

An Autobiographical Reflection of an English as a Second Language Teacher: Teaching in Ghana

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Abstract

English is vital in Ghana because it functions as the country's official language and arguably as the nation's lingua franca. It is also the primary language used for instruction and assessment at all levels of education. In this paper, I reflect on my over ten years of experience teaching English in Ghana. I highlight the marginalization of teachers in discussions about curriculum issues. Further, I present my teaching philosophy regarding reading and writing. I also discussed and reflected on my teaching practices in relation to the selection of texts for my reading and writing class. While discussing my role as a teacher, I also emphasized the role of students in the reading and writing class. This paper highlights the need for teachers to adopt learner-centred teaching approaches.

Keywords: curriculum, Ghana, ESL, teaching English; teaching reading and writing

In Ghana, English is the language of instruction and assessment at all levels of education. In fact, it plays a crucial role in the nation as it functions not only as the official language of the country, but also as the nation's lingua franca. This presupposes that, for one to succeed in most sectors, particularly in formal education, one's proficiency in English is of immense importance. Apart from that, all other subjects, besides the Ghanaian languages, are taught using English. This, perhaps, informed my decision to become a teacher of the English language. I taught English for more than a decade in Ghana. This, of course, was a wonderful experience. However, in 2017, I left the country for further studies in Canada. I strategically chose Canada because it provided me with a distinct opportunity to connect with a university in an English-speaking environment academically. My time in graduate school has offered me the opportunity to critically reflect on my teaching.

In this write-up, I draw heavily from my lived experience as a teacher in Ghana. I reflect on my teaching of English as a second language. I discuss some of the techniques I engage in to facilitate my students' learning. Drawing on my years of teaching, I reflect on the curriculum and how teachers, vis-a-vis the government relate to the development of the curriculum. I then focused on how to teach to engage students. Essentially, this work highlights my teaching philosophy. The aim of this write-up is not to put forward a teaching method but to highlight an approach that will engender further discussion in the teaching English as a Second Language.

Teachers and the Curriculum

It is a well-documented fact that teachers have generally been excluded when decisions regarding curriculum are being made (Bascia et al., 2014; McLaughlin et al., 2016;_Watkins, 2022). As teachers, we suffer the brunt of developed curriculums without paying attention to what pertains on the ground. This is because most curriculums are designed with the broader picture in mind, and there is no place for individual differences. Teachers, who undoubtedly are the ultimate implementers of the curriculum, are not consulted when decisions are being made as to what to include in and what to exclude from the curriculum (Apple, 1990). In Ghana, politicians are at the forefront of educational policy issues, and decisions are made more or less considering educational and political goals. The result is that each political transition ushers in a new education policy (Owusu-Kwarteng et al., 2018). A noteworthy example is the New Patriotic Party (NPP) administration's alteration in the duration of secondary education from three to four years, followed by the National Democratic Congress's (NDC) subsequent reversal to three years when the NPP administration lost power (Adu-Gyamfi et al., 2016).

This fittingly describes the frustration I encountered at my first teaching job, where the students I was supposed to teach were not at the level they were supposed to be, and I had to adjust the curriculum to teach them. Specifically, I was posted to a rural area to teach, and to my dismay, most of the students at the junior secondary school level could not read. Consequently, I decided that before dealing with the syllabus, teaching the students how to read was essential. However, both my headmaster and circuit supervisors advised against me making adjustments to the syllabus. In my quest to protect my job, I complied with the directives of my superintendents. In the end, the children I taught were significantly disadvantaged in that, regardless of how well I taught, their results never improved because most of them had not mastered the basic skills to succeed in school. This confirms Eisner's (1990) argument that "no matter how well something is taught, if it is not worth teaching, it is not worth teaching well" (p. 524). This typifies the conundrum teachers are faced with when, in their quest to remain faithful to the prescribed curriculum/syllabus, teachers accept and adopt methods that are at odds with their beliefs or the best interests of their students.

One main problem I noticed with the curriculum was that it seemed to be cast in stone, and there was little or no consultation with the teachers, who are the ultimate implementers of the curriculum. However, it is crucial for teachers to systematically gauge the level of their students and decide what to emphasize in a particular term or lesson, even though this might be against what is prescribed in the formal curriculum. This is more important considering the disparities between the different schools. Thus, context should determine what is taught since no two schools are the same. Similarly, no two students are the same.

