LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research, 8(2), 26-37, 2011
ISSN: 1813-2227

Literature Circles and Primary Pupils' Literacy Development for Nation-Building

Alice E. Udosen
Department of Curriculum Studies,University of Uyo, Nigeria
E-Mail: Alidosen@Yahoo.Com
Phone: 08035664356

ABSTRACT

The literacy goal of primary education system appears to be eluding Nigerians in spite of government's consistent reforms in the sector. Educators are worried about the increasingly low literacy attainment of school leavers, some of whom cannot read, write or converse meaningfully in the English Language. A few of them who become fluent decoders of text lack comprehension of what is read. Accusing fingers often point to the teachers for not doing the right thing- for not adopting the social interaction and group- based learning processes which involve pupils in engaged learning. This paper explores the potentialities of literature circles as a departure from the prevalent teacher- centred classroom process in developing primary pupils' literacy as well as other social interpersonal skills for their lifelong development.

INTRODUCTION

One of the goals of primary education according to the national policy on Education (2004) is to inculcate permanent literacy and numeracy skills in the school leavers. The literacy skills would serve as a foundation for the pupils' future developments whether they are pursuing further education or go into the world of works. The emphasis on literacy skills is understandable because both ways, language is the foundation for learning in school and for interaction in the society which is highly multilingual.

Regrettably, this lofty literacy education policy of government seems to be eluding Nigerians in spite of the constant reforms in the sector. Many more pupils are leaving the system without acquiring the basic literacy skills for future development (Udosen, 2006). It is doubtful how many public primary school pupils can boast of quality tertiary education in the face of post University Matriculation Examination [UME] screening test in the country today.

In developed countries where English is the first language of the learners, efforts are being made to ensure that all categories of pupils learn to read,

write and speak English. This has led to a federal mandate such as "No Child Left Behind Act" and the "state standards" which require that every child, irrespective of linguistic background should have not only equal access to all areas of the curriculum, but also meet the state and local standards (Roit, 2006, p. 79). These mandates place heavily on the shoulders of the teachers the challenge of how to teach linguistically diverse students to read and write in order to develop the critical tools needed for learning across the curriculum and for participating fully in the society (Roit, 2006, p. 80)

The picture Roit has painted here is that of a school system with children who are learning English as a second language and the efforts teachers are putting to ensure learning for all. Our classrooms share the same features. Most children come into contact with English at the school. Some of them come from very poor homes while a few of them can speak some English. Yet all of these children are in the school to learn. And the language of learning and that of education is the English language. Do we have such teachers as those reported by Roit in our public schools who make the learning of their pupils a priority? Such concerns would result in increased learning and high literacy attainment of the school leavers and a constant search for innovative strategies to aid them achieve their goals.

The contrary seems to hold true in our society. This scenario if left unchecked can mar education for all campaign of governments both at state and federal levels. To ensure that primary school pupils benefit from education, they need to acquire the skills that would enhance their processing of the curriculum and therefore accomplish their educational ambitions. Researches have shown a move away from classrooms where teachers try to keep pupils from "talking all day" to those that teachers spend time trying to teach pupils how to talk more and effectively (Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2007, p. 45; Mcintyre, 2007). Literature circles provide ample opportunities for primary school pupils to talk more in order to learn. This is the view of Mohr (2004) who stressed the need for increased talk time for English learners. Pupils need to be helped not only to learn how to comprehend text but also learn how to talk about text and about what they are learning (Roit, 2006). This type of interaction is obviously lacking in many of our classrooms. How can it be developed? This paper sets out to discuss (1) the concept of literature circles and their theoretical basis, (2) examine literacy skills that can be cultivated using literature circles, (3) discuss other social and interpersonal skills that can be developed using literature circles, and (4) outline steps that teachers can follow in implementing literature circles in our schools. The paper then concludes with a call for teachers to experiment them in Nigerian classrooms.

