

A Balanced Activity Approach to the Teaching Learning of Essay Writing In English in Nigerian Secondary Schools

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Abstract: The study recognizes the primacy of good expressive power in career and academic success. This however is generally lacking in the written expression of majority of our graduates. Since these noticed communication problems are carry over from the secondary school, the study contends that the problem should be addressed at the secondary school level. In the process of assisting the students, the writer examines different methods of teaching essay writing in Nigerian secondary schools, e.g., the traditional and the input hypothesis methods. Looking at the inadequacies of the two methods, balanced activity approach was recommended. This is a method whereby the traditional method of teaching and the input hypothesis (such as reading novels, plays, magazines and journals) are combined to teach essay writing in schools and colleges. The method was tested on two groups of students in South and North local government areas in Ogbomoso, Oyo State. The first group was the experimental group, while the second group was the control group. It was discovered that the experimental group performed better than the control group in terms of expression. The study therefore, concludes that students should be assisted with comprehensible input in addition to the traditional method of teaching essay writing.

Key words: Essay writing, written expression, traditinal method of teaching, secondary schools, hypothesis

INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively is central to success in many walks of life. This ability entails learning different language skills which include listening, speaking, reading and writing in that order. The skills are organized in such a way that one precedes the other. According to Lee and Allen (1963) no one of them can be taught or learnt without others being directly or implicitly involved. In other words, the acquisition of the language skills is based on the premises that one must listen first, before speaking, reading and writing the language. Out of the four language skills according to Afolayan and Newsum (1986) writing seems to be the most complex and the most difficult.

Adesanoye (1976) observes that the average Nigerian undergraduate writes inadequate English, if only in terms of the mechanics of the language. Also, Landy (1976), Odejide (1980) and Ekong (1981) agree with Adesanoye (1976) that written expressions of Nigerian students from the upper forms of the primary school up to the university level is not high enough. Landy (1976) is of the opinion that minimal degree of correctness is essential in the writings of Nigerian students. He stresses the need for

correct written expressions in business, communication, civil service and education. He further states: A graduate who consistently misspells, confuses commas with full-stops, transposes or makes other egregious grammatical blunders, puts a barrier between himself and success.

The need for good written expressions in the English language as pointed out by Landy (1976) becomes very profound especially when the university graduates enter into the job market. There, letters and memos would be written, files would be treated, reports of meetings and conferences would be presented in the written form of the English language. At this junction, many of these graduates because of their inadequacy in the written form of the language which is the official language in Nigeria expose themselves to the world as unworthy of the degree awarded to them.

It must be pointed out here that today in many schools and colleges, even at the tertiary institutions, teachers are complaining bitterly about the awful written expressions of their students. Many of these teachers lecturers are now attributing this to the ineffective teaching learning of the English language in Nigerian schools and colleges. Some scholars even specifically advocated for the change of the use of English syllabus

in the higher institutions of learning. More specifically, Odejide (2003) expresses her concern on the issue of what to teach and how to teach it while Azeez (2001) studies felt and actual needs of students of University of Technology for writing skills. Fola-Adebayo (2004) acting on Odejide (2003) on what to teach and how to teach it presents materials used in teaching lecture comprehension in the Federal University of Technology, Akure. This researcher is of the opinion that students should be properly groomed in the art or writing from the upper forms of the primary school up to the secondary school level so that less work would be left for the university teachers. This will help to obtain adequate results since it is at this level that the rudiment of the language in being taught and acquired.

It is relevant to point out at this stage that this study concentrates on the secondary schools level only. There are two reasons for this. First, there is hardly any doubt that the secondary school is the level of formal education at which most Nigerian learners of English really begin to learn and use the language. Of course, English, being a second language, is mainly acquired through formal education. While some rudimentary English is learnt in the primary school, such knowledge of English can hardly be said to represent what can be regarded as the nucleus of English in Nigeria. Yet, only a few of those who graduate from the secondary school proceed to higher institutions. Indeed, very few of such students study English as a main course.

