

# Using Newspaper Stories To Teach Narrative Composition At The Basic Level

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*Abstract: Writing, one of the four literacy skills is very essential for every learner. It involves one's ability to understand and use correctly, the rules of spelling, punctuation, capitalization as well as grammar of the English language. Of course, planning, organization, unity and coherence are skills required of the learner who engages in the act of writing. There is a strong connection between reading and writing; as a result, it is difficult for a child who cannot read to acquire the basic skills of writing. When the child reads, he acquires language structures and reinforces them in writing. There are inadequate textbooks in our basic schools to be used by both pupils and teachers; this has made the teaching of narrative composition difficult and unattractive. Teachers have not realized a strong connection between reading and writing, hence, they teach pupils separately which accounts for the inability of our pupils to write. Based on the above, this research will help introduce the use of newspaper stories in basic schools and help to resolve this dilemma and determine the best approach to teaching narrative composition in order to improve the writing competences and skills of pupils in our schools.*

**Keywords: Composition, Narrative, Newspaper, Stories, Teach**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Writing, one of the four literacy skills is very important in education and even to the young child before they enter kindergarten. Children begin to engage in literacy activities like writing even before they enter school. Though their writing may not look like conventional writing, it is important to state that the attempt at writing in itself is part of the literacy process. According to Graves (1983), children may scribble, but there is meaning behind what they scribble; all one needs to do to ask the children what that scribble means. The success of a learner in the language classroom does not only depend on his/her ability to read or speak but also the ability to write and that is why the inability to write has serious repercussions on a learner's achievement and even the quality of life of the individual. The individual needs to write notes to friends, fill important documents, give written instructions, write short accounts of activities, and the list goes on. To be able to do any of the above, the individual/learner

must understand the meaning and the rules of spelling, grammar, punctuation and capitalization. Besides, he must also possess the skills of planning and organization as well as the ability of structuring the elements of unity and coherence. The crucial role of writing is reflected in the words of Raimes when she says that:

Writing helps students learn. How? First, writing reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary that we have been teaching our students (Raimes, 1983:3)

In the school system, how best to teach writing has been a matter of concern. Writing is a very valuable part of the language course because of the strong relationship between reading and writing. Because of the indispensable nature of writing in the language course, various kinds of methods and approaches have been proposed for teaching writing.

Concerns about pupils' inability to write any meaningful piece at the basic level reveal that the various approaches to teaching writing are inappropriately used. It is not out of place to say that language teachers have failed to improvise or adapt

useful methods and approaches of teaching writing. The effect of this is that, pupils complete the basic level, continue to the second cycle and then to the tertiary level with serious writing disabilities.

The teaching of narrative composition in most English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms in Ghana is textbook-based. Language teachers have not made any attempts to bring media texts such as newspapers into the language classroom. As our educational system projects into the computer age, an approach for writing instruction or teaching of writing has evolved, and this approach uses stories, especially newspaper stories to teach pupils how to write narrative composition. Because reading and writing are taught separately, that strong connection between reading and writing is broken. According to Clouse (1994), newspaper stories can do much better in writing lessons than just the subject matter for the composition topic. Newspapers are very important in our society; they can be the source of information, entertainment, local news and even international news among others. One interesting fact about the newspaper as a teaching material is that it carries latest and fresh information every day. Newspapers can be used to enhance the writing skills of learners by making them interact with the language of the newspaper. This means that the teacher can use newspaper stories as authentic materials from the very beginning to build the learner's confidence. It starts with the stories and not the skills. When teachers begin writing programmes with newspaper stories until the foundation is laid, the teacher can then proceed to lead children to discover that joy of effective writing and develop a lasting love for writing.

Tapia (1993:46) is of the view that "by using newspaper, we can achieve two important objectives: using authentic material from the very beginning and building the learner's confidence as she/he can read text that were written for native speakers".

Newspapers are very good teaching and learning materials that are also readily available. This point is buttressed by Stroller (1994:2-5) when he says that a great number of English language news magazines are becoming available worldwide and he thinks that teachers can make use of these news magazines by bringing them into their classrooms.