Literature Circles and their theoretical Basis

Literature has to do with life as it is lived in the society. The different activities embarked upon by men and women, whether good or bad, are held up as minor by writers with the view of correcting wrongs. Literature circles

therefore can be described as literature discussions, book clubs or literature studies (Gilmore & Day, 2006). They are formed when a group of readers gather together to have in-depth talk about a book they have read (Strube, 1996). In a school setting, literature circles are characterized by students who usually read a selection of literature on their own before they come to discuss it in small groups of four to six. The discussions are often guided by students' responses to the read text and not on the list of questions from the teacher (Schlick Noe & Johnson,1999). Because group members "share their thoughts, feelings, impressions, personal connections, ideas and problems" about the books, they naturally engage in intensive reading in order to participate effectively (Peterson & Eds 1990 cited in Gilmore & Day, 2006, p. 195).

Literature circles are different from a mere or glorified sharing session. In a sharing session, pupils who understand the polite rules of conversation (speak in turn, sit quietly when it is not your turn, look at the speaker) fail to engage in a true discussion. It is possible to have students learn to engage in real discussions about the things we want them to discuss if only we give them a little attention (Kelley & Clousen-Grace, 2007). To help us conceptualize fully what literature circles are, Daniels (2002) provides eleven key ingredients as shown below:

1. Reading material is chosen by students.
2. The groups are small, temporary and are based on book selection.
3. Each group reads a different book.
4. Groups meet on a predictable and regular schedule
5. Written or drawn notes are used by students to guide their discussion.
6. Discussion topics come from the students.
7. The discussions are characterized by natural conversations about the book.
8. The teacher does not belong to the group but serves as a facilitator.
9. Teacher observation and student self-evaluation are the evaluation techniques employed.
10. The atmosphere should be fun and playful.
11. Readers share what they have read with classmates when they have finished and then form new groups based on text selection.

Harvey Daniels is known as the father of literature circles because of his ground breaking work in this instructional practice in 1994 with the publication of "Literature circles: Voice & Choice in the Student-centred classroom" (Clarke & Holwaded, 2007, p. 21). According to the authors, information on literature circles has since grown as many scholars regard it as an important addition to the literacy curriculum. One of the reasons for the popularity of this discussion practice is its alignment with the transactional view of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978). In this theory, meaning does not just reside in the text or in the reader's head but also in the transactions between the text and the reader. The reader takes active part

in the reading process in order to construct meaning. The resulting meaning may be extended, altered, confirmed or questioned. Thus, the socio-psycholinguistic view of the reading process, which recognizes that reading is a meaning-making process, provides support for literature circles (Samway & Wang, 1996). The theories of social interaction propounded by (Vygot-sky, 1978, cited in Gilmore and Day, 2006), also gives credence to this practice. This is because as children engage in literature circles, they construct their understanding of the text through interactions with peers and the teacher, as well as when they share what interests them about the books they have read (Stein & Beed, 2004; Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2007). This vygotskian notion that learning develops through social interaction and the research that collaboration and group work can lead to positive consequences (Johnson and Johnson cited in Clarke et al, 2007) led to many teachers experimenting on them. They believe that adopting literature circles would help increase positive social learning opportunities in their classrooms.

The passive nature of our classrooms with its attendant increasing low literacy attainment of most school leavers should be a concern for many more teachers in this part of the world. They should join their counterparts world over "to move away from traditional teacher-centred instruction to more student-centred opportunities" to improve learning in their classrooms (Clarke et al, 2007, p. 21). This is why literature circles is advocated in this paper for Nigerian classrooms where English is learned as a second language. Many literacy skills can be developed using this process. The following section takes a look at some of them.

What Literacy Skills can be Development with Literature Circles?

There are many literacy skills that are derivable from literature circles. These are discussed below:

1. **Enhanced comprehension**: Reading can only be useful when comprehension is enhanced. Many pupils lack understanding of what they read and so must be supported with comprehension aids. Literature circles present pupils with the aids to comprehension. It has been proved through research that students who engaged in literature circles made more gains in reading comprehension than their counterparts who are not so engaged (Klinger, Vaughn & Schumann, 1998; Daniels, 2002). This is because literature circles provide pupils opportunity to engage in natural talks about books. They are also able to connect the stories to their life and this makes for better understanding of what they read. Through the written and artistic responses to the texts, L2 learners gather stronger understanding of what they read (Young & Hadaway, 2006).
2. **Enhanced Communication**: One of the biggest problems besetting English as second language learners is ineffective communication in

the language. Communication can be written or oral form. Literature circles afford pupils opportunities to engage in meaningful communications. And as Brown (1994, p. 69) puts it, "appropriate and meaningful communication in the second language is the best possible practice to engage in". In literature circles, pupils express their thoughts, ideas and opinions freely with their peers and the teacher and this facilitates their learning of the English language.

