

GRADE SEVEN PUPILS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ENGLISH COMPOSITION TESTS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT: A CASE STUDY AT KAROI JUNIOR PRIMARY SCHOOL, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT: *This study sought to find out Grade Seven pupils' perceptions towards English composition tests as an instrument of performance measurement. Twenty (N=20) pupils participated in the study. Questionnaires and interviews were used as data gathering instruments. The study established that, generally, Grade Seven pupils have positive perceptions towards English composition writing. It was also found out that teachers teach composition writing in their classes and it again emerged that handwriting of pupils influenced the award of marks by teachers. The study recommends that teachers should take advantage of pupils' zeal to write English compositions by giving them as much practice as possible as well as giving feedback on time on written compositions. There is also need by parents to take an active role in the education of their children by assisting them in English composition writing at home.*

Keywords: Perceptions, Composition, Performance, Measurement, Feedback.

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the issues that have affected the education system in primary schools in Zimbabwe is the introduction of English composition tests in Grade Seven examinations. It is in this light that the study investigated Grade Seven pupils' perceptions towards English composition tests as an instrument of performance measurement. Pupils' perceptions towards English compositions determine their success or lack of it in both internal and external examinations. Generally, pupils who have positive perceptions

towards a subject do well and the reverse is true for those whose perceptions are negative. Thus, the knowledge of pupils' perceptions towards English composition tests helps teachers employ relevant teaching methods in the teaching of English compositions. Bruce (1969)[1] observed that there is now a paradigm shift from multiple choice tests to essay tests. However, there are challenges that learners face in English composition writing. These revolve around the complex demands of writing long paragraphs and lack of proper language skills to

express themselves clearly. With constant practice, learners will develop the necessary competencies required in composition writing (Hopkins and Antes, 1978)[2].

II. BACKGROUND

Primary school pupils in general and Grade Seven pupils in particular, have difficulties in writing English compositions. The challenges they face are not only unique to them, but also common among most secondary and tertiary students. The demands imposed by punctuation, grammar, idiomatic and proverbial expressions and handwriting are challenges that pupils need to overcome (Muzumara, 1995)[3]. Most schools do not introduce English composition writing until very late in Grades 5 or 6 when in actual fact, English composition writing should begin in infant grades. Muzumara (1995)[3] further points out that teachers rarely speak the same language nor share a common frame of methodologies in teaching composition writing. This breeds conflicting and contradicting advice on how to write English compositions thereby posing a serious challenge to pupils' composition writing skills and competencies.

Most pupils experience difficulties in composition writing when they are using a second language. The situation is further compounded by the fact that some schools are being manned by untrained teachers (The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training, 1999)[4]. Untrained teachers lack the methodological expertise and confidence in teaching, hence they influence pupils' perceptions towards learning. Mavundukure and Thembani (2000)[5] argue that training is systematic experience which provides individuals with knowledge and skills to perform a particular task. Therefore, untrained teachers are not competent enough in executing teaching tasks. For this reason, it became imperative for the researchers to find out pupils' perceptions

towards English composition tests as an instrument of performance measurement.

Before the introduction of composition writing at Grade Seven level as an examinable subject, English composition writing was seriously neglected in the primary school. Teachers had a tendency of concentrating on examinable areas only and neglecting the subjects that are not examinable. The introduction of English composition in 2003 was a result of the recommendations of the 1999 Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training. The argument was that the objective type of question and answer tests were little assistance in determining the academic route a pupil would follow in secondary and tertiary education. This implies that, the bulk of primary school teachers need in-service training on English composition writing skills so that they, in turn, become effective in teaching English composition to learners.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF TESTS

Tests have been conducted throughout the history of mankind. In the early societies elders used to conduct tests on young men and women to determine the extent to which they would have matured. Salvia and Ysseldyke (1978)[6] report that tests were administered to measure a person's maturational aptitude or to evaluate the extent to which a person would have profited from an instruction. For example, boys were tested to determine whether they were competent hunters, fathers or caregivers. Girls, on the other hand, were tested on feminine tasks.