In the words of Pemagbi (1995:53), "my lower secondary school English teacher never failed to use an opportunity to emphasize the value of newspapers ... in language teaching and learning". Similarly, Patterson (1991:37) posits that using newspaper articles to teach English Language skills is very effective. According to him, he uses newspaper articles once or twice in a week in his composition and conversation lessons.

Again, Clouse (1994) states that the obvious connection between reading and writing is that, reading can supply some of the materials you may need for writing. She adds that reading newspaper articles about a drive-by shooting, may excite a student to write about giving you control laws. Reading may also give one an idea to develop one's composition.

There is an abundance of newspapers everywhere in our environment; from our homes, to the public toilets and the groundnut or plantain seller. Exposing children or learners to

written language especially newspaper stories may help them to know more about print material and language structures which may in turn influence their writing.

## II. METHODOLOGY

### A. THE CONTEXT

St. John's Anglican Junior High School was where this study was conducted. Established in 1927 by the Anglican Missionaries, the school has a population of about two hundred pupils and is located about two hundred meters (200m) away from the northern gate of the University of Education, Winneba (south campus).

### B. DESCRIPTION OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

This study was conducted the Junior High School (J.H.S.) two class with a population of sixty (60) pupils, made up of twenty-seven (27) girls and thirty-three (33) boys with the age range between thirteen (13) and eighteen (18) years. A few of the pupils of this class have literate parents while the rest have illiterate parents some of who are engaged in fishing while the rest do nothing for a living therefore, making it difficult for these children to pay their school fees.

#### a. THE PROBLEM

Teachers and educators have for many years had difficulty determining the best approach to teaching narrative composition as a result of inadequate textbooks in our basic schools for both pupils and teachers; this has made the teaching of narrative composition difficult and unattractive. In this regard, they have experimented with various approaches and continue to experiment but the results have always been disappointing. This is evident in the chief examiner's report (1995): This is a test in creative writing. The candidate is to write a short story About himself, stating which qualities and achievements make him special. The run-of-the-mill candidate spilt out the fact that: "I was born on Tuesday, 31<sup>st</sup> September my mother's name is Mrs. Mensah. I go school in xx. I am an Africa. I am black, my eye are black. I have two foot". And these candidates expected examiners to find this catalogue so interesting as to consider them SPECIAL.

However, there is evidence that the use of newspaper stories for narrative composition is a very effective way of teaching children how to write. Research has it that newspaper stories are often the best sources of immediate information on current subjects which textbooks may not treat. Besides, newspapers cover a wide variety of subject matter.

### B. INTERVENTION PROCEDURE

Pre-intervention  
Intervention

*a. PRE-INTERVENTION*

The purpose of the pre-intervention was to find out the level of the learners' language, therefore they were asked to write an essay on the topic, "How I spent my Christmas Holidays". The time allotted for the composition was one hour, ten minutes. The results were not impressive. Out of sixty pupils, only fifteen wrote good compositions. Majority of them fell below average. (samples of these can be seen in Appendix A).

The following general weaknesses were noticed in their work: Lack of understanding of the topic, misspelling, poor paragraphing, poor capitalization, grammatical mistakes such as mixing up of tenses, inadequate lexical range or vocabulary and poor expression.

Considering the fact that there are inadequate textbooks in the school, which is largely responsible for the above weaknesses of pupils, an alternative text, that is, newspaper (NP) stories was introduced in the classroom to improve their writing skills. Newspaper stories were selected for the following reasons:

They are cheaper, more easy to handle, have local or Ghanaian flavor, treat a wide variety of subject matter, have attractive and interesting pictures and have very current information that books don't treat. It is important to mention that before the intervention, there was a brainstorming session where pupils were told about the usage of newspapers in class. They were also asked to bring newspapers to class.

