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Text-Conversion Approach And The Teaching Of Writing To Trainee Teachers: An Integration Of Theory And Practice

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Abstract

Writing instruction in Nigerian schools includes the four traditional essay types. But from working with trainee teachers, the researchers discovered that the trainee teachers had a marked preference for the narrative, and a phobia for the argumentative. And since "... no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers", the researchers decided to use the text conversion approach as a method to broaden the trainee teachers' essay writing base. The application of this integrative approach has positively influenced the aptitude and attitude of the trainee teachers to those essay types.

Introductory Remarks

A widespread belief has it that students show a preference for certain essay types/writing tasks in the English Language class. One of the reasons for this preference could be the (writing) demands inherent in the essay types. The other and more plausible reason could be what teachers usually teach them, because as it is stated in the National Policy on Education (1981) sect. 57:38 "... no educational system can rise above the quality of its teachers"

Since teachers' command of the subject matter is one of the requisite teaching competencies, especially, during his / her preparatory years, a need then arose to empirically find out the writing preference of the would-be teachers vis-à-vis the essay types they would love to write and would consequently teach to their would-be students. Based on the findings, there was a need to introduce some pedagogical strategy (Text-conversion approach) as a language teaching approach which could help them practice, with some ease / convenience, the writing of other essay types.

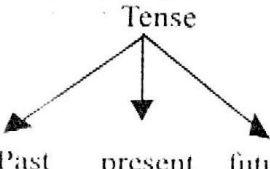
Typologies of Writing Task in the Secondary School Class

At the secondary level, students irrespective of their subject inclination - sciences, arts or social sciences - are required to embark on the following writing tasks (as stipulated by their teaching and examination syllabuses): Letters, Essays and Speeches / Addresses. Each of these is schematically presented below:

Letter Writing

Informal	Formal
Sender's address Date Salutation The Body Closing and first name of sender	Sender's address Date Recipient's address Salutation Subject Matter: Title The Body Complimentary Close Signature Name in Full.

Essays

Descriptive	Narrative	Expository	Argumentative
Paints a mental picture of something Talks about - shape - Size - Colour Uses words that appeal to the relevant senses: Sight Taste Smell Touch Hearing Movement Temperature Purpose: To enable the reader to form a correct mental picture of what is being described	- Tells a story of - what } It happened? - where } - when } People (things) involved Tense  Past present future + Some description + chronological report of events -first -next -finally Purpose: to give detailed information about actions, events or happenings-	Explains/reveals <u>how</u> to do something -Explains meaning/uses of something/idea or functions of a person Explains advantages/disadvantages of an action/policy Explains similarities or dissimilarities between two actions or objects. Method: cause & effect, definition/illustration, analysis, classification, process, analogy. Purpose: to explain an issue or idea or process -To analyse such an issue, idea/process into its aspects, types or stages.	Gives reasons for statements/opinion or preference. -To prove that an idea is true or false, correct/incorrect, better/worse. -Could be framed -declaratively -interrogatively Purpose: To give reasons for the position we take: -to justify that position -to prove that we are right in taking that position.

Speech / Address

Caption in Block Letters:

- 1 (i) Type - welcome , farewell etc.
(ii) By Presenter - Name / Office
(iii) To the recipient
(iv) The Occasion
(v) Venue
(vi) Date
- 2 Salutation: start with titles
(i) To the office
- 3 The Body
- 4 Conclusion

Memo

Name of the Institution

From.....	To.....
Ref No.....	Date.....

Subject matter

.....

.....

Telegram

To:	Date:	Front
Message :		
.....		
.....		
Sender's Name /		Back
Address		

On the Text-Conversion Approach: Its Theoretical Concept

According to Williams (1990: 186), text - conversion is a

type of text - based exercise in which a text is converted into another variety of writing. Students are given practice in saying the same thing in different ways.

In learning the skills of second - language writing, one of the important aspects of language use to be mastered is varietal sophistication. The student must recognize that the written message ...varies in accordance with : (1) the audience, (2) the need to be formal/intimate, (3) the function/purpose , etc.

This belongs to the “put -it- differently” or “in -other-words” manner of writing.

Theoretical Concepts:

The following concepts provide the backdrop for the use of text - conversion technique: the ebb -and - flow concept, currency exchange concept and Botkin, Elmandra and Melitza's (1999 cf. Thatcher 1990) Innovative-cum -Reinforcement learning types.