The United States experienced anti-tests movement in the 1960s which argued that tests were irrelevant because they represented simplistic attempts to measure complex traits or attributes. However,

Salvia and Ysseldyke (1978)[6] note that the pro-tests movement prevailed over the anti-tests movement. According to Kubiszyn and Borich (2003)[7], several laws were passed by the United States enforcing the writing of tests in both public and private educational institutions. Since then, educators, parents, policy makers and teachers have used tests as the barometer of national and social change.

The history of Zimbabwe bears testimony that tests were preserved for the minority while blacks were excluded from tests. Persons with disabilities were also excluded from taking tests (Chimedza, 1999)[8]. The enactment of the Education Act (1987) [9]ruled that no individual should be excluded from any academic activity on grounds of colour, sex or disability. This was further consolidated by the Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (1999)[4] which emphasized the need to test all individuals. Recommendations of the said commission ushered in a new era in which English and Shona compositions were introduced at Grade Seven level as examinable concepts from 2003.

IV. TYPES OF COMPOSITION TESTS

There are basically three types of tests used in various schools namely; oral, objective and essay tests (Congelosi, 1990)[10] Oral tests are verbal in nature and are used in selection interviews which Congelosi (1990)[10] maintains are highly subjective because they depend on candidates' speaking and listening skills. Objective tests on the other hand call for short answers which may consist of one word, a phrase or a sentence (Mwamwenda, 1995)[11].

Essay tests fall into two groups (Mpofu, 1990)[12], the long and short essays. Essay tests require candidates to provide a written response to a question. Zandem and Pace (1984:549)[13] say, "Essay tests allow students to demonstrate their ability to recall, organise, synthesise, relate, analyse and

evaluate ideas." An essay question is one for which a pupil supplies rather than selects the correct answer (Zandem & Pace, 1984)[13].

Essay items test complex cognitive skills such as organisation of ideas in a logical sequence. Gronlund (1985)[14] observes that the distinctive feature of essay questions is the freedom of response. Candidates are free to select, relate and present information or ideas in their own words. Thus, the freedom of response is one of the strongest advantages of essay tests over other forms of tests (Bruce, 1969)[1]. Essay tests are marginally superior over multiple choice and free response questions. But this freedom of expression is what poses a challenge in most learners. Similarly, teachers and markers face challenges in grading essay tests because of the freedom of expression associated with this type (Bruce, 1969)[1].

4.1 Restricted Response Essay Tests

Essays that require a pupil to give limited content are called restricted response essays. Such essays demand the essay taker to provide the answer under guided circumstances. This is consistent with Grade Seven essay questions because the pupils are considered less mature and therefore appropriate for their level (Linn & Gronlund, 2000)[15]. It was observed by Linn & Gronlund (2000)[15] that restricted response essay questions usually limit both the content and the response. It specifies the length of the response and demarcates the academic territory that a pupil must dwell on. Latiff (1988)[16] observes that restricted response essay questions are common in primary schools. A pupil is given guidelines on the length of the essay, for example, Grade Seven pupils are required to write a composition which is a page long or between 80-120 words. Kubiszyn & Borich (2003)[7] suggest that restricted response essay questions have relatively few areas of content that

need to be tested. For example, an essay question may just require a pupil to describe An Athletics Sports Day with the following guidelines:

- when and where the athletics took place
- the schools that took part
- the outstanding athletes
- prizes for winners
- the winning school

In Zimbabwe, this is the form in which Grade Seven composition take. This is consistent with the observations made by Latiff (1988)[16]. However, there are instances when guidelines may be removed to allow pupils to write using their own ideas.

