

Assessment into Developing Pupils' Literacy and Communication Skills: A Study of Gbewaa Demonstration Junior High School, Pusiga, Ghana.

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Abstract

Literacy and communication skills are related both in speech and writing especially in the academia. Empirically, reading and writing as well as speaking and listening skills are better acquired, developed and improved with a structured instructional pedagogy that co-construct writing and reading. This study experimented on the use of the Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading + Discussion And Expression (USSR + DE) on the improvement of literacy and communication skills and guided pupils to pleurably read a text of their choice. Eighty Two (82) pupils were studied via observation, test, portfolio and an attitude survey over a period of Twelve (12) weeks. The study provided pupils an opportunity to practice reading, writing, listening and speaking which resulted in great improvement of skills in literacy and communication and an attitudinal desire for reading, writing and speaking.

Keywords: Uninterrupted, Sustained, Silent Reading, Literacy, Skills, Communication.

1. Introduction

Communication skills are broadly related to literacy in many ways. In the classroom, pupils need to be literate so that they can determine what acts of communication can bring about positive academic results. I found (during my seventeen years of practice as a professional teacher) teaching literacy and communication and their skills were extremely challenging due to many ineffective strategies to impart literacy, communication and to teach their skills and new concepts. The challenge compares with Powell & Caseau (2004) who attest that, 'If a student cannot read and write effectively, it is reasonable, to assume that his teacher(s) will struggle in class'. Nonetheless, literacy and communication skills with the Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading plus Discussion and Expression (USSR + DE) were greatly experimented. History has it that, the USSR grew out of concerns in the past due to students' low reading achievement.

The theoretical basis of the USSR + DE in this study was based on the belief that self-selection motivates students to read with interest, and the resulting extended period of practice, improves students' reading achievement (Tierney & Readence, 2000).

The DE (Discussion and Expression) was pedagogically added in 1999 by Abudulai Jakalia, a lecturer in the English Department at the University of Education, Winneba (Ghana). The DE allows and situates issues of communication as students practicing USSR will be provided an opportunity to discuss or express both in writing and speaking their reflections after reading.

An underlying assumption of the USSR + DE which prompted its usage in this action research is that pupils learn to read and to express themselves by reading constantly and

talking about what is read (Jakalia et al, 2005). Again, the USSR + DE approach epitomizes the behaviourists who argue that language [literacy] is a behaviour that develops as other skill. The behaviourists' theory encompasses Vygotsky's (1962) Social Development Theory which contends that social interaction precedes development. These theories suggest that literacy and communication skills can be acquired and developed through regular practice of reading and writing in a friendly context like that of the USSR + DE.

It is common for people to attribute academic excellence at the Basic Education Level to literacy and communication skills. They are considered as more important decisive factors in attaining academic excellence and progression. In spite of the increasing importance placed on these skills, many of our pupils at the Junior High Schools (JHS) struggle to communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively – whether in verbal or written form. Many of them leave gaps like empty space, uncompleted spelling of words, cancelled words without rewriting them and attempted spelling in their writings (communication). At other instances, their speech and expressions are jumbled. These weaknesses were observed in the reading, writing and communication efforts of JHS 3 pupils of the Gbewaa Demonstration School located in the Pusiga District. These weaknesses were noted in the researcher's attempt to help prepare them in the area of English Language for the April, 2011 Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE). Many of the pupils could not read and write responses on past Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) passages or compose simple descriptive or narrative essays. They could not also spell words of their academic age. This therefore, needed some timely intervention (as they were still in the first term of the academic year) to improve their literacy and communication skills and to prepare them to write the Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE).

2. Materials and Methods

The study was an action research. It used the USSR + DE as an instructional intervention. An entire JHS 3 Class of 82 pupils was purposely chosen for study. The sample had 50 boys and 32 girls. The then immediate purpose of the Class (to write the 2011 BECE) also influenced their selection for the experimentation of the USSR + DE literacy strategy.

