

ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM CONTENT AIMED AT TEACHING SUMMARY WRITING AMONGST SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN NIGERIA

BY

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Abstract

The study was an exploration of the analysis of the English language curriculum content aimed at teaching summary writing amongst secondary school students in Nigeria. The aim of summary writing is to equip the learner with the technique that enhances comprehension and retention of a written discourse. The review revealed that summary writing is not a theme on its own in the senior secondary school curriculum; it appears as a sub-topic under Theme 3 (Literacy skills – Reading comprehension) of each of SS1, SS2 and SS3 classes. Perhaps, this is why some teachers in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classroom do not know exactly how to teach summary writing. It was thus concluded that the teaching of summary writing requires a conscientious use of innovative techniques, methods, approaches and relevant instructional resources. Nevertheless, it was recommended that students should be made to realise that the aim of summary writing is to equip them with the technique that enhances comprehension and retention of a written discourse. This is a skill they shall need throughout their lives. Moreover, English language teachers teaching summary should aim at enhancing the ability of learners to comprehend word-meaning through context and making notes thereafter, and not otherwise.
Keywords: *Summary writing, English language, Curriculum content, Classroom and Literacy skills*

Introduction

Summarisation is one of the most well-known types of academic writing. It is also difficult to accomplish in a short period of time. Because of its challenging nature, most students have difficulties in writing summaries both in L1 and L2 settings. Pathetically, even some teachers in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classroom do not know exactly how to teach summary writing. Summary writing is the aspect of core English Language which, from time immemorial, poses and still poses a serious problem to many students. It may simply be defined as reducing a text to its basic essentials. Thus, it is significant to note that a summary is not the re-writing of the original passage. Rather, it is a brief and straight to the point version of the original or elaborate passage. It can be regarded as a way of creating a concise version of any passage that has been read without losing the key-words in the passage. In that respect, it is a mark of one's competence in the language in question.

There are two kinds of summaries: that which is done as a means of comprehending a text – the study tool; and, summary of a given specification of length or detail for some professional or academic need (Bleck, 2010). This could be in the form of précis, the paraphrasing, the analytical or alternative titles summary, the paraphrasing, or the sentence level.

Aims and Objectives of the English Language Curriculum as Regards Summary Writing

The aim of summary writing is to equip the learner with the technique that enhances comprehension and retention of a written discourse. Hence, the objectives of summary writing based on the English language curriculum are to make students, effortlessly, possess the ability to:

- i. retain key words or key sentences in a speech, chat, conversation, discourse, etc.
- ii. differentiate between contextual and literal meaning
- iii. recognise the relationship and contrast among tone, purpose and meaning in a given discourse
- iv. acquire and develop skills that will help them in assigning titles or headings to passages
- v. identify main and supporting points in each paragraph
- vi. extract the main points from the passage
- vii. identify and have adequate source of information about a topic
- viii. put together sentences in their own words as a summary
- ix. extract points from the book read and make notes of their own
- x. identify the implied meanings of words made at various settings
- xi. detect from various reading materials evidence (if any) of illogicality, inconsistency, faulty reasoning, misleading statements, etc.
- xii. identify the topic sentences in paragraphs
- xiii. identify key words and tell the meaning in context
- xiv. explain the key words used in given poems and dramatic works
- xv. identify facts and opinions
- xvi. paraphrase passages from other subject areas orally
- xvii. paraphrase difficult poems in their own words and phrases
- xviii. re-write a given dramatic work in their own words
- xix. take note of main ideas from different paragraphs

A Critical Overview of the Summary Writing Component of the Nigerian Senior Secondary School English Language Curriculum

To a great extent, summary writing enjoys a pride of place in the current Nigerian Senior Secondary School Curriculum based on the opinion of whoever is viewing it and the angle at which s/he views it from. It is to be pointed out that summary writing is not a theme on its own in the curriculum; it appears as a sub-topic under *Theme 3* (Literacy skills – Reading comprehension) of each of SS1, SS2 and SS3 classes. For each class, this theme is sub-divided into two categories – the first focuses the reading comprehension, while the second is titled “writing for communication” as it focuses essay/continuous writing. Summary writing appears under the first category, i.e. reading comprehension. In this regard, two different views immediately come to mind. The first opinion points to the fact that reading comprehension should not be seen as being exclusively different from summary writing as the skill of summary writing could be learnt through attempting questions under reading comprehension. The second view establishes that summary is treated as an unimportant aspect of the English language curriculum content as there is no special separate section reserved for it.