(a) The ebb - and - flow concept is derived from the natural phenomenon of fluctuation in water movement (tide) whereby the high tide (flow) can change (convert) into low tide (ebb), and vice versa (b) The money (foreign) exchange (conversion) concept refers to the practice whereby money in one currency can be changed or converted into another, or vice versa.

Used in this paper, text conversion as derived from concepts (a) and (b) above refers to a two-way conversion of one text into another (or other) text types and back to the original text, if need be. As regards the Botkin *et al's* (1979) Innovative-cum-Reinforcement learning types, Thatcher (1990:276) explains each thus:

Innovative Learning is the outcome of some of the programmes of learning activities which people follow or which are devised for learners which enable individuals, groups or systems to innovate change in the system for its more successful survival. Innovative learning ensures that participants in a system not only maintain it but also foster its adaption to challenge and problems in such a way that the system will adapt successfully or positively, to change and thus continue to survive in the face of challenge and opposition.

Reinforcement learning, on the other hand, is learning which “reinforces that which has already been learned, ensuring a speedy response to a given set of circumstances” (Thatcher, 1990: 277). As used in this context, the two learning types are apt anchors for text -conversion as a technique of learning because they provide the premise for learning to continue to thrive in spite of the difficulties learners may encounter in their bid to study certain school subjects such as (traditional) essay types as exemplified in this study.

Modus Operandi

Statement of the Problem

Since it was generally believed that students usually show preference for certain essay types, these researchers embarked on this study to ascertain the truth or falsity of the assumption.

Research Questions

This research was predicated on the following research questions

- (1) What essay types do learners of English like to write most?
- (2) Does the sex of the learner influence the choice of the essay type?
- (3) Does the learner's entry qualification to B. Ed have some influence on his/her choice of essay types?

Background to the Investigation

Preliminary Stage

Needs analysis was carried out and this was to find out what essay types students (i.e. would-be teachers) like to write. This was because essay writing is a *sine qua non* for students' training in and graduation from school. Banjo (1975 : 80) asserts:

a university student rises or falls according to the quality of his production skills. You may ask, how? The simple answer is that the student has to produce something, for him to be assessed at all.

So this was done by

- (a) Getting students to list the different writing tasks they know of (this they did orally, though the tasks were written on the board as they mentioned them).
- (b) Based on (a) above, students were asked to indicate their writing preference by rank ordering the four (4) traditional essays. (see Appendix 1).

Preliminary Findings

Students displayed knowledge of all writing tasks as per (a) above. In (b) majority of students ranked narrative essay the highest followed by descriptive; expository and argumentative essays. Asked why they did not choose expository and argumentative, some students said: "they are demanding".

The Main Study

After three (3) weeks had elapsed, and being armed with the findings in 1 (a) above, a take-home assignment on different essay types was given to a class of one hundred and twenty three (123) year three (3) Education / English students with varying educational backgrounds such as O/L, A/L, ND and NCE. They were to choose only one topic and write an essay of about 150 words (see the essay topics in Appendix 2) and submit it in a week's time. Why they needed one week was to enable the majority of the class to do the assignment. Students were told to pay attention to grammar and mechanics. The teachers/researchers told them that they were not bothered about the veracity of the story (However, they were interested in the choice of essay type).

After two (2) weeks one hundred (100) out of the one hundred and twenty three (123) students turned in their assignments.

Findings and Discussion

In answering the research question 1 which deals with CHOICE OF ESSAY TYPES Table 1 presents the pattern of choice

Table 1
Table Showing the Essay Types Chosen by Respondents
Essay Types

	Descriptive	Narrative	Expository	Argumentative	Total
No. of respondents	20	65	9	6	100
Percentage	20%	65%	9%	6%	100%

A cursory look at the table above reveals that the narrative essay type was chosen by the majority of the respondents (i.e 65%). Next to it was descriptive (20%) while expository (9%) and argumentative (6%) types were the lowest. The result from this practical/writing experience confirmed their earlier response in the checklist, self-assessment exercise found in the preliminary stage to this study which showed that more students (respondents) ranked narrative-the highest-followed by descriptive essay types. Moreover, the lower number of choices of expository and argumentative could be backed up by the respondents' comments that attested that these essay types are usually very demanding.