3. **Engaged Reading and Writing Skills**: Literature circles encourage both extensive and intensive reading and writing. As Peterson and Eeds (1990) show, intensive reading occurs when group members share their thoughts, feelings, impressions, personal connections, ideas and problems about the books. Because students set time to finish reading a chosen book before discussing, this encourages them to read. In the process of reading, they do a lot of writing to aid them remember the points to talk about. In this regard, Almasi (1995, p. 20) says "students who talk about what they read are more likely to engage in reading". The more students read, the better their comprehension which in turn improves their higher order thinking and fosters quality responses to texts (Eeds & Wells, 1989; Sweigart, 1991; Gambrel & Almasi, 1996). Literature circles encourage voluntary reading which is a foundation for reading to become a life long habit and deeply owned skills (Daniels, 2002). This may be the sought for reading culture/habit.
4. **Development of Critical Thinking**: Critical thinking has to do with the ability to think beyond what is explicitly stated in the text to being able to analyse, evaluate and make a good appraisal of the text material. This ability leads to good judgement but yet it is lacking in our second language learners and must be developed. The discussions that occur in small groups help to broaden students' horizon thereby strengthening their critical thinking ability (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996). Connecting something in the book to their own lives help students to think critically. Thus, when they see themselves through the characters of the book, they begin to grapple with some serious issues and at the same time try to solve those problems that affect them.
5. **Enhanced Vocabulary Learning**: Vocabulary development is critical in pupils' literacy acquisition because when they acquire enough vocabulary, it makes it easier for them to operate in the language.

Incidentally, as rightly observed by Spencer and Guillaume (2006), children from low socio-economic backgrounds and second language learners are especially at risk in vocabulary learning. According to them, these pupils may not be able to catch up without direct instruction in word learning. Beck & Mckeown (1991) on their research contend that children who are immersed in oral and written language learn 2,500 or more words in a year without the help of direct instruction. Thus, the relevance of literature circles which are characterised by many interactive activities to enhance

vocabulary learning. Whether in read-aloud or in small group discussions or in their personal reading, pupils come in contact with new words which increase their word stock for improved learning of the English language. Nation and Newton (1997) cited in Young & Hadaway (2006) share the same view. They show that teachers who provide meaningful context and communicative activities around a scenario and repeatedly expose their pupils to vocabulary through instruction and group-based peer-interaction, enhance their second language learners' vocabulary learning.

It is however suggested that teachers should develop both depth and word knowledge and breadth of word knowledge in their pupils. The former entails knowing many things about a word- literal meaning, its various connotations, the sorts of syntactic constructions into which it enters, the morphological options it offers, and a rich array of semantic associates such as synonyms and antonyms. The later implies knowing many words (Nagy & Scott, 2006 cited in Young & Hadaway, 2006)

6 Asking Questions

Teachers can attest to the fact that many pupils cannot ask or answer questions. Yet questions play important role in teaching/learning situation. Literature circles provide opportunities for students to ask questions and clear up misunderstanding (Young & Hadaway, 2006). Research has shown that when students are encouraged to ask questions, they have the opportunity to think and gain greater understanding (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 1995). Teachers can also ask questions. This is especially needed when group members use one word or nondescripts answers. In such cases, the teacher uses probing or follow-up questions to get the students to express their feelings adequately.

Other Social and Interpersonal Skills that can be Developed

Literature circles have the power to develop useful social and interpersonal skills in primary school pupils. The very foundation of literature circles is based on the notion that learning develops through social interactions. Thus the following social skills are possible:

1. **Collaborative Learning**: Literature circles foster social learning opportunities in the classroom. Johnson & Johnson (1989) observe that collaboration and group work can lead to positive consequences. Teachers can use this instructional practice to create positive learning community, provide a context for engaged, student-directed and meaning-making literacy experiences (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). Each member of the group knows that he has something to contribute to the success of the discussion and works hard to fulfil the expectation. This makes for success and enriched learning as each group member clarifies points not known by the others.

