

Towards a holistic approach of teaching and learning literature: Misconceptions about and endangerment of literature in Uganda's schools



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Vers une approche intégrée de l'enseignement/apprentissage de la littérature: les fausses idées associées à la littérature et son statut de matière menacée dans les écoles ougandaises.

Résumé

Cet article décrit les fausses idées associées à l'enseignement/apprentissage de la littérature dans les écoles ougandaises. Il s'agit des mentalités tenues par les étudiants, les enseignants et le public en général. L'article part de l'hypothèse selon laquelle le problème des mentalités est à l'origine de l'enseignement/ apprentissage mal réussi de la littérature dans les écoles. Aujourd'hui, de jeunes apprenants n'ont plus d'intérêt en littérature; ils croient que cette matière ne leur ouvre pas des opportunités sur le marché de l'emploi. Certains enseignants continuent à enseigner cette matière suivant des méthodes traditionnelles où les étudiants jouent pratiquement un rôle passif et où ils séparent le cursus de la langue de la littérature. Les parents, quant à eux, croient que la littérature n'est pas économiquement viable et de ce fait, préfèrent que leurs enfants apprennent des disciplines plus lucratives à l'université comme les sciences économiques, le droit ou les sciences naturelles. Ils croient que la littérature n'a aucun rapport avec le développement national du pays. Pour résoudre ce problème, l'article propose un changement des mentalités, l'utilisation des méthodologies interactives, la promotion de la culture de la lecture dans les écoles, et ce à partir de très bas âge. L'idée soutenue par cet article est la suivante: puisque les Africains sont dotés d'une tradition riche en folklore orale, il faut qu'ils saisissent cette dernière d'urgence en tant qu'outil et ressource de transmission des connaissances littéraires.

Mots-clés: littérature, tradition orale, culture de lecture, méthodologie

Abstract

This article presents the misconceptions that surround the teaching and learning of literature in Uganda's schools. These misconceptions are held by students, teachers and the general public. The paper hypothesizes that as long as these misconceptions continue to be held, they will affect negatively the learning of this subject. Young students today are so apathetic about studying literature; they think that the subject does not provide openings for them on the job market. Some teachers still separate the language curriculum from the literature one. They think that literature has no connection with national development. In addressing such misconceptions, the paper proposes a change in mindset, the use of interactive methodologies, and the enhancement of a reading culture in schools right from the early stages of learning. The paper argues that since Africans have a rich oral tradition (folklore), they should exploit this

as one of the tools and resources in imparting literature knowledge.

Keywords: literature, oral literature, reading culture, interactive approaches

Introduction

Three fundamental questions should be addressed in the quest to improve the teaching of literature in our schools in the great region particularly, and in Africa in general. What is the relationship between literature and national development? Should school curricula continue to teach literature as a separate entity from language? What methodology should be used in teaching and learning literature and in enhancing the culture of reading in schools? Uganda's experience has shown that the journey to cover in this respect is still long. There is still need to strike a balance between the literature content and the methodology of teaching it in order to avoid the misconceptions held about the learning and teaching of this discipline. In addressing the questions raised above, the literature curriculum designers should revisit its form and content (what to teach); teacher training institutions in the country should seek to perfect the methodology of teaching literature (how to teach) in order to produce a holistic and analytical student, capable of managing independently his/her own learning process (learning how to learn). Only then shall the literature curriculum be considered worthwhile in solving the problems that it is intended for. This study reflects the research findings from students, teachers and parents on the misconceptions of teaching/ learning literature in Uganda's schools. While the study delves into the causes of the multi-thronged complexity of misconceptions about literature, it also attempts to identify some missing links that should be embraced to make the subject friendlier to students, teachers and the public at large such that literature can, once again, play its traditional and rightful role in and for society.

1. Definition and goals of literature

O'Grady (1974) defines literature as the mirror of mankind, a channel of culture and the fine art of verbal expression. This conception of literature places the discipline into four major contexts, namely society, culture, language and the oral tradition (orature/ oral literature). The last category embeds literature in the life of all individuals as a conveyer-belt of a people's folklore, namely the culture that is passed on through oral traditions: songs, proverbs, tongue twisters, stories, etc (Bakahuuna, 2000). As a cultural aspect, literature deals with issues related to birth, death, love, sexual life, etc (ibid). As language, it examines how language is used, interpreted and manipulated to fit all sorts of intentions by its speakers. As an aspect of society, literature can be used as tool to lead to the resolution of conflicts among individuals and nations.

