

Teaching Essay in Nigeria from the Examiner's Perspectives

Nwaiwu, Mishael C*
Nnanna, Ngozi R**

* Federal Polytechnic, Nekede-Owerri, Imo State, Nigeria

** Rivers State College of Arts and Science Rumuola, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

Abstract The variance between teachers' approach to essay writing and the examiners' expectation has greatly affected the performance of the candidates. This is because the candidates go to examination in search of expository, argumentative, narrative, descriptive essays and others, while the examiner marks them on content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy. This paper calls on the teachers of English to teach the candidates according to the expectations of the examiners, especially on how to effectively use the styles of expository, argumentative, narrative, descriptive and others, to explicate the content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy as required by the examiners in essay writing.

Keywords: Essay Writing, Examiner, Teacher, Candidates

Introduction

It is indisputable that Nigeria has fully settled for English language as official and common language in the sense that English is the major language for commerce, education, mass communication, entertainment, evangelization, administration, government, judiciary science and technology, international relationship and others. English language as a matter of fact has maintained its position as the language of education and the educated that today every Nigerian child is either at the basolect, mesolect or acrolect level in the bid to understand, read, speak as well as write in English language. Among the component of testing tools for the students proficiency essay writing has been the most tasking and detailed. This is because it examines the four languages skill; reading listening, writing and speaking. It is regrettable that many teachers of English language have always taught this aspect of the language learning in theoretical stereotypes which list types of essay as letter writing, expository, narrative, descriptive, explanatory, argumentative, discursive and others. This method not only deceives the students, but keeps them at extreme poles with the examiners. In this paper, we are of the view that essay writing should be taught from the examiners point of view, in the strict sense. We have the notion that the so called types of essays are styles of organizing and explicating the points in essay writing, instead essay writing should be taught according to; the content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy which is the expectation of the examiners.

Examiners in this paper are the bodies such as West African Examination Council (WAEC) National Examination Commission (NECO) National Board for Technical and Business Education (NABTEB) and others that organize the basic certificates either at ordinary level (O level) or at advance level (A level). These also publish syllabi or course contents for candidates, who seats for these examinations. In other words they were given authority by the laws of the land to pronounce who passed or failed in English language at the basic certificate levels, as WACE has stated in the marking Guide:

This paper(English language paper) is designed to test the candidates' ability to use English as an effective means of communication in a given situation i.e. the candidate's ability to express himself clearly and coherently in a manner appropriate to the audience, purpose, topic and situation.(2011:1)

My Argument is that, this requirement should guide not only examiners but also the teachers who teach English language.

Martyn Walsh and Ann Walsh in their book *Plain English Handbook A complete guide to Good English* (1950) have noted two classes of composition oral and written composition, furthermore they outline the type

of written composition to include: fiction, biographic Essays, Newspapers writings and letters (98). However our focus will be on essays and letters. An Essay according to *BBC English Dictionary* (1992) is a short piece of writing on a particular subject written by a student. In other words an essay makes minimum demand on the reader as well as the writer, but provides maximum information in the clearest language possible according to the demand of the subject matter. Anumihe N.C (2010: 68) considers essay writing as a piece of extended prose writing. He further adds that the process of essay writing requires the use of the imagination to conceive or formulate, visualize or see in the mind and build up mental pictures of the things visualized into an indefinable coherent form or shape that we can describe, explain, discuss, narrate, contend or argue about convincingly in a well articulated and lucid language. This makes essay writing an essential partner to creative imagination.

However essay's aesthetics is integrated in the form or shape as are demanded by the subject matter. Eko Ebele (1999) maintains that "The success of an essay or any piece of writing depends on the effective organization of its part." Primarily Eko, is emphasizing words, sentences and paragraph in an essay writing. Yet all these are built in the parts of an essay as demanded by the examiners' content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy. Hence it is stated clearly in the WAEC marking guide that: "the merit of a piece of writing should be judged in terms of the writers success in achieving the purpose, be it to entertain instruct, inform admonish or persuade". (2011:1)

Adding to the above the council states that; judgment will be based in varying degrees on factors such as

- 1) Adequacy of subject matter
- 2) Originality of approach
- 3) Appropriateness of language
- 4) Clarity of exposition, narration or argument etc
- 5) Balance of ideas
- 6) Mechanical accuracy (2011:1)

That is to say that, there is no single way of explicating the content of any essay but each of the students is to be taught to substantiate his points with exposition, narrative, descriptive, argumentative or other styles. This sounds like a truism, but most teachers of essay writing so stereotype the teaching of essay writing to students, that they get to the examination hall looking for expository, narrative, augmentative, descriptive essays instead of using these styles as tool in the explication of the points in essay writing. Although it is not disputable that in a particular essay, a style may dominate the others; yet there is no way an essay could be written without making use of two or more of these styles of essay writing development.

However, each of the styles as essay tool has its peculiar sequencing, descriptive and expository styles use spatial sequencing. In spatial sequencing each point in the essay is drawn in relation to the space, that is to say that, the stages of the essay are developed according to the spaces they occupy in their natural order. For example in using the descriptive style, the description of the head is followed by the structures in the thoracic cavity before the abdomen. This sequencing demands an appropriate education of the contents of each space towards the support of the point raised in the overall development of the essay.

In like manner, the narrative style uses the chronological sequencing in the narration. Events in life occur in time and space, so at every point, the story follows the other points in the natural time and space. For example the story of a befitting burial for a loving Uncle should follow the events accordingly to the final interment. No time should be presented before the previous events.

