

Rethinking Methodologies in Essay Writing Pedagogy in Nigeria: The Metacognitive Learning Strategy Alternative

MUHAMMAD KHADIJAT SAMA
Curriculum Studies and Educational Technology,
Faculty of Education and Extension Services,
Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto

Abstract

The paper examines the position occupied by English language in Nigeria's educational system in its introduction. A cursory look at the state of essay writing of students in secondary schools in Nigeria was made. The main thrust of the paper was on the methodologies used in teaching essay writing in the language classroom. The paper contends that the conventional method of teaching essay writing that is primarily product-based proves ineffective at promoting the skill and art of essay writing in students. Therefore an alternative approach in the form of metacognitive learning strategy was proposed. This strategy of learning entails self-planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation on a given task in composition writing. This is because available literature indicate that students who produced good essays used metacognitive learning strategy to plan and monitor their work more than students whose essays were of poor quality. The emphasis of the strategy was on the development of reflective practice and efforts geared towards developing learner autonomy, independence and self-regulation. Therefore, the paper recommends that among other things, explicit metacognitive training should be offered to students of secondary schools which will go a long way in enriching their writing performances.

Introduction

English language is a core subject at Basic Education and Secondary levels of Nigeria's educational system. It is also the medium of instruction with which almost all other subjects and courses at all levels above the lower basic are taught. Several decades after the English language (L2) is proclaimed by the Federal Government to be the medium of instruction in Nigeria (Muhammad, 1995) the West African Examination Council, WAEC (2002) reported that there is a relative dismal and unimpressive performance in English amongst students and school leavers of Nigerian schools. It is expected that at the SS level, students should have acquired a substantial grasp of or mastery in English and communicate effectively in writing. This is because success in writing is success in language. When the language in question is the medium of instruction, it then follows that success in it is success in knowledge of almost all subjects.

Given that, the SS level of education is the education children receive after a nine-year Basic Education in Nigeria, the students at this level have been exposed to the four components of English language for over six years. These components are; Listening, Speaking Reading and Writing. Though, the four language skills are interwoven, the ability to write is one of the most foundations of a student's academic endeavours. This is so because the most significant judgments in school are made in written examinations. A student who has the ability to write at the early stages of his or her schooling is predicted to succeed in any academic pursuit. A student who is expected to have acquired writing skills but is still unable to write is likely to suffer academic failures. Indisputably, for a student to learn any discipline, a mastery of the skill of writing is required to be successful in that field, especially in Nigeria where academic success or failure is paper-based that entails the ability to write and pass written examinations.

The State of Essay Writing Among Secondary School Students in Nigeria

Proficiency in English language skills especially in writing in today's diverse society is the key to the world's proof of knowledge and universal culture (Mgbodile, 1999) and a gate way to success in global economy. The ability to write well, hitherto a luxury, is now a dire necessity (Gallagher, 2006). According to Aka (1997) many examiners would testify that quite a great number of students get very low marks for their essays or letters for several reasons. Such as:

Not understanding the wording of the subject or topic they have chosen and thus writing out of point. It is popularly known that understanding the question is half an answer to it. Thus, a selection of a topic whose wordings are poorly understood could only lead to a hollow piece.

Having little or no knowledge of the subject or topic chosen. When students have poor knowledge of the topic they selected to answer, they are likely to perform poorly on such tasks. Every essay question needs to be fully developed. Absence or lack of ideas to develop the essay could lead to writing a piece that would seem obscure and out of place. But due to lack of strategic knowledge, students attempt questions which did not give them enough materials to develop.

Lack of familiarity with the required formats: Essays are of different kinds. There are narratives, argumentative, expository, formal and informal letters etc. Each of these has its distinct features and format of handling it. The moment a student use the format of a narrative essay in an essay requiring argument, then the aim is almost

defeated. It is not uncommon to find students who are asked to write a letter, writing it without the address(es) as if they are narrating a story. This could be a clear manifestation of being unaware of strategies effective to accomplish the task.