From the above definition, it follows that the goals and objectives of a literature curriculum are broad-based. Literature should be used to enrich the totality of the students' curriculum: (1) it can be used as a basis to acquire and enhance the written and spoken language skills because "it will extend linguistic knowledge by giving evidence of extensive and subtle vocabulary usage and complex and exact syntax" (Rugambwa-Otim, 2000:79); (2) literature can be used as a tool to enhance the oral and listening skills (ibid); (3) it can sharpen the learners' judgment and analytical ability (ibid) (4); literature develops the students' cognitive skills at various levels of knowledge acquisition; these include: comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bakahuuna, 2000); (5) it also develops the affective skills which require the perception and expression of emotions (ibid); (6) it cultivates students' interest as well as empathy, and judgment of values (ibid); (7) literature enhances psychomotor skills because it entails reciting, acting, dancing and singing especially during early childhood education (ECE) (Rugambwa-Otim, 2000); (8) literature also teaches social skills that enable individuals to live in society through enhanced understanding of human relationships. Socially, the relationship between 'literature and language' leads to the artistic use of language or words to capture an image of humanity and absorb human relationships between members of a given society (ibid); (9) it is an excellent vehicle for imparting and developing fundamental values such as the awareness of human rights combined with a sense of social responsibility, appreciation of social equity and democratic participation in decision making, understanding and tolerance of cultural differences and pluralism compassion, cooperation and a spirit of caring, enterprise, creativity and open-mindedness to change (ibid).

In the above holistic definition, the literature curriculum should be able to spell out the guiding principles that are commensurate with all the above needs of a given nation (ibid). The teaching of literature in schools must therefore be made relevant to the learner's needs at all levels, namely at individual and community, regional, national and global levels (ibid.). There is therefore need to teach and learn literature from a holistic view point to enable students to solve personal, societal, national and global problems.

2. The problem of misconceptions about literature

The major problem associated with the teaching of literature in Uganda schools is basically related to the misconceptions about its role and usefulness to and in society. Literature is differently misconceived by parents, teachers, and students on the one hand. On the other hand, this misconception is crowned by the very government institutions that should strive to protect it from endangerment. These various misconceptions

have led to its mystification, eventually leading to its disqualification as a key player in national development, hence its endangerment *vis-à-vis* its competitors—the natural sciences and business-oriented disciplines.

2.1. Problem of mindset

There are some public figures in Uganda who advise students to ignore studying literature in favor of natural sciences or business-related subjects. This has had the effect of reducing the number of students who opt for this subject at advanced levels of learning, particularly at university. On this issue, Bakahuuna (2000:72) laments:

“The public, however, has its own attitude towards literature and its teaching, an attitude that reflects a complete failure to understand what it is about. For example, at an occasion that I attended a few weeks ago, an MP and government minister who was the guest of honor advised parents against letting their sons and daughters go to university to study language and literature. He said that economics is a better subject. He failed to see that knowledge of economics is useless without the language to express it, and indeed that to understand social interactions, one needs an understanding of human emotions and beliefs.....”

From the above observation, it is clear that many members of the general public (teachers, parents, policy makers, etc) are misinformed about the nature of education that should be given to their children. They see education not from its holistic perspective of providing knowledge and skills to enable children adapt to their society, skills that can help them to solve their problems in society through understanding the conduct of personal and social relations. The author cited above blames many literature teachers who compound the problem under study by misconceiving its aims and objectives. He has this to say:

“They consider the question of what they should teach rather than the question of why they should teach it. They are not creative in their teaching; on the contrary, they teach everything according to the set texts, either word for word or else through notes, often using published notes for the purpose. These notes fail to take the students’ level of understanding into account and do not constitute any meaningful communication about the real literature themes. Students who are taught this way naturally study the subject to pass exams and qualify for further studies, while those who do not offer literature dismiss it ... as a waste of time.”

We wish to argue that studying literature is not a waste of time. On the contrary, literature fits very well in the jigger-saw of Uganda’s national goals of education (Uganda Government, 1992). We shall cite only six of these: forging national unity,

promoting moral and ethical values, promoting humanitarianism and cooperation, evolving democratic institutions so that every citizen can have a voice in governance, guaranteeing fundamental human rights, etc. Rugambwa-Otim (2000) observes that the achievement of these goals rests on the development of the students' cognitive, affective and psychomotor faculties which enable the latter to acquire productive skills and build a complex of integrated and self sustaining personalities. Literature empowers students with skills needed to help the nation to achieve these goals. This can be done on the basis of a thematic approach whereby teachers can choose texts on thematic areas like nationalism, leadership, cooperation and unity, respect for human dignity, etc. (ibid.) All these are in line with UNESCO's recommended methodology of teaching that aims at adapting "to more modern approaches such as democratic participation in the classroom, cooperative learning and problem-solving and interactive pedagogic methodologies (UNESCO, 1996:194)". Literature teachers should teach the subject within the framework of a curriculum that spells out guiding principles that are commensurate with the students' national needs.