Research Question 2

Does the sex of the learner influence the choice of the essay type

Table 2
Table Showing Respondents Sex vis-à-vis His/Her Choice of Essay Types

	Descriptive		Narrative		Expository		Argumentative	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
No. of respondents per essay type	10	10	29	36	6	3	5	1
	50%	50%	44%	55.4%	66.7%	33.3%	83.3%	16.7
Total	100%		100%		100%		100%	

With reference to Table 2 above, it could be seen that the CHOICE of essay type depended to a large extent on the sex of the respondents. For instance, in the narrative essay types, out of a total of sixty-five (65) respondents, thirty-six (36) females representing (55.4%) attempted the essay while the male counterpart were twenty-nine (29) representing (44.6%). But when it came to expository and argumentative essay types, more males chose these essay types than did the females. For example, out of a total of nine(9) respondents to expository type, six (6) males representing 66.7% while the number of female who attempted it was three(3) representing 33.3%. For argumentative essay five (5) males from a total of six (6) chose this essay type while only one(1) i.e 16.7% female chose this type. For the descriptive type, the

choice was on an equal basis for out of the total number of twenty (20) respondents, the males were ten (10) (=50%) and the females were also ten(10) i.e 50%.

It could still be observed that despite the limited number of respondents who wrote on the expository and argumentative essays, male as well as female still chose to write on these “demanding essay types”.

Research Question 3

Does the learner’s mode of entry into the B.Ed degree programme have some influence on his/her choice of essay types?

In order to answer the question above, we present the findings in Table 3 below

Table 3
Table Showing Student’s Mode of Entry into B.Ed Programme vis-à-vis His/Her Choice of Essay Types.

Mode of entry + Years already spent in programme	ESSAY TYPES + NO OF RESPONDENTS				Total
	Descriptive	Narrative	Expository	Argumentative	
NCE 4-5 years	1	3	5	4	12
ND 4 years	1	3	2	1	7
A/L 4 years	2	4	4	1	11
O/L 3 years	15	55	-	-	70
Total	20	65	9	6	100

Judged from the picture presented in Table 3 above, it is clear that those respondents with NCE background chose the more demanding writing tasks as in expository and argumentative types than those with ND, A/L and O/L. As corollary, it was discovered that those with just O/L preferred descriptive and narrative types to expository and argumentative which they never attempted at all. From all indications therefore, it could be deduced that the more the number of years students spend in tertiary institutions studying English, the higher their ability to handle the “demanding” writing tasks of expository and argumentative essays.

Application of Text-Conversion to Teaching of Writing: An Afterword

Armed with the results of this research plus the fact that students must necessarily produce all the essay types, the researchers decided to employ a teaching approach viz - text - conversion that will involve all the students. The choice was predicated on the fact that people usually like to execute the plans they themselves initiate. Furthermore, the approach makes use of both deductive (topic -based) and inductive (passage -based) styles of teachings. Below is the procedure:

- Using The Topic - Based Technique = Deductive Style
For example, Topic: “A Road (that is) in disrepair in your locality”
Step 1 Discuss texts that can be derived from the broad topic above. Students’ discussion yielded the following:

- (a) **Letter:** (i) friendly (ii) formal (iii) internal memo
(iv) telegram (v) card (formal) (vi) e-mail, etc.
- (b) **Essays** (i) descriptive (ii) narrative, (iii) expository
(iv) argumentative
- (c) **Speech / Address:** Welcome / Farewell, Keynote, Prize - giving Day Speech, etc
- Step 2: Generate topics based on the categories above. With the help of the researchers the following were constructed.

(a) **Letters**

(1) **Friendly:** Your uncle who has been away for three years wants to spend his next leave at home. Now write a letter to him describing the bad state of the old but shorter road and advising him to use the new but longer road (150 words).

(2) **Formal:** Your council chairman wants to embark on some projects in your area. Write a letter to him decrying the poor state of the road to your village and propose that the road be rehabilitated (150 words).

(3) **Internal Memorandum:** As a project supervisor in your Local Government Area, do a memo to the works Unit instructing the officer in charge to rehabilitate the bad road in your ward.

(4) **Telegram:** Your State Government is visiting your Local Government Area, and the only road to the Headquarters has just sunk as a result of a heavy down-pour. Send a telegram to the Council Chairman alerting him on the need for an immediate rehabilitation of the road.

(5) **Invitation card:** Your village Progressive Union is organising a fund-raising ceremony towards the rehabilitation of the only road that links it with its neighbours. Design an invitation card that will be sent to guests at home and abroad.

(b) **Essays (Traditional)**

For questions 6-9 write an essay of about 150 words.

(6) **Descriptive:** Describing the worst road you have ever seen

(7) **Narrative:** Narrating how a one-hour journey took 6 hours because of a bad road.

