

TEACHING CONTINUOUS WRITING IN NIGERIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS: STRATEGIES, PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

V. T. B. Okotie

Abstract

Writing is undisputedly an important aspect of any educational system. It is used to gauge what the students know and where they have problems. It is therefore a means through which we assess our students' academic performance. This paper takes a look at the complex and cognitive processes of writing and the important roles teachers play in that regard. It also highlights the major problems which hinder effective writing communication by the students in secondary schools and offers suggestions for improvement.

Introduction

Good teaching of English language more especially in the ESL environment requires the effective teaching of the complex interrelated skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Writing skills is important in the whole language development and learning. It is expensive, last longer than speaking, and often less understood by learners. Writing is the ultimate of language skills and determines to a great extent, the success of students in both internal and external examination. Good writing skills is required of students to pass at credit level at the West African School Certificate Examinations. Essay and letter writing takes the highest of the total marks, followed by comprehension papers I and II, summary, lexis and structure and test of orals respectively in the examination.

Despite the important position that writing holds among the language arts skills, it is disheartening to note that its teaching and learning has not been as effective as it should be due to various problems. This ineffectiveness has been reflecting in the poor performances of students in English language in internally as well as externally conducted terminal examinations.

The West African School Certificate Examination May/June 2003 Chief Examiner's report has it that despite all efforts made to simplify the candidates' task, a good percentage of the candidates scored below average.

The May/ June 2004 report is no less bad. The chief Examiner stated that;

... Many candidates still performed below average. Some candidates failed to score single mark out of 120. One wonders how such candidates qualified to be promoted to the school certificate class.

As at today, the situation in the educational sub-sector with regards to the poor performance of students in externally conducted examination, especially in English Language and Mathematics is still giving cause for great worry. In the 2009 National Examination Council (NECO) November/ December Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination result, it was announced on radio and television nation wide that only about 5% of the candidates that sat for the examination were able to pass English and Mathematics plus three other subjects at credit level. Over 90% or thereabout of the candidates failed English and Mathematics. What a shame!

The causes and the solution to this problem need to be sought and that is the focus of this paper.

Strategies of Teaching Continuous Writing

Research outcomes in the area of effective strategies for teaching writing abound ranging from within and outside Nigeria. E.g Collins and Sommers (1985), Obi Okoye (1991), Lawal (1995), Essex (1996), Janienne (2007), Jibowu (2009) and Morris (2009).

Obi-Okoye, citing Raimes (2008:17) recorded the following methods:

1. The Traditional Grammar Method.
2. The Grammar-Syntax-Organization Approach.
3. The Controlled-to-Free-Approach.

4. The Free Writing-Approach.
5. The Distancing Approach.
6. The Communicative Approach.
7. The Modeling Approach.
8. The Writing Process Approach.

Other writing approaches not mentioned in Obi-Okoye's list above are the Learner's Errors Approach by Obi-Okoye (1991) and Jibowu (2009) and the Games Approach by Janienne (2007).

Of all these methods the Collins and Sommer Writing Process Approach to teaching continuous writing has received widespread acceptance by researchers, educators and teachers. (Duruamaku-Dim and Duruamaku-Dim 2006).

Advocates of the Process Approach to teaching writing see writing as an on-going multi-stage process with emphasis given to each stage in writing.

Collins and Sommers (1985) cited by Duruamaku-Dim (2006) list the stages as pre-writing (organization), composition, revision and post-writing (i.e. presentation of the write-up).

The Pre-Writing Stage

Basically, the Pre-Writing Stage involves all the preparations the writer makes before writing. Here, the writer organizes his work in a logical and clear manner by selecting the topic if it is not given, forming points of view, searching for facts that drawing up an outline. Situations exist where one may be given a topic, or one may be asked to select the topic.

Accordingly, one should choose a topic that one is familiar with or knows something about. Getting oneself correctly situated means forming a point of view which involves things about the topic until one discovers what one wants to write. Gathering relevant ideas/point's means getting information about a topic. Usually, there are two sources of getting information. They are through one's experience and from printed materials like books, journals, magazines etc. Thereafter, the writer should put down as quickly as possible his ideas as they occur to him and ask questions like what, when, where, how and why? In analyzing and arranging these ideas/facts, one should go over them one after the other. By so doing, therefore, irrelevant ideas are discarded and relevant ones are arranged logically. Omoni (2008:31) posited that research have shown that teachers who are encouraged to engage in an array of pre-writing experiences evidence greater writing.

The Composition Stage or Writing Stage

This is the delivery stage. It is made up of three related parts namely: introduction, development and conclusion. First, an introduction should indicate briefly what the essay is all about and its scope. The purpose of an introduction, therefore, is to provide information for the understanding of the main part or body of the essay.