2. **Supportive and Safe Environment For learning**: one of the major tenets of literature circles is the promotion of trust and respect for the multiple voices and opinions. Members of the group feel valued because of the safe classroom atmosphere that is created (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999). Classroom community is also widened because members who are not normally friends are brought together on the basis of text and so they discuss together thereby forming new bonds (Daniels,2002).
3. **Conversational Skills Developed**: Literature circles afford students opportunity to develop good conversational skills. Through this instructional practice, students learn not to dominate conversations. They learn how to take turns in discussing in a group. They also learn group membership behaviours such as active listening, building a community, getting others involved and building on one another's point (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007). These are social skills that make for harmony in the society.

In spite of the positive sides, there are certain roadblocks which the teacher may encounter in the course of implementing literature circles. They are discussed elaborately by Kelley & Clausen-Grace, 2007). I summarise those obstacles here:

1. Students not prepared and not knowing how to prepare for discussion.
2. Students not knowing how to participate in discussion.
3. Students' conversations being superficial or contrived.
4. Students' reading materials not appealing.
5. Students not being involved in the conversation.
6. Students digress.
7. Students are off-task.

All this can be overcome with proper planning, commitment and close monitoring as discussed in the following section.

Strategies for Implementing Literature Circles

For effective literature circles to be conducted, a number of steps need to be taken. These include:

1 **Choosing Quality Books**: Books can make or mar the whole exercise. That is why teachers must be careful in choosing books. They should choose books that are rich in language, interesting plots, and richly developed characters. Also good are books that contain a lot of pictures and illustrations as these will help learners understand the plot. Samway & Whang (1996, p. 28) sum it all this way: "selecting books is critical because it can change how students view books and themselves as readers". Books selected must be based on the interests of the students as well as having the potentials of leading them toward discussion (Samway & Whang, 1996). Another benefits derived when students are involved in the choice of books

are outlined by Daniels (2002) who states "the deepest spirit of literature circles comes from independent reading and for reading to become a lifelong habit and a deeply owned skill, it has to be voluntary" (p. 18-19). This means that teachers will be up and doing to identify suitable books that will inspire discussion and captivate students' attention.

2 **Scaffolding Literature Circles**: Scaffolding is simply what the teacher does to help students to understand what is going on in the text. The teacher can use props, gestures, pictures or anything to aid pupils' understanding. According to Gilmore & Day (2006), teachers can "serve as scaffolds when they demonstrate a procedure, guide students through a task, break complex tasks into smaller steps, and supply information" (p. 195). This means that teachers have to show pupils how to do literature circles. After choosing books and creating reading schedule with the students, the teacher acts as a guide to encourage productive discussions during literature circles. As a guide, he behaves as a gatekeeper to ensure that all the students' voices are heard. He models the discursive skills required and facilitates deeper conversation. He demonstrates positive group membership behaviours such as active listening (nodding of head, agreeing, saying good point and 'hmm'), building a community ("Eno thinks a snake kills-who else has an opinion?"), getting others involved ("Has anyone else read something like this?"), and building on another student's point ("Okon was saying that his text reminded him of … I agree because…") (Clarke & Holwade, 2007). The intention is that as students gain knowledge and experience about the task requirement, teachers gradually withdraw their support so that students make the transition from social interaction to internalized independent function, (Vygotsky cited in Gilmore and Day, 2006).

3 **Model Read-Aloud**: In a second language classroom such as ours, it is usual to find many pupils that will not be able to read. In this circumstance, it is quite good to embark on read-aloud. Research has shown that one of the best ways to help children to learn how to read is for them to hear others read books (Galda & Cullinan, 2000; Trelease 1985). This is because listening to stories read aloud improves their emotional development and enhances their imagination (Young & Hadaway, 2006). Collaborating with the view, Rasinki (1989) opines that reading to children help to develop their sense of story, vocabulary improves and they are motivated to finish reading the book on their own. So read-aloud is a good way to begin literature circles. After reading the book, poetry or book chapter, the teacher begins a whole class discussion by asking questions. Such questions as "what do you think about the book?" "How do you feel about the book?" might prompt students to share their feelings and thought voluntarily and informally. The teacher

stresses natural discussion or talk that occurs between family and friend- talk, laugh, give advise, disagree, sympathize and share your inner thoughts (Smith, 1990).

