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An Examination of the Approaches Adopted by English Language Teachers in Teaching Composition Writing in Cape Coast Basic Schools, Ghana

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Abstract

The Chief Examiner's report for the Basic Education Certificate Examination English language paper has over the years reported on candidates poor demonstration of the mechanics of writing such as; grammatical errors, wrong tenses, wrongly spelt words and many other errors, which sadly leads to the poor performance of the English language paper by candidates.

This study examines the approaches that English Language teachers in Cape Coast use when teaching composition writing to their upper primary pupils. Seventy-five teachers

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 January 2014

Gertrude Afiba Torto, M.Phil., B.Ed. (Hons.) An Examination of the Approaches Adopted by English Language Teachers in Teaching Composition Writing in Cape Coast Basic Schools, Ghana

were selected out of the 213 upper primary teachers in the Metropolis. The instruments used for the data collection were questionnaire, interviews and observation guide. All the 75 teachers answered the questionnaire. The composition writing classes of these 75 teachers were also observed. Twenty-five teachers were selected out of these 75 teachers to be interviewed, based on their teaching of composition writing.

The study revealed that the sample used does not know about the current approaches to the teaching of composition writing. The teachers used the techniques which are similar to that of the product approach in teaching their pupils. The study also revealed that in the teaching and learning of writing situations involving these teachers, the role pupils played was passive. The teachers played the active role doing most of the talking. The writing difficulties that teachers encountered in their teaching of composition writing were the lack of vocabulary on the part of the pupils which lead to the pupils' inability to express themselves to compose a creative text.

This study recommends that teachers, who teach composition writing, should spend more time on the teaching of the subject, involve pupils in the writing composition lesson and also use a combination of the approaches in helping their pupils to write better compositions..

Introduction

Ghana is English as a second language (ESL) country. Ghana uses English in pedagogy throughout the curriculum. The reason for the use of English is that as a member of the Commonwealth, Ghana has adopted the English language as her medium of instruction in schools. In Ghanaian basic schools, English is both a subject and a medium of instruction.

A key concept of the English syllabus in the basic schools is the integrated approach to the teaching of the language skills which are: listening, speaking, reading and writing (English Language syllabus for Primary schools, 2007). These skills complement one another in use. Though all these four language skills are linked, at certain times, more attention could

be given to one skill depending on the aspect of the English language that is being taught. Thus during oral lessons, more emphasis could be given to listening and speaking and then during writing lessons where the teacher wants to examine the pupils' creativity, more emphasis could be placed on the writing skill than on the other skills.

Of the four language skills mentioned, the skills that demand more effort on the part of the user are reading and writing which are also known as the productive skills. The productive skills allow the user to depend on his or her cognitive skills in order to construct a meaningful and a coherent sentence. Writing which is a productive skill could either be penmanship or composition. Writing as composition is quite complex since it requires thinking, planning and constructing more than penmanship. In fact, writing as composition strengthens grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that learners have been taught and when these learners write, they have the chance to manipulate the language to go beyond what they have learned. Thus, when students are taught composition, grammatical structures which have been taught are being reinforced (Raimes, 1983).

In an ESL country like Ghana, students' performances in English language at external examinations have been of much concern to the stakeholders of education. Chief Examiner's report for Basic Education Certificate Examination (B.E.C.E) (2012) mentions the fact that pupils' compositions at examinations contained many grammatical errors, inaccurate tenses, wrongly spelt words and wrong breaking of words. It again mentions that some candidates too deviated from the composition topic that they wrote. Perhaps these problems are due to the lack of vocabulary or because schools do not do a good job of teaching this complex writing skill (Graham & Perin, 2007). It is therefore necessary to find out what exactly is the problem.

The research questions that directed this research were: 'What approach(es) to teaching composition writing do teachers in Cape Coast metropolis basic schools adopt in

their classrooms?', 'What role(s) do teachers play in the composition writing lesson?', 'What role(s) do the pupils play in the composition writing lesson?' and 'What difficulties do teachers face in using the writing approaches in teaching pupils?'