In addition, the body of the writing should consist of the ideas that were arranged at the preconception stage (pre-writing stage). Each of these ideas would become topic sentence which will be developed fully, using the various ways of developing a paragraph (linkers) and ultimately an essay.

Finally, the conclusion should draw attention to what is discussed in the body of the writing, and the conclusion in a well organized writing needs just one, two or three sentences, emphasizing the topic.

The Revision Stage

During this stage, the writer makes what whatever changes he/she feels are necessary. Revision may involve additions and deletions, changes in syntax, sentence structure and organization. It becomes superior when there are inputs from the teacher and fellow students. Cooperative evaluation should therefore be encouraged. This means that learners should allow others to give an objective critique of their write-up to enable them make necessary corrections and adjustment.

After the revision stage, the learner re-writes the work after going through several times, making necessary corrections in punctuation and spelling. In brief, as a neglected baby can die shortly after birth so can an essay "die" if it is left unedited. Essays should not be submitted until they have been read over and all mistakes corrected.

The Post-Writing or Publication Stage

This refers to the delivery of the writing to its intended audience (readers/ listeners). Classmates, parents and members of the school community are among the potential audience for student's written work. Student's motivation and achievement are enhanced when their works are published for larger audience than the teacher. Omoni (2008:32) stated that is a form of positive reinforcement to a learner when what he or she has written is given wider publicity.

Problems Inhibiting Effective Writing Communication in Secondary Schools

Many problems contribute to hinder effective writing communication in secondary schools. Alihu (1997:81) summarized these problems to include the following:

1. Mixed tenses e.g present and past.
2. Poor topic identification.
3. Awkward sentence construction.
4. Poor spelling
5. Inappropriate words and expressions, and.
6. Lack of adequate ideas to write on.

Moreover, anyone who has the opportunity of classroom experience in Nigeria will know that the writing poses numerous problems to the students. Okoye (1990:3) pointed out that one problem, facing teachers of English Language is to help students overcome writing problems.

Causes of the Problems

Some of the causes of the problems are:

1. **Poor Linguistic Background**
Students who lack sufficient background in reading and speaking are likely to have difficulties in writing.
2. **Unfamiliarity with the Topic**
For students to write well on a topic, they have to be familiar with it, for this will help them generate enough materials to write. For instance, if a secondary school student is asked to write on a topic that is not appropriate to Nigeria culture and environment, he would find it difficult to generate ideas to write on.
3. **Lack of Knowledge of Different Types of Writing**
Students at secondary school are expected to have knowledge of different types of writing such as essay, letter, short speeches etc. They are therefore expected to be taught the conventions of different types of writing and lack of knowledge of these kinds of writing would be a problem to them.
4. **First Language Interference**
A child's mother tongue may interfere with his learning of a second language. This interference is noticed in terms of spelling, pronunciation etc. This affects the student's constructions at sentence level and organization of the discourse. Student at times also make direct translations of the experiences in the L1 which may not be appropriate in the L2 situation and this becomes a problem to them.
5. **Bad Reading Culture**
This is a problem not only to students at the secondary school level but even to those at higher levels. Students generally do not cultivate the habit of reading extensively these days most especially with the advancement in modern technology. They instead prefer to watch television, satellite dish transmitted programmes, video, browsing and inter-net etc, giving little or no room to reading to obtain information the ideas necessary for writing.

6. **Poor Teaching Method**
Students at secondary school also face the problem of poor teaching methods used by teachers. This situation is expressed by Zamel (1983:165) thus “ESL writing continues to be taught as if form preceded content, as if composing were a matter of adopting preconceived rhetorical frameworks, as if correct language usage took priority over the purposes for which language is used.” The above situation obtains because it is thought that all language teachers are automatically writing teachers and this should not be the case. A writing teacher must be trained in the field. He has to be familiar with the steps involved in teaching and assessing writing and be patient as he directs the students through the different processes of writing.
7. **Lack of Proper Writing Skills**
Most students at the secondary school level also lack adequate knowledge of the writing skills such as punctuation, organization, spelling and proper use of tenses and connectives. This affects their writing negatively because their message is not normally well conveyed.
8. **Lack of Interest**
Students at secondary school have problems with writing because they do not find writing interesting. Okoh (2002:55) suggested that quite often, our students do not appreciate the true nature of writing, and thus are unable to approach the task with the seriousness it demands.
9. **Lack of Motivation to Write**
Encouraging students to write develops in them positive writing habits and attitudes. It helps develop comprehension and composing skills as well as promotes their spelling and decoding skills.
10. **Inadequate Provision for Writing on the Time Table**
The time table in Nigeria secondary schools is not favourable to English Language teaching generally and this affects the teaching of writing which in most cases, is lumped together with the teaching of other language skills. As Aliyu (1979:65) showed, when students write, they need a quiet classroom environment to think, to consider words, to organize ideas, and to get them on paper. Nigerian students are usually not given the relaxed and quiet atmosphere under which to write.

