



**PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO THE TEACHING OF THE
DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY IN SELECTED SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN FAGGE
LGA.**

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Abstract

Participatory approaches to the teaching of essay writing studies the role these approaches play in the teaching of the descriptive essay in SS II classes in two senior secondary schools of Fagge LGA. The participatory approaches of conferencing, revision and self-assessment were employed for a six week period to teach descriptive to an experimental group. The instrument was the 2012 SSQE (Senior Secondary School Qualifying Examination). The results indicate a significant difference in the mean scores of the experimental group who improved significantly in the areas of content, organization and mechanical accuracy- over the control group. Recommendations were made in favor of the use of participatory approaches in the teaching of essay writing.

Key words: participatory, approaches, experimental, group, instrument, essay.

Introduction

Participatory approaches to learning are active strategies that encourage students to think for themselves, work together, and get involved in all teaching activities. Conferencing, journaling, revision and interaction with textbooks are some of the many process-based participatory approaches to the teaching of essay writing in secondary schools. The main focus of these approaches is on learners, as they are mostly involved in the writing task (Auerbach, 1992). A participatory approach sets out a clearly defined outcome. Essay writing is topic-based and does not accommodate extraneous or irrelevant material. It involves many skills that must be mastered and these cannot be taught all at once. In addition, most students- for many reasons- lack confidence and enthusiasm in writing and may never have written much either in their first language or in English. Whatever the reason, there is the need to teach students how to build the correct writing habit, as most of the poor performance in essay writing originates from secondary schools, which are the points of entry into higher

education a level where a near-perfect mastery of writing and all its skills are a prerequisite. Many approaches to the teaching of essay writing- such as the integrative, the communicative, the direct, and the notional, to mention a few are in existence, yet students' poor performance in the essay writing field persists with impunity. Recent advances in researches into the pedagogy of writing seem to suggest that the time for the participatory as an effective method of instilling the proper and correct writing habits has arrived (Hyland, 2002).

The problem

Chief examiner reports of public examinations in the English language are replete with concerns about the poor performances of students. This concern extends to teachers, parents and other stakeholders in education. English is the official language in Nigeria, as well as many parts of the world. It is, indeed, frightening to notice the appalling grammatical and other errors in the compositions of most Nigerian secondary school students. This paper examined the effects of participatory approaches on a students' performance in writing descriptive essays. There are plenty of pre-writing activities that could be neglected by the teachers of essay writing in addition to the major problem of the 'lack of composing competence in students', which leads to 'essay writing apprehension' (Krapels, 1990).

Objectives

- i. To ascertain whether participatory approaches can have an improving effect on the expression and mechanical accuracy skills in the descriptive essays of SS II students,
- ii. To adjudge whether participatory approaches can improve the content and organization skills in SS II students' descriptive essays
- iii. To determine whether a significant difference exists in the essays of students instructed using the participatory approaches (the experimental group) and those students who were not,
- iv. To examine whether pedagogy using participatory approaches can positively alter the general performance of the subjects at the post-test stage.

Research Questions

- i. What is the difference between the mean performances of the two groups of SS II students before pedagogy using participatory approaches?
- ii. What is the effect of the participatory approach on the performances of students in descriptive essay writing?
- iii. Is there any difference in the overall mean performances of students taught essay writing using participatory approach and those who were not?

Hypotheses

- i. There is no significant difference between the means of essay writing scores of SS II students at the pre-test stage.
- ii. There is no significant difference between the mean performance in the area of the presentation of the skills of expression and mechanical accuracy in the descriptive essays of SS II students taught essay writing using participatory approach and those who were not.
- iii. There is no significant difference between the mean performance in the area of the presentation of the skills of content and organization in the descriptive essays of SS II students taught essay writing using participatory approach and those who were not.
- iv. There is no significant difference in the overall mean performances of students taught essay writing using participatory approach and those who were not.