V. ERROR OF MEASUREMENT IN ENGLISH ESSAY TESTS

English composition tests do not yield scores which are error free. Tests are not entirely a true reflection of the ability and achievement of learners. Johnson, Dulaney & Banks (2002:3)[17] say, "Measurement error means that we can underestimate or overestimate a student's true ability or achievement. In scoring English compositions, teachers may be influenced by the nature of a pupil's handwriting rather than the content of the composition itself. Similarly, markers of English composition tests tend to differ on scoring compositions. Two markers have a high likelihood of assigning two completely different marks in a single composition. Teacher mood, state of mind and personality of the marker strongly influence the awarding of marks in English composition tests. Stalnaker (1936:41)[18] says, "Knowledge of a candidate by an examiner can influence the scoring of essays." There is need however, for markers to use standardised marking schemes which must contain all the items to be looked at, to ensure uniformity among different markers. Where necessary, it is also important to have compositions marked by at least three markers. Linn and Gronlund (2003)[15] note

that, after any large discrepancies have been found, ratings must be averaged for a more reliable result.

VI. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The researchers' vast teaching experience at primary school level spanning more than a decade revealed that learners' perceptions towards a subject has great influence on their performance in that subject. It is in this light that the study sought to find out Grade Seven pupils' perceptions towards English composition tests as a way of measuring their performance at Karoi Junior Primary school in Karoi urban.

6.1 Research Questions

- What are Grade Seven pupils' perceptions towards English composition tests?
- Do boys and girls have different perceptions towards English composition tests?
- Do teachers consider handwriting when marking pupils' English compositions?
- What is the nature of comments teachers write on pupils' English compositions?

VII. METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for this study was the descriptive survey design. The descriptive survey "describes and interprets what is concerned with conditions or relationships that exist, practices that prevail, beliefs, points of view or attitudes" (Best, 1981:315)[19]. For this reason, the researchers adopted the survey design because it guaranteed that pupils' perceptions towards English composition tests would be unravelled.

7.1 Population

The population of the study comprised eighty-five (85) Grade Seven pupils at Karoi Junior Primary School. There were 43 boys and 42 girls at the school in 2011.

7.2 Sample

For this study, a randomly selected sample of twenty (N=20) was selected. In a descriptive survey design, Van Dalem (1979)[20] says that a sample of between 10 and 20 percent is representative enough. In this study, the sample was more than 20 percent thus making it representative.

7.3 Sampling Procedure

Cards written YES and NO were put in a box from which participants were asked to pick a card at random. There were only ten YES cards and the rest were written NO. Boys were first to go through the process. Those who picked the “YES” cards became part of the sample. The same procedure was repeated for girls – the ten who picked “YES” cards became part of the sample. The sample was made of ten boys and girls apiece.

7.4 Data collection instruments

Questionnaires and interviews were used as instruments for data collection in this study. According to Mhlanga and Ncube (2000)[21] questionnaires ensure confidentiality and guarantee anonymity, so participants can respond freely without fear of victimisation. Interviews were conducted with two (2) Grade Seven teachers who teach at the research site. Interview data was meant to supplement questionnaire-obtained data. Teacher interviews would probe into subtle issues which pupils would not bring out (Mushoriwa, 2003)[22].

7.5 Data Presentation and Analysis

Frequencies and percentages were used to present and analyse data. Questionnaire obtained data were presented and analysed per item as it appeared on the questionnaire. This is in line with other attitudinal

studies done by, for example, Mushoriwa (1998)[22] Interview data were presented and analysed qualitatively.

VIII. RESULTS

Table 8a: Distribution of participants who said they either write compositions in their class or not.

Item	Response	Boys	Girls	Total	%
Do you write compositions in your class?	YES	10	10	20	100
	NO	0	0	0	0
	Total	10	10	20	100

Table 8(a) shows that all participants, 100% indicated that they write compositions in their classes.

Table 8b: Distribution of participants on number of compositions they write per week

Item	No. of Compositions	Boys	Girls	Total	%
How many compositions do you write per week?	1	1	0	1	5
	2	4	1	5	25
	3	2	7	9	45
	4	1	1	2	10
	5	2	1	3	15
Total		10	10	20	100

Table 8(b) shows variations in the number of compositions the participants indicated they write per week.

