# Enhancing Poetic Literature Instruction Through Stylistic and Thematic Approaches

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## Abstract

This study investigated the effects of instruction in stylistic and thematic approaches on students' achievement in poetic literature. It also determined the moderating effect of gender on students' achievement in poetry. The study adopted pretest, post test, control group quasi-experimental design. The participants in the study were SS11 students in Akure metropolis. The subjects were randomly assigned to two experimental groups and one control group. The instruments used were Students' Achievement Test in Poetry (r=0.75), Instructional Guide on Stylistic Approach, Instructional Guide on Thematic Approach, Instructional Guide on the Convention Lecture Method, and Teaching Observational Scale. Three hypotheses were tested at the 0.5 alpha levels. Data were analyzed using means, standard deviation, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) and Scheffe post hoc test.

Findings revealed that there was significant main effect of treatment on students' achievement in poetry (F $(2,125)$ =25.915; P<.05). There was no significant main effect of gender on students' achievement in poetry (F$(1,125)$=.011; P>.05. The interaction effect of treatment and gender on students' achievement in poetry was, however, not significant (F$(2,125$=.577; P>.05). Based on these findings, it is recommended that teachers should adopt stylistic and thematic approaches in the teaching of poetry in particular and literature in general.

**Key words:** Poetic literature; Stylisticapproaches; Thematic approaches

## INTRODUCTION

Literature offers tremendous benefit to both teachers and students in particular. According to Ayanniyi (2009), literature study has the following value: it opens the mind and illuminates it, purging the mind of prejudices as it makes it free and active. Through the study of literature, students learn the humane approach of examining thought and actions. Aluko (1989) opines that the study of literature makes to the development of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains of an individual. It plays an important role in the achievement of the goal that education aims at; the complete development of the individual. It is the potential for growth in knowledge and wisdom; the acquisition of a keen understanding of human nature and of human relationship, the freedom of choice to enter each character's heart.

It develops the cognitive domains of the individual as it develops the capacity for discrimination, judgment and decision. It helps in language development as it is a tool for understanding language because it is easily learned in real life situation in which language is heard and\ or in use. It helps students to appreciate their culture and those of others and develops reader's creative ability.

In the affective domain, Aluko (1989) also opines that literature has the capacity to shape an individual's taste, develop his sympathy and empathy and the expression of feeling and emotions. It gives pleasure and entertains. It also brings us to the realities of human situation, problems, feelings and relationships. Literature also

encourages students to develop the desire for achievement, continuous self education and self improvement both in school and in later life.

In the psychomotor domain, it provides an avenue for dramatization, demonstration and active participation by the individuals involved. Simpson (2004) article in ITS Educational News summed it up that literature can provide students with fresh and creative angle with which to approach studies in particular.

There are three genres of literature and each of these make a unique impact on people exposed to them. Poetry, in particular has a lot to do with feelings and the senses. It appeals to the feelings and by so doing develops the emotional and imaginative aspects of man. According to William Wordsworth, an 18 century romantic poet, cited by Smith (2010), Poetry is a spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling or thinking recollected in tranquility or an exposition of one's inner feeling when the mind is at rest.

Poetry explores the possibilities of language and uses it to control and clarify emotion, spiritual and sense experience. Smith (2010) also opines that familiarity with the concept of metre and rhythm can improve students' own writing and they will be able to appreciate and apply these ideas. Brosna (1998) highlights the features of poetry: the language of poetry is concise and condensed. The words in poetry are carefully chosen in a way to make them sound musical and meaningful. Poetry is written in verse and can only be best realized when it is recited or sung. This is because every good poem is first and foremost meant to be sung. Poetry is not easily understood when reading, Ayanniyi (2009). Research has shown that among the three genres of literature, poetry seems the most difficult. This is because of its ambiguity, obscurity, unfamiliarity of words and its elliptical nature.

As a subject that features prominently in the school curriculum, the failure rate in it at the school certificate level, in spite of all the good efforts of researches, is a phenomenon that is giving students, teachers and school authorities a big concern. This is because, the low performance in this subject has shattered the dreams of students of getting admission into many lucrative courses such as Law, Mass Communication, Language Art, Communication Art, Theatre Art and a host of others in our tertiary institutions. As stipulated in JAMB Brochure (2010), at least a credit pass is a requirement before any candidate is eligible for admission to any of the aforementioned courses. The main issue of concern is therefore how to reverse the undesirable trend of unsatisfactory performance in literature-in-English with particular emphasis on poetry:

The comments of WAEC Chief Examiners' report May/ June, 2011 on literature-in-English showed that students generally did not perform well in the three genres especially in poetry where the performance was worst. They blamed the poor performance of candidates' lack of

seriousness, poor knowledge of literature texts, literature being handled by incompetent teachers and their bad approaches of teaching.