Student-Centred Teaching

In recent years, many stakeholders in education have emphasized the need to shift from teacher-centred teaching methods to learner-centred. This

conception shifts teaching from the traditional standpoint to a more learner-oriented outlook (Collins & O'Brien, 2011; Demirci & Akcaalan, 2020). Learners are, therefore, put at the forefront of every instructional activity, and the teacher is only to play a facilitative role (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Since learners are the main reason lessons are being taught, making them the focal point of lesson delivery is very much needed. According to Prince (2004), active learning refers to any instructional approach that involves students actively participating in the learning process. Active learning necessitates students engaging in meaningful learning activities and reflecting on their acquired knowledge. Apart from the lack of resources to effectively carry out student-centred teaching, one main issue I observed while implementing active teaching approaches was that it enabled loquacious pupils to dominate classroom discussions.

Biggs (2012) argued that the ultimate aim of good teaching should be to close the gap between students of different academic abilities. He captured this beautifully when he said, "good teaching is getting most students to use the higher cognitive level processes that the more academic students use spontaneously" (p. 41). The concept of teaching from the known to the unknown was fundamental as it made the class lively and got all students on deck. This way, the likelihood of students lagging is highly reduced.

As a teacher, I support Shuell's (1986) assertion that what students do is more critical in engendering learning than what teachers do. Due to this, I place more value on student activities than teacher activities. My views about the role of the teacher in the reading and writing class is informed by Freire's (2014) assertion that dialogue is an essential element of every classroom. This dialogue is reflected in teacher-student conversation or pupil-pupil conversation. Freire (2014) further asserted that when teachers acknowledge that students bring vast knowledge with them to the class, this dialogue is possible. This resonates with my belief as a teacher of reading and writing.

Teaching English as a Second Language

Contrary to the assertion of Lado (1957), I believe that the mother tongue of my students, rather than being considered in terms of interfering with the learning of a target language, is of great asset to me in teaching reading and writing. This is premised on my belief that students, regardless of the foreign language they study, think first and foremost in their mother tongue. Thus, I see the L1 of my students as a valuable potential that can be harnessed to improve learners' proficiency in their target language. My stance parallels the larger conversation in the literature of teaching reading and writing (Cummins, 2012; Yamashita, 2002; Kieffer & Lesaux, 2012).

The notion that incorporating L1 in the classroom enhances language acquisition piqued my interest (Cummins, 2012). Frequently, I study students' first language (L1) and compare various language patterns. The first language (L1) can enhance communication, but it is essential to remember that L1 is likely the most powerful cognitive tool for our English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. Individuals primarily utilize

their L1 for cognitive processes and information processing. By limiting the audible usage of their L1, we are denying them access to this valuable resource. This is why I feel sad about the preference of Ghanaians for English only as the medium of instruction (Opoku-Amankwa, 2009; Bronteng et al., 2019).

Regarding successful teaching approaches, there is a consensus among scholars such as Grabe (2009), and Koda (2005) that the teaching of L2 reading abilities should be done clearly and directly. Even though a student's mother tongue is a valuable asset, teachers need to provide a systematic and explicit teaching of L2 reading methods, abilities, and processes since this enhances learners' ability to comprehend and engage with the L2.

Furthermore, I find it essential to encourage L2 learners to engage in extensive reading because the gradual and structured exposure to engaging, pertinent, and culturally relevant content in the first language (L1) can enhance L2 language skills and thus improve reading abilities. The instruction should focus on enhancing metacognitive and metalinguistic awareness in both the mother tongue and the L2. It is important to inform learners about the similarities or differences in word structure between their native language (L1) and the second language (L2) they are learning (Koda, 2005).

As should be expected, no single teacher would possess knowledge of all the first languages (L1s) spoken by their students in their classrooms. Ghana has 44 indigenous languages, of which about nine have received formal approval from the State for their usage in education and schools (Opoku-Amankwa, 2009). In this scenario, teachers must use every opportunity to prompt their students to contemplate the similarities or differences between the two languages. This will help the students become aware of certain aspects of languages such as cognates, verb inflection, sentence syntax, text organization, discourse structure, and the roles of the reader and writer.

It is vital to inform learners about the cultural norms that influence how texts are written in both their native language (L1) and their second language (L2). I, therefore, agree with Smith and Elley (1997) that "there are no inferior or disadvantaged languages —only language differences" (p. 72).

