Using Four Square Technique of Writing to Solve Problems of Paragraph Fragmentation: A Nigeria-Ghana Experiment

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on Four Square technique which describes a procedure whereby a paragraph is properly organized to collaborate the writing skill of second language learners. With the use of this technique, learners are provided with unlimited sources of information to form readable and coherent essays. The technique was used to teach Senior Secondary School students from Nigeria-Ghana International College, Kuje, Abuja, Nigeria. The outcome of the study reveals that students were able to develop their essays more coherently with enough ideas. Two tests were administered on the students to serve as pre and post tests. Teaching was done in between these tests.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that essay writing can be very challenging for learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) as they must overcome the personal challenges associated with this type of writing, some of which are, generating ideas, organization, and mechanics, in order to develop the skills requisite for coherent and readable essays. This explains why there is consistent poor performance of students in English language across all levels of Nigerian education. Several reasons have been advanced for this phenomenon. Some of these according to Ajayi (1996) are the absence of defined objectives, the dearth of trained language teachers; lack of adequate and realistic syllabuses and testing devices. Added to these problems is inappropriate use of relevant techniques of teaching essay (Ohia and Adeosun 2010).

That teaching essay requires the use of relevant techniques is not arguable. Trupe, (2009) sees breaking down of essay types into smaller units as the best way to solve this problem. Narrative essay, for example, could be broken down first in terms of what it is used for -it tells a story, has a point, is organized, uses selective details to convey its point and makes use of effective language. In the view of Peters (2000) age, proficiency level and mother tongue should be among the things to be considered before choosing a technique of teaching essay. To him, process-product approach is more the most appropriate. He sees this approach as a way of solving writing problems of students in essay and to be able to do this properly, content and organization should be included. To Ajayi (1996) using News Papers to teach written essay is the most effective technique. Looking at the views above, it is clear that technique alone cannot solve the numerous problems encountered by learners in written essay because every technique must be delimited to solving a particular problem –content, organization or mechanics.

According to Limone (2012) developing good paragraphs is a spice of every good essay as there can never be a good essay without good paragraph development no matter the technique used. To effectively write a good essay, he advocates the use of expansion technique to teach paragraph development. Crossley,, Dempsey & McNamara. (2011) see a paragraph as generally a group of sentences developing a central theme. Inadequate paragraph development in the view of Aragoni (2012) is the bane of writing from elementary school to graduate school. It should therefore be taught according to essay type. Four square technique is advocated by Gould (1999). When this technique is applied to the teaching of individual paragraph in an essay, it simplifies essay teaching. Of these techniques discussed, only four square technique by Gould (1999) is seen as most suitable for teaching essay writing to Senior Secondary School students

2. THE PRESENT STUDY

The problem of learning writing in our schools is compounded by teacher's inability to use necessary enrichment techniques that can stimulate the desired intellectual development, thus, students' essays are poor because they cannot develop sufficient ideas in different paragraphs and present such ideas in acceptable expressions. Therefore, the present study determines the effect of four square technique of teaching paragraph development on writing classes at Senior Secondary School level. This study is thus hinged on Gould (1999).

1.1 Research Questions

Does four square technique have any significant effect on paragraph development in composition writing of senior secondary school students?

1.2 Hypothesis

Four square technique does not have any significant effect on paragraph development of composition writing of senior secondary school students.

3. METHOD OF STUDY

The design of the study is quasi–experimental design using pre–test-treatment-post-test format. The format is diagrammatically represented below. Amin (2005) observes that quasi-experimental design is the most appropriate for studies that involves treatment:

Figure 1
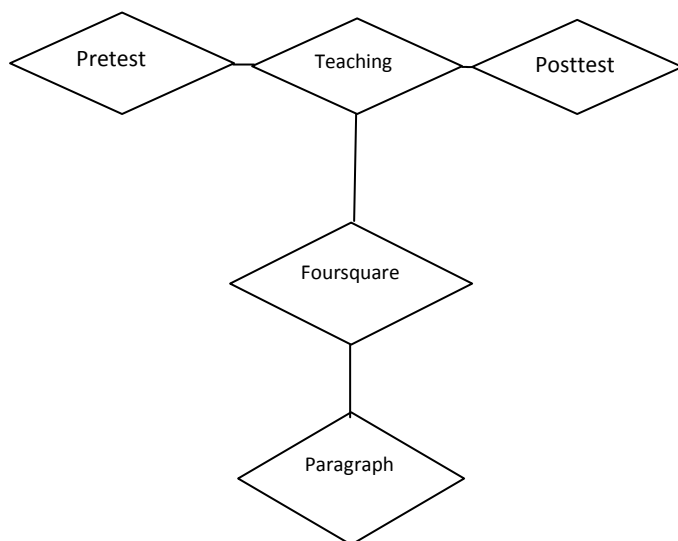
In this study, students were given two different essay topics to write, one to serve as pretest and the other to serve as posttest. Teaching using four square technique was done in-between the two tests. The essence of the teaching was to see whether or not Four Square technique could be used to improve on the outcome of the pre test

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Learners and methods are the bases for this work. Methodology must be geared towards solving learners writing problems. Learning has gone beyond the traditional classroom where the teacher is the alpha and omega. Various methods can be used by a teacher to achieve the desired goal of his teaching. This is achieved through choosing the most effective combination of approaches and techniques. In effecting the methods, the teachers must be able to make use of appropriate techniques which have connections with the underlying assumptions because approaches are bedrocks of language methods (Ohia and Adeosun 2010).

Different approaches and methods have evolved as a result of different conception of the nature of language and how it can be taught and learnt. One functional approach to teaching accepted by most teachers is the use of diagram or picture. Using this approach creates mental pictures in the minds of the learners and this could lead to self-discovery (Ubahakwe's 1991).

Gould (1999) exemplifies this with the use four square technique of teaching written essays. This technique is applied to the teaching of individual paragraph in an essay. To use this technique according to Gould (1999), a rectangle is drawn, width exceeding height, and divided into four smaller rectangles of equal size. An additional rectangle is drawn in the center of the figure, taking up some of the area in each of the other four rectangles. A total of five rectangles are thus created. The student writes a complete topic sentence in the center rectangle. The student then writes sentences in the lower-left, upper-left, and upper-right rectangles that develop the thesis of the central topic. Finally, the student writes a

summary sentence in the lower-right rectangle. The summary sentence describes how the reader is intended to feel about the topic. An example is shown below as illustrated by Gould (1999):

Figure 2
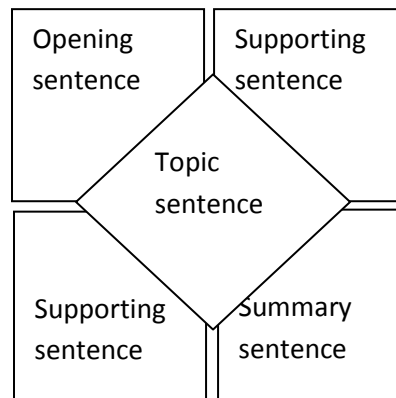
5. STEPS IN IMPLEMENTATION OF FOUR SQUARE TECHNIQUE IN THE CLASSROOM

The steps adopted by Gould (1999) were re-adapted for this study. The re-adaptation is itemized below:

(a) The teachers used drawing as teaching aid for teaching this topic. They drew the four square symbol on the board

(b) They then allowed students to select topics which were of interest to them.
(c) The students were encouraged to draw the chart.

(d)The teachers made sure that each square is filled by a sentence

(e)The teacher then asked the students to join the sentences together to form a paragraph

(f) The students were instructed to use the technique to develop other paragraphs

6. POPULATION AND SAMPLING

The target population of the study was Senior Secondary School students in Nigerian. Nigeria-Ghana International College Kuje, Abuja was used as experiment centre. Two different year groups were used for the study this was to ascertain whether the technique would take care of all Senior Secondary School classes that is SSI to SSIII in Nigeria. The outcome of the two tests reveals that student performed better in the post test than the pretest. This outcome is set in the table below:

Table 1

	N	Mean	SD	t-cal	t-critical	Decision
Pre test	57	7.8	2.68	-12.73	-1.98 to +1.98	Rejected

Post test	57	11.3	1.47

At 0.05 level of significance, the table value of t lies within -1.98 to +1.98. The calculated -12.73 is outside the stated range. Therefore the hypothesis which stated that Four Square technique does not have any significant effect on paragraph development of composition writing of senior secondary school students is hereby rejected. This means that Four Square technique has a significant effect on paragraph development of composition writing of senior secondary school students. Possibly the teaching of paragraph development using Four Square technique must have contributed to this significant difference. This is evident in the writing of the students under study because the outcome of posttest of the students is better than that of their pretest in the table above.

