

The Teaching Strategies of Poetry in Two Selected Secondary Schools in Tarauni and Kumbotso Local Government Areas of Kano City

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Abstract

The fall in standard of education in Nigeria is often evaluated with the performance of students in terminal examinations handled by West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council. In the recent time, there have been reported cases of students' failure in Literature-in-English which has three genres (poetry, drama and prose). This paper limits its focus to poetry because it is often taken as the most difficult of all the genres of literature. Two schools were taken from Tarauni and Kumbotso local government areas of Kano. Students were selected with random sampling technique. These students were divided into experimental and control groups after the selection of ballot papers with yes or no written on them. Students in the experimental groups were taught by the researchers while the control groups were taught by their respective teachers. Comparing the pre-test and post-test of the experimental and control groups, it was found out that teaching strategies adopted by teachers have significant impact on the performance of students in Literature-in-English examination. In view of the findings, this paper, therefore, recommends that government should provide instructional materials in schools and teachers should be creative and dynamic in the course of teaching in their respective classrooms.

Keywords: Teaching strategies and academic performance; Classroom management; Students' academic performance in Literature-in-English.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Literature-in-English, one of the subjects examined by West African Examination Council (WAEC), National Examination Council (NECO) and Joint Admission and Matriculation Board (JAMB), has been attracting the attention of researchers and stake-holders owing to how it is taught in the country's secondary schools and the overall performance of students in the terminal and entrance examinations into the institutions of higher learning. The syllabi of literature-in-English of these examination bodies comprise the genres of poetry, drama and prose. Of these three genres, most students always find poetry very difficult to handle, perhaps because of how it is taught to them or their own level of comprehension of poetry texts.

This paper's concern is the teaching strategies adopted by teachers in the teaching of poetry, "a term applied to many forms in which human beings have given rhythmic expression to their most intense perceptions of the world, themselves, and the relationship of the two" (Holman and Harmon, 1992). The reasons for this attempt are comments often receive from students that they always find poetry difficult to understand and the general poor performance of students in the questions that centre on the genre of poetry. The poor performance of students in the genre of poetry is not peculiar to students from the northern part of Nigeria. The experience is similar to the performance of students in the south-west region of the country. The present researchers offer this view because of their experiences in the teaching and evaluation of the Literature-in-English in secondary schools located in the south west region. The experience in the south-west region of the country is consolidated with the current experiences in the northern region of the country.

1.2. Statement of the Research Problem

Poetry is the basis of literature (in any of the world languages). The classical era of Greek first recorded the use of poetry for formal and informal occasions. Since the classical period, some members of the audience/readers have been finding it difficult to comprehend the content of poetry in totality. This is connected with the use of language and the seriousness of themes particularly the lyrics, narrative and descriptive poems. The significance of literature as an interpretation of life makes it a subject in the terminal examinations conducted by West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO). In these examinations, students find it more difficult to perform very well in questions on poetry compared to their performance in other genres of literature, drama and

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prose. This observation is based on the previous experiences of the present researchers in the teaching of Literature-in-English at secondary level of education. Among the problems, perhaps, is the poor teaching strategy adopted by teacher in the teaching of poetry.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the academic variables that are responsible for failure of students in poetry. Other objectives are as follow:

- i. To investigate the contributions of instructional materials/technologies to the failure or success of students in the genre of poetry.
- ii. To consider classroom variables such as instructional methodologies and their impacts on the performance of students in the genre of poetry.

1.4. Research Questions

- i. In what capacities have instructional materials/technologies contributed to the failure of students in the genre of poetry?
- ii. How has classroom variables such as instructional methodologies contributed to the poor performance of students in the genre of poetry?

2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this paper focuses on two important variables in the title: poetry and teaching strategies. These variables are central to the understanding of the focus of this paper. Scholars and researchers have offered different views on the conceptualization of poetry and teaching strategies.