Table 8c :Distribution of participants on whether they would like to write more than one essay per week

Item	Response	Boys	Girls	Total	%
Would you like to write more than one	YES	10	10	20	100
	NO	0	0	0	0

composition per week?	Total	10	10	100	100
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Table 8(c): shows that all the participants (100%) indicated that they wanted to write more than one composition per week.

Table 8d: Distribution of participants on how they feel when asked to write English compositions

Item	Response	Boys		Girls		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
How do you feel each time you are asked to write an English composition?	Happy	4	20	7	35	11	55
	Unhappy	6	30	3	15	9	45
	Total	10	50	10	50	20	100

55% and 45% of the participants indicated that they feel happy and unhappy respectively each time they are asked to write an English composition.

Table 8e: Distribution of participants who said that they are taught composition writing or not

Item	Response	Boys		Girls		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Does your teacher teach you how to write compositions?	YES	10	50	10	50	20	100
	NO	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	10	100	20	50	20	100

Table 8(e) shows that all participants indicated that their teachers teach them how to write compositions.

Table 8f: Distribution of participants on whether teachers mark pupils' compositions timeously or not

Item	Response	Boys		Girls		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Does your teacher mark your compositions timeously?	YES	10	50	10	50	20	100
	NO	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	10	100	10	50	20	100

Table 8(f): shows that all the participants indicated that their compositions are marked timeously.

Table 1g : Distribution of participants' responses to comments given by teachers

Item	Response	Boys		Girls		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Does your teacher write good comments on your work?	YES	3	15	6	30	9	45
	NO	7	35	4	20	11	55
	Total	10	50	10	50	20	100

Table 8h: Distribution of participants on whether they get help at home on composition writing or not

Item	Response	Boys		Girls		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Do your parents help you in composition writing at home?	YES	3	15	6	30	9	45
	NO	7	35	4	20	11	55
	Total	10	50	10	50	20	100

Table (8h) shows 45% and 55% of the participants who agreed and disagreed respectively that they got help at home in composition writing.

Table 8i: Distribution of participants according to whether they get help at home or not in composition writing

Item	Response	Boys		Girls		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you think teachers award marks according to pupils' handwriting?	YES	5	25	6	30	11	55
	NO	5	25	4	20	9	45
	Total	10	50	10	50	20	100

Table 8(i): show that 55% of the participants indicated that teachers are influenced by pupils' handwriting when awarding marks. 45% of the participants disagreed.

Table 8j: Distribution of participants on whether they like or dislike writing compositions in Grade Seven 2010 examinations

Item	Response	Boys		Girls		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Do you like to write English compositions in 2010 Grade Seven examinations	YES	10	50	10	50	20	100
	NO	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	10	100	20	50	20	100

Table 8(j): shows that all the participants indicated that they would like to write English Compositions in Grade Seven examinations.

IX. DISCUSSION

Table 8(a) shows that all the participants indicated that they write English compositions in their classes. This may be taken to mean that, because English compositions writing is now examinable at Grade Seven level, teachers are obliged to teach it as a matter of policy. The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training (1999)

[4]observed that teachers have a tendency to concentrate only on examinable subjects hence their effort at teaching English composition writing.

Table 8(b) shows variations in the number of English compositions participants indicated they write per week. The majority, 45% of the participants indicated that they write 3 compositions per week while another 25% indicated that they write 2

compositions. Despite the variations in the number of compositions participants indicated they write per week, there is evidence that teachers mandatorily teach the concept. The differences in number of compositions written per week might be connected to teachers themselves. Some teachers give more work than others.

Data on Table 8(c) shows that 100% of the participants indicated that they like to write more than one English composition per week. This might be taken to mean that pupils realise the need to have proper composition writing skills since this determines the route they would follow in secondary and tertiary education (The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training, 1999)[4]. For this reason, teachers can take advantage of pupils' zeal to write English composition and actually give them more work to do and practise.