Digression – some students score low grades for their inability to stay on track of the topic of discourse. Consider a question on how I spent my last holiday. Some could approach the topic dwelling on a wedding ceremony they have attended (during the holiday) giving all the details and leaving other events that occurred during the holiday. With adequate metacognitive strategy training students could be trained to stay on track of the assigned task.

Writing too short of the required length of the essay. Most essays would carry the required number and or lengths of words to which the students are expected to conform to. However, in many cases, essays written by the students are mostly too short of the required length resulting in students penalizing themselves. (WAEC, 2002: 9). It is common to find students writing between 50 to 100 for an essay that demands 300 words. This is indeed a gateway to failure in the write – up.

Having limited vocabulary and expressing themselves poorly due to grammatical and mechanical inaccuracies. Students at Secondary School level in Sokoto State like their counterpart elsewhere in Nigeria find writing an uphill task due to poor diction. Often, students are seen writing a whole essay in a single paragraph, probably of two hundred words. Poor spelling, faulty grammar and poor punctuation as exhibited in students' essay marred most students from high scores.

In any worthwhile education system the teaching of writing becomes top priority for concerned educators. Gallagher (2006) observes that a school that teaches its children the curriculum without concurrently teaching them how to write well is a school that has failed. Regrettably, this typifies the public school system in Nigeria where writing is hardly taught in any meaningful way (Oyetunde & Muodumogu, 1999). The WAEC (2002) lists poor knowledge of the rules of grammar, inability to construct good sentences, lack of teacher's exposure to modern methods of teaching as causes of students' poor achievement in English language. Of all the factors advanced for learners' inability to write, teacher related factors appear to be the most reverberating (Obi-Okoye, 2004). It is often believed among scholars that students' success or failure depends in large part on what goes on in the classroom. Either that the learners are not familiar with the use of effective learning strategies or the strategies are not

explicitly taught at schools. To support this assumption, Oyetunde and Muodumogu, (1999) observed that writing is hardly taught in any meaningful way in Nigeria.

Conventional Methods in Essay Writing in Nigeria

Given the above, it is probable that unqualified English language teachers and inappropriate methodologies are the bottom-line for learners' inability to write good essays. It has been observed by Nwaiwu and Nnnana (2011) that many teachers of English language have always taught this aspect of language learning (writing) in theoretical stereotypes which list types of essay as letter writing, expository, narrative, descriptive, explanatory, argumentative, and others. In this situation essays are treated as list of items to be memorized by learners. Then, one or two of the essays would be given to learners as classroom exercise or as an assignment with little or no guidance from the teachers on the technique or process of essay writing. For instance, asking the students to write about how they spent their last holiday at the beginning of a term without proper training on the skill to be employed for a coherent narration. In such a scenario, the students would be writing without knowing the appropriate tense to use, the proper way to generate ideas, arrange and present the ideas logically and arrive at a good essay. This method not only deceives the students, but keeps them at extreme poles with the examiners. Instead, the scholars suggest that essay writing should be taught according to the content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy which are the expectations of the examiners. In addition to this, various methods and techniques have been advanced in essay writing pedagogy. Omachonu (2003) identified three types of method in the teaching and learning of essay writing used by teachers. These include the guided method, which gives students guidelines to help them write or produce correct compositions. The non-guided method which is also called free composition where the students are given topics and allowed to produce correct essays on their own and the literacy method which provides students with the necessary experience in the theme, structure, tone and other aspects of style. These methods of writing serve as conventional classroom practices based on product approach rather than emphasizing on acquisition of the knowledge, art and skills of writing. Fearn and Farnan (2001) opined that product approach to writing instruction consists of three components; assign, write, and assess with little attention paid to what young writers thought, valued or did. It lays heavy emphasis on mechanical correctness and the final product of writing and requires students to write essays with little or no guidance from the teacher. Such practices are what make writing classes dull and boring to both tutors and learners.

