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# LITERACY AND READING IN NIGERIA

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VOLUME 5

Edited by

*Timothy O. Oyetunde*  
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# **LITERACY AND READING IN NIGERIA**

## **VOLUME 5**

Selections from the Proceedings of the  
Third Biennial Conference of the Reading  
Association of Nigeria held in Owerri,  
September 11-16, 1989.

**Edited by**

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**Foreword**

The publication of this fifth volume of *Literacy and Reading in Nigeria* marks the 9th year since the inception of the Reading Association of Nigeria. The articles in this volume attest to the significant growth in the quality and breadth of reading research in Nigeria during this period. There is clear evidence of on-going scholarly work at all levels of literacy development. In the early years of the existence of the Reading Association of Nigeria one major undertaking was that of creating an awareness of the widespread reading failure in Nigerian schools. It is regrettable that this situation in the schools has not improved. However, the first step to solving a problem is recognition that the problem exists, and RAN has made tremendous progress in this area.

The theme of RAN's 4th Biennial Conference, out of which this volume emanated, was 'Toward Functional Literacy.' This theme was particularly timely in the light of the United Nation's designation of the years 1990 - 2000 as International Literacy Decade. RAN's commitment to promoting functional literacy is, therefore, in line with this world-wide effort to eradicate illiteracy by the year 2000. Thus, RAN is in a unique position to take up a leadership role in implementing the objectives of the International Literacy Decade in Nigeria. The challenge before RAN is both to serve to disseminate its accumulated knowledge of reading and literacy in Nigeria and to make its combined expertise available for literacy development in the Nation. This volume would support this effort, as its contents should serve to guide educational policy decisions at the National level as well as render practical information on reading instruction and literacy development for prospective and practicing teachers throughout the Nigerian educational system.

Joanne J. Umolu  
President  
Reading Association of Nigeria  
1989-1991

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**24****Some Factors Affecting Readers'  
Reactions To English Texts in Nigeria****WALE ADEGBITE**

### Introduction

This author intends to observe the influence of certain socio-personal factors on the responses of some readers to two English texts and examine the implications of the findings for English textual studies in Nigerian universities. Two assumptions that thus underlie this study are that certain social and personality factors can influence the attitudes of readers when they interpret texts (Dechant and Smith, 1977), and that such attitudes should be taken into consideration in drawing efficient and effective programmes of teaching English (Catford, 1959),

The two texts used in the study came from two different versions of *The Bible*, the *King James Version* and the *Living Bible*. (See appendix.) The two texts present the same information via different modes of expression. The questions addressed in the study are:

- a. Do both texts appeal to readers in the same way?
- b. Which of the two texts appeals more to readers and why?
- c. What implication(s) does the answer to 'a' and 'b' above have for textual studies in ESL institutions of higher learning?

### Research Design and Procedure

The data for this study come from responses to questionnaires administered to some students and lecturers of Obafemi Awolowo university, Ile-Ife in Nigeria. Out of the 150 questionnaires sent out, 147 were correctly filled and returned. Of this number, 120 were filled by final year undergraduate students of English studies while the remaining 27 were filled by lecturers in the Departments of English Language and Literature in English. The investigation is limited in this instance to the students and lecturers involved in the English studies programme because these people are the most concerned with teaching/learning the principles and methods of producing, interpreting and analyzing English texts in the country. The subjects of the study are also among the most well-equipped students and lecturers in the University to respond appropriately to English texts of various kinds.

The respondents were requested to answer five questions in the questionnaire given them. The first question required personal information about some social factors that may influence their reading attitudes such as education, sex, age and religion. The remaining four questions, shown below, asked for information pertaining to content, interpretation and attitudes to the text.

1. Are the two texts saying different things?  
Answer yes or no.
2. State briefly what you think the author is saying in each of the two texts.
3. Which of the texts appeals to you more?
4. Give reason(s) for your decision in.