Theoretical Perspectives of the Study

The theoretical framework of this study is influenced by the social constructivism theory. Constructivism suggests that learners construct knowledge out of their experiences. The social constructivists further emphasize the social dimensions of learning; how the individual learner is influenced by his or her society, culture and interaction with the people in his environment (Hiebert & Rapheal, 1996). Social constructivism views each learner as a unique individual with unique needs and background (Wertsch, 1997). Every human being has his own ideas and experiences that make him or her different from another. Social constructivism therefore encourages the learner to arrive at his or her version of the truth, influenced by his or her background, culture or embedded world view. This theory asserts that learning results from social interactions that occur within the Zone of Proximal Development (Z. P. D.), (Vygotsky, 1978). The Zone of Proximal Development is defined as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem – solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem – solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). The concept of Z.P.D. suggests that students or pupils can, with help from adults or children who are more advanced, master concepts and ideas that they cannot understand on their own (Sperling & Fredman, 2001). Through a process of scaffolding, a learner can be extended beyond the limitations of physical maturation to the extent that the development process lags behind the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). A learner is able to perform a given task which he hitherto could not perform when he interacts with adults or more capable peers in his own environment.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 January 2014

Gertrude Afiba Torto, M.Phil., B.Ed. (Hons.) An Examination of the Approaches Adopted by English Language Teachers in Teaching Composition Writing in Cape Coast Basic Schools, Ghana

Learning is an active construction process. Moreover, language is not an isolated activity; it is rather a social one. It is believed that language learning is a social practice, and it is a process of gaining entry to a discourse of practitioners through assistance from peers and teachers.

The constructivist theory requires learners not only to know how to write, but also how to use writing in a social context. Social interaction encourages pupils to actively dominate their writing, to learn with individual styles, and to be responsible for their own writing based on self reflection. Collaboration which is present in constructivism is a goal-directed social interaction (Vygotsky, 1962). It involves children with different learning capabilities working together. This is a group task in which each member is individually accountable for part of an outcome. Collaboration enhances writing from three aspects: Idea generation in brainstorming, meaning construction in the drafting stage and peer review.

The approach to teaching writing, especially the integrated approach, is informed by the social constructivist theory in the sense that, writing under this approach makes the learner active in the classroom. This approach is learner – centered and it enables learners write essays at their own pace. Learners are also involved in some vocabulary work and the selection of the topic to be written about. They generate ideas, make multiple drafts, have peer and teacher reviews, so that the essay could be discussed and corrected. Social constructivists mention that help from adults and more capable peers help learners to complete given tasks. This happens in the integrated approach classroom where teacher and peer conferences are held to help discuss the written essays and offer feedback to learners. Social constructivism also emphasizes that by engaging the learner in challenging tasks, he or she is able to function in his or her environment at the end of learning. Thus, learners tend to have ownership of the learning or problem – solving process and also of the problem itself (Graves, 1983). In the integrated approach classroom too, learners engage in challenging

tasks as they write. Learners learn the grammar and the vocabulary in context and are able to write to fit a real situation. They are able to write on their own in the real world and claim ownership of their writing.

For the ESL learner, knowledge about grammar as well as vocabulary in addition to the process-genre will be much beneficial since the learner is not a native speaker and therefore may have limited intuition in vocabulary and grammar. The teacher of this learner must therefore use the methods and approaches of teaching that will be helpful to the learner to enable this learner to write on his or her own. The integrated approach to teaching writing is informed by social constructivism and it is therefore appropriate as a framework for the current study.

Review of Related Literature

Current approaches to the teaching of writing mention the product, Process, Genre and the Process- genre approaches to the teaching of writing. Prior to the advent of student-centred learning, greater emphasis was placed on the finished product (Clenton, 2008) where pupils were expected to produce flawless compositions (essays) within a specific time. Thus English teachers dwelt mainly on the finished essay written by individual pupils which was suppose to be devoid of wrong mechanics of writing, grammar, tense and spelling. The end product was considered important (Jones, 2006). This approach according to Santos (1992) still holds fast in ESL classrooms.

Another current approach that emerged as a result of reactions to the product approach is the process approach. With this approach, writing shifted attention from the final written product as is the case of the product approach, to the process of writing which was viewed as a complex problem-solving process (Jones, 2006). This shift according to Silva (1997), occurred because many researchers thought that the traditional product approach did

not foster thought or expression. According to Steele (2004), the process approach focuses

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 January 2014

Gertrude Afiba Torto, M.Phil., B.Ed. (Hons.)An Examination of the Approaches Adopted by English Language Teachers in Teaching Composition Writing in Cape Coast Basic Schools, Ghana

more on the varied classroom activities which promote the development of language use, and uses brainstorming, group discussion and re-writing. It focuses on the whole language and not on the sentence. Under this approach, teachers together with the pupils select the topic to be written on. Brainstorming and generation of ideas are done together by both pupils and the teacher. Pupils are then allowed to discuss and write the composition in groups.

