

Original Research Article

Assisting Students Improve the Techniques of Answering Essay Questions in Social Studies in McCoy College of Education Through Action Research

ABSTRACT

The study was carried out at the McCoy College of Education in the Nadowli District of the Upper West Region of Ghana. It seeks to explore ways of assisting students improve the technique of answering essay questions in social studies. A case studying level 100 students of the McCoy Collage of Education was carried out where it was found out that they are lacking in the area of study.

The researcher intends finding out why students in these classes perform poorly in essay assignments and examinations.

The researcher sought to investigate to what extent the poor approach to essay writing, poor introduction, paragraphing and conclusion writing coupled up with inadequate expression, irregular essay tests and assignments, inadequate prompt and irregular marking of assignments and quiz scripts and students' inability to use linking words among others is affecting their written essays in social studies.

Reasons ascribed to this phenomenon after the study is that, students are not assessed regularly by essay questions. It is also the case that essay questions are not marked and tutors do not

regularly do assessments of students, a situation that has to do with a large student population, affecting the student – tutor population ratio.

The study recommends that the institutions concerned with training teachers make effective communication studies a hallmark of skills needed for teaching.

The findings of the study take special interest in improving the oral and written communication skills of teacher trainees and by extension their prospective pupils.

Key Words: Action Research, Needs Assessment, North Western Ghana, Ghana Tertiary Education Commission

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

1.2 The action research was conducted at the McCoy College of Education. The college is one of the new colleges of education to be absorbed by the Ghana government. It was established in the year 2014 by the Catholic Church to cater for the short fall of teachers in north western Ghana. The college was established as a result of needs assessment conducted by the catholic mission. A needs assessment is a systematic process for determining and addressing needs, or "gaps" between current conditions and desired conditions or "wants". The discrepancy between the current condition and wanted condition must be measured to appropriately identify the need. The need can be a desire to improve current performance or to correct a deficiency.

The institution is situated in Nadowli in the Upper West Region. It is located off the Nadowli – Daffiama road at the outskirts of the Nadowli Township.

At the McCoy College of education, the problem I identified was the inability of students in answering essay questions in Social Studies properly. This was identified through students' performance in class assignments, test and mid-semester examinations in the beginning of the 2020/21 academic year. In diagnosing the problem through observation and interview of both students and tutors, it was established that it was due to the following:

- i. Students were not taught how to answer essay questions in Social Studies at the pre-university level.
- ii. Students were not given essay assignment regularly.
- iii. Some of the student's assignments were not marked.
- iv. Tutors' inability to review students essay assignment with them.

By way of finding solutions to the above problems, the following interventions were necessary:

- i. Teaching students the techniques of answering essay questions.
- ii. Regular essay assignment to students.
- iii. Regular and prompt marking of essay assignments and examination scripts of students.
- iv. Regular and prompt review of students' essay assignments and examination scripts.

The researcher adopted the following measures as the interventions to use.

They were:

Teaching students various techniques in answering essay questions in Social Studies, regular and prompt marking of essay assignments and tests, regular and prompt review of students' assignments and examination scripts and the involvement of students in activities such as debates and drama activities.

The topic that has emerged from the above development was “Assisting Students Learn the Techniques of Answering Essay Question in Social Studies in McCoy College of Education through Action Research.”

1.3 Statement of the Problem

The Problem to be investigated is the inability of level 100 students in Social Studies in the McCoy College of Education answer essay type questions and what could be done to improve upon the situation.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the research is to find out why level 100 students of the McCoy College of Education are unable to answer essay type questions properly.

It is also aimed at identifying strategies to assist them overcome the problem.

1.5 Specific Objectives

The following objectives guided the study:

- i. To find out if students are taught how to answer essay questions.
- ii. To find out if tutors review examination questions with students.
- iii. To find out how students can be helped to answer essay type questions properly.

1.6 Research Questions

- i. Are students taught how to answer essay type questions?
- ii. Do tutors review assignments and examination scripts with students?
- iii. How will students be helped to answer essay question properly?

1.7 Significance of the Research

The outcome of the research would help expose the defects of answering essay questions among level 100 students in Social Studies in McCoy College of Education and also establish the nature of these defects and how they can be corrected.

It will also help correct wrong approaches used previously, putting an end to this problem.

Finally, the study would also be of great importance to policy makers and implementers such as Colleges of Education, Ghana Tertiary Education Commission and the Ministry of Education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0

This section reviews relevant literature on the topic **“Assisting Students Learn the Techniques of Answering Essay Questions in Social Studies in McCoy College of Education through Action Research”**.

This section is also put into themes.

2.1 Themes:

- i. Description of essay and objective types of tests.
- ii. The nature of essay tests.
- iii. Answering of essay tests.

2.2 Description of Essay and Objectives Types of Tests

In all schools, students are often tested to find out about their understanding of what they have been taught. This is often done in various forms. In Social Studies, the most common technique

which is used to gather information about the learner is the traditional paper – and - pencil test which include essay and objective tests. Whereas an essay test is a test containing questions requiring the respondent to respond in writing, an objectives test on the other hand is a test having clear and ambiguous scoring criterion. With the two formats of tests, level 100 students in Social Studies in the McCoy College of Education in the Upper West Region, face a greater challenge of wrong approach to the solving of essay questions.

2.3 The Nature of Essay Test

The most notable feature of an essay test is the freedom of response it provides to each respondent. Basically, essay questions can be divided into forms; the restricted and extended response questions. The extended response question gives room for creative integration of ideas and sufficient freedom to demonstrate skills of synthesis and evaluation.