On how participants feel when asked to write English compositions, more girls 35% than boys, 20% indicated that they feel happy as shown in Table 8(d). Of the 45% of the participants who indicated that they feel unhappy when asked to write English compositions, 30% and 15% were boys and girls respectively. The teachers who were interviewed said that girls are better than boys in terms of their predisposition to write compositions. This was confirmed by Gordon (1995)[23] that English language was named as the subject girls believe were best at because it is considered easy. Boys do not seem to like writing English compositions may be, for the reason that they like other subjects such as Mathematics and Science (Gordon, 1995)[23]. Clinton (1986)[24] also observed that boys were less positive than girls towards English compositions.

Table 8(e) shows that all participants, 100%, indicated that their teachers explicitly teach them English composition writing. This agrees with data on

Table 8(a) that pupils write English compositions in their classes. Teachers who were interviewed agreed that they teach English composition writing in their classes as dictated by policy. Table 1(f) shows that all participants, 100%, indicated that they get timeous feedback on their written compositions on how well they will be progressing. Ormorod [24] observed that timeous feedback is more beneficial to learners than feedback that comes too late because it would be difficult for learners to unlearn certain things.

Table 8(g) shows that of the 45% participants who said that their teachers write good comments on their work, 15% were boys and 30% were girls. On the contrary, more boys, 35% than girls 20% did not agree that teachers write good comments on their work. The overall picture that emerges is that teachers do not write good and encouraging comments on pupils' work, a situation that is very discouraging on the part of learners. It would also appear that girls get more positive and encouraging comments from teachers as confirmed by the teachers themselves during interviews. It is important to write elaborate comments so that it shows them where they are coming from and where they are going. Good comments spur the learners on (Ormorod, 2006)[25].

Data on Table 8(h) shows that, less 45% than more, 55% of the participants indicated that they do not get assistance in terms of English composition writing at home. Of the 45% of the participants who get assistance at home, there are more girls, 30% than boys 15%. It would appear that there is differential treatment between girls and boys by parents or guardians. It might also be taken to mean that, because girls normally stay at home most times than boys, they are more likely than boys to get help from their parents/guardians. The ideal situation is to have parents actively involved in the education of their children. (Chung and Chakanyuka in The Prime

Minister. September 2009[26]; The Presidential Commission of Inquiry into Education and Training, 1999)[4].

Information on Table 8(i) shows that 30% and 25% girls and boys respectively indicated that teachers award marks on English composition writing taking into account pupils' handwriting. Teachers who were interviewed confirmed that they are indeed influenced by pupils' handwriting in scoring compositions. The teachers said that they also teach handwriting in their classes hence it must be taken into account when marking pupils' work. Clinton (1986)[27] did research and found out that a composition with the same content but written in legible and illegible handwriting scored 9/10 and 2/10 respectively. This shows that handwriting is an important factor teachers consider in scoring pupils work.

Table 8(j) shows that all participants, 100% indicated that they are keen to write English compositions as part of their Grade Seven examinations in 2010. The participants said that they stand to benefit from knowing how to write English composition writing in their short and long term educational endeavours.

X. CONCLUSION

This research study examined Grade Seven pupils' perceptions towards English compositions as an instrument of performance measurement. The findings show that, generally, Grade Seven pupils perceptions towards English compositions are positive and that teachers are actually teaching composition writing to their classes. The study also found that girls are better than boys in terms of composition writing and it was established that teachers take into account pupils' handwriting when scoring their work. Overall, the study revealed that Grade Seven pupils have positive attitudes towards English composition tests.

XI. RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings, this study makes the following recommendations:

- Teachers must continue to give timeous feedback on pupils' written work as a way of motivating them so that they develop positive attitudes towards English compositions.
- Teachers should capitalise on pupils' appetite for English composition writing by giving more written exercises per week so that they improve on their composition writing skills.
- Teachers should teach pupils to write neatly and legibly since handwriting has a strong bearing on marks obtained by pupils.
- Parents or guardians should be actively involved in the education of their children by assisting them with homework.
- Teachers should be encouraged to hold in-service workshops on how to teach, mark and grade pupils' compositions.

XII. REFERENCES

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