All these are in confirmation that the poor performance was because of poor teaching approaches as the approaches currently adopted in schools tend to minimize students participation and thus fail to capitalize fully on the educational and motivational benefits to be gained from experiential learning and from the integration of the students' reaction into the teaching and learning situations (Ufot, 2006).

Some of the approaches used by the teachers in teaching literature include cultural model or literary-core approach, interpretation of characters approach and appreciative approach. The disadvantage in literary –core approaches is that it is teachers- oriented and does not give room for extended language work. For interpretation of characters approach, literature is seen as a springboard or a tool to counsel students and teach morals, Iwuchukwu (2003). In appreciative approach the beauty of the text is not seen. This leads to frustration and lack of interest. In these approaches literature teaching tend to be superficial, Iwuchukwu (2003). To Ufot (2006), literary texts are taught as finished products, to be unilaterally decoded, analyzed and explained. To improve the performance of students in poetic literature, there is need to improve the quality of teaching by employing appropriate teaching approaches that will facilitate better achievement. The aim of this study is to show that the teaching of literature rightly practiced, can be lively, stimulating, challenging and a participatory activity and this can be achieved through approaches which include stylistic and thematic approaches.

Stylistic approach, according to Shibu (2006) deals with investigating how the resources of a language code can be put to use in the production of the actual messages. This approach considers literature primarily as discourse, a communicative discourse. It also deals with how the use of language patterns in a text which creates a form of communication that conveys its particular messages. According to Niazir (2010), stylistic provides a way of integrating two subjects, English language and Literature-in-English. It is a systemic teaching of literature and it helps in deepening the process of understanding. Fisher-Stake (2010) in his view describes stylistic as a study of language in literature and that it is a part of linguistic. By analyzing the linguistic pattern of a text, it gives answers to questions such as how literary effects are encoded in language. The goal of this approach is to decode meaning and structural features of literary texts by identifying linguistic pattern in the texts, Weber (1996). Stylistic is the only linguistic discipline which allows the analysis of a literary texts and their literary meaning by way of linguistic techniques. In this approach, the teaching of literature and poetry in particular emphasizes the writer's

choice of words and their functions, the structure and the deviation from the norms, the use of foregrounding and parallelism, and other figure of speech, the lexical cohesion and coherence in the texts and the grammatical patterns, and how all these bring out the message or meaning in the texts (Makinde, 2004; Timucin, 2010).

Thematic approach on other hand, deals with the theme of any work of art which may be psychological, ethical, didactic or sociological. It deals with the organization of text around a theme. According to Yushan (2008), it encourages learners' active involvement, emotionally and intellectually in learning. In this approach, the major themes which anchor everything are identified. Other minor themes also identified and how these themes, characters and the stanza, in the case of a poem, relate to the major themes is identified. The themes may be more than one but they are all connected and how these themes are presented is the concern of thematic approach. Settings, characters and situation can be trappings of the themes. These contribute to give its values. The author comes up with an idea, it obsesses him and he is compelled to express it, to give it flesh and all the "trappings" that give it a concrete form and to embellish it, so that it will have both internal and external values. These values distinguish it from other works of art (Fischer-Starke,2010).According to Shibu (2006), this approach helps students to search for values while reading and elicit students' evaluation on what they should do or not do based on their reading ( Parwathy et al, 2004). While stylistic deals with decoding meanings and structural features of literary text especially poetry, thematic deals with stimulating the learners to think about or around an idea a text is conveying.

Apart from the poor teaching approaches, gender is also a factor that affects the performance of students in literature most especially poetry. Oyesoji (1999) looks at the sex of learners as being a very good predicting variable on their academic performance. Ayanniyi (2009), and Basu and Chakroborty (1996) report two conflicting findings on effect of sex on students academic performance. While Yushau (2008) finds that female students have a significantly higher performance than their male counterparts, Basu and Chakroborty (1996) reports, that boys achieve higher scores than girls. However, Aremu (1998) in her own study finds no significant difference in the degree of preparation of male and female students towards important examination. These conflicting findings necessitate further studies on gender in relation to achievement, especially, in poetry.