The conventional method of teaching essay writing has not greatly helped students' written expression and this is largely because writing is one of the skills according to Obi-Okoye (2004) that is not amenable to mere memorization of a set of rules because it calls for development and application of composite skills in the writing process. "Until teachers start teaching students to see writing as a process of discovering, exploring ideas and constructing frameworks with which to present ideas; there will be little or no improvement in students' essays" (Chinwe & Catherine 2013, p. 112). Often time, students make negative remarks about writing. They see writing as a difficult task. Any teacher at levels above the lower basic education in Nigeria is familiar with students' poor writing ability. One can simply infer that students nowadays hate any task that entails putting pen to paper. Yet these are students who aspire for careers that require a high degree of writing skills such as sciences, business, law, medicine, and education to mention but a few. Thus, there is a growing concern about deficiencies of the quality of writing of Nigerian students which remains a focal topic of discourse and research across the nation. However, one can only imagine the futility of attempt to communicate effectively in writing with poor knowledge of the skills of written English. The situation is too pathetic that exploring literature on this discourse could only amount to creating desperation and disappointment in the minds of concerned educators.

Perhaps the instructional strategies used by teachers to teach essay writing are such that keep the learners at a disadvantage. In such a scenario, the lessons largely become too teacher-dominated without much active participation by learners. Oyetunde and Muodumogu (1999) believe that, teachers do not teach writing because they do not know how to teach it. When teachers are ill-equipped in essay writing pedagogy, the skill becomes the most neglected of the four language skills which could have adverse effects not only on their academic life but also on their work-place at large.

The Metacognitive Learning Strategy Alternative

The concern with teaching and learning has shifted from the teachers' teaching to the students' learning. Thus, emphasis is placed on learner-centredness and effort geared towards finding methods and techniques that will make learning of English more meaningful to improve students' achievement and understanding. Promoting learning proficiency by means of strategies training can make learners more autonomous in language learning. One strategy that is gaining contemporary acceptance as potentially effective in essay writing pedagogy is metacognitive learning strategy.

This strategy springs from the broad term, metacognition. Metacognition is thinking about thinking and is most commonly broken down into two distinct but interrelated areas. Flavell (1970) one of the first researchers in metacognition and memory, classifies these two areas as metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive regulation. Metacognitive knowledge is awareness of one's thinking or thinking about what we know. It is viewed by Zhang (2010) as highly interactive knowledge variable of person knowledge, task knowledge, and strategic knowledge.

Person's knowledge refers to general knowledge that learners have acquired about themselves as learners, which facilitate or inhibit learning. We know that children are not very accurate or efficient at describing what they know, but as they get older their skills improve, especially if they have been taught and have had practice in how to think about and discuss their own thinking. Task knowledge generally involves three aspects: Learners' knowledge about the task purpose and how it will meet their learning needs and goals (Breen 1987), knowledge about the nature of a particular task identified through a classification process; information about a task's demands such as the approach to the task and the knowledge and skills needed to complete the task. Strategic knowledge on the other hand, refers to general knowledge about the types and usefulness of strategies, and specific knowledge about their utility for learning. One common approach to developing metacognitive skills involves teaching study strategies that require students to think about the way they learn best.

Metacognitive regulation otherwise known as self-direction or directing learning refers to the processes by which learners plan how to approach a task, their analysis of the task, and the monitoring of its implementation. The cognitive literature refers to the same processes as self-regulation. When a student has information about his/her thinking (metacognitive knowledge), he/she is able to use this information to direct or regulate his/her learning.

Metacognitive learning strategy is a procedure management adopted by learners to learn a second or foreign language successfully, an act regulated by learners themselves (China 2010). It includes determining and adjusting learning aims, choosing learning methods and skills and evaluating learning results. It is a strategy consisting of self- planning on a given task, self- monitoring in the course of executing the plan and self- evaluation after completing the task. Once learners have a good command of metacognitive learning strategy, they will become more independent and autonomous and will be more capable of planning, monitoring and evaluating their writing processes and thus become efficient writers (Fenghua & Chen2010).

Drawing from available literature “O’Malley and Chamot’s definition and classification “are more accurate and more widely accepted” (Fenghua & Chen 2010: 136). Therefore, their classification which entails three categories of (1) Planning (2) Monitoring and (3) Evaluation were adequately accepted and used as the basis for the position of the paper.