Recommendations

In order to alleviate the problems highlighted in this paper, the following suggestions are proposed.

Students should be exposed to different reading materials such as magazines, novels, newspapers, texts etc. Parents should give their children a head start by buying these reading materials and encouraging them to read them at home.

In addition, English language teachers should be taught specifically how to teach writing. The role of a writing teacher is more complex than that of the teacher of other language skills. They need some theoretical knowledge about the communicative process of writing. They should know what writing means and how it takes place.

Furthermore, students should be taught punctuation and spelling. They could be given distorted sentences, paragraphs or passages to punctuate. They should be given practice in words that are often miss-spelt and be encouraged to consult a dictionary for guidance. The teachers should themselves correct the spellings.

Students need encouragement to invest time in the development of their writing skills. Many spend time watching television, video, browsing etc which discourage them from doing assignments, writing and reading. The parents have a role to play here.

Moreover, the writing attitude of the students should be developed through various motivational strategies.

Finally, in view of the limited hours allocated to teach English Language, teachers should encourage students to write on topics of interest as assignment which may be exchanged in class by

students themselves and supervised by the teacher. The teacher should however, go through these essays at convenient times.

Conclusion

This paper has taken a critical look at writing as a process and its importance to the learning situation. It has also examined the problems that hinder effective communication in secondary schools and the causes of the problems. Recommendations were also proffered to minimize the occurrence the problems highlighted. These recommendations are workable and can work in all language learning situations. Stakeholders in the educational sub-sector should be conscious of these problems and suggestions provided for improvement. This could go a long way in enhancing the academic development of our students.

References

- Aliyu J.S. Writing at the secondary school level: Some practical considerations in Oyetunde, T.O. *English Teaching Improvement*, Jos: LECAPS Publisher Nigeria limited (1977).
- Chief Examiner's Report* May/ June (2003). The West African Examination Council. Lagos; Nigeria.
- Chief Examiner's Report*, May/June 2004). The West African Examination Council. Lagos, Nigeria.
- Duruamaku-Dim, G.C.E. C & Duruamaku-Dim, J. Computer literacy in kindergarten and primary school. *Journal of educational improvement*, Vol. 3, April 2006: Conference on Educational Improvement. Nigeria, West Africa (2006).
- Essex, C. Teaching creative writing in the elementary school. *Eric Digest* (1996).
- Janienne, J. Essay games to teach writing skill to children. <http://www.lessonplanhelpsmite101.com/article.cfm> no penmanship writing, retrieved 1/24/2010.
- Jibowu, A.V. *English language needs of SS students as perceived by some teacher and examiners*, 6th Annual Conference of NATRSI/ELTT, 21-25 October 2008, FUT, Akure (2008).
- Morris, Chery-learning essay writing skills through games, *Voices* September-October 2009 Issue. 2010 AITEFL, U.K. p.7 (2009).
- National Examination Council 2009 Nov/Dec senior secondary school certificate result* announced on N.T.A Network News in March 2010.
- Nwankwo, U.C. Problems of teaching oral English in secondary, schools. *Journal of Language and Literary Studies* (2005)
- Obi-Okoye, A.F. The Use of Error in Teaching English Composition in ESL. *JESSL*. No 3. pp 22-23 (1991).
- Obi-Okoye, A.F. Process writing /composition teaching and learning in ESL in Obi-Okoye (ed). *Teaching and Learning English Composition via the Model Writing Process Approach*. Enugu: FREFAB. G. Investment Ltd (2002).
- Obi Okoye, A.F. *Advanced English Composition*, Onitsha: Gonaj Books (2004).
- Odo, J.C. *Communication Skills and the Mechanics of English*, Enugu: John Jacobs Classic Publishers (2005).

Okoh K. *Effective business communication in English* Port-Harcourt; Pear Publisher (2002)

Oluikpe, B.O. Teaching the art of continuous writing in Ubahakwe, E. (ed). *The Teaching of English Studies: Readings for Colleges and Universities*. Ibadan. Ibadan University Press (1979).

Omoni. G. Writing for Children in Primary Schools in Omaraka V.O. & Ijeh U.S. (ed), *Development of Writing Skills*. Agbor. Kriskbec Publication. (2008).

Zamal, V.E. The composing process of advanced ESL students, six case studies; *TESOL Quarterly* 17(2) (1983).