Regarding teaching reading, I am careful when selecting the passages I make my students read. I select texts, considering my students' intellectual level and interests. Against the backdrop that stories are an active learning method (LeTexier, 2008), I often employ stories in my lessons. Knowing that reading interest can be affected by the content of the passages, and against the backdrop that "interest is one of the main elements of motivation" (Brantmeier, 2003, p. 36), I select texts written by Ghanaian writers about Ghanaian issues. For example, following the observation of Dei (1996), I choose passages about the foods my students are conversant with, the rivers they swim in, the streets they walk, and the places they visit. This is motivated by my belief that when passages are culturally relevant to my students, the passages activate schema (Azmuddin et al., 2020), which not only promotes and sustains students' interest but also promotes comprehension.

Talking about interest also brings to the fore the critical issue of gender: How are boys and girls depicted in the passages I allow my students to read? Is the language of the text gender-sensitive? Do I assign reading tasks that tend to activate the schemata of both boys and girls? These are some of the questions I consider in my attempt to make my reading class gender-sensitive as much as practicable. In order to have passages that are gender-friendly and culturally relevant, teachers might need to be consciously selective about some of the passages in the textbooks provided by the government. Herein lies the importance of a teacher's pre-lesson preparation, where a teacher goes through the textbooks to ascertain their appropriateness for his class. In what follows, I discuss how I assist students in understanding the reading tasks that have been assigned to them.

The role of word recognition cannot be overemphasized in the reading class. Even though I am not oblivious to the fact that phonological processing can be a useful word recognition strategy, I lean more toward orthographic processing because research has suggested that there is more reliance on orthographic processing as learners progress in their reading (Nassaji, 2014). Nevertheless, my surest bet is to rely on morphological processing since I am convinced that morphological awareness, emanating from morphological processing, aids in promoting reading comprehension and helps students when it comes to understanding constituents of a new vocabulary, thereby giving them the power to decipher the meaning of new vocabularies. In the next paragraph, I discuss the topic of vocabulary further, paying attention to the appropriate time to treat vocabularies with my students.

Treating Vocabularies

There has been a debate regarding whether to treat vocabulary before or during reading. My ten years of experience teaching English Language has taught me to regard both approaches as complementary. As a teacher, I believe that teaching vocabularies at the pre-reading stage is the best way to prepare students to approach a text. While I see the treatment of vocabularies during the pre-reading stage to be akin to a warm-up session undertaken by footballers before the actual match, I see the treatment of vocabularies during the reading stage to be akin to a football coach giving direction to his team during the match. In my opinion, both are important. However, depending on the exigencies of the class, I decide which approach to stick to more often. This brings to the fore my reliance on diagnostic tests very early in the school year to enable me to gauge the level of the students in my class and make important decisions regarding the skills or strategies to emphasize.

Alessi and Dwyer (2008) advocate treating vocabulary during the reading stage. Their stance is premised on the fact that words, in isolation, do not possess any concrete meaning. Thus, words must be related to other words to possess meaning. In this regard, context is almost always significant in determining the meaning of words. In as much as I agree with them on the importance of treating vocabularies during the reading process, I also believe that the treatment of the vocabularies at the pre-reading stage, especially at the primary school level,

reduces the anxiety a child might have prior to reading. Therefore, even though I advise that the two methods should not be seen as mutually exclusive, I think treating vocabulary before reading is more suitable for basic levels of education, while treating vocabulary during reading will be appropriate for higher levels of education.

I believe that the more vocabulary students possess; the more their comprehension is improved, which translates into writing. However, unlike the generally held view that students should read extensively to improve their vocabulary base (Suk, 2017), I am of the view that rather than merely encouraging students to read extensively, it is my duty as a teacher to guide my students towards the acquisition of academic vocabulary. This way, the vocabularies are helpful when it comes to writing. This is in congruence with the assertion of Coxhead and Byrd (2007), who posit that the best way of teaching students in a composition class is to focus on *language-in-use*. *Language-in-use*, according to Coxhead and Byrd (2007), "provides insights not simply on what is possible with grammar/vocabulary but on what is done when a language is used for a particular type of communication" (p. 130).

I believe that Morphological awareness is essential for comprehension. However, it is not an aspect that is consciously taught. Understanding the meanings that prefixes and suffixes convey helped me acquire a vast vocabulary stock and aided my comprehension of assigned texts. It is, therefore, not surprising that Kieffer and Lesaux (2012) found that it has a direct and indirect link to developing word reading and comprehension skills.

In Ghana, students are always encouraged to cultivate the habit of reading widely. The basis of this advice is that reading widely is the best way to build upon one's vocabulary repertoire. While I think extensive reading might do the trick for native speakers, who acquire vocabularies more naturally due to the context in which they mostly might find themselves, I believe that there should be a conscious effort to develop morphological awareness among non-native learners. Regarding the issue of vocabulary "threshold," vis-à-vis comprehension, I agree with Schmitt et al. (2011) that no threshold guarantees the propensity to comprehend an assigned text. My position is informed by the fact that understanding a text is influenced by many factors other than familiarity with the words in the text. Such factors include context and the previous knowledge with which a reader approaches a text.