# 1. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

As one of the subjects offered in secondary schools, literature has been very beneficial to the students. It is, however, disheartening that the performance of students in this subject has been very poor. This has been attributed to poor teaching of the subject especially poetry which is an important genre of literature. Researchers, in attempt to find solutions to the trend of poor performance in the subject, have experimented with various instructional strategies which were found very effective for the teaching of literature especially poetry. The significant contribution of these strategies, notwitstanding, performance of students in literature and poetry in particular, continues to decline. Scholars have advocated the adoption of students-centered staregies that make for active involvement of learners in the teaching and learning process of poetry. Two of such strategies are thematic and stylistics. Studies have attested to the effectiveness of these startegies but in the teaching of other areas of literature such as prose and drama. The effect of these strategies in the teaching of poetry has not enjoyed much research attention. Therefore, this study examined effects of thematic and stylistic approaches on students' achievement in poetic literature. The moderating effects of parental involvement and gender were also examined.

# 2. HYPOTHESES

The following null hypotheses were tested at. 05 levels of significance.

HO$_1$ There is no significant main effect of treatment on students' achievement in poetry.

HO$_2$ There is no significant main effect of gender on students' achievement in poetry.

HO$_3$ There is no significant interaction effect of treatment and gender on students' achievement in poetry.

# 3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

It is expected that the finding from this study would lead to effective strategies for the teaching of poetry. It is expected that the result would lead to improved teaching and learning in poetry with the use of stylistic and thematic approaches. It is also hoped that the study would lead to improvement of students' achievement and make poetry a pleasant pursuit. It is also possible that the result of the study could be of use to curriculum designers and textbooks writers.

# 4. METHODOLOGY

A pretest, post test, control group quasi-experimental design was employed in the study using 3x2x2 factorial matrix. A total of 138 SSII literature students in intact classes from six purposively selected senior secondary schools in Akure Metropolis participated in the study. This was because the SS2 students have been exposed to the rudiments of literature and have started treating some of

the poems. SS.3 students were not selected because they were writing the external examinations. Six instruments were used in the study for the purpose of data collection namely,. Students achievement test S.A.T poetry; Questionnaire on parental involvement; Instructional guide on thematic approach; Instructional guide on stylistic approach; Instructional guide on modified conventional lecture method; Teaching performance observational scale. In order to find the reliability of the test, the result was subjected to a test- retest statistical analysis using Pearson Product Moment Correlation and a reliability co-efficient of. 75 was obtained. The reliability of Parental Involvement questionnaire was determined using Cronbach-alpha yielding a value of 0.71.The instructional packages contain instructional approaches; thematic, stylistic and modified conventional approaches. The procedure for study was in three phases and was divided into twelve weeks. Training of research assistants went for two weeks. Thereafter, the pretests were administered to the students. The next eight weeks were used for the treatment programs in which the two experimental groups were exposed to stylistic and thematic approaches to the teaching of poetry while the control group took poetry lessons using the conventional lecture method. The last week was used for post test administration.

## 5. DATA ANALYSIS

The data collected from the study were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics used include computation of means and standard deviation for the achievement of students in each of the variables. Inferential statistic used includes analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to test the hypotheses and to determine the main and interaction effects of the variables under study. Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) was also used to determine the direction of the effects of the independent and moderator variables on the dependent variable. Where significant main effects were detected, the Scheffe Pairwise comparison was used as post-hoc measures.

## 6. RESULTS

$H0_1$: There is no significant main effect of treatment on students' achievement in poetry.

To test this hypothesis, Table 1 is presented.

**Table 1**
**ANCOVA of Post Test Achievement in Poetry by Treatment and Gender**

| Source of Variance | | Hierarchical Method | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Covariates | PRE | 2501.711 | 1 | 2501.711 | 211.559 | .000 |
| Main Effects | (Combined) | 905.924 | 4 | 226.481 | 19.153 | .000 |
| | TREATMENT | 612.900 | 2 | 306.450 | 25.915 | .000* |
| | GENDER | .129 | 1 | .129 | .011 | .917 |
| 2-way Interactions | (Combined) TREATMENT x GENDER | 180.948 | 5 | 36.190 | .557 | .012 |
| | Model | 3644.179 | 12 | 303.682 | 2.351 | .099 |
| | Residual | 1478.140 | 125 | 11.825 | | |
| | Total | 5122. 319 | 137 | 37.389 | 25.681 | .000 |

* Significant at P<.05

Table 1 shows that there is a significant effect of treatment on students' achievement in Poetry ($F_{(2,125)}$ =25.915; P<.05). This means that there is significant difference in the achievement scores of students exposed to stylistic, thematic and the conventional approaches. Hence, hypothesis 1 is rejected.