Secondly and in view of the first reason above, secondary school leavers constitute the bulk of English language speakers in Nigeria. It is reasonable therefore, to concentrate on the secondary school level in one's effort to provide a solution to the poor written expression of Nigerian students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Teaching of english essay writing in a second language

situation: At this point, it is necessary to bring it to focus that various approaches had been advocated for the teaching learning of English writing skills in a second language situation. Among many others are Meckel (1968), Adesanoye (1980), Krashen (1977), Ellis (1982) and Harmer (1983). Let us look at the methods in turn.

Traditional method of teaching essay writing: The traditional method of teaching writing skill has been described as the conscious learning of a list of structures or functions which might be based on natural order or not. This method involves indiscriminate and endless drilling order. The method has been criticized as not yielding adequate result in terms of performance. Krashen (1977)

therefore, introduced the input hypothesis method of teaching learning English in a second language situation.

Input hypothesis of teaching: This hypothesis made a distinction between acquisition and learning. Krashen (1977) described acquisition of a language as subconscious process, which results in the knowledge of a language and describes learning a language as a conscious process, which results in 'knowing about' the language. He emphasizes that is learnt is not available to the language user in communicative situations. This means that the language would not naturally spring to his mind without the user having to think about it. In a spontaneous interaction, the user of a learnt language, as a result of formal study, is highly likely to resort to hesitant and ineffective communication.

Acquired language on the other hand as described by Krashen (1977) is a language that is instantly available to the language user. It has been exposed to the language and has internalized it. In other words, Krashen (1977) is of the opinion that the 'best' methods are therefore those that supply comprehensible input in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear or read. The methods he argues further don not force early production in the second language but allow students to produce when they are ready. He recognize that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input and not from forcing and correcting production.

Simply and precisely put, the input hypothesis states that students who get comprehensible input acquire language, but that language which is studied can never be part of the acquired store. Conscious learning in the classroom does not help acquisition, although it may help a language performer to monitor his output. The input hypothesis, therefore, suggests that the class, time, material, syllabus and teaching should be solely geared to providing our students with comprehensible input (language that is adapted to the level at which the student can understand what they hear or read) with a bit of 'cosmetic' conscious learning. The implication of this hypothesis is that conscious language learning, that is, traditional method of teaching should largely be abandoned. Smith did not totally agree with this hypothesis. He argues that both implicit knowledge about language (as the result of comprehensible) input and explicit knowledge (as the result of conscious raising) may stimulate the acquisition process.

A balanced activity approach: Harmer (1983) late built on Krashen's (1977) input hypothesis. He stressed the importance of a 'Balanced activity approach'. That is, the implicit and explicit kind of knowledge about a language are need for effective acquisition of a language. This

approach agrees with the outcome of the deliberations of American scholars and educators recorded in *The Basic Issues in the Teaching of English* that seeks co-ordination between composition and literature. The literature composition approach stresses that the literature read by students should form the basis of their written composition. The main contention of this approach is that one can develop writing skills through careful study of specific techniques in reading passages and through an imitation of such techniques.

The experiment described in this paper was conducted to determine if a particular teaching method (Balanced activity approach) could improve essay writing of Nigeria Senior Secondary School students or not.

Sample procedure sample size: Forty senior secondary school leavers were sampled in two extra-mural centers one each in Ogbomoso North and Ogbomoso South Local government Areas. The choice was based on the consideration that the students were training for the next West African Examination School Certificate paper. A random selection of 40 students, 20 from each centre, was made, a conservative 25% of the total population of the senior secondary school extra-mural class at the centers. The centers were labeled group A and B. The first group, A was the experimental group. This was the group sampled at Ogbomoso North Local Government Area. The group sampled at Ogbomoso South Local government Area, that is group B was made the control group. This was done so that the two groups would not be able to have any interaction that would influence their performance. Variables such as age, sex and socio-economic background were recognized, but they were not taken into consideration in the present study. This is because it is assumed that whoever fails and consequently attends extra-mural classes still needs to further improve on his/her performance on matter his/her previous level of competence.

Instruments: The instruments used were the pre-test, the training and the post-test materials. The pre-test materials were selected from the senior secondary school certificate examination on english essay writing. A marking guide used for marking the senior secondary school certificate examination in english essay writing was used for scoring the students. This was done for validity and reliability purposes.

RESULTS

The pre-test: The same pre-test was administered to the two groups on essay writing to find out whether there would be differences in their level of performance.