Scope and Limitation

This paper covers the three participatory approaches of conferencing, revision and self-assessment and their effects on the participatory teaching of descriptive essays in SS II classes, as the students at this level were about to write their promotion examinations to SS III where the school-leaving examinations await them.

Review of Literature

The Concept of participatory approach to teaching essay writing

It was not until the early 1980s that the participatory approach started to be widely discussed, though it originated in the 70s with the work of Paolo Freire who developed a native language literacy program for slum dwellers and peasants in Brazil (Bhatia, 1997; Beale, 2000; Marsh, 2000; Rich, 2010 and Winkler, 2007). Freire suggested the use of the participatory in the ESL classroom through problem posing, a central operational mode of critical pedagogy in three cyclical stages of naming, reflection and action all representing stages in the participatory approach, which seeks to focus on the learner as a central figure in the teaching of essay writing.

The goals of the participatory approaches are centered on experience and related to students' real needs: students are motivated to feel themselves centered upon and experts in their own lives while teachers are co-learners, asking questions about students' everyday occupations (Hennigan, 1999; Leki, 1992; Malone, 2002).

Conferencing

This is a central means of teaching the writing process (Tompkins, 1994:); it is a meeting to discuss work in progress (Malawi Institute of Education, 2006) and involves teachers listening to students talk about writing and helping them work through the process. Conference can occur at any given time in the writing process with the teacher asking questions that can guide students to discuss 'work in progress' (Abubakar, 2010; Grant, 2007; Moore, 2006).

Revision

This involves asking questions and giving answers on both parts (i.e. teachers' and students'). The questions generally focus on how, what and why of the revision of the essay task and are based on the specific writing being taught and what the expected outcome is. Questions are asked before, during and especially after the composition has been written (Meyer, 2006; Bale, 2004; Runcie, 2000).

Self-assessment

This approach involves students assessing their own writing. Students' reflections and insights are an important element of evaluation in this approach. A checklist of students' errors is a useful guide in self-assessment (Sasked,1997).

Teaching Descriptive Essay Using Participatory Approaches

A descriptive essay gives a vivid description of a person, object, or event (McCrimmon, 2000; Merriwether, 1997; Nunan, 1999). It is 'the most liberating and pleasurable essay to write' (www.you-can-teach-writing.com). To make a description requires a lot of imagination. The students need to tell a story usually about something that happened to them in such a way that the audience learns a lesson or gains insight and in a way that appeals to the five senses (Caudrey, 2000; Cohen, 2010; Merriwether, 1997). Descriptive essays are easier for many novice writers to handle (Crowhurst, 2000; Freedman, 2000).

Generally, the purpose for writing a descriptive essay influences the choice of events and the related details to be included (Willingham, 2012). In the participatory teaching of the descriptive essay, it is important for the teacher to review its general elements (Chandler, 2002). Descriptive essays are told from a detailed point of view-usually in the writer's so there is a feeling as well as specific and often sensory details provided to get the reader involved in the elements and sequences of description; the verbs are 'vivid and precise' (Reynolds, n.a; Warwick, 2002).

Teaching Expression Using Participatory Approach

Learning to write in a second language involves linguistic knowledge and the diction and grammatical patterns as well as the cohesive devices that make up the building blocks of texts (Harmer, 2004). Ecenberger,2008) held that any participatory teaching of expression should incorporate the teaching of the parts of speech, transitions, complete sentences, word choice and complex sentences. All these are necessary because the rules of English grammar are not predictable and systematic. Harmer (2008), Rich (2010) and Yang et al (2006) believed that teaching expression is a four-stage process that involves teaching 'certain grammar and vocabulary, usually through a text' (Harmer, op. cit.), followed by 'controlled writing', and then 'guided writing' and free writing.

Teaching Essay Content Using the Participatory Approach

Content is what students are required to talk about. This involves a set of themes or topics of interest that establish a coherence and purpose for the course (Harmer, op. cit.). Teaching content involves: review of vocabulary and content concepts and interaction as well as knowledge of the topic (Short & Echevarria, 2005; Harmer, op. cit.; Grabe, 2001).