(8) **Expository:** On the steps to take on rehabilitating a bad road in your locality.

(9) **Argumentative:** For or against "the use of soil-fillers for the rehabilitation of poor roads in your area".

(c) **Speech / Address**

(10) **Address:** Your Council Chairman is visiting your village in two weeks' time. As the president of your village union, you are required to write an address to be presented to him, highlighting the need for rehabilitating the bad road in your area.

Step 3: Students are asked to write five (5) essay types in all, with at least two from sub-sections 1a and b.

Step 4: Teacher assessment

II. Using the Passage -Based Technique = Inductive Style

Here, students are given a passage (for example reading comprehension) to read and generate suitable topics for different writing texts tasks as in 1.1 above. For an illustration, we adopted an expository reading passage on "Efficient Reader".

Steps 1 and 2

Generate topics to reflect letters, traditional essays and address/speech as below:

a Letters

1 Friendly: Write a letter of about 150 words to your friend in any tertiary institution on the need for him / her to become an efficient reader.

2 Formal: Write a letter to the university librarian on why more books should be acquired for the university library as these will help the students read efficiently

3 Internal Memo: As a class librarian send a memo inviting fellow classmates to come and borrow books for these can help them to become efficient readers in their different disciplines.

4 Invitation Card: The readers club in your school wants to have a fund raising ceremony in order to acquire suitable books on how to become efficient readers. Design an invitation card that would be sent to the guests.

5 Telegram: The President of Nigeria is visiting your school as a model school in your state. Send a telegram to the commissioner of Education in your State on the need to acquire more books for your school library.

(b) Essays (Traditional)

6 Descriptive: Describe the type of reader you would like to be

7 Narrative: Generate a story with an ending : "it pays to read efficiently."

8 Expository: Write on how to read efficiently

9 Argumentative: Write for or against intensive versus extensive reading.

(c) Speech / Address:

Write a speech entitled: " On the need to read efficiently" to be delivered on a prize giving day in your school.

Pedagogical Implications

Use of this approach in the teaching of English pays a lot of dividends. First, teachers can use it in teaching all the language skills, integratively viz. listening, speaking, writing, and reading, in that order, because as students discuss (listen and speak on a topic, they write down their views and later, read them. Coupled with the integrative nature of the approach is the fact that the method is flexible in that it allows the use of other teaching methods/styles such as discussion, brain storming, inductive

and deductive styles. The method is suitable for the handling of large classes because the teacher can resort to use of small groups for discussion. Above all, the teacher reduces the amount of talking because he/she becomes more of a guide than the centre of attraction.

For the students, their learning becomes more student-centred than teacher-centred because they become highly involved in the learning situation. As they make their contributions during class meetings, they stand to remember for it is stated that "people usually remember what they say as they do a thing". A lot of them, in the final analysis, always try to bring the learning to a logical conclusion for they seem to be guided by the principle which states that "people usually like to execute the plans they themselves initiate" probably for the fear of being termed failures.

Conclusion

This paper has made use of text conversion as a technique for teaching writing to trainee teachers. The approach illustrates the currency exchange concept where one idea is converted into another. For instance, as shown in the paper it is possible to convert an expository passage into a letter, an address or any other type of essay. In doing this, we have succeeded in showing the flexibility of the text conversion approach. Hereto, it has been possible to make the trainee teachers eliminate a phobia for the expository and argumentative essays which they thought were too demanding. The reason is that this approach-text-conversion is broad-based as it involves topic-based and passage-based styles of teaching.

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Appendix 1: CHECKLIST:

Rank order the four essay
types to indicate your:
most preferred 1
other 2
other 3
least preferred 4

Explain why you like or do not like any of the essay types.

TABLE 4

Rank Ordering of Essay Types

Essay Types	Rank-order			
	Most preferred	Other	Other	Least preferred
Descriptive				
Narrative				
Expository				
Argumentative				

Appendix 2

- (1) Argumentative: Write for or against the motion that "Bursary should be restricted to only students in Law and Medicine".
- (2) Descriptive: During the last holidays you had the opportunity to travel to another state/town and to witness some of the traditional festivals in the area. In an article suitable for publication in the students' magazine, describe one of these festivals. (300 words).
- (3) Expository: Write an essay on "why I chose to read / study education?"
- (3) Narrative: You were caught in a flood along the Calabar-Itu road on a trip to Uyo. Narrate your experiences in a letter to a friend.