4 **Forming Small Groups**: Daniels & Steineke (2004) advocate the forming of groups using membership grid. What this means is that groups are formed around commonalities and interests. When pupils of like interests gather for work, there is likelihood for cohesion and less tension. Groups should be made up of four or five pupils. The teacher asks the pupils to write top three book choices on a secret ballot and this forms the basis of grouping them. Each group receive their first book and decide how many times they will read the book (if it is a picture book), or how many pages to read (if it is a chapter book), to be able to complete it on the due date before they discuss it fully. Pupils should be given enough time to read judging from their circumstances as second language learners (L2), they read slowly and thus need support. Allowing time for everybody to finish reading before discussion makes for high quality contributions/discussions.

5 **Introducing Techniques for Effective Literature Circles**: The teacher has to show pupils those tools/techniques that they need to adopt to help them think about the text and prepare them for meaningful discussions about the book in literature circles. These include:

- **Sticky Notes**: These are notes that pupils mark pages that they learned from, loved, cared about, could not stop reading, connected to, questioned, puzzled over, thought were funny, or found surprising which they intend to discuss with others in literature circles (Schlick Noe & Johnson 1999). These techniques are found to be beneficial to second language learners in doing effective literature circles (Peterson & Eeds, 1990). It aids memory and keep them focused on the task.
- **Sketch and Stretch**: This exercise involves students sketching what the story they have read or listened to, means to them- their feelings and thoughts about the story. They share their sketches in literature circles with their peers who make comments. This exercise helps children communicate through their drawings and has been found beneficial to second language learners (Short, Harste & Burke, 1996).
- **Story Hats**: During read- aloud sessions, students draw scenes from the story on an 11x 14 sheet of paper and "write sentences to represent their thoughts about what is happening in the story" (Young & Hadaway, 2006, p. 201). After the drawings, they share with their peers in small literature circles. They then fold the paper in the shape of a

hat, staple it and wear their story hat home. Story harts help children think (Schlick Noe & Johnson, 1999).

- **Graffiti Board**: One technique that Short et al (1996) found to generate much enthusiasm among students is graffiti board. This board is created by a teacher placing a large piece of chart paper in the middle of the table. Each member of the group takes a corner and writes and draws his/her thoughts about the book in graffiti style. The main focus here is brainstorming using pictures or words. After that, they share their graffiti with one another in their literature circles (Young & Hadaway, 2006).
- **Journals**: Another technique found useful is journals. A note book can be used. It is suggested that pupils take the writing more seriously if teachers prepare a special journal for pupils. Journals can be made by stapling together 5 to 10 pieces of paper. Students write after they have read one to three chapters. The teacher can brainstorm open minded prompts that students can use to begin their journal entries thus: 'I predict', 'My favourite part', 'I cannot' and 'I would change'. Students should highlight areas in their journals that they would want to share with the group. Teachers should respond to students' journal very often and encourage them in their reading, thinking and understanding of the text (Young & Hadaway, 2005).
- **Monitoring**: Effective literature circles call for close monitoring to prevent situations where children engage in "sidetracking and off-task behaviours" as found in Clarke, 2004, cited in (Clarke & Holwadel, 2007 p. 23). In the said study, most children resorted to use of abusive language and insults. In monitoring, the teacher takes the role of a guide, facilitator, participant, mediator as well as an active listener (Short, Kaufman, Kaser, Kahn & Crawford, 1999). While monitoring, the teacher listens to students' reading, sits down with a group and reads with them. He takes "kid watching" notes on a clip board and lists things she notices about students' reading (Young & Hadaway, 2006). As a facilitator, the teacher performs the following functions to enhance literature circles:
    - (i) ask students to extend and expand their ideas;
    - (ii) provide additional information to clarify details related to the story;
    - (iii) restate comments when others have missed something;
    - (iv) aid with conversational maintenance

(v) challenge a student's comment (Short, et al 1999).

When all these steps are taken, literature circles can be a joy and aid to improving literacy attainment by our pupils.

