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Large Class Size: An Impediment to Teaching and Learning of Reading Comprehension and Summary Writing in Senior Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Education is the pivot of national transformation and development. Evidently, English language has been accepted in education for teaching and learning and for subsequent services in Nigeria. This suggests that the four language skills which comprise of listening, speaking, reading and writing are to be taught properly, but this is not so in Nigerian schools. The paper discussed large class size as a hindrance to proper teaching and learning of reading comprehension and summary writing. Based on the discussion recommendations were made that stakeholders in the education industry should provide adequate facilities to encourage conducive teaching and learning environment. English language teachers on the other hand should involve students in constant summary writing activities.

Education as defined by Longman (2007) is the process of teaching and learning usually at school, college or university. Embedded in this are the existence of teaching, learning and training activities meant to impact information, knowledge, skills and competences for individual and societal improvements and development. Education can be conceived as the development of the cognitive, affective and psychomotor domain and abilities of an individual for optimal function and performance in the society. The individual is helped to maximize his mental, psychological and emotional abilities which will benefit him and the society he belongs. Hence, it can be said that the essence of education is the harmonious development of the individual's physical, mental, social and spiritual powers so that he or she is equipped to offer useful service to God and humanity. Therefore, education is the acquisition of knowledge which helps a person develop ability, skills, attitudes and other forms of behaviour with positive value in the society (Okecha, 2008). Okecha (2008), further stated that education is a lifelong process which frees a man from

ignorance and superstition. It enhances the quality of an individual and enables him to build up his personality in such a way that he is able to play an effective role in the development of the society he belongs.

Education is fundamental to personal and national development it plays a key role in the ability of a developing country to absorb modern technology and to develop the capacity for self-sustaining growth and development (Todaro and Smith, 2009). This is to say that education holds the key that unlocks a country's potentials towards national transformation and sustainable human national development.

Accordingly, Education For All (EFA) has become a global movement led by United Nations Educational, Scientific and cultural organization (UNESCO). This movement aims at meeting the educational needs of all children, youth and adults by 2015. UNESCO was mandated to lead the movement and coordinate efforts to reach Education for All. The EFA goals also contribute to the global pursuit of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). From the world conference in Jonitien, Thailand in 1990, Education for all was adopted, which stressed that education is a fundamental human right and countries were enjoined to strengthen their efforts to improve education to ensure that the basic learning needs for all were met. To meet the learning needs, six goals were established which include: Universal access to learning, emphasis on learning outcome, and enhancing the environment for learning among others.

No national can develop without a massive investment in the educational system. This is because a country's development is tied to the quality of her human resources, which is the most important and critical factor of production and development (Ilechukwu and Njoku, 2012). The issue of neglect and poor funding of education in Nigeria which bring about decay in the public school system have led to serious demarcation between education theory and practice. As Mordil (2008) stated, even in a system where the private schools are expected to play a significant role in education, it is still necessary for government to set good example for the private to follow. This is done by making sure that public schools are well funded, with conducive learning environment, adequate facilities and an attractive remuneration for the teachers to teach development –relevant curriculum that meets the needs of the time.

Current Status of English Language

Language generally plays a vital role in the life of a people. Hence, Ani (2007), suggested that human beings cannot think without language. It is an integral part of man and it surpasses communication and social interaction. Language influences thought and thought conditions actions. Considering the relevance of language to mankind, Ibiowotisi (1996) state that language is so vital in man's life that there is hardly any situation where it is not involved, it is a vehicle of power, a means

by which we control, create and preserve. This is to say that without language, there cannot be any human society, education or even human beings as it is uniquely a human activity.

In Nigeria, English language has been give an exalted position with great reach and influence. It is the most internationalized in the distribution of any language in the world Graddol (1997) supported that the only people who think that one can conduct all of one's affairs in this world through the medium of a single language are speakers of English. With the arrival of the colonial masters in Nigeria, English became the machinery for cultivating the minds and training of staff for effective communications with the colonial masters (Azikwe, 2007). In the course of time, English language became a course of study at all levels of learning from nursery to tertiary institutions.

Specifically, English has become the nation's lungua Franca and has taken the place of a second language in Nigeria. It is currently evident that the English language is socio-linguistically the language of social and official transactions, the media, science and technology, the language of legislature and judiciary respectively. In the area of education, English language plays a major role as the medium of instruction, a tool for transmitting knowledge. As enshrined in the National Policy on Education (2004:16).
It is stated that:

> *The medium of instruction in the primary School shall be the language of the immediate environment for first three (3) years. During this period, English shall be taught as a subject; but from the fourth years, the English language shall progressively be used as a medium of instruction and the language of immediate environment shall be taught as a subject.*

Clearly noted, the language has been accepted in education for teaching and learning and relevant services in Nigeria. From the foregoing, English occupies an enviable and a strategic position in Nigeria, growth and unity of the nation. Realizing the sensitive position given to English language, competence in its use, therefore, is necessary. This requires that the four language skills comprised of listening, speaking reading and writing should be taught properly. This is not so in Nigeria due to the problems that hinders the effective teaching and learning of English in secondary schools. Such problems include lack of teaching materials, teachers' incessant strike, inadequate infrastructure and worse of it all large class size.

The Problem of Large Class Size

The introduction of free schooling programme for all in 1976 know as Universal Primary Education (UPE) led to increase in population in primary schools which extended to secondary school enrolment in Nigeria. As the enrolment into

schools increased by day, the available resources did not increase. This led to merging of classrooms which resulted to large class size. To some educators, there can be no quantitative definition of what constitutes a large class as its perception varies from context to context.