### Findings of Investigation

The information about age showed that most (87%) of the students' ages fell between twenty one and thirty, while most of the lecturers (67%) belonged to the age

group of thirty-one to forty years. Sixty two of the student respondents were male while 93% of the lecturers were male. Also, 59% of the students were Christian while there were no Muslims among the lecturers. The respondents generally (97%) agreed that the texts had a similar information content, which is 'The Proclamation of Jesus Christ'. The level of education of respondents seems mainly to determine their text preferences. While 73% of students preferred the text from the *Living Bible*, because it is more 'readable', 'comprehensible' and 'less ambiguous' than the *King James Version*, only 24% of the lecturers preferred the same text. Instead, most members of the latter group (63%) indicated their preferences for the *King James Version* because, according to them, it is more 'pleasurable', 'poetic', 'compact', 'mystical' and 'spiritually challenging'. One very significant thing to point out here is that none of the students, indicated his preference for either text on the bases of the class of literary genre it belongs to or resembles. They may have been prevented from doing so by the design of our questionnaire, but the outcome seems to confirm our belief that the simplicity/difficulty of reading is of particular rather than of literary genres. For the younger ESL readers what was more important to them was to be able to understand the message of a text rather than how pleasurable the text is to them.

When we talk about the influence of religion on interpreting the texts in this study, it is clear that though Muslims are at a distinct disadvantage when we compare their level of familiarity with the text to their Christian colleagues, the difference of religion alone did not determine the way students reacted to texts. In other words, both Christian (68%) and their Muslim colleagues (82%) preferred the text from *The Living Bible*. There is not much difference (73% and 74%) between the responses of male and female students.

### Implications

One of the major findings of this study is that the level of educational attainment of readers affects their attitudes towards the two texts presented to them. For example, the higher levels of education of the lecturers enabled them to transcend the difficulty of a text and derive some pleasure from it as well as understand it. As this was not the case with the students, the question then arises whether students should be content with their ability to read and enjoy simple texts alone or whether they should also learn to read some useful but difficult texts as well. If so, then how can students achieve this?

One fundamental but persuasive error in English literary studies in Nigeria today derives from the wrong identification of difficulty in texts with particular genres. For example, an unwarranted bias against poetry has already been created in the minds of young Nigerian readers, as early as the first half of their secondary education, by teachers who always transfer their own biases against this genre to them. No justice can ever be done to English literary texts if one suggests a special treatment for one genre because it is assumed, quite falsely, to be more difficult than other genres.

In selecting texts for study according to their levels of difficulty, the suggestions of Bright and McGregor (1970) and Nutall (1982/1988) are relevant. The level of

difficulty can be assessed in each text, irrespective of the genre to which it belongs, in terms of its size, the degree of its linguistic simplicity/complexity, thematic relevance/absurdity, cultural familiarity/alienation, or a combination of some of these factors.

The selection of literary texts for reading and appreciation should be done on the basis of individual consideration of texts rather than consideration of genres. For once, let teachers select books for students to read and let the readers decide for themselves what pleasures they can derive from them.

### Conclusion

It is apparent in this study that different social factors can influence the responses to texts by different individuals. In particular, it has been demonstrated that the level of educational attainment of Nigerian learners of English can influence their attitudes towards the texts.

Although the investigation is rather limited in scope, there is no doubt that it has answered some useful questions pertaining to English literary studies in Nigerian universities. It has made us suggest, for example, that the selection and presentation of texts need not be based on the assumption that poetry is more difficult than prose and drama. For the accessibility or inaccessibility of a text lies in the respective linguistic, thematic and cultural properties of such a text as well as the reading ability and level of the individual reader. In this respect, the selection, ordering and presentation of English texts in ESL institutions of higher learning should be guided by the proper determination and assignment of texts to levels of education according to the varying degrees of linguistic, thematic and cultural difficulties of such texts.

### Appendix

#### *King James Version* (John 1: 1 - 14)

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the light that all men through him might believe. He was not that light, but was sent to bear witness of that light. That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own receiveth him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory as of the only begotten of the father) full of grace and truth.

*The Living Bible*

Before anything else existed, there was Christ with God. God has always been alive and is himself God. He created everything there is - nothing exists that he didn't make. Eternal life is in him, and this life gives light to all mankind. His life is the light that shines through the darkness - and the darkness can never extinguish it. God sent John the baptist as a witness to the fact that Jesus Christ is the true light. John himself was not the light; he was only a witness to identify it. Later on the one who is the through light arrived to shine on everyone coming into the world. But although he made the world, the world didn't recognize him when he came. Even in his own land and among his own people the Jews, he was not accepted. Only a few would welcome and receive him. But to all who received him, he gave the right to become the children of God. All they needed was to trust him to save them. All those who believe this are reborn - not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan - but from the will of God. And Christ became a human being and lived here on earth among us and was full of loving forgiveness and truth. And some of us have seen his glory of the only son of the heavenly father.

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