Regarding the method of teaching reading, I prefer the top-down strategy because it saves time. Moreover, following the top-down approach allows me to direct my students to focus on reading for meaning. Furthermore, I believe the top-down approach is consistent with my desire to make my classroom gender-sensitive, since, according to Brantmeier (2002), the top-down strategy has the propensity to help both boys and girls.

Regarding writing, I consider it my duty to prepare my students to become proficient academic writers in the future. This is based on my belief that writing helps in developing critical thinking. In fact, ideas remain mere thoughts

until they are written down. I am meticulous when it comes to the types of texts I make available for my students to read. Before giving my students a text to read, I critically examine the text to identify moves (Swales, 1990) that I want my students to learn and apply in their writing.

My belief regarding academic writing is that one can only become a better academic writer if one spends time reading academic papers. In designing the tasks to develop my students' writing abilities, I aim to develop critical thinking in my students. How do I do this? At the pre-writing stage, I use many teaching-learning materials to help my students compose logical arguments in writing. Most of the essays I give to my students are first and foremost discussed in class since I believe whole class discussions lead to developing critical thinking skills in my students (Bovill, 2020). This, to me, provides a scaffold for the writing process.

According to Knoch et al. (2015), students' writing has the propensity to improve if teachers give students enough opportunities to produce written assignments. Due to this, I always provide my students with opportunities to write essays, after which I provide them with feedback. In most cases, the composition exercise is a way of testing the efficacy of my teaching methods rather than for grading. Furthermore, recurring errors direct me toward what to emphasize in my subsequent lessons.

Thinking back on my experience as an English teacher, I realized how the complex rules of the language limited so many students. In Ghana, like many other African countries, success in education is tied to the ability to read and write in the language of our colonial masters. This confirms the argument of Low (2003) that even though the colonial masters have long departed several shores, their influences still linger. The linguistic influence largely seems to be the most significant colonial legacy, particularly in Africa. Take a cursory look at the official languages of most of our African countries, and you will realize that French and English dominate our continent. Of course, one might argue that English has become the *Lingua Franca*, but why do we reject our many indigenous languages totally and opt for only English?

In Ghana, for instance, the current language policy states that children should be taught exclusively in their mother tongue for only the first five years of schooling (from Kindergarten to Primary 3). At this stage, the L2 (English) is introduced to them as part of the curriculum (Bronteng et al., 2019). In subsequent years, through to the university, the children learn every other subject through English—using English as the medium of instruction and as the language of assessment.

In reading Low's (2003) article, I recall an incident when I was teaching at a Senior High School in Ghana. This incident made me believe the limitations that the grammar of English places on ESL learners and how, as teachers, we are prone to judge a student's ability based on mastery of the rules of the grammar of English. Once, one of my students approached me and told me of her interest in writing stories. She requested that I read a story she had written to see whether or

not the story made sense. When she brought the story, I was surprised a girl of her age could write that much. In fact, she had written over twenty pages. When I started reading the story, I noticed that the girl had so many grammatical inconsistencies. Sadly enough, instead of trying to follow the plot of the story, I was rather scanning the write up looking for her grammatical problems. I was just 'marking' and not reading. I finished 'marking' the story and handed the story back to my student only after giving her the usual sermon of 'make sure you learn your grammar well.' Somehow, for a reason I cannot place my finger on, I asked her to narrate the story to me. When she did, it was an interesting story. No doubt, an ESL learner requested a meeting with Low, insisting that "I think you mark only my grammar ... I want us to read me together." (Low, 2003, p. 57). I asked my student to rectify the many errors she had with her story and re-hand it in. She never came back, and in retrospect, I realize that, through my overemphasis on the rules of English Grammar, I stifled her desire to write. This is the case in Ghana, where even the most brilliant ideas are ignored because they are not captured sophisticatedly in the Queen's language.