A simple definition of poetry is a genre of literature written in stanza. This definition reveals the essential feature/structure of poetry. The definition of poetry goes beyond the consideration of its structure. The significant feature of poetry is the metaphorical and creative use of language to express views and emotions of poets. In the light of this view, (Murphy, 1972) describes poetry with a consideration for a poet. In his view, Murphy avers:

A poet is a person who is usually more sensitive than most to the sights, sounds, and sensations of the world around him; to the behaviour of people, their follies, sufferings, their nobility, to the thoughts that humans ask about themselves and their world: Where do we come from? What are we doing here? Where are we going? More than this, the poet is a person who is capable of expressing these things in language. *The poet has some experience which he wants to express in words and he does this in the form of a poem.* (Emphasis, the present researchers).

The above descriptions of poets and poetry suggest that the text of poetry contains the complex and dynamic experiences of individual poets packaged with creative and imaginative use of language. Murphy's description of poets and poetry hinges on the use of sound and music to differentiate between poetry and other genres of literature. This view is consistent with (Dasylva and Jegede, 1997) opinion that:

What distinguishes poetry from other forms of literature is its exploitation of the resources of *language* and *music*. In other words, the distinguishing features of poetry are both intrinsic and extrinsic. The exploitation of the resources of language and music is such that is intense, more frequent and more discriminate than exist in other /forms of literature.

The strict imaginative use of resources of language and sound in poetry, perhaps, accounts for some difficulties that students face in the study of poetry. Dasylva and Jegede's view underlines the significance of sound and music in poetry through the mechanisms of rhyme, rhythm and other figures of sound such as onomatopoeia and pun. Poetry, therefore, is a method of literary expression which suggests by means of imagery, rhythm, and sound (Egudu, 2007).

Teaching strategies are simply the means adopted by teachers and instructors to impart knowledge in the learners. These teaching strategies are the traditional and scientific approaches to teaching-learning process for better performance of students. There are different teaching strategies that a teacher can adopt in the course of teaching. Among these strategies are metacognitive approach, case method, direct teaching, etc. For literature-in-English, some teaching strategies that can be adopted by teachers are drama method, direct teaching, excursion, discussion and interactive sessions particularly in the teaching of poetry. A teacher should know how and when to vary strategy in the course of teaching because a teaching-learning process may require different teaching strategies for effective learning. This view is consistent with Yelon (1996) opinion that:

To gain and keep students' attention, vary your instructional procedures. One simple thing to do within a lesson is to break up explanations with examples, demonstrations, practice, and feedback. That's enough variation to keep anyone alert. Vary your program format across lessons. Sometimes explain the idea to students; sometimes have learners discover the concept from examples you provide; sometimes have students discuss the meaning of a study; sometimes run a simulation. Have students work individually and in groups. Use varied techniques within a lecture. Use a series of short lectures followed by exercises, intersperse short readings or videos in the lecture, and ask students to briefly discuss a point with a partner or write a reaction to an issue during a lecture.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

Scholars have evolved and developed different theories in the enhancement of effective teaching-learning process across all disciplines and subject areas. This development does not exclude literature-in-English. Among the learning theories that have been appropriated into the teaching-learning process of literature-in-English are cognitive theory, behavioural theory, socio-cultural theory and transmission theory. Of all these theories, this paper adopts socio-cultural theory because of its empiricism in the analysis and interpretation of literary texts.

Socio-cultural theory developed from the seminal work of Lev Vygotsky, a psychologist. The theory sees teaching-learning process of literature-in English as an exercise which is within the reach of teachers and learners because of their shared socio-cultural experiences. As a contemporary of psychologists such as Freud, Skinner and Piaget, Vygotsky is of the view that peers, families, caregivers and the larger culture have influence in the shaping of learning and character of individuals. In Vygotsky's view, the basic tenet of sociocultural theory is that each culture has the capacity to make young learners learn effectively through "tools of intellectual adaptation" – the tools which allow children to utilize their mental capabilities in such ways that are adaptive to the culture of their immediate environment.

UNESCO (2014), submission on the sociocultural learning theory establishes its significance in the teaching-learning process of literature-in-English. UNESCO's submission validates Vygotsky's view as shown in the following words:

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning describes learning as a social process and the origination of human intelligence in society or culture [...] Vygotsky believed everything is learned on two levels. First, through interaction with others, and then integrated into the individual's mental structure [...] The implications of Vygotsky theory are that learners should be provided with socially rich environments in which to explore knowledge domains with their fellow students, teachers and experts.