In the content of the SS1 curriculum for instance, only one objective (i.e. *topic v*) out of the six listed explicitly mentioned summary. This buttresses the latter view that summary writing is an unimportant aspect of the English language curriculum content. Nevertheless, going by the first view, all the six topics listed as objectives in the curriculum under category one of *Theme 3*, only one appears not to directly relate with the skill of summary writing. The six topics are listed as follows:

- i. Reading to comprehend main ideas or story line
- ii. Reading to comprehend supporting details
- iii. Reading to comprehend word-meanings through context

- iv. Reading to identify the writer's mood, tone and purpose and the relationship between purpose and tone
- v. Reading for summary
- vi. Reading to make notes

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that only *topic iv* appears not to directly relate with the skill of summary writing. This is because "identifying the writer's mood, tone and purpose as well as the relationship between purpose and tone" has little to do with summarisation at the secondary school level. Rather it is a strong skill under the comprehension passage at this level. However, topics i, ii, iii, and vi all point to topic v. This is because reading for summary requires one to have the ability of not only comprehending main idea but also being able to identify supporting details. Close to this is the ability to comprehend word-meaning through context and making notes thereafter. It is pertinent to note that understanding a good summary writing entails internalising all these skills.

In the content of the SS2 curriculum, the mentioning of summary appears to be more direct compared to the SS1 content. All the nine topics listed as objectives under category one of *Theme 3*, only two appear not to directly relate with the skill of summary writing. The nine topics are listed as follows:

- i. Reading for main gist
- ii. Reading to summarise an argument
- iii. Reading to summarise longer selections
- iv. Reading chapters of books and making notes
- v. Reading for implied meaning
- vi. Reading for critical evaluation
- vii. Reading to paraphrase poems and dramatic works
- viii. Reading to pick out topic sentences in paragraphs and longer selections
- ix. Reading for specific structural pattern

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that only *topics v and vi* appear not to directly relate with the skill of summary writing. This is because "reading for implied meaning" and "reading for critical evaluation" have little to do with summarisation at the secondary school level. Rather they are strong skills under the comprehension passage at this level. Furthermore, in the content of the SS3 curriculum, the mentioning of summary appears to be even more direct compared to what we have in both the SS1 and SS2 contents. In SS3, there are eight topics listed as objectives under category one of *Theme 3*. Only one appears not to directly relate with the skill of summary writing. The eight topics are listed as follows:

- i. Reading silently to answer questions
- ii. Reading to summarise by outlining main points
- iii. Reading and summarising expository passages
- iv. Reading and summarising argumentative passages
- v. Paraphrasing prose
- vi. Paraphrasing poetry
- vii. Paraphrasing dramatic works
- viii. Reading and making notes

From the foregoing, it could be deduced that only *topic i* appears not to directly relate with the skill of summary writing. This is because "reading silently to answer questions" has little to do with summarisation at the secondary school level. Rather, it is quite often a skill under the comprehension passage at this level, even though summary passages too need not to be read aloud so as to enhance comprehension especially at SS3 which is a terminal class.

Table 1: Captures all the three classes at a glance

N	TOPIC	PERFORMANCE OBJECTIVE	EVALUATION GUIDE
i.	Reading to comprehend main ideas or story line	Students should be able to: retain key words or key sentences in a speech, chat, conversation, discourse, etc.	Students are to: pick out main ideas as the teacher reads through short prose passages.
ii.	Reading to comprehend supporting details		
iii.	Reading to comprehend word-meanings through context	differentiate between contextual and literal meaning	read passages with words underlined for substitution in order to give some contextual meanings
iv.	Reading to identify the writer’s mood, tone and purpose and the relationship between purpose and tone	recognise the relationship and contrast among tone, purpose and meaning in a given discourse	identify contrast in mood, tone and purpose in given texts and passages
v.	Reading for summary	acquire and develop skills that will help them in summarising passages – skills such as assigning titles or headings to passages	assign titles or headings to passages
vi.	Reading to make notes	identify main and supporting points in each paragraph	identify the main/supporting points
SS2			
i.	Reading for main gist	extract the main points from the passage	list four (4) main points in a given passage
ii.	Reading to summarise an argument	identify and have adequate source of information about a topic	recognise the main gist in a given passage
iii.	Reading to summarise longer selections	put together sentences in their own words as a summary	pick out topic sentences
iv.	Reading chapters of books and making notes	extract points from the book read and make notes of their own	summarise in two (2) sentences the main idea of a book read
v.	Reading for implied meaning	identify the implied meanings of words made at various settings	use the words in meaningful sentences
vi.	Reading for critical evaluation	detect from various reading materials evidence (if any) of illogicality, inconsistency, faulty reasoning, misleading statements, etc.	detect in various reading materials evidence of illogicality, inconsistency, faulty reasoning, etc.
vii.	Reading to paraphrase poems and dramatic works	explain the key words used in given poems and dramatic works	summarise the poems and dramatic works
viii.	Reading to pick out topic sentences in paragraphs and longer selections	identify the topic sentences in paragraphs	write the topic sentences in paragraphs
ix.	Reading for specific structural pattern	identify key words and tell the meaning in context	identify key sentences
SS3			
i.	Reading silently to answer	discuss the passage exhaustively	answer two (2) questions each