In all, 82 pupils were pre-tested using four (4) different passages culled from some literary materials that the class was immersed with (two each from African and European texts). A record of low achievers (pupils who got less than an average score of 50 which was the average pass mark) was kept. In the process of the intervention, the low achievers were offered some close monitoring with more scaffolding and snowballing activities. Data was collected from four different sources. First, pre and post tests were conducted using varied reading comprehension texts. These tests sought to measure pupils' literacy and communication weaknesses and strengths before and after the intervention. Besides, pupils were encouraged to develop and keep portfolios. Portfolios of pupils contained their written works such as exercises and tests. The portfolios were used to augment the study of pupils' progress and all other related writings. It was a post intervention instrument.

The events that took place in and outside the classroom, pupils' verbal conversation and participatory level were observed. The process focused on the language of interaction between teachers and pupils, and among pupils themselves. The observations were spread over the sessions of DE during which time the pupils were typically involved in discussing their views at group levels. The observations also noted pupils' participation during reading and writing sessions. Finally, an attitude survey was conducted at the end of the programme

for all the 82 pupils. Some of the items in the attitude survey were scaled using the Likert scaling dimensions (Babbie, 1992). The attitude survey was a post intervention instrument towards collecting data on pupils' reactions about the USSR + DE approach. To operationalize and maximize the impact of the USSR + DE strategy, pupils were first prepared by been informed of the tenets of the strategy especially of the reading period - everybody reads and no interruptions during reading (Jakalia et al, 2005).

The reading period was always signaled through an alarm clock for beginning and end, and all 82 pupils respected these provisions. All the reading sessions began after pupils were given enough time to select their reading materials. The reading session lasted for forty (40) minutes.

During the reading sessions, pupils were advised to underline answers to general pre-reading questions (which were normally written on the Blackboard) and to write down new or difficult vocabulary in their Vocabulary Books and to find their meaning later. Once the reading time ended, the researcher moved on to the discussion and expression sessions which took twenty (20) minutes. At the DE (discussion and expression) sessions, the pupils were encouraged to share what was read. The researcher normally demonstrated this first, by informing the class of the number of pages he read and commented on interesting ideas read. After which pupils in an open forum stated the number of pages read, what interested them most, the characters in the story, the plot and other similar activities that encouraged the act of reading and writing. Then in literature-circles (Tierney & Readence, 2000) pupils reading the same/similar text discussed and put together their views in relation to the questions that were given. Pupils subsequently after their literature-circles activities re-narrated stories or explained their answers to their colleagues based on question(s) provided. After the DE sessions, I briefly treated some interesting topics for the day or something else. Notably, my role during the reading sessions was doing exactly what the pupils did – reading. This important role as Tierney & Readence (2000) submit; showed good, sustained silent reading behavior and for some pupils, it was the first time to observe an adult reading. The USSR + DE reading programme was administered thrice a week on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays for twelve (12) weeks in the first term. Each session lasted one hour (on Tuesdays and Thursdays after normal class hours from 3:00pm – 4:00 pm and on Saturdays from 8:00am – 9:00am). Each pupil pleausurably read and wrote responses on number of simplified or abridged texts.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Pre-intervention Observation

The School had 5 teachers; 4 male and 1 female. All 5 teachers were qualified to teach at the junior high level with teaching experiences ranging from three to ten years. 3 of the teachers possessed three-year teachers' certificate 'A' and had almost completed a sandwich top-up course to earn them diploma certificates which were organized by the University of Cape Coast at some selected teacher training colleges while 1 had done the three-year Diploma in Basic Education. The 5th teacher possessed three-year teachers' certificate 'A' and had enrolled on a three-year Diploma programme mounted through distance learning by the University of Education, Winneba. All 5 teachers have been teaching at the junior high school level since their first posting. It was therefore quite clear that the teachers had enough experiences and are quite aware of the problems of literacy and communication skills among pupils of the junior high school. It was revealed that all the teachers were not familiar with the

Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Reading plus Discussion and Expression (USSR + DE) instructional strategy. It was however noted that all 5 teachers relied on short comprehension passages (traditional method) from textbooks to impart literacy and communication skills and attitudes.

