

RETHINKING LITERATURE PEDAGOGY: A DEMOCRATIC AND PARTICIPATORY APPROACH TO TEACHING LARGE CLASSES IN LAGOS STATE

Adeyinka Ogunye
Department of Music,
Olabisi Onabanjo University
&
Olusola Smith Adeyemi
Department of Performing Arts,
Olabisi Onabanjo University

Abstract

The teaching of literature transcends the mere transmission of textual knowledge; it is a dynamic, dialogic process that enables learners to interrogate human experience, social realities, and cultural identities. Despite its transformative potential, the teaching of literature in large classrooms especially in developing contexts such as Nigeria continues to face pedagogical limitations rooted in traditional teacher-centred approaches. This study examines the effectiveness of democratic and participatory classroom strategies in the teaching of Literature-in-English in large secondary school classrooms in Lagos State. Using participatory and observational research methodologies, data were generated from selected schools in Badagry Local Government Area. The findings reveal that participatory approaches significantly enhance students' engagement, comprehension, and critical thinking. Drawing on the pedagogical philosophy of Paulo Freire and Critical Social Theory, the study argues that the creation of a democratic classroom environment characterised by dialogue, collaboration, and shared knowledge production offers a viable alternative to the traditional "banking model" of education. The paper concludes that participatory pedagogies not only improve learning outcomes but also foster democratic consciousness and critical literacy among students.

Keywords: Democratic Classroom; Participatory Pedagogy; Literature Teaching; Large Classrooms; Critical Pedagogy

Introduction

Literature occupies a central position in the humanities as both an artistic and intellectual discipline that reflects and interrogates human existence. Often described as the "mirror of life," literature provides learners with opportunities to explore identity, morality, culture, and social structures. Through engagement with literary texts, students are not only exposed to aesthetic experiences but are also equipped with the cognitive tools necessary for critical reflection and societal participation. However, the pedagogical realities of teaching literature in many Nigerian secondary schools present significant challenges, particularly in large classrooms where student numbers often exceed manageable limits. In such contexts, teaching is frequently dominated by lecture-based methods, which limit interaction and reduce students to passive recipients of information. The persistence of this approach aligns with what Paulo Freire describes as the banking model of education, where knowledge is "deposited" into students who are expected to memorise and reproduce it. Contemporary scholarship continues to critique this model for suppressing critical thinking and student agency. In contrast, modern pedagogical research increasingly emphasises participatory and democratic approaches to teaching. These approaches foreground dialogue, collaboration, and student engagement as essential components of effective learning. Studies show that active and participatory learning environments significantly improve comprehension and foster deeper engagement, particularly in large classroom settings.

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This paper argues that literature teaching, by its very nature, demands a democratic classroom environment. Since literature involves interpretation, analysis, and multiple perspectives, its teaching must go beyond rote learning to embrace dialogue and critical engagement.

Review of Literature: Literature Teaching and Democratic Consciousness

The teaching of literature has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, particularly with respect to its role in fostering critical thinking, cultural awareness, and democratic engagement among students. Literature is more than an artistic medium; it is a vehicle for social reflection, intellectual development, and moral reasoning. Scholars consistently emphasise that the study of literature allows students to understand human experiences, develop empathy, and interrogate societal norms (Hardianti, 2024). Recent scholarship highlights literature's potential to develop critical literacy, which goes beyond reading comprehension to involve questioning assumptions, identifying biases, and connecting texts to social realities. Critical literacy, as conceptualised by Freire and applied in contemporary classroom contexts, encourages students to examine power structures, cultural narratives, and historical contexts embedded in texts (Janfada & Thomas, 2024). For example, studies in Nigerian secondary schools show that students who engage with literary texts critically are better able to relate themes such as social justice, identity, and governance to their lived experiences. Similarly, Sara Cotin & Tom Pendergast (2003) emphasised that literature provides opportunities to explore similarities and differences among peoples, languages, and cultures. Contemporary research supports this view, demonstrating that literature teaching fosters social awareness, empathy, and global citizenship. For instance, modern studies in secondary education in Lagos State indicate that students exposed to dialogic reading methods exhibit improved analytical abilities and higher-order thinking skills (Castro & Iannone, 2024).