Two major points of difference peculiar to most of the students were identified. One of these was use of less than three sentences in all paragraphs of the students writing which affected their flow of thought. The other was the use of more than six sentences which made their writing clumsy. These are illustrated below with writings of student numbers 33 and 44. Student number 33 for example used average of two sentences per paragraph in his pretest but corrected that by using an average of four sentences per paragraph in the post test. Using two paragraph denied the student ability to express his view in-depth there by making his thought not flowing well. The correction he took to in the post test made his writing more interesting and he was able to ineptly develop all his ideas. Student number 44 used too long paragraphs of about fifteen sentences but corrected them in the post test where he used average of five sentences per paragraph. Using a long paragraph with too many sentences makes a student to lump more than one idea together there by making the writing clumsy. The correction separated the student's ideas into sizable and coherent ones

A pie chart is used to graphically show the difference in the scores of the students in pre and posttests below:
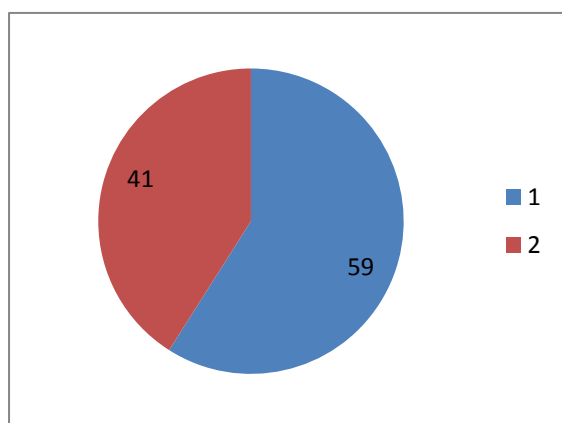

Figure 3

While 1 stands for pretest, 2 stands for posttest in the pie chart. The pie chart shows the percentage of both pre and posttests when the two tests were placed over 100. The percentage in pretest is 41% while that of posttest is 59%. There is therefore a percentage increase of 18%

(improvement) in the post test. Teaching of essay where Four Square Techniques was used was the contributory factor to this improvement.

7. DISCUSSION

According to the results obtained, teaching paragraph development with the use of Four Square Technique is the most effective means of teaching composition. Students writings after the teaching which made use of FST were better, students were able to identify that a paragraph must have a topic sentence, at least one supporting sentence and one summary sentence. Those who wrote one sentence paragraphs in pretest corrected them in their posttest. As exemplified by student number 33 and those who use more than eight sentence paragraph also corrected them as in student number 44

8. IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The need for relevant techniques in essay writing is more urgent than ever before. Fortunately, our findings in this study have shown that using FST could solve part of the writing needs of Senior Secondary School students. Thus, we recommend that teachers of English should be more creative and innovative in their use of techniques. FST is a magnificent language enrichment technique. For Instance, FST could be drawn and pasted using different coloures for each square. Also, the drawings could be done on the classroom board.

Curriculum designers should take advantage of the FST in preparing writing materials for secondary school students. Textbooks can be designed in such a way that certain features of FST can be used in classroom teaching. For Instance, students can be asked to write a story using FST to improve on their writing responses. Books can also be designed to allow students to work in groups using FST where each student presents a sentence based on the topic.

9. CONCLUSION

This paper has been able to establish that paragraph fragmentation is a problem not only in the elementary schools but across all levels. This is in corroboration to Liu and Wang (2011) where out of the four types of paragraph-level errors identified, errors in paragraph development has largest percentage (43%), as against errors in paragraph coherence with (28%), (errors in paragraph unity) with (18%) and (inconsistency in point of view) with (11%). What this means is that even advanced level students too have difficulty in paragraph development. It is therefore recommended that more studies be carried out on paragraph development to assist learners. Other techniques of writing should be geared towards doing this

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