*b. INTERVENTION*

Pupils brought 'Daily Graphic', 'Weekly Mirror' and 'Junior Graphic' to the classroom. They were then asked to select and cut out stories that interest them most. At the end of it, the stories they cut were mostly from the 'Junior Graphic' and these included poems. The fact that most of the stories pupils cut were from the 'Junior Graphic' could be attributed to the fact that these stories were written by their peers and they seem to identify with them. (See samples in Appendix B')

After cutting out the stories, a methodology that will help improve pupils' writing skills, that is; group work and peer editing was introduced. Group work and peer editing were chosen because it is one way of ensuring active participation of pupils. Besides, pupils are able to move more readily from receiving knowledge to generating knowledge, learn better from others in the group, creates more opportunities for speaking and encourages co-operative instead of competitive learning. It also helps pupils to appreciate comments from their peers and use them to better their essays.

Small groups ensure active participation of pupils and effective monitoring on the part of the teacher. In line with this, pupils were put into groups with a maximum of four members. Each group had at least one good pupil. In terms of gender, each group had one or two girls. The groups also had dictionaries to facilitate the spelling of difficult words. Pupils selected their own group leaders. Each group met two times (two sessions) with each meeting lasting for one hour, twenty minutes before submitting their final draft to the teacher for evaluation. All groups wrote on the same topic and for that

matter they were required to follow the same laid down procedures.

*FIRST SESSION*

The laid down procedures for the first session are:

- ✓ Groups meet
- ✓ They read newspaper stories
- ✓ They look out for vocabulary, characters, setting, dialogues, paragraphing and expressions.
- ✓ They brainstorm on question
- ✓ They go and write drafts

This session was for discussion and brainstorming exercise. It was meant to make pupils understand the demands of the question. This session was very relaxed and pupils were required in their respective groups to read newspaper stories, discuss and note down features like introductions, conclusions, paragraphing, expressions, characters, dialogues and vocabulary. They then brainstormed on the topic they are to write on. After the discussion and brainstorming, pupils draft their compositions individually using the points they have noted as guidelines. (See sample of drafted essay in Appendix C).

*SECOND SESSION*

The laid down procedures for the second session are:

- ✓ Pupils sit in pairs
- ✓ They exchange drafts
- ✓ They read and edit essays looking out for the following: spelling, tenses, paragraphing, characters, introduction and conclusion.
- ✓ They give back edited work.
- ✓ They then rewrite their work.

During the second session or meeting, pupils worked in pairs. They exchanged their essays, read, made corrections and comments on their partner's work, who then rewrote them taking into account their peer's comments. After the rewriting exercise, the researchers evaluated pupils' work. The topic they wrote on was "My first day in the Junior Secondary School". (See sample of an edited essay in Appendix D).

III. DISCUSSION

After pupils were taken through the activities mentioned in the intervention that is, prewriting activities, drafting, editing and revising, this was how they fared. One of the areas the researchers realized much improvement was the understanding of the question. Despite the difficulties encountered at the initial stages of the brainstorming exercise, pupils were able to grasp the understanding later. All their ideas centered on the questions they were given, unlike at the pre-intervention stage where pupils went as far as writing letters when they were not asked to do so. Pupils were encouraged to take the brainstorming exercise seriously as a result, the researchers decided to increase the frequency of the exercises in class to limit the complexity of composition writing.

Paragraphing is another area that saw some improvement. The physical structuring was good, but then, some few students still had a problem with that. Another group of pupils could not represent their ideas properly in paragraphs; they were mixing up ideas. Pupils were encouraged to do extensive reading.

Apart from the above areas, capitalization is one other area pupils did not do too bad in. At least they started their paragraphs, sentences and proper nouns with capital letters but when it came to abbreviation of some names, some pupils used small letters instead of capital letters. However, the areas that saw very little improvement are spelling, grammar, punctuation, expressions and lexical range. These particular areas are quite troublesome and so, "the walls of the formal classroom were collapsed" to enable pupils work in a very relaxed atmosphere. The length of written work to be produced was limited to one page, the question given them was manageable and enough time was given them for the writing process, that is the pre-writing and post-writing activities were within their level. This was to allow room for cross-checking to correct minor errors.

