

The Problems of Teaching and Marking English Language Essays in Large Classes in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Some Panaceas

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Abstract: Numerous research works have studied the problems of poor performance in English language examinations in Nigeria and have identified a number of hindrances to poor performances. One such hindrance which has enjoyed a flimsy attention is the challenges of large classes to teachers of English language especially with respect to teaching and marking of English language Essays. While a few works have concentrated on possible pedagogical strategies teachers may adopt in coping with the problem of large classes, none, it seems, has dwelt on specific pedagogical strategies teachers of English language may adopt in teaching and marking essays of students in oversized classes. This paper discusses useful strategies the teacher of English language in secondary schools may adopt so that teaching and marking of essays in large classes become less cumbersome for the teacher, highly rewarding for the learners and time-saving for the overall school programme. Suggesting some panaceas: introducing essays at the beginning of terms, practically discussing the format of essays, random marking of scripts of a few students in classes, discussing the marked scripts in classes, conducting essay exams after the mid-term break and, discussing the correction before the terminal examinations; the paper argues that these will reduce the teacher's stress, benefit the students immensely and make for timely completion of the scheme of work.

Keywords: English language, essay writing, large classes, marking, students.

I. Introduction

It is no more news that a very large number of students in Nigerian schools, year in year out, perform poorly in public English language examinations. This ugly trend has posed a daunting challenge to researchers and educators who have continually devoted a large body of research works to solving the perennial problem of woeful academic performances in English language examinations. Governments, educators, parents and stakeholders in the teaching-learning enterprise who considered the trend as unacceptable have continuously lamented the dastard performances of students in English language certificate examinations. Their apprehension is largely borne out of the fact that English language occupies a very special position in the education of a typical Nigerian student and as such, every effort must be mustered to ensure a good performance for him/her in English language examinations. To him/her, it is the language of interaction within the school among school mates and teachers and, outside the school with peers and, in the near future, a language of diverse opportunities. While a good grasp of English language helps the learner to grasp easily other school subjects, it is also the important subject that ensures promotion from one class to another as well as admission to post secondary education.

Scholars like Oluikpe (1981) and Banjo (1981) stress in worrying terms the deplorable condition of English language teaching and learning as well as the deteriorating level of proficiency of English among secondary school and university products. Public examination bodies too have not been left out as such bodies as WAEC, NECO and JAMB have testified to the poor performances of our secondary school students through the series of poor results rolled out every year. Adejare cited in Jowitt (1991) regrettably laments that despite the government's investments in teaching and learning of the subject, there seems to be no positive results. He avers that 'the nation's huge investment in the English language appears not to be yielding any substantial dividends. The percentage and quality of passes in the subject at the primary and secondary school levels are disconcertingly low nation-wide' (p. 25). Jowitt, confirming the deterioration in English language acquisition, posits that:

'though the general position of English in national life is perhaps stronger than it has ever been, the quality of the English spoken and written by Nigerians is perceived by most Nigerians qualified to judge to have been deteriorating over a long period' (1991, p. 25).

Like the earlier scholars, later researchers have also been singing the same bleak song. A few of these scholars, including Odusina and Maduekwe (1992, 1993), Akere (1995), Ogunleye (1999), Adegbile (2006), Oluremi (2012), Njemanze (2012) have therefore been probing into the causes of mass failure in English language in both internal and public examinations and, suggesting ways of ameliorating the problems. For instance, according to Odusina and Maduekwe (1992, 1993), a major problem in the area of teaching English as a second language is the shortage of foreign textbooks. They claim that since available Nigerian books are not written within the readability level of the students, a lot of students read at frustration level. Ogunleye (1999) argues that incessant strikes by the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and constant closure of schools affect performances in English language while Adegbile (2006) argues that a reason for students' woeful performances in examinations is that the teachers lack communicative competence in English. The Federal Government of Nigeria in the National Policy on Education (2004, p. 26) states categorically that 'no education system may rise above the quality of its teachers'. Therefore incompetent teachers can only create further problems for learners. Further, while Faleke and Ibrahim (2011) aver that GSM text messages and its orthography 'is gradually being adopted by Nigerian students' and 'would invariably adulterate the standard of English usage in Nigeria' (p. 61), Oluremi (2012) subscribes to the view that infrastructure plays a major role in the teaching and learning of English Language and that negative consequences of lack of infrastructure are grave. The latter concludes that a basic school infrastructure should be a part of any plan to improve students' performances in English. Other problems identified by scholars include inconsistency on the part of government, the emergence of Nigerian English (NE), mother-tongue interference (Maduekwe, 2007, pp. 42 – 45), imbalance in learner/teacher ratio, learner readiness/ maturity, poor teacher/learner motivation, indiscipline among learners (and teachers), examination malpractice (Njemanze, 2012, pp. 50), as well as poverty (Lacour & Tissington, 2011).