However, Edoabasi (2007) in Adeyemi and Akabogu (2012) described large classes as over populated classrooms or as sometimes presented, streams of a segmented class, running from 'a' to 'm' for one secondary school teacher. In order to avert the danger involved in large classes and for effective teaching and learning, the National Policy on Education (2004) suggested that the teacher to thirty-five students (1:35). In the same vein, All Nigeria conference of principals of secondary school, some years ago, recommended a maximum of forty (40) students in a class for proper management and control.

Unfortunately, the outlined policy of the National Policy on Education (NPE) on class size is violated by the same Nigerian government. This is because classes are assigned with students' population ranging from seventy (70) to one hundred (100) in most secondary schools. Overcrowding according to Eze (1998), makes teaching ineffective and sometimes impossible. In the words of William (1999), there is a world of difference in teacher effectiveness between a class of fifteen and a class of fifty. He went further to state that dividing the language class into small groups is a way of tackling the problem of large class size. He emphasized that in second language learning and teaching, the importance of small group activity cannot be ignored.

The teaching and learning of English as a second language requires close teacher and student interaction which large class size does not allow. The processes that help learners develop skills for reading comprehension and summary writing involves different interactive stages between the teacher and student, which if not practical results to poor performance of students in English.

When teachers have fewer students, more attention and tailored instructions can be given. Every educator would argue strongly that large classes have an adverse impact on education, learning and society. In learning English as a second language (ESL), being in a small class would give teachers opportunity to identify the students' language needs, his areas of strengths and weaknesses.

Not only do large class size affect learning, but also on the teacher or education classes have low morale and self-esteem. Motivation suffers and classroom methods are restricted to little more than lecture, which brain-based learning has shown to be by itself, the poorest of all teaching methods. With overcrowded classrooms new and more dynamic teaching strategies and techniques cannot be implemented. Increased class size also affects students' behaviour and as such reduce the opportunities for schools to provide the level and quality of teaching that is needed to enhance student learning and achievement.

Reading Comprehension and Summary Writing

Reading and comprehension are specialized activities which are very important in a person's educational pursuit. Effective comprehension helps the reader to read, extract meaning and generate ideas from the information got from the text (Akpama, Egong and Akwa, 2005). Reading and Comprehension have to operate as one concept due to their synonymous relation. Comprehension is a by-product of reading. It does not occur in the absence of reading neither is reading interesting of meaningful without understanding. For whatever reason a student decides to read, comprehension is aimed at, and a reader does not continue to read if he does not comprehend the material.

Effective comprehension in the different context areas in English language is important. Students need frequent practice in comprehension exercises. Unfortunately, this is not the norm in large classes, reason being that there would be so many of such exercises to be marked by one teacher. This is turn affects the performance of the students in examination. Akpama et al (2005) assert that the comprehension questions which students answer in examination expose their level of understanding of various aspects of the language, that is, the grammar, vocabulary, and content level. This shows that lack of competence in any of these affects the general performance of students in English language in WAEC and NECO examinations. For a long period of time the government, universities, general public and the West African Examination Council have to express disappointment at the annual poor performance of candidates especially in English language.

Onukaogu (1993), found out that over 70% of candidates failed because of their performance in the comprehension and summary sections of English language paper 1 (English paper 1). According to him 40% of those who failed in this section scored less than 10% because their inability to understand a passage makes it difficult for them to summarize it.

Summary writing is a very important writing skill and it covers a wide range of activities. Eyisi (2005) asserted that the art of summarizing is not a one-dimensional issue. It is a heculean task, complex and challenging and thus requires a full range of academic reading and writing abilities. Summary writing is the process of rewriting a passange to make it shorter while retaining its essential points. It is a shorter account of a write-up that gives only the most important information, ignorance the details. Writing generally is mastered through practice, hence success in summary writing is dependent on effectual practice. Constant practice on the part of the students demands the attention of the teacher. In large classes as is the case in Nigerian schools, students receive less attention which hinders high achievement.

The process that helps students develop skills for summary writing can be linked to the knowledge of essay writing and exercises in comprehension passages.

The skill is developed as they go through the stages of pre-writing, writing and re-writing. According to Christine (1982), you teach students to write more effectively by encouraging them to make full use of many activities that comprise the act of writing not by focusing only on the final written products and its strengths and weaknesses. Eyisi (2005) suggested that writing an effective summary requires the following:

i. Ability to recognize the main point in a passage.
ii. Reflecting accurately only the original author's idea, order of presentation and points of emphasis
iii. Underlying the main points
iv. Write, re-write and edit to ensure correctness of your summary.

Summary writing, therefore, is a peculiar writing skill that requires being learnt and taught meticulously. The situation in most secondary schools in Nigeria is that of large class size which makes the effective teaching of summary writing difficult. Poor performance in summary writing leads to poor performance in English language and hinders students' achievement in higher education.

Conclusion

As earlier stated by William (1999), there is a world of difference in teacher-effectiveness between a class of fifteen and a class of fifty. Class size is a significant factor in students' performance in reading comprehension and summary writing. Large class size tends to worsen the teaching and learning situation as students in a large class cannot have all the attention they may need from the teacher. The teacher/student interaction is also very much reduced and this hinders high achievement in learning, generally.

Recommendation

This paper recommends the following:

1. There should be a strict adherence to the recommended teacher versus ratio of 1:35 as in the National Policy on Education. This should be enforced by relevant government agencies in the education sector.
2. Government at all levels of education should provide enough facilities like classrooms to avoid over crowdedness
3. In addition to providing classrooms, more teachers should also be employed into the services of the public schools in different states.

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