Researchers again realized some drawbacks with the process approach. Those researchers mentioned that writing was supposed to be an individual problem-solving activity and that process models fail to introduce pupils to the cultural and linguistic resources necessary for them to engage in critical texts (Hyland, 2003; Johns, 2002). The Genre pedagogy therefore was introduced. This genre are text types which learners meet in the school curriculum and which have specific social purposes, particular overall structures and specific linguistic features shared by particular cultures (Gibbons, 2002). Examples of genre include stories, research reports, resume`s and a lot more (Adam & Artemeva, 2003; Johns, 2003, 2002). The genre approach to teaching writing focuses on teaching particular genres that pupils need control of in order to succeed in particular settings (Paltridge, 2004). This approach like the product, views writing as predominantly linguistic, however, the genre placed a greater emphasis on the social context in which writing is produced.

The genre approach was also criticized and this criticism led to the introduction of the process – genre approach. The process – genre was seen as an eclectic approach where it synthesizes the strengths of the process and genre for implementation in the classroom (Nordin & Mohammed, 2006). Thus this approach views writing as involving knowledge about language, knowledge of the context in which writing happens, the purpose for writing, the skills in using language and then the processes of writing.

The ESL Learner in the ESL Context

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 January 2014

Gertrude Afiba Torto, M.Phil., B.Ed. (Hons.) An Examination of the Approaches Adopted by English Language Teachers in Teaching Composition Writing in Cape Coast Basic Schools, Ghana

Kim and Kim (2005) contend that learning the process of writing is a difficult skill for learners to develop and especially learners in ESL context, where English learning is limited to only a few hours every week. According to the authors, learners learning English writing as a second or foreign language struggle with many problems. These problems include the correct use of language and other linguistic features such as paragraph formation; gathering of ideas about a topic, and using the correct language in the correct social context. Learners in this context, usually, are passive learners since they only receive what the teacher teaches without these learners getting actively involved in class discussions.

In Nigeria, teachers use the traditional approach (product) in the teaching of writing in schools (Aladeyomi & Adetunde, 2007). Landy, (1976) ; Odejide, (1980) and Ekong (1981) all agree that, the ESL students face a lot of problems because their written expressions are not high enough. It is therefore true that in the ESL environment, the ESL learners struggle with many linguistic problems when they have to produce a composition on their own. Odejide attributes this problem to the ESL teacher who may also have some linguistic problems and so may not be able to handle the teaching of the subject well.

Methodology

Research Design

The current research used a descriptive study which employed a mixed method strategy. A mixed method research uniquely combines both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to gain a better understanding of the research problem (Schroeder, 2007). The nature of this current study, however, is both numerical and verbal since the research involves the use of questionnaire, interview and observation. The descriptions of observations are expressed largely in non-numerical terms (qualitatively). The quantitative method used in this

research involves simple frequency and percentages, and this helped the research problems to be fully understood and better researched.

Population

The research population comprised all the upper primary teachers within the Cape Coast Metropolis. The reason for using the upper primary teachers in this research is that, at the upper primary level, writing becomes more demanding since the pupils are expected to write their compositions using punctuations, minding the correct tenses and also writing a cohesive and a coherent essay. Pupils at the upper primary are also expected to be creative and original in their writing since they tend to understand concepts and can also reason much better than pupils at the lower primary,

Sampling

The present study employed a multi-stage sampling procedure. The Cape Coast Metropolis has six circuits. A simple random technique was used to select five out of the six circuits. The simple random technique was again employed to select five schools from each selected circuit. Then a purposive sampling procedure was employed to select all the upper primary teachers in the schools for the study. The reason for this is because at the upper primary level, writing tends to be more demanding than at the lower primary level.

The total sample for the research was seventy-five (75) teachers. All of the seventy-five (75) responded to the questionnaire. Out of the seventy-five (75) teachers who responded to the questionnaire, twenty-five (25) of them were selected randomly to be interviewed and their writing classes observed.