Since literature-in –English is not made in a vacuum. The contents of literary texts are products of the immediate and remote experiences of the writers. In order to understand the intrinsic and extrinsic messages of literary texts in the course of teaching-learning process, teachers should relate the texts to the socio-cultural experiences of the learners.

3. Review of Literature

Considering the persistent poor performance of students in Literature-in-English, a number of researchers (Sanoto, 2017; Sesan, 2013) have carried out studies on how to improve the teaching-learning process for better performance. These researches focused on teaching methodology, measurement and evaluation strategies as well as classroom/space management in the teaching and learning of Literature-in-English.

Dickfors (2015), study focuses on the theoretical orientations in the teaching –learning process of Literature-in-English at high school level. In the study, Dickfors makes a comparison between socio-cultural theory and transmission theory. The comparison of the two theories hinges on the speculations that methodological approach to the teaching of Literature-in-English influences learning outcome and the performance of the students. His argument, therefore, is that appropriate theory will promote rewarding learning outcome in Swedish national high schools. What can be deduced from Dickfors' submission is that learning theory plays significant role in the promotion of better performance in Literature-in-English.

Sanoto (2017), examines the curriculum development and classroom interaction in literature classroom for the promotion of English as second language in Botswana primary school. Primary school level is where the love for reading and understanding of literature starts, and for the teachers to succeed in the teaching of reading and literature they need to display certain habits and practices in their English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms (Sanoto, 2017). Her study which adopted qualitative approach and case study was empirical through the use of verifiable data. She observed that some teachers teach literature without encouraging students to read recommended literary texts. This is one of the anomalies that cause poor performance of students in Literature-in-English examination.

Raji and Sesan (2013), examine the challenges involved in the teaching and evaluation of Literature-in-English in public examinations in Nigeria. They (Raji and Sesan) observed that poor teaching strategies always affect the understanding of students in the genres of literature taught to them. They argue that failure of students in Literature-in-English examinations can be traced to teacher's attitude to teaching and lack of competence. The core of the argument is that a teacher must have the mastery and understanding of the subject matter and the appropriate method(s) to be adopted in the course of teaching.

Sesan (2013), examines the management of space in a classroom and in the process of teaching-learning process of Literature-in English. He considers some variables contributing to space (mis) management in Literature-in-English classroom. He also avers that psychological disposition and readiness of a teacher contributes greatly to the better performance of students in Literature-in- English. Among the variables which constitute space in the Literature-in-English classroom are arrangement of the classroom, availability of instructional materials, duration of teaching and assessment. He also avers that psychological disposition and readiness of a teacher contributes greatly to the better performance of students in Literature-in- English.

The above review of literature demonstrates a common feature – None of the studies specifically focuses on poetry as a genre of literature. Each of the studies treats literature as a whole. This paper, however, focuses on poetry specifically because of the difficulty that students face in answering questions on poetry.

3.1. Population and Sampling Technique

Kano City has eight (8) local government areas: Fagge, Dala, Gwale, Kano Municipal, Tarauni, Nassarawa, Kumbotso and Ungogo. Two (2) of these local government areas (Tarauni and Kumbotso) are purposively selected based on the factors of proximity and convenience of data collection. Federal Government College (Ugwa Nku) in Tarauni Local Government and Workman Model Academy (Naibawa) in Kumbotso Local Government are selected for the study. Federal Government College (FGC) is selected because it is one of the best public secondary schools in Kano while Workman Model Academy is also selected because it is one of the best private secondary schools in Kano. The choice of private and public secondary schools is made in order to do a comparative study of instructional strategies in private and public secondary schools in Kano. The two schools were selected based on their good results in terminal examinations organized by West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO).

3.2. Structure of Poetry in Literature-in-English Examination

The structure of the syllabus of poetry in Literature-in-English is in two parts – African Poetry and non-African Poetry.