It was also observed that pupils' essays and speech had blemishes such as gaps and jumbled sentences. Pupils wrote and communicated badly in English, failed to comprehend reading passages with a high difficulty in understanding instructions. They showed weak knowledge about punctuation and summary skills, sentence construction, spelling, expression and pronunciation. To ascertain problems observed, a pre-intervention test was conducted.

3.2 Pre-intervention Test

The pre-intervention test items were four passages culled from four novels which were part of the reading list. These four novels were randomly sampled by pupils themselves based on a simple ballot. Out of the 82 pupils in the class, I had 4 pieces of paper with 'yes' while the rest of 78 pieces were 'no'. Pupils who picked yes had their novels selected as materials from which passages were culled. The passages were conveniently culled from the sampled stories. Each passage was scored over 100. The 4 pre-intervention test passages therefore totaled a score of 400. After marking pupils' answers, an average score of each pupil was calculated. The average score per pupil was the total score obtained in the 4 passages (tests) multiplied by 100 then divided by 400.

$$\text{Thus, } \frac{(\text{Test 1 score}) + (\text{Test 2 score}) + (\text{Test 3 score}) + (\text{Test 4 score})}{400} \times 100$$

Below is the performance of the 82 pupils in the four passages.

Table 1: A pre-intervention test average scores performance of pupils in 4 passages

Test Score Averages	Number of Pupils	Percentage
0 – 24	38	46.34
25 – 49	35	42.68
50 – 74	07	08.53
75 – 99+	02	02.43
Total	82	99.98

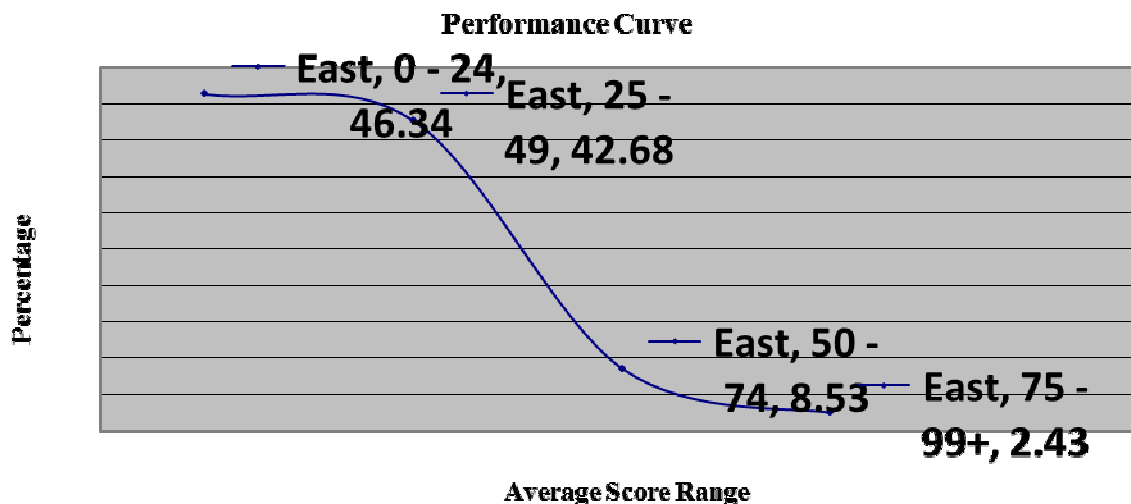
NB: The average pass score was pegged at 50.

$$\text{Thus, the median which was } \frac{49 + 50}{2} = 49.5 \text{ (approximately 50 \%)}$$

From Table 1, a total of 9 pupils representing 10.96 % (approximately 11%) obtained marks ranging from 50 to 99+. 73 pupils (about two-third of the class) representing 89.02 % had below the standard average mark of 50.