Planning

Planning is more about brainstorming on the assigned task and systematic organization of how the task is to be completed successfully. According to Fenghua and Chen (2010) planning comprises five strategies; namely, (1) Advance organization (2) Directed attention; (3) Selective attention; (4) Self management and (5) Functional planning. For instance, in a narrative essay (A recent Journey), learners can think of the number of paragraphs, direct their attention on the journey itself, focus on the selected points raised, manage the time, wordings and execute the plan respectively. Broadly however, planning for learning in the light of O’Malley and Chamot (1990) involves two kinds of strategies which are advance organization and organizational planning. In the writing process focus is often made on the process of writing rather than on the product of writing, and on the recursive nature of writing rather than the linear nature of writing. An integral time log of writing should be focused on planning stage of writing where the goal setting occurs. Goal setting is one important aspect of good writing. It involves the selection of appropriate strategies and allocation of resources that affect performances. One finding is that the ability to plan, and knowledge about this process, develops throughout childhood and adolescence, improving dramatically between the ages of 10 and 14. Older more experienced writers engage in more global as opposed to local planning. Hence, they possess more knowledge about cognition and use that knowledge to regulate their learning before they undertake a task.

Monitoring

Monitoring can be described as being aware of what one is doing in the course of accomplishing or executing a task. In addition, monitoring refers to one’s on-line awareness of comprehension and task performance. The ability to engage in periodic self-testing while learning is a good example. However, several recent studies have found a link between metacognitive knowledge and monitoring accuracy. For example Schraw and Dennison (1994) found that adults’ ability to estimate how well

they would understand a passage prior to reading was related to monitoring accuracy on a post –reading comprehension test.

Fenghua and Chen (2010), suggest that self-monitoring involves checking, verifying or correcting one’s comprehension or performance in the course of the language task. It involves more specific metacognitive strategies as follows: (1) comprehension monitoring, (2) production monitoring which means checking, verifying or correcting one’s language production in for instance the journey made. It is primarily applied in writing and speaking, (3) Auditory monitoring (4) Visual monitoring (5) Styling monitoring i.e whether in the form of chronological order or based on the succession of events during the journey. (6) Strategy monitoring (7) plan monitoring and (8) Double –checking monitoring. During the second stage of writing process, i.e. self-monitoring, ideas are translated into the written mode. The writer is expected to perform many tasks during this period. Being conscious of the task at hand, staying on track of the assigned task and guarding against unnecessary mistakes of spelling, grammar, punctuation etc are some of the features of self- monitoring.

Evaluation

This is a mental process involving conscious inspection of learning outcomes and one’s own progress in the new language. Fenghua and Chen (2010) view that self-evaluation subsumes five metacognitive strategies. They are: (1) Production evaluation; (2) Performance Evaluation; (3) Ability evaluation; (4) Strategy evaluation and (5) Language evaluation. In this regard, students can check the final essay written about the recent journey, assess their performances in line with their abilities, evaluate the efficacy of the strategy used in the narration as well as the language i.e use of past tense, correct spellings, punctuation and appropriate grammatical expression in the essay on recent journey respectively.

Self-evaluation is a basic and important aspect of the writing process as it enhances the quality of essay. Effective revision (which is part of self evaluation) results in good writing. Many writers, however, revise little; they tend to be, in the opinion of Sommers (1980) proof readers rather than reviewers whose role is to edit the document to suit a known audience. In many public schools in Nigeria, many children do not revise competently and effectively. In most cases, focus is on mechanical and word-level changes and their revising influences little on the quality of writing. The students’ sense of audience is limited resulting in less revision. Many students submit written essays unchecked and unrevised. Others probably, proof read once to pick out a few spelling mistakes. This strategy is graphically represented in figure 1.