**Table 2**
**Multiple Classification Analysis of Post Test Achievement by Treatment and Gender**

| Variable + Category | | N | Predicted Mean | | Deviation | | Eta | Beta |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Unadjusted | Adjusted for factors and covariates | Unadjusted | Adjusted for factors and covariates | | |
| TREATMENT | Stylistic | 50 | 27.7800 | 27.4488 | 3.2438 | 2.9126 | | |
| | Thematic | 42 | 25.1190 | 23.7562 | .5828 | -.7801 | | |
| | Control | 46 | 20.4783 | 22.0827 | -4.0580 | -2.4536 | .503 | .377 |
| GENDER | Male | 70 | 24.5000 | 24.3016 | -3.62E-02 | -.2346 | | |
| | Female | 68 | 24.5735 | 24.7778 | 3.730E-02 | .2415 | .006 | .039 |
| R =816 | | | | | | | | |
| R Squared =665 | | | | | | | | |

Table 2 presents the magnitude of the mean scores of the respective groups.

From Table 2, students in the stylistic instructional group performed better ($\bar{x}$=27.45; Dev= 2.91) than those in the thematic instructional group ($\bar{x}$ = 23.76; Dev=-.78) and control ($\bar{x}$=22.08; Dev.=-2.45).

The actual source of the significant effect of treatment on students' achievement was traced using Scheffe Post hoc analysis and results are presented on Table 3.

**Table 3**
**Scheffe Posthoc Test of Achievement Scores by Treatment**

| Treatment | N | X | Treatment | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | | Stylistic | Thematic | Control |
| Stylistic | 50 | 27,45 | | | * |
| Thematic | 42 | 23.76 | | | * |
| Control | 46 | 22.08 | * | * | |

* Significant at P<.05

Table 3 shows that the two experimental groups are significantly differently from the control group. For instance, the stylistic is significantly better ($\bar{x}$=27.45) than control ($\bar{x}$=22.08) and the thematic instruction ($\bar{x}$=23.76) is significantly better than the control group. These two pairs contributed to the observed significant effect of treatment on students' achievement in poetry.

H0$_2$: There is no significant main effect of gender on students' achievement in poetry. From Table 1, students' gender has no significant effect on students' achievement in Poetry ($F_{(1,125)}$ =.011; p>.05). Hence, hypothesis 2 is not rejected. Table 2 however, reveals that female students obtained slightly higher achievement score ($\bar{x}$=24.78; Dev.=.24) than their male counterparts ($\bar{x}$=24.30; Dev. = -.23).

H0$_3$: There is no significant interaction effect of treatment and gender on students' achievement. From Table 1, the interaction effect of treatment and gender on students' achievement in poetry is not significant ($F_{(2,125)}$=.577; P>.05). Hence, hypothesis 3 is not rejected.

# 7.  DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

## 7.1  Treatment and Students' Achievement in Poetry

The result indicated that all the experimental groups performed better than the control group. The stylistic approach group obtained the highest mean score, followed by the thematic approach while the control group had the lowest mean score. The result is consistent with those of Timucin (2010), Hwang et al (2007), Tutas (2006) and Simpson (2004) concerning the effectiveness of stylistic approach, while it reaffirms the findings of Makinde (2004), Parwathy et al (2004) and Kovalick (2005) on the effectiveness of thematic approach to the teaching of literature.

## 7.2  Gender and Students' Achievement in Poetry

The finding indicated that gender, as one of the intervening variables, does not contribute significantly to the students' scores. The implication is that these approaches, stylistic and thematic approach could be used with all students irrespective of their gender in the teaching of poetic literature. This finding corroborates those of Ayanniyi (2009) and Anderson (2000) who reported in their various studies that sex is no barrier to students' achievement. It, however, negates the findings of Brosnan (1998) and Blume (2009) who in separate studies discovered that gender contributed significantly to the achievement of students.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

From the result of the study, it could be concluded that the study of poetry could be demystified through the use of stylistic and thematic approaches as they are more effective in the teaching and learning of poetry than the conventional teaching method. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made.

• Teachers need to adopt stylistic and thematic approach in the teaching of literature in general and poetry in particular. They should be encouraged to use them as strategies to reinforce the conventional approach.

• Parents should be encouraged to be actively involved in their children's education. They should take time to supervise their children's work and make the necessary materials available for them.

• Textbooks writers should apply the principles of prior knowledge in texts for schools and in structuring curriculum.

• Government should encourage teachers to go for in-service training that will expose them to the use of these approaches which in turn will boost their confidence in handling poetry lessons and increase students' achievement in literature and poetry in particular.

• Curriculum designers should design literature curriculum in such a way that emphasis is placed on the functions of words.

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