2.2 Inappropriate methodology

Many teachers are blamed for making literature lessons unpleasant and boring. By concentrating on the exam through memorizing notes and critical commentaries which they give to students, most teachers end up conceiving the text reading process in only one direction—the teacher-centred approach. They do not conceive the concept of reading literature texts as an interactive process which sets several processes into action, i.e. top-down (text-driven) and bottom-up processes (reader-driven) (Rumelhart, 1977; Rudell, 1994; Bright and McGregor, 1970; Carrell et al 1995).

According to these interactive processes, knowledge in the text is organised by the reader according to interrelated structures or schemata in the reader's brain. By merely giving notes to students and using critical commentaries instead of reading primary works, literature teachers leave many students' schemata unexploited; they fail to foster pleasure in the reading (Kiguli, 2000). In the same vein, students should be encouraged to conduct extensive reading of novels and works of all types: comic strips, narratives, fiction novels, newspapers as genre, etc. Reading literature texts should provide an interface between language, thought and culture (Day and Bamford, 1998) in which case this would enable a number of factors to come into play to arrive at text-message comprehension. These factors include: knowledge of the word and world, knowledge of the topic covered in the text, prior knowledge which the reader brings to the text, knowledge of the subject of reading itself, knowledge of the text arrangement, knowledge about the organisation and structure of the text in question as

well as of other texts, etc. (Rudell, 1994). The methodological argument raised here is that exploiting literature texts should help young readers to develop a critical outlook of a variety of cues useful in mobilising several sources of knowledge which are related to the reader's culture as well as his/her knowledge schemata. In other words, if the reader is ill-equipped to conduct a resourceful interface with the text, his/her capacity and skills of constructing meaning from the text will be limited, leading to frustration while reading.

3. Methodology

The researcher conducted a qualitative study among four categories of stakeholders in Mukono district. These were high school students, teachers as well as parents. The respondents were purposively selected to participate in four focus group discussions (FGDs) to discuss and analyse the current state of teaching literature by identifying the problems surrounding its teaching/ learning, its role in national development, the misconceptions surrounding the subject, etc. Each category was represented by 5 respondents with a total respondent participation of 20 subjects. Finally, the respondents were called upon to suggest ways and means of improving the teaching of the subject in Uganda's schools.

4. Findings

The study findings revealed that literature is an *“interesting but endangered subject in Uganda because it is not supported by government like science subjects”*. One respondent said that many students meet problems with learning literature because it is taught and learnt in a foreign language—English. They proposed that the subject should be introduced at lower levels, especially in the primary cycle where pupils can learn it in mother tongue. They expressed that *“the language problem dissuades literature students in Uganda from expressing their sentiments and views and arguments in an original manner”*. Another respondent added that *“many students lack self confidence while expressing themselves in foreign language; they therefore cannot critically analyse phenomena due to this shortcoming”*. The above respondent quoted Ngugi Wa Thiongo, a renowned Kenyan novelist who *“ceased to produce more literary works in English and instead, embarked on writing in Kikuyu, his mother-tongue”*. Ngugi's argument was that he realized that writing in English was accompanied by lots of psycho-social inadequacies. He therefore wanted to communicate and express himself better in mother-tongue. So, Ugandan students with lower capabilities than Ngugi's should, *ipso facto*, be finding a problem in internalising literary works written in foreign languages.

Another problem which was associated with literature was that many Ugandan students are dissuaded from studying the subject because of *“its limited employment opportunities after graduating from school”*. *“If I study literature,”* one respondent said, *“I shall end up becoming a teacher and teachers are the most poorly paid civil servants in this country.”* Some respondents argued that literature is considered to be a very complicated subject because of its many specialised fields like poetry, prose, plays, and novels. They noted that of these, poetry is the most complicated area owing to its *‘mythical terminology’*. Another problem identified was that literature is too demanding in terms of reading. The students *“need to read a lot yet the culture of reading is at very low ebb in Uganda and Africa”*. In addition, they cited the scarcity of literature teachers in the country as well as abundant old and inappropriate reading materials in *“our libraries”*. It was also revealed that, countrywide, *“the number of English language and literature students / teachers is on the decrease especially at ‘A’ level and university and this forces many schools to avoid offering the subject at A level”*. The respondents noted that the guidance and counselling departments in many schools do not perform their task effectively: *“the career masters under-inform us about literature-related careers, hence they fail to link literature with national development; we think that when we study literature we shall become redundant”*. Finally, the respondents noted that in many Ugandan schools, oral literature is not taught at all, and instead *“teachers concentrate on written literature especially novels”*; *“even drama is taught theoretically; hence, oral literature is not given the importance it deserves.*

5. Discussion

5.1 Oral literature as a missing link

This study identified oral literature (orature) as a missing link to complete the teaching of literature in Uganda’s schools. This is corroborated by Kwikiriza (2000) who asserts that, from time immemorial, orature was used by Africans as a powerful tool and resource in imparting knowledge. Oral literature should therefore be taught in all its forms—story telling, proverbs or sayings that characterise the oral discourse of elders; riddles, tongue twisters, metaphors, similes as well as idiomatic expressions used to convey messages of wisdom. Orature also includes the use of songs and dances to convey specific important messages such as instilling good behaviour in the young generation, playing roles, etc.