The logical sequencing draws from simple logic and reasoning in argumentative style. It is obvious that something cannot be and be at the same time; that is it can be or not be. If it is, it is; if it is not, it is not. In this there are two traditional method of logical sequencing: deductive and inductive logic. In deductive logical sequencing, a conclusion is drawn from a general premise; this makes the general statement to inform the particular instances in the conclusion. For instance, if the general premise is that all teachers are goods, whosoever takes, the position of a teacher irrespective of the class or creed of the person, he is bound by

logic to share from the general premise. On the other hand inductive logical sequencing develops from series of events to draw conclusion. In this case instances of particular events culminate and sum up to the general conclusion.

This is because there is a truism that series of events mark a character or trait. With the above sequencing the content of an essay is development. Although it also contributes to the organizations

However, organization in an essay or letter writing has an orthodox paradigm. A letter as a form of correspondence may be formal, semi formal or informal. Each has its demands of address formant. A formal correspondence does not address a person instead; it addresses an office and therefore goes with two addresses: the senders address and the receivers address. Semiformal in like manner avoids duplication of a closely shared address as a result takes only the senders address, while maintaining other official components such as: official salutation, a caption, or title and official subscription. Informal correspondence on the other hand is written to a person, hence it takes only the sender address with personal salutation and subscription.

But in the bid to elicitate and explicate the points in these forms of correspondence the writer may employ expository, narrative descriptive or argumentative style. In other words even in the formal or informal correspondence the styles are used as tools in the development of essays. In advising the examiners on what to expect from candidates in organization, WAEC (2011) notes, that "the qualities to look for are: a suitable opening, adequate development, good paragraphing, balance coherent and suitable conclusion (2011:2). In most cases WAEC as well as other examination body states the format of the address(es), salutation and subscription, but note that points are only to be marked when they are well developed and no point is developed without employing any of these styles.

Also in the organization of an Essay the sequencing is given adequate attention especially on the mode of unfolding the events. 2011 marking guide WAEC maintains that;

A well organized story has a beginning, a climax, and a conclusion. In addition to a good plot paragraphs should be well developed and ideas properly linked. If dialogue is successful used it should be accepted (2011:10).

This shows that invariably the story might be developed with any style such as expository, descriptive, narrative and dialogue or dramatic, but the paragraphs must be properly linked. Considering the expression, WAEC demands

- a) Clarity and general appropriateness of style
- b) Variation of sentence structure and type
- c) Judicious use of figurative language
- d) Skilled and sophisticated use of punctuation (2011:2)

In writing essay the candidate is expected to know that it involves a good mastery of the language rudiments and application of same. In other words, the examiners expect a good choice of words in relation to the subject and appropriate application of imagination to create the right atmosphere with the most adequate tones which should reflect in the variation of sequences of styles and structure. These aspects are often assumed by the teachers and as a result are not adequately given attention or taught in the old stereotype way. That they hardly draw the attention of the candidate to the fact that essay writing tests both their imaginative and creative ability as well as their expression of such in their writing. Little attention is paid to the structures and use of simple sentence, complex sentences, compound sentences, compound complex sentences or multiple sentences. In some cases these sentences are mixed up with the styles such as loose, periodic, balance and mixed sentence styles. Yet it is what the examiners are looking for. In some case, the candidate utterly neglect the uses of sentences in declaration, imperative, interrogative or wishes as tools, in developing the appropriate tones but the examiners emphatically says that "A mixture of the various sentence types would be necessary to avoid monotony". (2011:10)

Considering the mechanical accuracy WAEC maintains that the main categories of error which the examiner may indicate with rings are:

- a) Undeterminable errors in grammar
- b) Punctuation errors
- c) Spelling errors (2011:3).

The above errors may be grouped as errors in grammar or spelling or punctuation. It is important to note that there is a strong demarcation between the errors in mechanical accuracy and the errors in expression. In fact the error of mechanical accuracy can be treated alongside other misuses of English language but demand carefulness and absolute aptness to overcome.

In conclusion instead of teachers of English teaching essay in the old stereotype method of regimenting candidate to look out for expository essay, descriptive essay, narrative essay, argumentative essay and others we believe it is time to teach candidates from the examiners perspective by properly exposing them to employ the style as tools in expository, description, narration, arguing or persuasion and others in explicating their essays but drawing appropriate attitude to the content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy in building the introduction, body or conclusion of their essay. Most importantly they should apply these styles with creative and imaginative ability that will reflect in their sentence styles and structures and use so with the most adequate diction in relation to their subject matters, audience and occasion so as to satisfy the examiners.

References

- Anumihé, N.C (2001). *Advance Writing for professional: A stylistic Approach*. Owerri Newman.
- Anyanwu P.A. (1999) *Correctness and style in the English language*. Owerri Spring Field.
- B.B.C. *English Dictionary A Dictionary for the world* (1992). London. Harpercollins Publisher.
- Eko, E, (1999). *Effective Writing* Ibadan, Helenmann. Eductrual Books. Nigeria Plc.
- Heffernan. J.A.W and John .E. Lincoln (1990). *Writing a College Workbook* London. wwnorton & company.
- Hicks, W. (1993). *English for Journalist* London. Rout edge Pub.
- Shaw H.A. (1973). *A complete Course in Freshman English*. London Harper & Row publishers.
- West African Examination Council May/June SSCE 2011 Marking Guide.