Analysis and Discussion

In this research, the investigator concerned herself with the approaches that English teachers adopted in teaching composition writing in the upper primary level of Cape Coast

basic schools. The variables that were employed in answering the research question were: what approach(es) do the teachers use in teaching, what role(s) do teachers play in the composition writing lesson? What role(s) do pupils play in the composition lesson and what difficulties do teachers face in using the writing approaches in teaching pupils?

The Approach(es) Teachers Adopt in Teaching Composition Writing

Table 1: Training Received in the Teaching of English Language

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	52	81.25
No	12	18.75
Total	64	100.00

A greater percentage of respondents forming 81.25% (Table 1), said that they had had some training in the teaching of composition writing, meaning that the majority of teachers teaching in the upper primary level of Cape Coast basic schools are trained to handle the teaching of composition writing.

Table 2: Knowledge of the Approaches to Teaching Writing

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Yes	46	72
No	18	28
Total	64	100.00

Table 2 reveals that a greater percentage of respondents forming 72% said that they knew about the approaches to teaching composition writing. This statement therefore implies that these teachers might use the approach that suited their pupils when teaching composition

to these pupils. There is also the likelihood that in the classrooms of the teachers who did not

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 January 2014

Gertrude Afiba Torto, M.Phil., B.Ed. (Hons.) An Examination of the Approaches Adopted by English Language Teachers in Teaching Composition Writing in Cape Coast Basic Schools, Ghana

have any idea about the different approaches to teaching composition writing, these teachers might rely on their own knowledge concerning the teaching of the subject, which could be dangerous. The reason is that there might be the possibility of misinforming the pupils. The teachers might not also know which approach will help the pupils to become better writers. What could salvage the situation, perhaps, could be organising in-service training sessions frequently in the schools to equip the teachers with current and helpful techniques and approaches that will be beneficial to their pupils

Table 3: The Different Approaches to Teaching Writing

Approaches	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Controlled and free-writing	44	95.7
Pre-writing, writing and post-writing	2	4.3
Total	46	100.00

In response to the question about the approaches that the respondents knew, Controlled writing and Free writing, and then Pre-Writing, writing, post-writing were listed. The majority of teachers (95.7%) mentioned that, to them, the approaches are Controlled Writing and Free-Writing. Only a few of the teachers, forming 4.3%, mentioned Pre-Writing, Writing and Post-Writing, as the different approaches that they knew. This table reveals that most teachers do not know about the current approaches to teaching writing. The very few (4.3 %) who know about the current approaches only know of one approach which is the process approach. This data reveals that teachers are not familiar with the current approaches to writing.

Table 4: The Approach (es) used by Respondents

Approach	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Controlled	48	75
Free writing	14	21.9
Pre-writing, writing, post writing	2	3.1
Total	64	100.00

In response to the question about the approaches that the respondents were using to teach; Controlled, Free writing and Pre-Writing, writing, post-writing were again listed by the respondents as the approaches. A great number of respondents constituting 75% mentioned that they were using the controlled writing which is very similar to the Product Approach, to teach. Fourteen respondents constituting (21.9%) also intimated that they were using the Free Writing Method. The results from this table further mean that in the majority of upper primary classrooms in the Cape Coast Metropolis, the old methods of teaching composition are what pertain there.

The Role(s) Teachers Play in the Composition Writing Lesson

Table 5: The Role(s) of the Teacher in the Writing Class

Statements	SD%	D(%)	A(%)	SA(%)
I ask pupils to select their own topics	35(54.7)	23(35.9)	6(9.4)	0(0)
I put pupils into groups to generate ideas about a topic and to write the composition	11(17.2)	8(12.5)	29(45.3)	16(25)
I help pupils in generating ideas for their compositions	4(6.2)	29(45.3)	31(48.4)	0(0)

I give an example of how the composition should be and I ask pupils to follow my example	0(0)	5(7.8)	23(35.9)	36(56.2)
I usually ask pupils to fill in gaps in an already written composition by the teacher	12(18.8)	18(28.1)	20(31.2)	14(21.9)
I give pupils a limited number of lines to write	13(20.3)	13(20.2)	30(46.9)	8(12.5)
I give pupils a time limit within which they must finish the work	0(0)	2(3.1)	38(59.4)	24(37.5)
I allow pupils to write freely without giving them any restrictions	25(39.1)	16(25.0)	14(21.9)	9(14.1)
I allow pupils to share their work with others	30(46.9)	17(26.6)	12(18.8)	5(7.8)

Table 5 shows the results of the roles teachers performed in the writing lesson. The data collected shows that most teachers constituting 54.7% strongly disagreed that pupils should select their own topics to write about in the classroom. About thirty-six percent (35.9%) of the teachers also stated that they disagreed to pupils selecting their own topics. The Table therefore shows that the majority of teachers selected the composition topics for pupils to write on. The Table again revealed that 70.3% of the teachers put their pupils into groups in the classroom to work on a composition topic. If truly the pupils are put into groups, then these pupils are likely to do better in writing since they might learn from the members of the group to improve upon their writing.