A significant body of research in the past decade underscores the effectiveness of participatory learning in the teaching of literature. Participatory approaches shift the classroom from teacher-centred to student-centred engagement, aligning with Freire's problem-posing education model. This model challenges the traditional "banking" conception of education, where the teacher deposits knowledge into passive students. In large classes, where interaction is inherently limited, participatory strategies have been shown to increase engagement, comprehension, and critical reflection (Hardy et al., 2023). Participatory learning in literature often involves collaborative reading, role-play, dramatization, debates, and open discussion. Role-play and dramatization, in particular, enable students to inhabit characters and scenarios, facilitating deeper understanding of texts' thematic and cultural dimensions (Mieniczakowski, 2021). For example, dramatizing a scene from Shakespeare or Wole Soyinka allows students to explore conflicts, motives, and emotions, fostering interpretive engagement beyond textual comprehension.

Democratic approaches also promote student agency by allowing learners to contribute to the shaping of classroom discourse. Studies by Hardianti (2024) show that democratic participation encourages students to take ownership of learning, ask meaningful questions, and express personal perspectives, thereby bridging the gap between textual analysis and lived experience. In essence, the classroom becomes a space of dialogue, reflection, and co-construction of knowledge, rather than a hierarchical setting where knowledge flows unidirectionally from teacher to student.

Literature Teaching and Social Development

The teaching of literature has broader social and democratic implications. Literature not only cultivates literacy skills but also nurtures critical consciousness, civic responsibility, and social

awareness. According to Giroux (2025), literature teaching functions as a mechanism for social critique, empowering learners to question societal norms, challenge inequities, and develop socially responsible perspectives. In the Nigerian context, scholars such as Ogunba (2018) and Epochi-Oliseh (2020) note that literature has historically been a tool for nation-building and civic education. For example, the works of Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka have been used pedagogically to discuss issues such as corruption, gender inequality, and political oppression. Contemporary classroom practices that emphasise discussion, reflection, and participatory engagement make these texts more than historical artifacts they become platforms for active learning and social dialogue. Recent studies reinforce this connection, demonstrating that students exposed to participatory literature teaching show increased civic engagement and awareness of social issues (Springer, 2023). In this sense, literature classrooms can function as microcosms of democratic society, where students practice dialogue, negotiation, and critical evaluation.

Challenges in Teaching Literature in Large Classes

Despite its benefits, teaching literature in large classes presents unique challenges. Large classrooms often hinder individual attention, limit opportunities for participation, and make traditional lecture-based methods ineffective. Recent studies indicate that classrooms exceeding 40–50 students often experience decreased student interaction, reduced critical discussion, and limited opportunities for creative engagement (Springer, 2023). Moreover, large-class teaching tends to exacerbate passive learning behaviours. Students may feel anonymous, less accountable, and less motivated to participate. Castro & Iannone (2024) argue that this passivity is detrimental to the study of literature, which inherently requires dialogue, interpretation, and engagement with multiple perspectives. The challenge, therefore, is how to implement pedagogical strategies that maintain interaction, participation, and intellectual stimulation in a context where individual attention is limited.

Recent empirical research highlights strategies that can mitigate these challenges:

1. Group-based learning: Dividing large classes into smaller discussion groups encourages peer learning and collaborative interpretation of texts ([Hardianti, 2024]).
2. Role-play and active engagement: Using performance-based methods enables students to internalize themes and explore narrative dynamics.
3. Structured democratic dialogue: Establishing clear norms for discussion and reflection ensures participation without descending into chaos (Janfada & Thomas, 2024).