However, the ugly trend persists and has continued to dog the footsteps of our students even as they move into and out of tertiary institutions. No wonder many of them find it difficult to express themselves in English. Since English is the language of education, wider communication and of opportunities, it is imperative that the language be effectively taught in schools so that our students achieve necessary competence in it. In order to achieve the necessary competence in English, Essay and Letter Writing aspect of the English language subject becomes greatly important to our students. This paper therefore focuses on the effective strategies of teaching, marking and assessing Essay and Letter Writing component of the English language paper in large classes. This becomes imperative given the fact that Essay Writing component of the English language accounts for fifty (50) of the total marks for English language in public examinations. Further, the trend in most of our public secondary schools today is that of oversized classes, a situation where a classroom teems with between eighty (80) and one hundred and twenty (120) students.

Given the above, it is therefore imperative to devise new pedagogical approaches to the teaching, marking and assessing of essays written by these large numbers of students within the inadequate available period in schools and to effectively communicate corrections to the students, so that performances in Essay/Letter Writing and, by extension, English language may be improved. In the process, the teacher of English language would come out with improved quality. Perhaps, this is why Ajibola (2010, p. 97) while discussing the challenges of teaching large classes claims that 'the challenges of teaching ESL students are also excitement and means of creating quality teaching'. Similarly speaking in support of large classes, Lewis and Woodward (1988), Ur (2000), Hess (2001), Xu (2001) and, Qi and Wang (2009) have raised a number of advantages of large classes which include fostering greater human resources, engendering novel ideas, opinions and possibilities, enhancing cooperative interactions, creativity and innovation among students.

II. Problems Associated With Teaching And Learning In Large Classes

We maintain from the outset that an important cause of mass failure in secondary schools today is the problem associated with large or oversize classes. While students are increasingly flooding our schools in search of education as a sure means of survival in this highly competitive society, the facilities provided by the governments in public schools – building structures, furniture, spacious and conducive environment, books and stationeries – are grossly inadequate to cater for the needs of our teeming students. The results of the above are many, chief of which is the difficulty teachers had to grapple with in managing large classes of students.

Interestingly enough, the problem of large classes have been studied by scholars. Scholars like Hayes (1997), Coleman (1989) and Ur (1996) have said a lot on the definition of a large class. From these, we conclude that a large class is one where the students are more than the teacher wishes to manage and where pedagogical resources are inadequate in relation to the number of students. On the problems associated with large classes, Locastro (2001) summarily classifies them into three of pedagogical, management-related and affective. Valerian (1991) posits that large classes not only affect the quality of teaching but they can also affect learners' concentration. Bailey and Nunan (1996) identify overcrowding, hindrance to teacher's movement in class and peer competition for teacher's attention as problems associated with large classes. Blatchford (2003)

identifies distractions and greater tendencies that students may be off-task at their class works. Habeshaw, Gibbs and Habeshaw (1992) provide a lengthy outline of disadvantages of large classes some of which are: students do not have the information they need, it's difficult to keep track of everything, there isn't time to meet all the course objectives, there are not enough books in the library, students easily become socially isolated, students do not feel involved with the course, students do not get the individual help, students do not have independent learning skills, students do not feel valued and, staff feel powerless. Indeed, the problems associated with large classes are innumerable.

It is perhaps in recognition of these cluster of problems associated with oversize classes and the need to avert its repercussions that the National Policy on Education (NPE) in its introductory section (2004, p. iii) stated categorically one of the new policy innovations and changes in these words: 'in primary and secondary schools, there shall not be more than 35 and 40 pupils respectively to a class.' While the above in theory restricts the number of pupils in a secondary school classroom to a maximum of forty, the apparent reality shows that secondary school classrooms harbour larger students' population. In some public schools today, students have been well over one hundred in JSS classes. In addition to the problem of poor ventilation, poor acoustics, difficult task of classroom control, the teacher of English language Essay in such large classes would be tasking his brain and being on how to make teaching and learning take place, how to coordinate the learners themselves, how to go through Essays of these multitudes of learners and make appropriate comments after reading each essay. Thus, the problem of 'lack of consistency and determination on the part of government in fully implementing its own policies' (Maduekwe, 2007 p. 43) becomes an insurmountable burden on the shoulders of the teacher.

How then can teachers of English language who teach Essay and Letter Writing cope with teaching, marking and giving useful discussions to these large classes of students on written essays and letters? Before going into the discussion of the above question, it is imperative to examine the place of Essay and Letter Writing in the English language learning.