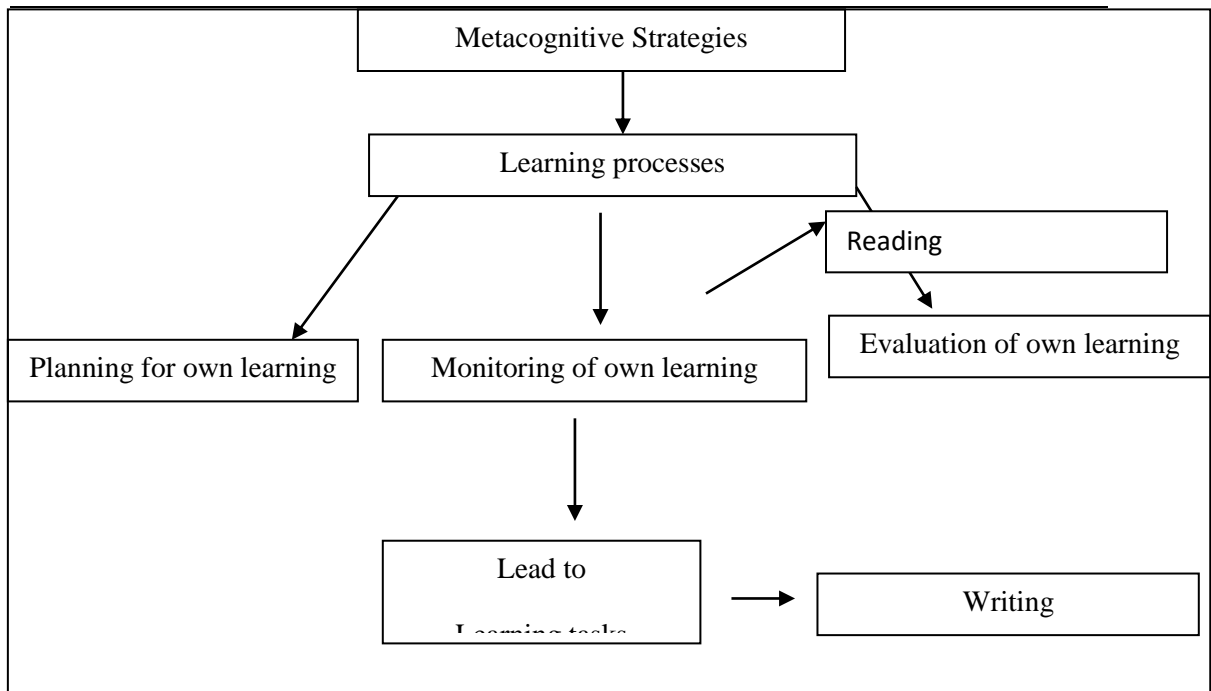


Figure 1: Metacognitive Strategy in Reading and Writing Processes
Adopted from Hamzah & Abdullah 2009: 678.

From figure 1, it could be seen, that there are three components of learning processes in Metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring and evaluation in learning English as a second language. These three components of learning process lead to learning tasks e.g. reading and writing skills.

Numerous studies revealed that mastery of writing skill can be made easy through direct instruction on metacognitive learning strategies (Olson & Robert, 2004; Kasper 1997; Uwazurike, 2010). Conner (2007) conducted a study on final year high school students. It was aimed at investigating the relationship between strategy use and sophistication of their essays. The results showed that students who produced good essays used metacognitive strategy to plan and monitor their work more than students whose essays were of poor quality.

Conclusion

Given the right training on metacognitive learning strategy, learners can display a better understanding of the importance of planning in their writing. They can further become continuously conscious of the task while executing it to stay on track. The tendency to edit, revise and to evaluate a piece of writing could as well become their attribute. This would eventually lead to more sophisticated writings with regular practice. Thus, students who demonstrate a wide range of metacognitive skills, as found out from the research can perform better on examinations and can complete work more efficiently.

Recommendations

The paper offered the following recommendations:

1. Learners of English language should be trained to become aware of the existence of metacognitive learning strategy and its efficacy at improving their writing ability. Moreover, explicit metacognitive training should be offered to students of secondary schools which will go a long way in enriching their writing performances.
2. Teachers of English language should be given professional training on the usefulness of metacognitive strategies and the effective ways of training learners to adopt the strategies for autonomous learning. For instance National Teachers Institute (NTI) can organize workshops for English language teachers to promote the use of metacognitive leaning strategy.
3. An infusion of a course of study or a course content known as strategy training in the curriculum of would-be-teachers of English at either the NCE or Degree level or (both) could equipped teachers with the necessary pedagogical skills to offer instruction on metacognitive learning strategies to students.