Knoch et al. (2015) investigated 'What happens to ESL students' writing after three years of study at an English medium university?' They found that after three years of study in an English medium university, students' writing improved, but only in fluency. Moreover, they found that extensive reading and frequency of writing played a very significant role in the improvement students made because students who had improved in their writing believed that their writing improved due to reading so many materials such as newspapers, articles, textbooks etc. The belief by the students that their writing improved as a result of extensive writing does not come to me as a surprise. This is because I have been constantly advised to read widely to expand my vocabulary base throughout my life as a student. Even as a teacher, I also advised my students to do likewise. The confusion now is 'What materials should students read extensively?' Vandrick (2003) posits that students can develop their linguistic resources through reading a piece of literature, for example, a novel. For her, "students can learn very precise, nuanced, and useful vocabulary in literature. They (students) are also exposed to language patterns that help students see the many and complex ways that sentences and paragraphs can be put together" (p.265). Despite this stance, I contend that there has been an overemphasis on extensive reading regarding improving academic writing. This is because, in my opinion, when one reads stories and newspapers, he/she is sure to acquire new vocabulary. But, some 'moves' are peculiar to academic texts, and these moves are absent in other writing genres. Moreover, due to the advancements in technology and its concomitant social media, most students read a myriad of articles on Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. Does this amount to extensive reading and will it help students in their quest to improve their academic writing skills? Usually, the language on social media include jargons and shorthand, emojis and other specialized forms of writings which do not benefit students. Due to this, we, as teachers, should not only encourage extensive reading but also advise students on the appropriate

materials to read to improve their academic writing skills. For this reason, I contend that, even as teachers encourage students to read widely, teachers should make students understand that the best way of improving academic writing is to read academic papers. When students read and acquire more vocabulary, how does vocabulary acquisition translate into writing? In what follows, I discuss the importance of creating opportunities for students to practice writing.

According to Knoch et al. (2015), other students who believed their writing had improved also held that their writing improvement was due to the requirement to produce written assignments. This contrasts with those who contend that their writing had not improved: they blamed the lack of improvement on a lack of extensive writing cum the fact that they did not receive any feedback on their writing. This got me thinking about how we assess students' writing. Looking back, I recall I did not give my students enough writing assignments, probably because it was more challenging to mark and grade writing assignments as compared to grammar and reading comprehension exercises. The difficulty of grading writing assignments was further compounded by the large number of students a teacher had to teach. Moving forward, I intend providing students with more opportunities to write. Also, to limit the adverse effects of the large class size, I might have to put students in groups. That way, I can limit the workload on me, while at the same time, give students sufficient practice while at the same time offering feedback about their work.

In terms of giving corrective feedback, I am more comfortable with providing students with indirect feedback, since indirect feedback is in congruence with my desire to make my class learner-centred. Nevertheless, depending on the error type, I employ different feedback types. For example, I employ indirect feedback for slips, direct feedback for grammar, and metalinguistic for lexical and idiosyncratic errors. Moreover, since students come to our class with varying intellects, I identify the outstanding students through my assessment methods and guide these good students to help provide feedback on their colleagues' write-ups. This is because there is ample evidence regarding the efficacy of peer feedback in the ESL class (Rollinson, 2005).

I always opt for integrated tasks to help students apply the skills learnt. Thus, I provide a passage for students to read, after which I let them write an essay, taking cognizance of some of the issues raised in the passage. In this way, I can give assignments not only to test my students' writing abilities but also to their comprehension skills. This process also increases their critical thinking skills. Furthermore, I incorporate integrated tasks into the assessment of my students because integrated tasks align with high-stakes examinations such as TOEFL and IELTS. Being non-native speakers, my students will face this sort of assessment one day, should they want to study abroad. Thus, I believe incorporating integrated tasks into the classroom increases critical thinking and presents students with a miniature of the type of reading and writing tasks they might face in the future.

Conclusion

In this paper, I reflected on my over ten years of experience teaching English in Ghana. I indicated that teachers have been relegated to the background when curriculum issues are being discussed. Further, I presented my teaching philosophy regarding reading and writing. I also discussed and reflected upon my teaching practices in relation to the selection of texts for my reading and writing class. While discussing my role as a teacher, I also emphasized the role of students in the reading and writing class.

All teachers need to step back and analyse their belief systems and practices. This reflection is important when teaching and learning gradually evolves from teacher to student-centredness. It is also vital that government and stakeholders involve teachers in developing the curriculum. For example, English teachers should play an active role in writing the textbooks used in the classroom. The government should also pay attention to developing a comprehensive language policy that will focus on learning the English language and helping develop the local languages.

An obvious limitation of this write-up is that it focused only on aspects of the teaching I engaged in. While I acknowledge this limitation, I believe this write-up, because it employs auto-biographical reflection on teaching English in an ESL setting, will serve as a valuable guide to young teachers as they develop their teaching philosophies.

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