The above form of literature should therefore be promoted as leverage to the reading and writing cultures as well as the performing arts (drama and music) (ibid). The reading of oral-based literature such as folktales, proverbs, riddles, poems, songs,

folktales, etc. not only helps the young generation not only to appreciate and identify with their own cultures but it exposes them to cultures other than their own (ibid). This is corroborated by Parry (2005) who encourages the reading of oral-based literature, a process she refers to as “reading beyond borders”. In this way, learners who hail from different cultures can learn to live harmoniously together without despising or looking down upon each other hence, forging national unity through the medium of literature. The argument espoused is that oral literature should be preserved in both local languages and English for purposes of knowledge transfer. As demonstrated in the findings of this study, this will enable the young generation to value their own local languages as valid means of communication (ibid). Therefore through the use of traditional oral materials in reading instruction and assessment, the reading and writing cultures can complement and reinforce one another. Such oral-based materials that are familiar to readers and are bound to encourage learning and solve the problem of inappropriate reading material identified by many respondents. The familiarity of such materials prepared by teachers can help students to develop a sense of creativity and imagination thereby transforming the latter into future critical readers, writers or thinkers.

The findings of this study conform to what was found by Parry (2005) in Northern Nigeria among Hausa students on poor performance in the English written exam. They perform poorly in written work because their teachers ignor to rely on the already existent oral resource to sharpen the writing skill. Hence, writing can be strengthened through oral literature. This helps to enhance the students’ social and cognitive skills of all types: knowledge application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. From the above observations, it follows that the oral tradition can and should also be used in Ugandan schools as a basis to promote the cultures of reading and writing.

5.2 The reading culture as a facility to learning literature

The results of this study corroborate Bakka’s (2000) findings according to which many students in Uganda read little beyond their classroom textbook. This is justified by the fact that many students dislike reading because they do not find pleasure in the practice of reading or they have not adequately been prepared to practice independent reading at the early stage of their development (Nolan-Woods & Foll 1986; Baleeta, 2005). Thus, they end up developing a habit of considering reading tasks in schools as boring or burdensome. This point strengthens the view that there is a negative mindset among students towards both reading and literature. This mindset starts at early age especially in lower primary school. This is why all school timetables should include reading lessons right from the word go. In addition, students should be encouraged to do

extensive reading especially in mother tongue at lower levels. Secondly, this study has found that there are very few appropriate reading materials in school libraries. There is therefore need to increase school budgets on books that are demanded by students.

5.3 Interactive approaches

The findings of this study underscore the importance of interactive approaches in teaching (UNESCO, 1996). In this respect, literature teachers should borrow a leaf from the 'Breakthrough to Literacy Project' (BTL) in Kyambogo University, Uganda. This project has successfully conducted interactive learning by imparting reading and literacy skills to infants (Lubega, 2005). This methodology has replaced the traditional methods of teaching reading to infants through combining phonics, looking and saying, reading aloud, etc. The approach is based on the Uganda Government educational policy (1992) according to which mother tongue-based learning should be encouraged at early stages of learning. Hence, infants are able to draw from their own experiences and on their own established oral language skills as they learn to read and write. BTL uses a variety of methods and instructional materials and ensures that the children's interest is maintained and that different individual learning needs are attended to and catered for. The approach enables children to participate actively in their own learning and, even in large classes, the learners can be organised in smaller social independent groups, i.e. groups of friends which help the infants to develop confidence. Later (3 -4 weeks), the learners are divided into ability groups based on what they can do efficiently at their own pace. In this way, they develop leadership skills. They freely approach, consult and feel secure to identify with their teachers. In the final stage, the learners do more complex activities like topic discussion, silent reading, and reading class-library books, writing dictated sentences, producing their own original stories, etc. Finally the learners can develop literacy skills and apply them to other school subjects. During all the learning stages, the teachers carry out continuous assessment, keep records and display record-charts to enable the children to see what they have produced.

Conclusion

In order to improve the teaching and learning of literature in schools, the literature curriculum should be designed to reflect the holistic nature of community and national needs as well as the needs of the individual. Equally important is the fact that literature teachers should embrace teaching/learning methodologies that draw from UNESCO's recommendations that encourage active student participation in learning.

Teachers should serve as role models in practicing extensive reading as this enhances their knowledge on the dynamics of society. Extensive reading enables both students and teachers to develop a critical, analytical and problem-solving mind; students should also be helped to explore the wealth of oral literature through music, drama and the performing arts.

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