References

- Aka, S. M. O. (1997). *Model essays and letters for GCE & school certificate English*. (6th ed.). Benin-city, Nigeria: S.M.O. Aka & Brothers Press.
- Breen, P. (1987). Learner contributions to task design. In C. N. Candlin, & D. Murphy, *Second Language Learning Tasks*; Lancaster practical papers in English Language Education, London, UK: Prentice-Hall International.
-

- Chinwe, A. M. & Catherine O. U. (2013). Improving students' achievement in essay writing: What will be the impact of mini-lesson strategy? *Global Advanced Research Journal of Arts and Humanities (GARJAH)* **2** (66): 111-120 Retrieved from <http://garjob/index.htm>.
- China Papers (2010). A study of metacognitive strategies instruction in English writing in junior middle schools. China's outstanding Master's Theses Part C. in *Foreign Language*. Humanities Bookmarks the Permalink.
- Conner, L. N. (2007). Cueing metacognition to improve researching and essay writing in a final year high school Biology class. *Research in Science Education*. **37** (1): 1 – 16.
- Fearn, L. & Farnan, N. (2001). *Interaction, teaching writing and the language arts*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Fenghua, L. & Chen, H. F. (2010). A study of metacognitive strategies-based writing instruction for vocational college students, **3**(3): 136-144 Retrieved from www.ccsenet.org/elt.
- Flavell, J. H. (1970). Metacognitive Aspects of problem solving in L. B. Resnick (Ed.) *The Nature of Intelligence*, 231-236, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Gallagher, K. (2006). *Teaching adolescent writers*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Hamzah, M. S. G. & Abdullah, S. K. (2009). Analysis on metacognitive strategies in reading and writing among Malaysia ESL learners in four education Institutions. *European Journal for Social-Sciences*, **11** (4): 676 – 683.
- Kasper, L. F. (1997). Assessing the metacognitive growth of ESL students writers. *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*, **3** (1): Retrieved from <http://www.kyoto-su.ac.jp/information/tesl-ej/ejo9/al.html>.
- Mgbodile, T. O. (1999). *Fundamentals of language education*. Nsukka: Mike Social Press.

- Nwaiwu, M. C. & Nnanna, N. R. (2011). Teaching essay in Nigeria from the examiner's perspectives. In *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, **2** (4).
- Obi-Okoye, A. F. (2004). *Advanced English composition: The writing process approach* Onitsha: Ganja Books.
- Olson, C. B. & Robert, L. (2007). A cognitive strategies approach to reading and writing instruction for English Language learners in Secondary schools. In *Research in the Teaching of English*, **4** (3): 267-273. The National Council of Teachers of English.
- O'Malley, J. M. & Chamot, A. U. (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Omachonu, G. S. (2003). *Effective writing skills*. Nsukka: A.P. Express publishers Limited.
- Oyetunde, T. O. & Muodumogu, C. A. (1999). *Effective English teaching in primary and secondary schools: Some basic considerations and strategies*. Jos, Nigeria: Conference on Educational Improvement.
- Rog, L. J. (2007). *Marvelous mini- lesson for teaching revision writing*, *International Reading Association*. New York: Delaware.
- Schraw, G. & Dennison, R. S. (1994). Assessing metacognitive awareness. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, **19**: 460-475.
- Sommers, N. (1980). Revision strategies of student writers and experienced adult writers. *College Composition and Communication*, **31**: 378-388.
- Uwazurike, N. R. (2010). Metacognition and achievement goals as correlates of academic success in *Continental Journal of Education and Research*, **3**(1): Retrieved from <http://www.wiloludjournal.com>
- WAEC (2002). *Chief Examiners' Reports*. Nigeria. Lagos: Animo Press Ltd.
- Zhang, L. J. (2010). Awareness in reading: EFL students' metacognitive knowledge of reading strategies in an input - Poor environment, **11** (4): 268-288. Retrieved from <http://www.multilingual-matters.net/>.
-