III. The Place Of Essay/ Letter Writing In English Language Acquisition

Just as English language is the most important paper in Secondary School Certificate Examinations, Essay writing is the most important part of the English language paper because it carries the highest number of marks. It is also the only paper through which the proficiency of students in English language can be effectively measured. The English language examination in the 2014 May/June WASSCE is divided broadly into three papers. Paper 1 which has the highest contribution to the success of a student in the English language exams is further divided into three parts of Essay/Letter Writing, Comprehension Passage and Summary Passage. These three have 50, 20 and 30 as their assigned marks respectively. The simple deduction from the above is that Essay/Letter Writing part of Paper 1 has the greatest contribution to the success of a student.

Allocating the highest number of marks to Paper 1, understandably, is due to the fact that assessing the essays and letters written by students is actually a means of assessing the overall linguistic competence of the students. In it, students' performances in the various aspects of grammar, expression, lexis, collocation, punctuation, vocabulary, etc, are assessed. It can thus be argued that a good performance in the essay component of the examination would place a student on an easy path to success. In fact, this paper argues that poor performances of students in English language examinations are largely as a result of poor performance in Paper 1 and, Essay/Letter Writing contributes greatly to that performance. Even when WASSCE saw the need to make changes in the pattern of the examinations, as reflected in the 2014 English language questions, such changes only reduced the number of Comprehension passages and Objective Tests.

Further a good grasp of Essay/ Letter Writingskills in secondary school would set a student on an easy path in coping with various academic tasks in institutions of higher learning. What with the GNS courses, the public speaking ability, seminar presentations in classes, the need to write letters of invitation, etc, as members of associations on campuses and many more. Having graduated, adult students still have a compelling need for English language: to write application letters, at oral interviews, at meetings, in work places, to communicate soundly among colleagues just to mention a few. These are the reasons all efforts must be surmounted to teach, mark appropriately and discuss the outcome of written essays with the students, even when we are confronted with the problem of oversize classes.

IV. Strategies For Teaching And Marking Essays In Large Classes

To ease the difficult task that the teacher of English language essay writing may face in the course of teaching and marking of essay scripts, certain strategies have been proposed. We are aware that researchers in the area of large language classes (e.g. Coleman, 1989; Nolasco & Arthur, 1988) have outlined some suggestions on how to handle learners in large classes. These include dividing the group into sub-groups, encouraging group cohesion by providing opportunities for frequent interaction, encouraging intergroup

competitions and, giving group assignments and encouraging organized group presentations. However, what we propose here are practical strategies which if adopted, teachers would find their work easier and interesting, students would enjoy better class participation and good learning and their English language examination results would improve.

4.1 Introducing essays at the beginning of terms

We propose that the teacher of English should introduce essay writing at the beginning of terms. Learners' enthusiasm towards learning and general school programmes tend to rise at the beginning of terms. Therefore, if, as part of the scheme of work in a term, there is the need to teach argumentative essays for instance, the teacher may start the term's work with the teaching of argumentative essay, even if the topic does not come first in the scheme of work. When early lessons – say three or more periods – are devoted to the teaching of an essay type, learners' readiness would be put to optimum use and there would be enough room before the end of the term to assess the students, the teaching and learning tasks and to have feedback.

4.2 Practical discussion of the essay format

During the introduction of the topic, the teacher must practically discuss and demonstrate the format/layout of the essay. For instance, he/she must demonstrate in practical terms that in writing an argumentative essay, there should be the title, vocative/opening greeting, the specific position of the student (whether speaking for or against) and, statement and rational organisation of the argument should not merely be verbally discussed. In fact, each step in writing the essay must be practically demonstrated by the teacher and written on the chalk/white board. In addition to being given notes which they would have to read at their own time, students should be made to show their grasp of the lessons by practising what they have been taught in class. Corrections would follow certain unimpressive attempts by the students while they too would have the opportunity to ask further questions. This way, the lessons remain lasting in their memory. The teacher must make sure that all the students gain from the lessons. This can be ensured when the teacher makes the lessons lively and interesting. English language classes are generally expected to be practical, interactive and lively. The teacher has to move round the class while teaching, sit awhile around some students and change positions in class. At the end of the introductory lessons of a specific essay type, the teacher must not leave the class until he/she has given them an essay question as homework or assignment. Because of the large number of students and the inadequacy of time to mark the essay scripts, the teacher may start by giving short assignments such as making students to write the introductory part of the essay. At another time, the homework may that students give and develop two points (as two paragraphs) in support of a motion.