These strategies suggest that, while large-class settings are challenging, they are not insurmountable obstacles when participatory methods are intentionally implemented.

Paulo Freire's Theory and Teaching of Literature in English

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian lawyer, educator and philosopher who brought out educational ideas that have been considered a source of the best contributions to understanding educational practices. His theory on education and its essence in social and individual transformation could be applied to the teaching of literature in English. In his theory, Paulo Freire proposes concepts act, Banking Concept of Education. The students dents are and Critical Consciousness and Democratic teacher-student relationships. Education, he makes a clear distinction between the two concepts: In the areas of banking concept of education and problem-posing Banking concept is seen as an “act of depositing, in which the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students the depositories and the teacher the depositor instead of communicating, memorise and repeat”. Here, Freire rejects the patiently receive, memorise the basis that it makes the students “Banking concept of education” on the empty vessels that have to be filled with “deposit” of information by teachers. He argues further that this concept of education

deadened the student, limited their ability to develop important critical faculties and most importantly robbed them of the agency students need to make their education truly relevant. Students under this concept of education do not have the opportunity to question or critically evaluate the information deposited in them by the teacher. This is detrimental to the student's critical thinking.

In contrast to banking education Freire proposes a problem-posing concept of education which encourages students to become active in thinking about and acting upon their world. Problem-posing concept then is a revolutionary concept that allows the students to ask questions on the subject under discussion. It is this problem-posing concept that gives room for Democratic teacher-student relationship, which is dialogic in nature. It encourages participation, collaboration and group learning. It sets all parties on an equal playing field as it encourages collaboration and the development of critical skills of analysis, interpretation and articulation. In this concept, both the teacher and the students cease to exist. The teacher becomes the facilitator who guides the discussion so that the process of teaching does not turn rowdy. With this Freire submits that “the teacher is no longer merely the one who teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students who in their turn while being taught also teach” (67). With this approach, the teacher is able to create a democratic classroom environment where the students are allowed to dialogue through an experimenting creative process which motivates the students to actively contribute to the discourse at hand. This Democratic Classroom Environment method is suitable for the teaching of literature in English especially when it concerns the teaching of a large class.

Theoretical Framework

The theories adopted for this study is drawn from Sociological theories that are relevant to social development and human communication development. This is Critical Social Theory as postulated by Max Horkhemier, Juegen Habermas and Theodore Adorno. The choice of the theory is informed by the fact that it is adequate and relevant tools for measuring the state of any social and human development and in this study the researcher believes that, the theory, no doubt if applied to education can open up new areas of educational enquiries in the study the structure, functions and the intricacies of the use of literature for social change. Critical Social theory was postulated to analyse society from the stand point of its emancipation and collective social transformation. It asserts that emancipatory social transformation is necessary since the contemporary human society fails to satisfy the true needs of individuals and not only that but fails to create civilised society in which every member could live in with satisfaction. According to Hans the theory “originated from the Institute for Social Research, better known as Frankfurt School, a group of Marxist intellectuals who left Germany for USA following the rise of Nazism (89).” However, the doctrine of this school of thought is a departure from Karl Marx dialectical and historical materialism which calls for revolution against social and historical injustice, and any form of exploitation. Instead, the theorists propose a subtle way of advancing social change and development through dialogue. Though the theory is interested in historical change, it does not advance revolution for making the changes but calls for collective dialogue and reasoning.

Hence, the aim of Critical Social theory is to diagnose injustices and irrationalities within social circle and seek to stop their perpetuation by proposing for a just society that is self sufficient in terms of profound social and economic benefits. Since the theory is society and institution centred, it critically examines issues that create obstacles for social and social transformation and human development as a means of engendering social upliftment

The approach of critical social theories has been on the essence of breaking the traditional

deductive methods which favour social development being one sided, to collective social reformation and development achieved through dialogue. This implies that critical social theories is a counter to traditional social theory, and is meant to question the hegemony in the operations of the dominants that refuse collective social development. In the submission of Hobermas, one of the proponents of the theory, he asserts:

Fundamentally, traditional social theory is premised on the analysis and understanding of the status quo. By implicit acceptance of 'what is' traditional social theory cory does not challenge; but contributes to the preservation of the status quo. Critical Social theory on the other hand, is concerned with finding alternatives to existing social conditions which more adequately address human desires (2)'.