Table 1 shows the level of performance of the two groups before the training commenced. Table 1 shows subjects' overall performance in all areas of assessment in the pre-test English essay writing. The table further shows that the performance of both the control and experimental groups are poor in all areas of assessment. From the table, one can deduce that the two groups needed additional training in essay writing.

The training procedure: The 2 groups were taught the same way by the same teacher i.e., the researcher, using the traditional method of teaching writing skill (the conscious learning method). In addition to this, the experimental group had the advantage of reading a novel a week with other materials like newspaper features, journals, magazines and periodicals. These were brought to class by the teacher for the subjects to study from home.

Assignments were given to them on each novel read. The teacher usually checked the assignment for a few minutes before the teaching proper began. The teacher would appraise the work done by the students and stress the importance of reading extra-materials outside the classroom work. The result was highly encouraging. After a few weeks, the learners were able to buy more novels themselves to supplement the ones given then in class. Also, some of them were able to write short stories, which they presented in class.

On the other hand, the control groups were also making encouraging progress. They were able to utter simple and correct sentences but usually in the middle of their discussion, they were usually in want of words. Their thought units were usually largely jointed. Some of

Table 1: Subjects' overall performance in the pre-test english essay writing

Area of assessment	Subject	No	Mean	(%) score
Essay content	Experimental group (A)	20	4.1	41
Marks obtainable 10	Control group (B)	20	4.5	45
Organization	Experimental group (A)	20	4.8	48
Marks obtainable 10	Control group (B)	20	4.8	48
Expression	Experimental group (A)	20	9.2	46
Marks obtainable 20	Control group (B)	20	9.2	47
Mechanical accuracy	Experimental group (A)	20	4.5	45
Marks obtainable 10	Control group (B)	20	4.4	44

Table 2: Subjects' overall performance in the pre-test english essay writing

Area of assessment	Subject	No	Mean	(%) score
Essay content	Experimental group (A)	20	5.9	59
Marks obtainable 10	Control group (B)	20	5.2	52
Organization	Experimental group (A)	20	6.2	62
Marks obtainable 10	Control group (B)	20	5.4	54
Expression	Experimental group (A)	20	12.3	62.5
Marks obtainable 20	Control group (B)	20	11.4	57.0
Mechanical accuracy	Experimental group (A)	20	5.4	54
Marks obtainable 10	Control group (B)	20	5.1	51

them were not able to discuss in class for one reason or the other. At the tail-end of the exercise, the teacher revised the whole process of essay writing with the two groups and asked them few questions which they answered impressively. Later, the same essay given as pretest was administered as a post-test essay topic on the two parties and the same marking guide used in grading all the scripts. The results of their write-ups were presented in Table 2.

DISCUSSION

As indicated earlier, there were two groups the experimental group (subjects 1-20) and the control (subjects 21-40). Table 2 indicates the post-test essay writing results. It is interesting to note that the 2 groups have improved considerably in all areas of assessment. Going through the expression section, it is obvious that the two groups made considerable improvement considering the poor marks scored in the pre-test essay writing result. Although the two groups made a considerable improvement in the area of expression, yet it must be pointed out that group A performed slightly better than group B, the control group. This difference could be attributed to additional materials read by the experimental group. They might have been exposed to more expressions from the additional materials read. By this, they must have internalized some expressions used in writing their post-test essay. This probably might have accounted for their higher scores the area of expression. This indicated that the more the good expressions a learner comes across in a second language situation the more he is likely to produce accurate sentences that are void of grammatical mistakes and punctuation.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that even though the traditional method of teaching English Essay Writing is good, better results would be obtained if teachers could employ the Balanced Activity Approach that stresses the importance of additional reading materials alongside the conscious learning process of teaching English Essay Writing. It is therefore, suggested that teacher should introduce their students to additional reading materials like novels, plays, short stories, poems, journals and magazines. This will expose students to new experience and expressions that they could use whenever occasion warrants.

No teacher, however rich, could supply all the additional reading materials a class needs. It is therefore suggested, that each secondary school should strive hard

to provide a suitable library where relevant reading materials would be made available for students. Lastly, it is strongly recommended that literature in English should be made compulsory in all secondary schools.

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