4.3 Random marking of scripts of a few students in class

The teacher then devotes the next two or three periods to reading the students' essays in class. First, the teacher must ensure that all the students attempted the assignment. This becomes only possible when disobedient students are disciplined accordingly. Because the students are very many, the teacher would not normally be able to read through all the students' assignments. Having now written a full length essay, the teacher is advised to randomly select between three and five students whose essays he/she reads during a particular lesson. To ease the problem of teaching large language classes, the teacher may divide the students into small groups and select an essay from a group during a period. Here, the teacher has a number of tasks to perform at the same time. He picks the first essay and calls the student to stand in front of the class. The teacher then reads the essay to the class while taking time to note and correct the errors therein. Some of these errors and their corrected forms should be written on the chalk/white board so that other students also benefit by writing them down in their books. This is the most interesting part to students because it affords them the opportunity to engage in rewarding group discussions, make jest of others' errors and mistakes that are pointed out by the teacher while they themselves benefit by learning from such errors and mistakes. At this point too, the teacher should allow for a degree of noise because students would make jest of other's wrong use of tense, punctuation errors, expression errors, subject-verb disagreement, wrong choice of prepositions, spelling errors and so forth. In short the few randomly marked scripts should be fully discussed in classes.

Finally, the teacher should award marks as expected (using the standard C, O, E, MA), append his/signature on the read and corrected work before going to the next essay. If this method is adhered to, a teacher of Essay would be able to read about four or five students' essays per period and, between fifteen and twenty-five essays per week. When it is time to treat another type of essay, say narrative essay, the teacher would have to randomly pick again, but from among the students whose essays had not been read in class before. In this way, no student would have the false confidence that their essay may never be read, as a result of being in a large class.

Of greater importance is the fact that all the students in that class would have learnt the rudiments of the essay writing (say argumentative essay) as well as some correct forms of the English language. If the teacher is watchful enough, he/she would soon note that the corrected forms of the language would soon be featuring in the students' expressions within and outside the class; a signal that real learning is taking place.

4.4 Conducting essay exams after the mid-term break

Further, to ease the task of the teacher of English language, the teacher should seek permission from the school to conduct the essay component of the English language examinations immediately after mid-term break. In fact, the best time to conduct the essay exam for large classes is immediately the school resumes after the mid-term break. This would afford the teacher ample opportunities not only to mark the lengthy passages of essays before the examination proper but also to have time to pay close attention to each of the scripts. While marking the essays, the teacher is advised to take note of prevalent errors in the scripts of the students. Thus, the teacher would still have enough time to correct and discuss the observed errors in the essay scripts of students. Students should always be made to write all the corrected forms in their notebooks for easy reference.

However, if the essay component of the English language exams is delayed and conducted alongside all other examinations towards the end of the term, it would be very difficult for the teacher to mark hundreds of essay scripts after the school examinations in addition to the task of marking comprehension, summary, and the objective parts of English language, especially when the school would be going on holidays. In such cases where teachers are on a deadline to finish up on time, teachers would only hastily run their red pens over the scripts and award marks based on personal intuition.

4.5 Discussing the correction before the terminal examinations

The next task of the teacher of Essay/Letter Writing is to discuss the noted errors in class before the examination proper, because any correction done and learnt in essay writing is valuable in all the other aspects of English language. To be able to discuss the errors in the essay scripts of students properly, it is necessary for the teacher to write out the erroneous words, phrases or clauses on the black/chalk board for students to see so that some of them may make attempt to correct the errors. However, whether the willing students succeeded in correcting them or not, the teacher should still explain the correction in his/her own language. Specifically, errors bordering on grammatical rules (tense, number, comparison), the correct use of conjunctions and connectives, prepositions and determiners, sentence structures (simple, complex, compound, etc.), clause and clause types, use of punctuations, paragraphs and paragraph development and hints on the outline of essay/letter writing should be practically discussed and corrected in class again and again.

When these are done for a term, the teacher would begin to see the signs of improvement in the students. First, the students would begin to watch out to correct one another in their use of English even in interactions outside the class. By the time they wrote their exams at the end of the term, a watchful teacher of English language would note that even in answering questions on their Comprehension and Summary passages and, in attempting the Objective part of English language, their written English expressions and linguistic cognition are improving. Such a teacher only needs not to relent before the students would sit for Certificate exams and good results would flow in.

V. Conclusion

This paper has delved into the problems associated with large or oversize classes as they particularly hinder the teaching and learning of English language Essay writing in Nigeria, which in turn has greatly contributed to the poor performances of students in English language examinations. The paper discussed the important place of Essay (and Letter writing) component of the English language examinations and the exceptional efforts the teachers of English would embark upon to ensure that proper teaching and learning takes place, even in the midst of outrageous number of students in classes. Specifically, the paper suggested introduction of essays at the beginning of terms, practical discussions of the format of essay, random marking of scripts of a few students in class, discussion of the marked scripts in class, conducting essay exams immediately after the mid-term break and, discussing the correction before the terminal examinations. If these suggestions are employed, the paper argues that it would ease the difficult task of the teacher, students would learn better even in their very large classes, the English language syllabus would be completed in due course and students' results would improve greatly.

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