There were as many as 73 low achievers. The class overall performance was very weak. No pupil had obtained average marks ranging from 81 and above despite the fact that the questions were multiple choice and the pupils knew and had read the story books from which the passages were culled from. The Table 1 data gave a negatively skewed curve as shown below:

Chart 1: Performance curve of pre-intervention scores of pupils



The pre-intervention data above confirmed the need for remediation. Hence, the USSR + DE instructional pedagogy was introduced for twelve weeks. Each pupil pleurably read, wrote responses and expressed him or herself on one of the assembled texts for a session and was advised to keep portfolio that showcased their written works and progress.

3.3 Post-intervention Observation and Portfolio

After the intervention, a systematic random sample of 40 low achievers of the 73 portfolios were taken and studied to ascertain the progress of the low achievers. The following developments were noted:

- i. all sampled pupils had clear and legible written works
- ii. pupils' ideas in their essays were logically presented and their sentences were devoid of gaps and jumbled constructions
- iii. pupils used apt adjectives in describing characters and their roles
- iv. two-third of the sample (27 pupils) were able to give precise and apt subject matters, themes and summaries of stories they read
- v. about 35 pupils of the sampled low achievers obtained 70 % and above in all the twelve dictation exercises (each week had one dictation exercise).

These indicators showed that the entire pupils had progressed considerably in writing and vocabulary. It was also observed that pupils' language of interaction had changed from Kusaal to English despite majority still making frantic efforts to interact in English.

It was also observed during reading and writing sessions that the pupils:

- i. perceived some books to be more interesting and struggled or scrambled over such books.
- ii. concentrated and read independently
- iii. independently consulted me to help them on the pronunciation of some words outside class
- iv. listed difficult words and looked up their meanings in the dictionary
- v. were highly prepared and motivated to express themselves in class to indicate their mastery and progress in English
- vi. argued constructively and participated satisfactorily on issues of interest during discussion sessions and
- vii. discussed other worrying issues such as summarizing text and text difficulty with me during their leisure periods.

The post-intervention observation data indicated that the pupils had remarkably gained interest in the activities created by the USSR + DE programme. It implies that a structured literacy programme like the USSR + DE can potentially improve pupils' participation in literacy and communication activities and their skills (cf Jakalia 1999).

To further prove the observation that the USSR + DE improves pupils' proficiency in literacy (Kimbell-Lopez; 2003, Tierney & Readence; 2000) a post-intervention test was conducted.

3.4 Post-intervention Test

The post-intervention test used the same four initial passages that were used during the pre-intervention stage with two additional passages culled from two other novels that were conveniently selected by me. Each of the passages (now six) contained ten test items; five multiple choice and five short answer items.

The addition of the five short open-ended items in the post-intervention passages provided variety and tested pupils' sentence construction competence.

Below is the performance of the 82 pupils in the post-intervention tests of the four initial passages.

Table 2: A post-intervention test average scores performance of pupils in 4 initial passages

Test Score Averages	Number of Pupils	Percentage
0 – 24	00	00.00
25 – 49	05	06.09
50 – 74	23	28.05
75 – 99+	54	65.85
Total	82	99.99

NB: The average pass mark was 50 (reference to pre-intervention average scores).

From Table 2, a total of 5 pupils representing 06.09 % obtained average marks of 0 to 49 while a total of 77 pupils representing 93.90 % obtained marks from 50 to 99+. Comparatively, there was an improvement of 82.92 % in pupils' entire performance. That is, pupils who scored 50 to 99+ in the post-intervention tests were 77 (representing 93.90 %) while those who scored 50 to 99+ were 9 representing 10.96 % in the pre-intervention tests.

Therefore, $77 - 9 = 68$ (pupils)

Hence, the average improvement in terms of percentage is $\frac{68 \times 100}{82}$

$$82$$

$$= 82.92 \%$$

Notwithstanding this remarkable performance and improvement, 5 pupils (representing 6.09 %) performed poorly in the post-intervention tests. These pupils could improve considering the average level of improvement if the USSR + DE continued.

The improvement (82.92 %) suggests that a moderate amount of literacy activities will lead to substantial gains in reading, writing and communication abilities. It thus compares Jakalia (1999) that a good habit of reading improves ones literacy [and communication] proficiency in the long run.