Some pupils could not spell simple words even though they had dictionaries they could consult. A majority of them could not also punctuate their sentences properly. The aspect of grammar saw very little improvement. Pupils were mixing up tenses, writing sentences with the verbs not agreeing with the subjects. Again, pupils have very limited lexical range, and their poor grammar made it difficult for them to express themselves effectively and clearly in their writing.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

There is little or no innovation in the teaching of narrative composition in our basic schools. There is evidence that the use of newspaper stories for narrative composition is a very effective way of teaching pupils how to write.

This study revealed that newspaper stories are good and authentic teaching/learning materials that are also readily available and cheap. They sustain the interest of pupils in the classroom as newspaper stories have attractive pictures. The use of newspaper stories to teach in the language classroom is also new as far as pupils' reading materials are concern. They are the best source of immediate information on subjects so current that, books do not treat them much. Newspapers also cover a wide variety of subject matter. Apart from typographical mistakes that can mislead pupils and other ungrammatical constructions, pupils develop good reading habits that help them grow in the language. Newspaper stories can also be used to teach other aspects of English like reading, comprehension and grammar.

#### APPENDICES

##### APPENDIX A: SAMPLES OF PUPILS' ESSAYS AT THE PREINTERVENTION STAGE

4th February 2013.

How I spent the Christmas holidays.

School was vacated on 18th December, 2012, and I decided not to spend my Christmas holidays in Winneba here, so I left from here, on the 19th December, to my motherland hometown, Osamkrom.

When I got there, I make an effort to do a very hard work so that I got enough money within a small time. I spent some of the money to buy my needs and also our church youth choir decided to have an excursion, so I saved some money for that too. On the day of the Christmas wakekeeping, (25th December) we went church in the evening. When we came back, we did knockout-shooting competition to keep awake till the morning six o'clock. In the morning, I took my bath and had something to eat. After all I board board car and went nearby town where a big football match competition was going on and had a look at it.

On the 27th, all the children under 20 years were selected for ~~prizes~~

Image 1

11th February 2013

How I Spent the Christmas holiday.

Doing the Christmas holiday My sister came and took me to Tema. I was happy. When my sister came the so the next day we took a taxi from our house to station. And we took a bus from there to Tema.

Image 2

APPENDIX B: SAMPLES OF CUT OUT STORIES AND POEMS



Image 3

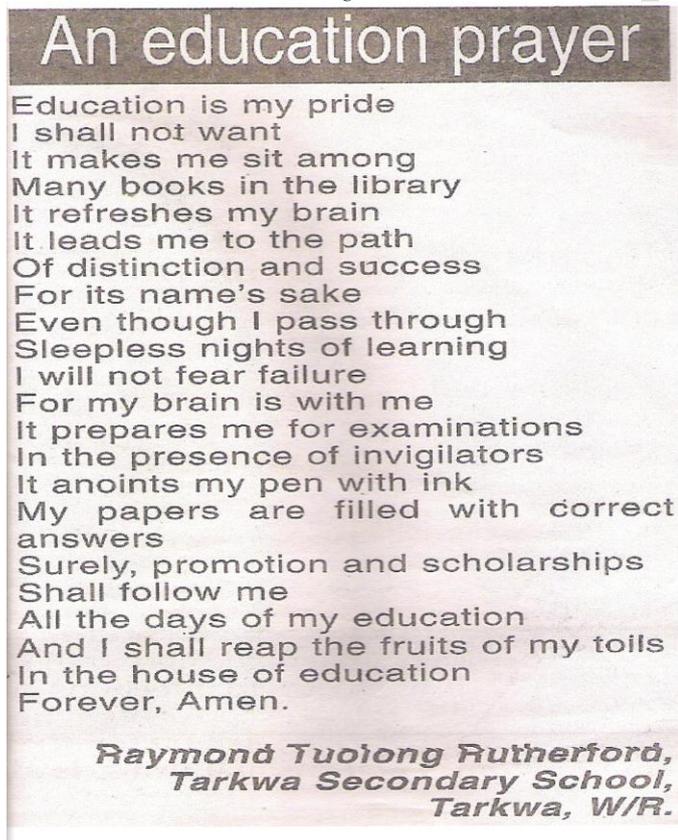


Image 4

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE OF PUPIL'S ESSAY DURING THE INTERVENTION

