, prose and poetry and utilize them maximally. There are some basic literary terms associated these various genres. For example, in drama, some terms like: dialogue, cast, soliloque, aside etc. are usually used. Using these words in the right contents broadens a learners' vocabulary. He/she is different from a learner that does not study literature who probably may not know the meaning of those terms because he/she does not have any cause to use them in his/her conversations. A teacher could employ the use of role play and group acting while teaching the drama aspect of literature. By doing these, learners come across more new words and their communicative skills are improved.

Considering the prose aspect of literature, teachers could encourage learners to read literary texts and pay close attention to unfamiliar words and how the words are used in various contexts. Learners should also be allowed to appreciate books creatively.

For poetry, learners are to be active participants. They should be made to take note of the poet's choice of words, how the words are used, rhymes, etc. Observing rhyming words could help learners to know the spellings of words and also meanings of various words. For example:

awe---ore

sun---son

key---quay

Learners could even be asked to write down rhyming words and transcribe them. This could aid proper pronunciation of the words. Learners should be encouraged to read poems aloud. This enables them to discriminate between sounds and pronounce words properly.

#### **Challenges teachers face while teaching literature:**

1. Lack of money to buy books and poorly stocked library. As Fakeye (2014) noted, many students only rely on study guides and notes.
2. Many students are lazy and do not like to read, some of them lack motivation to do so.
3. Some students find literature classes boring and so do not pay attention to what is being taught.
4. Unwillingness to pay close attention to new words or check up the meanings of new words that are discovered in the dictionary.

### **3. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to solve the challenges above and make it possible to enhance secondary school learners' English vocabulary knowledge through Literature-in-English, the following recommendations are made:

1. Wide reading among students and sharing vocabulary-rich literature in order to improve their vocabulary level should be encouraged.
2. The body in charge of recommending literature texts that are being used in schools should ensure that the recommended literature texts are readable, relevant, appropriate and appealing to students. As Ivey and Broaddus (2001) reveal, students will read voluntarily if the materials available are appealing to them. Willis(2000) found that when reading tasks selection are done within the context of students' preferences, it could circumvent the potentially adverse effect of boring, irrelevant content responsible for many students' passionate aversion to school. Reeves (2004) also submitted that adolescents prefer to discuss and talk about books they have enjoyed reading on their own than talk about school prescribed texts.
3. Teachers could help students to become aware of and look for interesting words in literature texts. There are many different forms of doing this. Students could pair up and look through books for words that catch their attention, then write down common words that the author could have used instead. Another method includes having students write out words they encounter on an 'interesting word wall' (Sloan, 1996).
4. Focus should not be made on vocabulary development alone during lessons and teachers should avoid a teacher-centred class so as not to bore students. The class should be as student-centred as possible; inputs of students should be allowed; discussions and literary appreciation during reading should be encouraged.
5. Literary activities such as drama clubs, reading clubs etc. can also aid students' willingness to study literature, motivate them to read and also improve their vocabulary knowledge.
6. Schools should ensure that their library is well stocked with books and the books should be accessible to students to read.
7. Books are no longer limited to prints; there are books on the internet. Students should be encouraged to read books online. This would widen their scope and make it possible for them to have access to more materials.

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