Furthermore, 59 respondents constituting 92.2 % mentioned that, they always presented an example of how the composition should be written to their pupils so that the pupils would write their own compositions while imitating that of the teacher. Again, from the Table, the majority of teachers mentioned that they limited their pupils to the number of lines they had to write in a composition.

The Role(s) Pupils Play in the Composition Writing Lesson

Table 6: The Role (s) of the Pupil in the Composition Lesson

Statements	S.D%	D(%)	A(%)	S.A(%)
Pupils select their own topic	33(51.6)	25(39.1)	6(9.4)	0(0)
Pupils think about teacher's topic	1(1.6)	0(0)	31(48.4)	32(50)
Pupils answer teacher's questions on the topic	0(0)	0(0)	19(29.7)	45(70.3)
Pupils talk about the topic in groups	4(6.2)	15(23.4)	29(45.3)	16(25)
Pupils follow teacher's example to write the composition	0(0)	3(4.7)	25(39.1)	36(56.2)
Pupils present their work to be marked when the lesson is over	0(0)	0(0)	25(39.1)	39(60.0)

Table 6 shows that in all 90.7% of the respondents mentioned that composition topics are selected for the pupils. Only 9.4% of the respondents agreed that pupils selected their own topics. The table again revealed that in all classrooms, pupils answered questions on a topic, as 100% of the respondents agreed to the statement. Furthermore, the respondents said that pupils were put into groups to discuss a topic, as 70.3% of the respondents agreed to this fact.

The majority of the respondents constituting 95.3% maintained that pupils were given examples of the compositions that they had to write to imitate. All the respondents again mentioned that pupils presented their work to be marked after the period for the lesson was over.

The Difficulties Teachers Face in Using the Writing Approaches in Teaching

Table 7: Approach (es) Teachers Find Difficult to Handle

Approach	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Free-writing (unguided)	8	12.5
None	56	87.5
Total	64	100.00

In table 7, the difficulties of the respondents have been presented. The majority of respondents constituting 87.5% mentioned that they found none of the approaches difficult to handle. These respondents according to the Table knew all the approaches and could handle them. A few of the respondents constituting 12.5%, however, said that they could not handle the unguided method well. Such teachers might tend to use the guided method always.

Discussion

The results from research questions showed that most of the respondents had been trained as teachers to handle the teaching of English Language but these teachers did not know about the approaches used in teaching composition writing. They mentioned these approaches as ‘Controlled Writing’, ‘Guided Writing and ‘Free Writing’. The mention of these methods proved that they did not know about the approaches. What some of the teachers called ‘Free Writing’ was actually allowing the pupils to write the composition on their own after the topic had been selected by the teacher, ideas generated by the teacher and

an example of how the composition should be written also given by the teacher. Pupils then write out the entire composition within a specific time and present their work which ought to be almost flawless. This way of writing clearly depicts the Product Way of writing as Escholz (1980) observed. The observation confirmed that the teachers whether trained or otherwise did not know about the approaches.

Teachers' role in the writing lesson was almost the same in all schools selected for this research. In almost all selected classes the teachers were the active participants in the writing session. The teacher selects the topic to be discussed and to be written by pupils. The teacher again leads the class in generating ideas that will be needed to write the composition but then abandons the practice and tends to raise the ideas all alone, citing lack of vocabulary on the part of pupils as the reason. This situation makes the entire learning process a teacher-centered (Barakus, 2003) one.

Teachers again expected their pupils to do individual work as if it were examination. Pupils were not allowed to solicit for help from their peers in any way. Model compositions were provided for by the teacher to serve as a guide. Pupils copied the teacher's composition, only filling-in few spaces with their 'own' words and using the teacher's model as a guide to write their own composition.