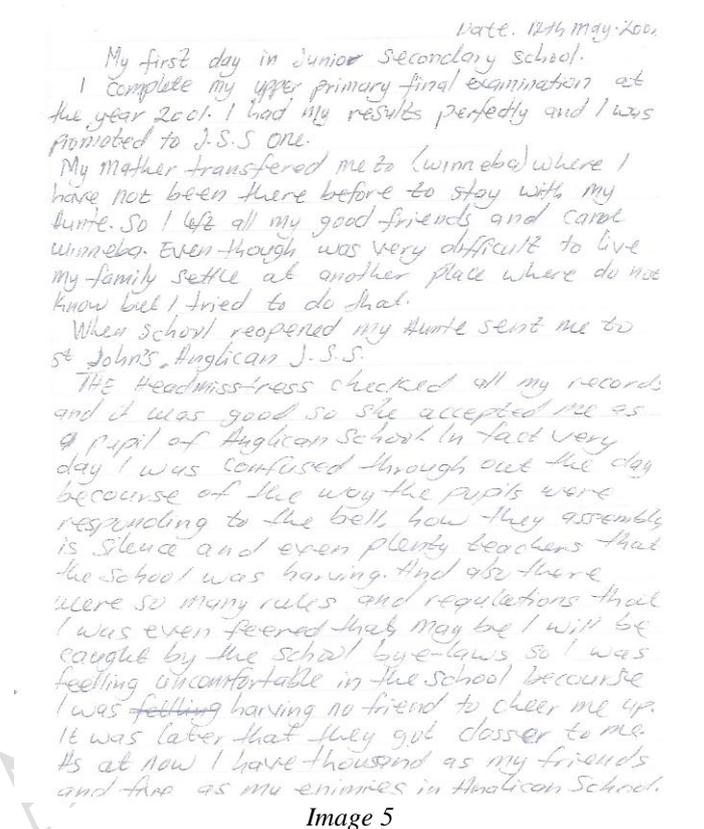


Image 5

APPENDIX D: SAMPLE OF AN EDITED ESSAY

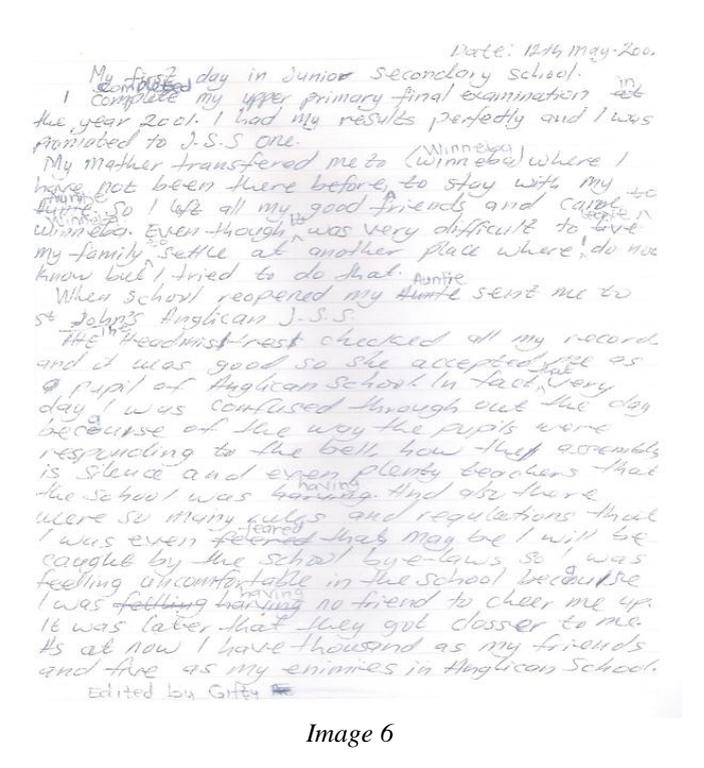


Image 6

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