Teaching Organization Using the Participatory Approach

Organization refers to the way different parts of an essay are arranged. The organizational structure of an essay takes many forms. The introduction, body and conclusion parts of the essay are the defining portions that should be taught in essay writing (www.you-can-teach-writing.com). What is common among them is the paragraph. The Schaffer paragraph is a five-sentence paragraph that has been recommended by many as a useful guide to teaching paragraphing (Gibson, op. cit).

Instrumentation

A quasi-experimental research design was employed; control and experimental groups were used to pre-test and post-test the subjects. The Kano State Ministry of Education SS II qualifying examination in the English language was the test as well as the instrument. Fifty students apiece were in the control and experimental groups; for data collection, the treatment was in the form of essay writing. A six week period was the length of the study in two male secondary schools in Fagge local government. For the data analysis, the t-test statistical technique was employed.

Discussion of Findings

The control and experimental groups displayed similar levels of performance at the pre-test level, thereby answering the question about their level of performance before the administration of the treatment. Had any significant difference been observed before the treatment, then there would have been no basis for any comparison, as the two groups would have possessed different abilities.

The second finding revealed a significant difference in the mean performance in the expression and mechanics skills of the control and experimental groups in the post-test

descriptive essays. The statistics showed that the experimental group did better in those areas than the control group, thus answering this paper's second research question. This finding corroborates the views of Cook (2007), Nasri (2008) and Vernon (2007) that pre-writing activities (conferencing, planning, brainstorming and revision) facilitate the writing of good content, better use of punctuation marks and the expression of essay ideas in students' essays. Errors like: 'is will be..', 'be imform...', ' and girammar' abound in the control group's essays. These errors point to poor mastery of spelling, v+ed constructions, and general ignorance of use of the auxiliary verbs. These errors were missing in the essays of the students in the experimental group.

The third finding indicates a significant difference between the mean scores in the students' performances in the skills of content and organization. In both areas, the experimental group performed better than the experimental group. The finding supports what Ecenberger (2008), Rich (2010) and Harmer (op cit.) proposed that teaching content and organization should proceed from the familiarization stage through controlled writing, guided writing and then free writing in addition to 'intensive drilling of the target language's ... syntactic and morphological features'(Rich, 2010). The experimental group's mastery of content could be seen in attempts, in various paragraphs, at using descriptive words referring to color, length, time and spatial relationships 'a long, silent, dark night'; 'just across the road from here'; 'up in the blue sky') to describe things or concepts related to the essay task. In contrast, there was no attempt to describe similar concepts by the control group's essays or to organize their ideas in meaningful paragraphs.

The paper's fourth finding revealed a significant difference between the post-test overall mean performances of the two groups' entire descriptive essays. The statistics suggest that not only at the SS II level but students at other levels of secondary school can perform better in writing essays when taught essay writing through the use of Participatory Approaches. This finding showed an overall mean of 8.30 for the control group and 13.24 for the experimental group- revealing a substantial gap between the two groups' actual performances.

Implications

The paper's findings contain a number of implications for teachers. One of these is the teachers of essay writing should improvise whenever they teach essays. This means that the findings suggest no single approach to the teaching of essay writing works with each group of learners but introducing students' participation through conferencing in the essay task would go a long way in instilling the skills needed to write better content, organization and expression ideas in written form. As essay teachers are instrumental in whatever essays students produce, the paper's findings imply that teachers should teach, separately, features of the various types of essays students are expected to learn in addition to integrating in their essay lessons the mastery of grammar points relevant to the specific writing tasks through substitution tables and the use of pattern drills relevant to the demands of the type of essay to be written.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the paper recommends that:

1. Essay topics should have cultural relevance. That is, topics should be about things, places or persons familiar to the students, as this familiarity often enriches essay content.
2. Teachers of essay writing should make the essay writing lesson a two-way one. Participation in writing or correcting a model essay would encourage more learner participation.

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