CONCLUSION

Concerned teacher's world over make the learning of their pupils a priority. This concern naturally leads them to innovations that can help them achieve their goals. Literature circle is one of such innovations and have gained currency in many classrooms. Among the attractive features of this instructional practice is the breaking away from the traditional, teacher-dominated classrooms with its passivity to classrooms where student-led interactions yield positive learning results.

This paper has explained the concept of literature circles and the theoretical support for adopting them in our classrooms with the hope that our teachers will experiment. The many literacy as well as positive social benefits derivable from this instructional practice has been discussed. The steps to follow have been outlined and the possible initial setbacks listed. It is hoped that with proper planning and commitment, literature circles will soon be a feature in Nigerian schools for improved pupils' learning. It is then that we can talk about functional literate school leavers who can contribute to national development.

REFERENCES

Almasi, J. F. (1995). The nature of fourth graders' socio-cognitive conflicts in peer-led and teacher-led discussions of literature. Reading Research Quarterly, 30, 314-351.

Beck, I. and M. Mckeown (1991). Conditions of vocabulary acquisition. In R. Baro, M. L.

Kamil, P. Mosenthal, and P. D. Pearson (Eds). Handbook of Reading Research, vol. 2,pp. 789-814. White Plains , NY: Longman.

Clarke, L. W. and J. Holwadel (2007). Help! What is wrong with these literature circles and How can we fix them? The Reading Teacher, 61, 20-29.

Daniels, H. and N.Steineke (2004). Mini-lessons for literature circles. Portsmouth, NH.Heinemann.

Daniels, H. (2002). Literature circles: voice and choice in book clubs and reading groups.Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Eeds, M. and D. Wells (1989). Grand conversations: An exploration of meaning construction in literature study groups. Research in the Teaching of English, 23(1), 4-29.

Gambrel, L. B. and J. F. Almasi (1996). Lively discussions! Fostering engaged reading:Newark, DE: IRA.

Gilmore, D. P. and D. Day (2006). Let's read, write and talk about it: literature circles for English learners. In Young, T. A. & Hadaway, N. L. (2006) (Eds). Supporting the literacy development of English learners. Newark, DE: IRA, pp. 194-209.

Kelley, M. J. and N. Claussen-Grace (2007). Comprehension shouldn't be silent.Newark DE, IRA.

Mcintyre, E. (2007). Story discussion in the primary grades: Balancing authenticity and explicit teaching. The Reading Teacher,60,610-620.

Mohr, K. A. J. (2004). English is an accelerated language: A call to action for reading teachers. The Reading Teacher, 58, 18-26.

Roit, M. L. (2006). Essential comprehension strategies for English learners. In Young, T. A. & Hadaway, N. L. (eds). Supporting the Literacy Development of English Learners. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, pp. 80-95.

Rosenblatt, L. M. (1978). The reader, the text, the poem: The transactional theory of literacy work. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.

Samway, K. and G. Whang (1996). Literature study circles in a multicultural classroom.Portland, ME: Stenhouse.

Schlick Noe, K. L. and N. J. Johnson (1999). Getting started with literature circles. Norwood,MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Short, K. G., J. C. Harste and C. Burke (1996). Creating classrooms for authors and inquirers. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemannn.

Short, K. G., G. Kaufman, S. Kaser, , L. H. Kahn and K. M. Crawford (1999). Teacher Watching: Examining teacher talk in literature circles. Language Arts, 76(5), 377-385.

Spencer, B. H. and A. M. Guillaume (2006). Integrating curriculum through the learning cycle: Content-based reading & vocabulary instruction. The Reading Teacher, 60, 206-219.

Stein, D. and P. L. Beed (2004). Bridging the gap between fiction and non-fiction in the Literature circle setting. The Reading Teacher, 57, 510-518.

Strube, P. (1996). Getting the most from literature groups. New York: Scholastic.

Sweigart, W. (1991). Classroom talk, knowledge development and writing Research in the Teaching of English, 25, 469-492.

Trelease, J. (1985). The read-aloud handbook. New York: Penguin.

Udosen, A. E. (2006). Teachers' perception of factors responsible for high illiteracy among primary school leavers in Akwa Ibom State. Nigerian Journal of Curriculum Studies,13, (6) 33-43.