3.3. African Poetry

- (1) Birago Drop - Vanity
- (2) Gbemisola Adeoti – Ambush
- (3) Gabriel Okara - Piano and Drums
- (4) Gbanabam Hallowell - The Dinning
- (5) Lenrie Peter - The Panic of Growing Older
- (6) Kofi Awoonor - The Anvil and the Hammer

3.4. Non-African Poetry

- (1) Alfred Tennyson - Crossing the Bar
- (2) George Herbert - The pulley
- (3) William Blake - The School Boy
- (4) William Morris - The Proud King
- (5) Robert Frost Birches - Birches
- (6) William Shakespeare - Shall I compare thee to a Summer's Day?

The above makes a total of twelve (12) poems. Candidates are expected to study and understand all the poems because nobody can predict any poem that can be tested in the examination.

4. Methodology

The administrators of the two selected schools were approached for the permission to engage the students in the teaching of Literature-in-English, particularly the genre of poetry. After the approval of the school administrators had been got, the present researchers used simple random sampling to divide students offering Literature-in-English into two groups – experimental group and controlled group in each of the schools. The experimental group and control group in each of the schools were selected through balloting which contains *Yes* and *No*. Any student who picked *yes* was for experimental group and any student who picked *no* was for controlled group. Balloting through contains *Yes* and *No* was used to avoid double standard. It affords the researchers to randomly select the respondents without jeopardizing anybody's opportunity.

Since the two selected schools are not comparable (one public and the other private), the present researchers formed experimental and controlled groups in each of the schools to assess the performance of students in poetry in public and private secondary schools in Kano City.

The experimental group in each of the schools were given pre-test to ascertain their cognitive ability before the experimental teaching. After the pre-test, the students in the experimental group were subjected to committed and active teaching of poetry by the present researchers while the control group were receiving instructions from their teachers. The students in the experimental group were taught three times a week for a period two (2) months.

4.1. Procedure

The researchers taught the students in the experimental group the process and procedure of reading poetry for better understanding. The reference point of the present researchers is [Dasyuva and Jegede \(1997\)](#) instruction on how to read and understand poetry as given in the following words:

The first step is that you must learn to read a poem aloud; if you cannot do this, learn to read it attentively so that you hear the sounds of its words in your inner ear. The second step is to bear in mind always that some poems are simple, some complex, but no good poem yields all its meaning easily or at once. A good poem has to be read several times and *repeatedly* before it can be fully appreciated. Do not start by worrying about the meaning of the poem. Start by appreciating its sounds, noting the variety of sound receptions. Go on to know the meaning of the words used in the poem, and to determine whether the words have been used denotatively or connotatively. From here, identify the figures of speech and rhetorical devices used and their meanings. Then try to

determine who the speaker in the poem is, what his /her situation is, and what tone he/she uses.

Then go over the poem again (and again and again and again and ...)

Dasylyva and Jegede's instruction on how to read poetry was helpful in the teaching of the experimental group. Following the instruction of Dasylyva and Jegede, the present researchers encouraged each of the students in the experimental group to get a very good and standard dictionaries for their use in order confirm meanings of some words in chosen poem for discussion.

After the students had been taught how to read a poem, the present researchers carefully taught the students figures of speech, figures of sound, rhetorical and poetic devices, imagery, symbolism, rhyme and rhythm. The knowledge of this contributed a lot to the understanding of the poems. More emphasis was placed on the use of language to communicate in any chosen poetry for discussion and how the contents of the poem can be related with the events and happenings in the society. The present researchers adopted sociocultural theory to explain the poems and this yielded positively.

The present researchers adopted different approaches such as Socratic (inquiry) approach, discussion, case study, dramatization/role-play, practical demonstrations and use of realia (use of real objects). The adoption of different approaches was meant to ensure that experimental group had rewarding learning experience in relation to better academic performance.

For better illustration of how the experimental group was taught, two of the poems (one African poetry and one non-African poetry) are treated below.

4.2. Piano and Drums - Gabriel Okara

When at break of day at a riverside
I hear the jungle drums telegraphing
the mystic rhythm, urgent, raw
like bleeding flesh, speaking of
primal youth and the beginning
I see the panther ready to pounce
the leopard snarling about to leap
and the hunters crouch with spears poised;

And my blood ripples, turns torrent,
topples the years and at once I'm
in my mother's laps a suckling;
at once I'm walking simple
paths with no innovations,
rugged, fashioned with the naked
warmth of hurrying feet and groping hearts
in green leaves and wild flowers pulsing.