The Table 2 data showed a positively skewed curve as below:

Chart 2: Performance curve of post-intervention scores of pupils (4 initial passages)

Performance Curve

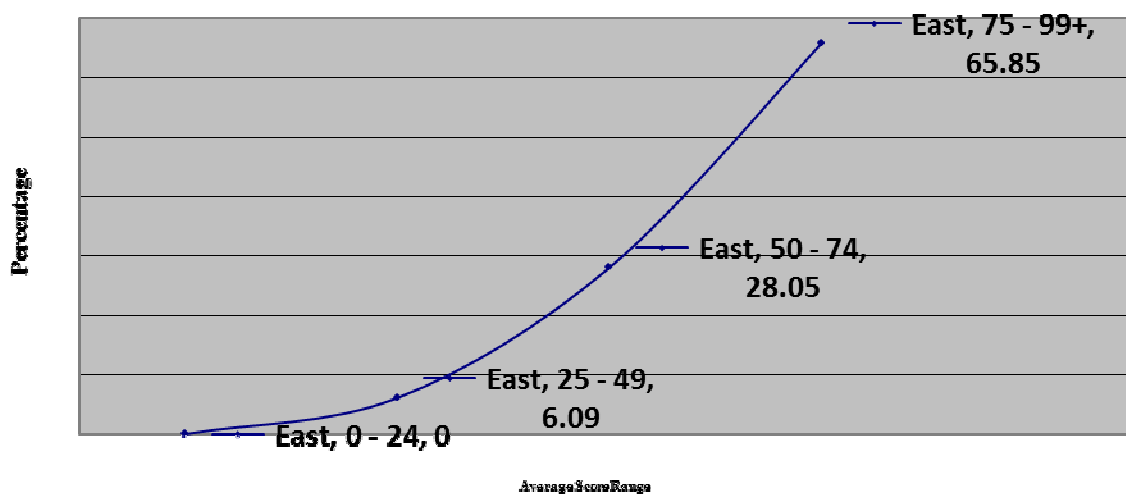


Table 3: A post-intervention test average scores performance of pupils in 2 additional passages

Test Score Averages	Number of Pupils	Percentage
0 – 24	00	00.00
25 – 49	07	08.53
50 – 74	33	40.24
75 – 99+	42	51.22
Total	82	99.99

As indicated earlier, the average pass mark was 50 %.

From Table 3, a total of 7 pupils representing 08.53 % obtained marks ranging from 0 – 49 while a total of 75 pupils representing 91.46 % obtained average marks ranging from 50 – 99+ in the two additional passages.

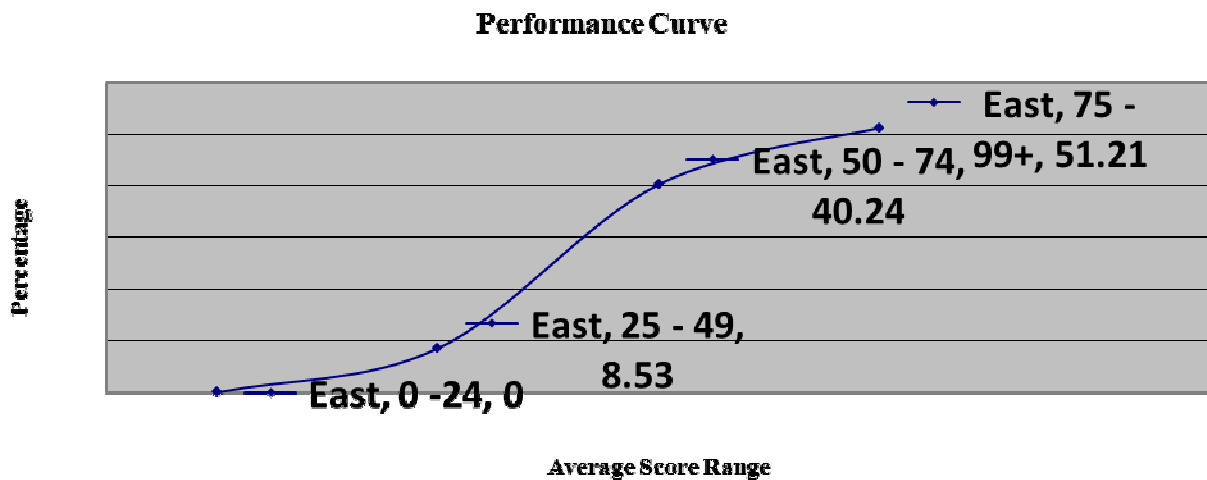
In relating the entire improvement gain of Table 3 to Table 2, there is a minimal reduction of 2.44 % (93.90 % – 91.46 %) which represents 2 pupils. The resulting difference (2.44%) is less than 5% which projects consistency in performance gain.