In some classrooms, the pupils were asked by their teachers to make sentences out of the substitution table provided by the teacher, to form their entire compositions. Interviews and observations also showed that, teachers laid great emphasis on the correctness of grammar as well as the length of the composition, stressing that at the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) they are supposed to write about 250 words in their composition.

In classrooms where letter writing was taught, teachers taught pupils to write the letters to fit the situation using the drill method. The observation revealed that in most

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 14:1 January 2014
Gertrude Afiba Torto, M.Phil., B.Ed. (Hons.) An Examination of the Approaches Adopted by English Language Teachers in Teaching Composition Writing in Cape Coast Basic Schools, Ghana

classrooms, because pupils were many (large class), teachers stood in front of the class without going round pupils desks to have proper contact with pupils. Pupils did not ask questions except to get the meaning of a word or an instruction well. The results of the questionnaire, interview and observation revealed that pupils played a passive role in the composition writing session. Pupils were not involved in the selection of topics to be written on. Observation showed that pupils did not really contribute to class discussions. The study further revealed that, no group work was allowed. According to Glassner (1983) group work helps students to discover audience. Pupils also learn from one another in a group so getting them involved in group work helps them a lot. However, that was not the case with the schools selected for the study. Pupils only followed the instructions given to them by the teachers and acted upon them. Pupils wrote their compositions within a specific time frame and these compositions were collected as soon as the time was up.

Observations again revealed the lack of feedback to pupils. The teachers collected the pupils' compositions at the end of the lesson, but did not have a thorough discussion of their work that will guide them to write better compositions. Teachers indicated that there was no time for that.

Data collected by the questionnaire also revealed that teachers did not find any difficulty in using almost all the approaches. From the questionnaire and the interview conducted, it came to light that the teachers did not even know about these current approaches and so were not using them. Almost all the teachers were encountering problems in their writing lessons. Teachers reported of pupils' lack of vocabulary, incorrect usage of grammar and being slow at learning concepts, as some of the problems they experienced in the teaching and learning process. In some schools, pupils could not express themselves in English and seemed not to understand certain concepts, so the teacher had to explain certain concepts in the Ghanaian language (Fante) for the pupils to understand the concepts better.

Conclusion

The findings of the study has shown that teachers in Cape Coast basic schools use the product or the traditional approach in teaching composition writing to their pupils, just like other ESL countries such as Nigeria and Korea. The results gathered from the questionnaire, interview and observation indicated that though the teachers in the Cape Coast basic schools do not know about the various approaches to teaching composition writing, these teachers however use techniques and methods under the product approach to teach their composition writing classes. The study showed a lot of the features of the product approach at play in the classrooms of the teachers used for the study. Pupils in the metropolis are made to write their compositions adhering to a particular number of lines. The way that they are taught does not also allow them to be creative since all they do is to write their compositions with the teacher's example in mind.

Pupils write their compositions and get them graded by their teachers at the end of the lesson. Teachers give no other feedback to pupils except to underline and circle words, statements, sentences and expressions that do not seem right in red ink and have the pupils re-write the composition under the heading "correction". The teacher, therefore, dwells on the correctness of the composition and not on the effort put in by the pupils.

The study has also brought to light the fact that teachers do most of the talking because the pupils do not have the correct vocabulary to contribute to class discussions.

The present study has again brought to light the fact that teachers in the Cape Coast basic schools taught specific genres of composition, but then, they taught these genres using the Product Approach. It has also come to light that some teachers used vernacular to explain certain concepts to the pupils during English language lessons. The conclusion can therefore be drawn that the poor performance of pupils of the Cape Coast Metropolis at the B.E.C.E.

English language paper could be the effect of the teacher's lack of adequate knowledge of the subject matter and how to handle it, and the low acquisition of vocabulary of pupils.

Recommendations

1. In an ESL environment like Ghana where most pupils have a low store of vocabulary and have problems with grammar, pupils must be taught using an amalgamation of the product, genre and the process approaches (Maniruzzaman, 2010) in order for these second language learners to be equipped with the skill of writing their own compositions. Teachers must therefore use the mixed approaches and involve the pupils in the lesson. Pupils must be made to talk by involving them in situations in which they must negotiate language with other pupils in the class.
2. Pupils must be given constructive feedback by their teachers. This feedback might encourage them to write better compositions and even extend their knowledge in one writing genre to other writing genres; such as, extending their knowledge from writing a descriptive text to a narrative text.

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