Then I hear a wailing piano
solo speaking of complex ways in
tear-furrowed concerto;
of faraway lands
and new horizons with
coaxing diminuendo, counterpoint,
crescendo. But lost in the labyrinth
of its complexities, it ends in the middle
of a phrase at a dagger point.

And I lost in the morning mist
of an age at a riverside keep
wandering in the mystic rhythm
of jungle drums and the concerto.

While teaching this poem to the students, the researchers read the poem aloud to the students and later allowed them (the students) to do independent reading of the poem. After the independent reading, the researchers started with proper class interaction with the adoption of different teaching strategies. One of the researchers who is also a specialist in instructional technology made available all the instructional materials needed for the discussion of the poem.

In order to provide proper imagery and symbol for the poem, there was a provision for piano and a set of drums. This helped in the explication of the poem. The discussion started with what piano and drums symbolize. It was discussed that piano symbolized Western/European culture and ideals while drums symbolize African culture and ideals. After the consideration of the symbols and imagery in the poem, close attention was paid to use of language, figures of speech, figures of sound and other rhetorical devices in the poem. This was done in close relationship with the arrangement of each of the stanzas. Before proceeding with the teaching, piano and drums were played for the students to master and study the difference in their sound. This was done to assist in the explanation that there are some differences in Western/European culture and African culture.

The students were tasked to provide raw meaning to the poem from the various reading attempts. Despite their reluctance, some of the students attempted raw interpretations of the poem. The researchers then began with the analysis and interpretation of the poetry considering its language and structure. The students were told that while reading a poem, there is always a need to consider subject matter, theme, diction and mood. All these variables will contribute to the understanding of the poem. In the light of this, the present researchers began the analysis and discussion of the poem with its subject matter.

The poem has four stanzas. The first and second stanzas of the poem discuss drums and essential qualities of African culture. The third and fourth stanzas, on the other hand, discuss piano and essential qualities of Western/European culture. The poem contrasts the rustic African life style with the European life style as evident in African societies. Through a proper lexical choices and discourse markers, the poet reveals a sudden transition from the rusticity of African life to the refined European life style as shown in material and immaterial aspects of the two cultures. In the last stanza of the poem, the poet expresses nostalgia (feeling of loss) for the past rustic African life that have been affected by the 'modernity' which was ushered in by the Europeans.

After the discussion of the subject matter of the poem, the present researchers started with the analysis of the poem. While doing this, the experimental students were told to check the meanings of some words up in their respective dictionaries. Among the words they were asked to check up in their dictionaries are "jungle", "mystic", "raw", "rugged", "diminuendo" and "concerto". These words provide proper imagery for better understanding of the poem. One interesting thing about this approach is that the students were able to have a quick understanding of the poem. This is because they were able to create a mental image of the symbols deployed by the poet to communicate his poetic thought. The words "jungle", "mystic", "raw" and "rugged" present the rusticity and simplicity of African life before contacts with Europeans. "Coaxing diminuendo" and "concerto", on the other hand, present some levels of complexity that characterize European culture. The poetic persona (the character in a poem) expresses confusion which follows the Afro-European contacts (the contacts between African people and European people) with the expression "but lost in the labyrinth of complexities". With the consideration for the explicit and implicit use of language in the poem, one can easily come to the conclusion that the poem is all about contact of two cultures and its attendant problem.

After the language of the poem had been considered, the present researchers shifted to the figures of speech, figures of sound and other rhetorical devices deployed by the poet. In the poem, there are uses of figures of speech such as simile, metaphor and personification as well as figures of sound such as alliteration and onomatopoeia. The researchers focused discussion on the significant contributions of all these figures of speech and figures of sound to the better understanding of the whole poem.

4.3. The Pulley – George Herbert

Having a glass of blessings standing by,
Let us, said he, pour on him all we can:
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.
So strength first made way;
Then beauty flowed; then wisdom, honour, pleasure.
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that, alone of all his treasure,
Rest in the bottom lay.
For, if I should, said he,
Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So should both losers be.
Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness:
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast.