Similarly, the pupils’ overall performance in the latter two additional passages vis-à-vis that of the initial four post-intervention passages shows a very strong growth in communicative and comprehension abilities since the pupils were able to express their ideas, responses or thoughts effectively in writing (tests).

Broadly, the pupils have therefore cultivated and will continue cultivating better reading habits which will ultimately lead to change in attitudes (Jakalia et al; 2005, Kimbell-Lopez; 2003, Chow & Chou; 2000, Gay; 2000, Tierney & Readence; 2000, Wiener & Cohen; 1997).

The Table 3 data was also plotted and it showed a positively skewed curve as below:

Chart 3: Performance curve of post-intervention scores of pupils (2 additional passages)



Finally, an attitudinal survey was conducted to ascertain if the USSR + DE impart attitudinal change on pupils towards reading, writing and communicating activities. It was administered on all the 82 pupils. The pupils' attitude survey had three sections namely I, II and III. There were 26 questions in all. Some questions were scaled while others demanded a 'yes' or 'no' answer. A few other questions were open-ended questions. Below are data and its analysis on the survey of pupils' attitudes in relation to the use of USSR + DE.

4. Conclusion

The study established that pupils' literacy and communication skills issues are attributable to many causes particularly inadequate learning methods/activities and materials that will propel pupils to learn beyond the classroom. These problems render pupils' reading, writing and speech jumbled, muffled and makes many pupils continue to struggle to communicate their thoughts and ideas effectively. This can however be remedied through the use of a literacy programme like the USSR+ DE alongside normal classroom activities. Particularly, the 12 weeks instruction of the USSR + DE in the Gbewaa Demonstration JHS 3 Class has developed in the pupils a life-long love for reading. The pupils' exposure to the various literary genres has also equipped them with immeasurable literary and vocabulary experience which has increased their desire to read on their own during their free time. The desire to read on their own is a positive change of attitude in pupils' towards literacy which has also brought about a substantial shifts in communication in vernacular to English. In addition to gains in achievement and shift in attitudes, the USSR + DE broadened pupils' background of information, thus providing them with a better knowledge base with which to relate to the content of other subject areas and teachers.

It was confirmed that good readers are often good writers, and vice versa. And that pupils who are good readers and writers perceive themselves as such and are more likely to engage in reading and writing on their own than others (Fielding et al, 1986).It has also particularly, provided pupils with some humor through characterization and some revealing images in texts read leading to insights into different kinds of people, interpersonal relationships, and moral dilemmas that can be difficult to learn from real life.

5. Recommendations

The experimentation and results of the USSR + DE gave a good basis for emulation. The USSR + DE provides a better option of imparting literacy that culminates in developing communication skills than traditional methods such as reading comprehension and story-telling. It is my opinion that, stakeholders should provide adequate and interesting supplementary reading materials to stock libraries for pupils at the JHS level. There should also be periodic in-service programmes to update teachers' instructional methods and strategies. It is also strongly recommended for the introduction of USSR + DE as a course of study in Universities especially those that are into English Language Education. Teachers of the English Language should research into novel ways of imparting attitudes, skills and knowledge than relying on the traditional methods which normally undermine general efforts of national literacy policy.

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