	questions	and intelligently	on the different levels of comprehension
ii.	Reading to summarise by outlining main points	identify the key words that serve as pointers to the theme and explain the meaning of the words in context	list four (4) topic sentences from the passage
iii.	Reading and summarising expository passages	identify topic sentences from a given passage	write out the key ideas from different paragraphs
iv.	Reading and summarising argumentative passages	identify facts and opinions	correctly distinguish between facts and opinions
v.	Paraphrasing prose	paraphrase passages from other subject areas orally	re-write a given passage in their own words
vi.	Paraphrasing poetry	paraphrase difficult poems in their own words and phrases	paraphrase two difficult poems in their own words and phrases
vii.	Paraphrasing dramatic works	re-write a given dramatic work in their own words	paraphrase one drama written by a Nigerian author
viii.	Reading and making notes	take note of main ideas from different paragraphs	write out main points in sentences of their own using some if the words from the passage

Scholarly Views on Summary Writing

Olagbaju (2019) observed that students that desire to succeed in English language examinations must do well in the aspects of the examination which covers writing tasks and one of such tasks is summary writing. WAEC Chief Examiners’ Report (2018) identified poor summary writing skills as one of the reasons candidates still fail the English language. The WAEC Chief Examiners’ Report (2018:9) states: Candidates still find summary writing difficult...; teachers should pay attention to this aspect of English. If the students are not adequately exposed to the skills of summary writing, they will continue to have problems with summary questions. From the above, urgent steps must be taken to address students’ underachievement in summary writing as an aspect of English language (Olagbaju, 2019) at the senior secondary level of education. Summary writing is closely related to comprehension because it requires the ability to extract the gist of a text; however, summary writing is more complex because it is a technique that enhances comprehension and retention of a written discourse (Aniga and Ellah, 2010; Olagbaju, 2019). Therefore, summary writing requires a deeper processing of the text and presentation of the answers in students’ own words; these constitute some of the problem areas for students in English language examinations (Olagbaju, 2015). Ojedokun (2010) averred that summary skills are needed by students to confirm that the different information gathered from books, lectures, seminars, laboratories, discussions etc. forms part of their knowledge and can be recalled when needed.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it could be concluded that summary writing requires a deeper processing of the text and presentation of the answers in students’ own words. Thus, it should be conscientiously taught using innovative techniques, methods, approaches and relevant instructional resources.

Recommendations

From the foregoing, the following recommendations were drawn for the various stakeholders in the teaching and learning of summary writing at the secondary school level.

1. Students should be made to realise that the aim of summary writing is to equip them with the technique that enhances comprehension and retention of a written discourse. This is a skill they shall need throughout their lives.

2. English language teachers teaching summary should aim at enhancing the ability of learners to comprehend word-meaning through context and making notes thereafter, and not otherwise.
3. Textbook writers should ensure that the summary aspect is treated in their textbooks as specified in the curriculum. Hence, majority of the SS1 textbooks in circulation should be re-written. All the summary passages and questions should be moved to the third term of their textbooks. By then, students would have taken enough instructions in reading comprehension which would have served as a good foundation for summary instructions in SS2 and SS3. Also, they need to have separate passages for summary writing; using the same passages for reading comprehension and summary writing is not ideal.
4. Curriculum developers should treat summary as a very important aspect of the English language content by reserving a special separate section for it in the the English language curriculum. Thus, teachers have not been teaching summary writing explicitly because they were made to see it as a component of reading comprehension. This is not unconnected with the fact that some textbooks in circulation also muddled up summary writing with reading comprehension, and most teachers religiously follow those textbooks.

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