This is a non-African poem. The same approach that was used in the teaching of the African poem as discussed above was used in the discussion of this poem. Since the poem has a religious undertone of creation story and relationship between God and human beings, the researchers began the teaching by asking the students simple questions on creation story. The common position of the students is that God created human beings and that He (God) expects human beings to always worship Him. After the responses of the students, the researchers give the subject matter of the poem.

As mentioned earlier, the poem has religious undertone. It discusses how God created humans in the world and His eventual resolutions to make humans appreciate and worship Him. In the poem, it is said that after God created humans, He gave strength, riches, beauty, wisdom, honour and pleasure. Realizing human follies, God refused to give rest. The reason for this is that lack of rest will always push human beings back to him. Though the poem is short, it offers some lessons about the ways of life in this turbulent world. For proper explication of the subject

matter of the poem, references were made to Bible and Quran to compare the creation story and the relationship of God and human beings.

Though the language of the poem is simple, the present researchers still consider the poet's choice of language for effective communication. In the light of this, the researchers asked the students to look up the meanings of some words in their respective dictionaries. Among the words that the students were asked to check are "stay", "repining", "weariness" and "toss". The denotative and connotative meanings of the words were explained to the students within the context of the poem. At the end of the analysis, the students understood the reasons for human restlessness in the world: the rich and the poor are restless.

After this, the present researchers considered the figures speech, figures of sound and other rhetorical devices deployed in the poem. The whole poem makes use of metaphor to present recklessness of human beings when they are in too much comfort. The poet also makes use of contrast in the form of oxymoron (placing of two contrasting words side by side) to show the mechanism that God put in place to ensure that human beings come back to Him. This situation is expressed in the following lines "If goodness lead him not, yet weariness".

The controlled groups that were taught by their teachers were taught in usual conventional way of teaching. The present researchers observed teaching strategies adopted by the teachers: they read the poem aloud to the students without engaging the students in active interactions. At the end of the class, they made the students copy very long notes. This teaching strategy did not produce rewarding experience because the classroom was always monotonous and boring.

4.4. Evaluation

In order to validate the view that teaching strategies were responsible for the poor performance of students in the teaching of poetry, a genre of literature-in-English, the present researchers evaluated the students. Experimental and controlled students were subjected to post-test. After the whole teaching encounter, the two groups of students were given another evaluation (posttest). The questions were structured in two parts: twenty (20) multiple choice questions (MCQs) and four (4) free response questions (essay questions) taken from African poetry and non-African poetry. The observation was that students in the experimental group performed far better than students in the controlled group.

5. Findings

Many students find the learning and understanding of poetry, one of the genres of literature, difficult to understand because of some faults found in the instructional strategies of teachers of Literature-in-English. Some of the teachers do not make the class engaging because of the use of traditional means of teaching. Though the teachers prepare lesson plan and lesson note, classroom delivery of the contents of the lesson plan/note is equally important.

Most schools do not have proper and effective instructional materials that can stimulate/simulate learning. This makes learning of poetry monotonous, boring and uninteresting to the learners. At the end, a good number of students lose interest in learning the subject.

Teachers and students rely on revision textbooks such as *Exam Focus* and *Essential* on Literature-in-English. This development has made the teachers and students become lazy in reading. In fact, the students of today do not engage in critical and creative reading that poetry and other genres of literature require.

Recommendations

Qualified and competent teachers should be recruited in secondary schools to teach Literature-in-English. The teachers should be individuals who studied English and Literary Studies, Classics and English Education. These individuals will have the mastery of the subject matter while individuals with no teaching qualification should be encouraged to undertake postgraduate diploma in education.

Related to the above is the in-house training for teachers. This practice will impart positively on the competence and performance of teachers. This in-service training may take the form of refresher courses that will keep the teachers abreast of the trends and latest discovery in the teaching-learning process. Teachers will develop self-awareness of what they have been doing right or otherwise in the course of teaching.

Government should contract the services of instructional technologists to equip public secondary schools with the modern facilities of teaching. Government should not also forget to assist in the library development because some of these students do claim that they cannot afford the purchase of some of the recommended literary texts.

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