From the above assertion by Hobermas, it is clear that Critical Social theory rejects the separation of social values and inquiry, knowledge and action from the hands of the majority while centralising them in the hands of the minority who cla claims to know it all.

Critical Social theory is a mass oriented theory, this is why it is grounded on three fundamental assumptions as stated by Herbert Marcuse and cited in Adeyemi (2015:18):

- I. People are the creator of their social world and as such can change it if they wish.
- II. All scientific knowledge about the social world is socially constructed and as such cannot avoid being infused with value orientations.
- III. Critical Social theory concerns itself with changing the status quo that is Hegemony and oppressive in nature to general social transformation. (18)

Instruments of Investigation

This study employed participatory and observatory research methodologies. Through participatory research method the investigators, who are teachers of literature in English actively participated in the classroom discussion with the students. In the process of the research, the investigators ceased to be teachers and turned subject facilitators by actively involving in the classroom discussion. Participatory method was effective for this study in the sense that it did not Only encourage the researchers in identifying closely with offers the group the opportunity to actively reflect together to explore the texts under discussion from different perspectives. At the level of observatory methodology, the researchers observed the students behaviour and responses for later analysis. With the students, it

Samples

The sample was made up of three senior secondary school students in Badagry central Local Government Area of Lagos State. The Students were mainly literature in English students from SSI (Senior Secondary School) to SS3 and those engaging in extramoral classes for West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) examinations. The sampled schools were Ajara Senior secondary school, Ajara, Badagry Senior Grammar School, Badagry and Sito Gbethrome senior Secondary school, Seme, all in Lagos State of Nigeria. In all, about 150 students were used as micro study for the research.

Procedure

The procedure for the teaching of the literature in English students adopted for this study. Goes thus:

- Introduction of the topic to the students either poetry, prose or drama
- Reading of the poetry to the students by the teacher.
- The teacher asked the student to read the essence of this is to prompt their participation

- The teacher asked the student to read the essence of this is to prompt their participation.
- The teacher dramatises (role play) some difficult stanzas to the students
- The teacher asked the student to dramatise (role play) it from their perspectives.
- The teacher engaged the student in participatory teaching.

Population

Three Senior Secondary Schools within Badagry Local Government Area were used as case study. One hundred and fifty students of literatures in English who cut across SS1-SS3 formed the population

Conclusion

From the research conducted in this study, the results have shown that certain methodologies or steps need to be taken by a literature-in-English teacher in taking a large class. For the teacher to evolve an intellectually robust class, he or she needs to adopt the understated steps in creating a Democratic Classroom Environment:

1. The teacher (facilitator in this case) introduces the students to a holistic and meaningful appreciation of the text being studied.
2. Create a positive classroom environment in which the text being studied will be valued through an extensive exploration of the content by allowing the students to collectively explore the plot, characters/characterisation, setting, theme and style.
3. Create open-ended discussion on the text for the students to react on. This helps them to demonstrate their understandings of the text in terms of its historical, cultural, social, economic and political milieu.
4. Allow the students to freely express their point of views as a means of formulating personal and critical responses to the text.
5. Structure the classroom interaction to enable the students to engage with the text, and develop individual responses to it.
6. Guide the students to explore connections between the text and the society.
7. Allow the students to form and articulate personal and critical responses to the text.

The application of the methodologies of Democratic Classroom Environment (DCE) through participatory communication, to the teaching of a large literature-in-English class allow the students to develop interest, broaden their exposure and develop the ability to engage with the text's diverse issues.

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