As stated by Gronlund (1976), the extended response essay question gives the candidate the ability to produce, organize, express ideas, integrate learning in different areas and create original forms and ideas.

In the restricted response essay questions, each respondent is limited in the form and scope of the answer because of the wording of the questions. This often specifically gives the directions to which the answer should take. Because of this, it is best used when testing knowledge at the comprehension, application and analysis domains.

2.4 Answering of Essay Tests

According to the various Chief Examiner's Report of the various social studies courses at the colleges of education level (February, 2017), candidates of Social Studies approach essay question wrongly due to the following factors:

- i. Poor communication skills continue to be a major weakness of most students since most of them cannot express themselves in simple good English.
- ii. Students also fail to take full context of questions. Instead, they try to understand the question 'word by word'. The situation is that if there is a particular word such as "hinder" or "flooding", highlight that they don't understand, they approach the question wrongly.
- iii. Some students also continue to list their answers. They forget that the paper is an essay type and that the answer must reflect as such. They often fail to have a full discussion of the points raised.

John W. Santrock (2001) is of the view that essay items allow students more freedom of response to questions but require more writing than other formats. Essay items are especially good for assessing students' understanding of material, higher – level skill, ability to organize information and writing skills.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter is on population and sample, nature of data, instruments used for the collection of data and the method of data analysis. It also covers validity and reliability

3.1 Study Population/Sample

The target population for the study was the level 100 social studies classes made up of one hundred and twenty (120) students, comprising of 80 males – 40 females.

Table 1.0 below shows the distribution of level 100 classes

Class	Programme	Females	Males	Total
A	Social Studies & English	10	30	40
B	Social Studies & Music	10	10	20
C	Social Studies & Ghanaian language	5	10	15
D	Social Studies & Primary Education	5	20	25
F	Social Studies & RME	10	10	20
Total		40	80	120

Out of the five classes, three classes were sampled for the study, these are A, C and D. The target population was the tutors and students. These two components were chosen because they were directly involved in the teaching and learning process.

The total population of Social Studies tutors was three (3) and all of them were chosen as a sample. The total number of students of Social Studies in level 100, A, C and D was one hundred and twenty (120) and for want of effective work to be conducted, eighty (80) of the students were sampled using the simple random sampling technique.

3.2 Nature of Data

The data that was collected was based on the performance of teachers in the teaching of students how to answer essay questions. Also, the data collected was based on reviewing of examination scripts with students.

3.3 Instruments for the Study

The research used questionnaires, interviews and inspection of written essay to questions. The questionnaire contained open-ended and close-ended questions.

3.4 Administration of the Instrument

The questionnaires were administered personally to students in most cases. The purpose of the study was made known to the respondents.

Respondents were encouraged to give honest answers. They were assured of confidential treatment of the information they were to give.

The researcher had personal interviews with the students and tutors to seek views on the particular situation. Written essays of students were also inspected.

3.5 Validity and Reliability of the Instruments

The validity and reliability of the data was ensured during the preceding lesson. This was because the researcher handled other level 100 classes. The necessary corrections were made from the above before meeting the actual classes in question.

3.6 Research Design

According Christine A Miller (2007), action research is a natural part of teaching. Teachers are continually observing students, collecting data and changing practices to improve student learning and the classroom and school environment. Action research provides a framework that guides the energies of teachers towards a better understanding of why, when, and how students become better learners.

In this study, action research was used, since it attempts at providing an accurate description or picture of a particular on-going situation or real-life setting. Again, this has helped to describe the relationship which exists between variables.

This became possible because the situation understudy was on-going in the first place. The activities and records obtained in the classroom were used to establish a kind of relationship between students and the lessons taught. By this, the study was sure of seeking solutions to the problem which is also always one of the greatest values of action research.

3.7 Method of Data Analysis

The data collected in this work was analyzed by means of tables and charts.

The analysis was also based on the assumptions. The assumptions were first stated and the intervention relating to them followed and analyzed one after the other.

This chapter in summary considered the research design, the population, the sampling procedure, the research instruments, the validity and reliability of the instruments, the administration of the instruments and the analysis of data collected as well.

4.0 INTERVENTION DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

4.1

The major feature that makes action research distinctively different from traditional research is the introduction of an intervention within the research process and the participation of the research in the process. This means that the research is concerned not only with identifying the problem but also in solving the particular context, Cohen. L. and Manion L. (1994). It was on this ground that this section is being devoted to the intervention's design and how they are used to overcome the task.

4.2 Intervention Design

Action research is a process in which a specific problem is identified and an experimental intervention designed and tested with a view of gaining insight into the problem and ultimately solving it. John, E. (2001), David, K. (2000). This particular intervention, undertaken at McCoy College of Education, Ghana, explored the experiences of students in answering essay questions in social studies in weekly sets.

The design interventions therefore include;

- i. Approaching a piece of essay writing
- ii. How to introduce an essay
- iii. Paragraphing
- iv. How to conclude
- v. Good expression
- vi. The use of terminologies
- vii. Frequent class test and assignments
- viii. Prompt and regular marking of assignments and examination script
- ix. Regular inspection of essay script
- x. Class debates and drama

The design and implementation of the above interventions in relations with the research assumption indicate an interesting trend of affairs.

4.3 Implementation of the Intervention

4.3.1 Approaching a piece of essay writing

The students were taught that one approach of writing essay is to plan carefully and write an initial draft at one sitting with all necessary references. Another way is to begin to write it with the intention of striking out what is irrelevant and pin-pointing what is important or an immediate response to the question or topic without much initial planning. Then, one may re-read it and it should be extended.

If one decides to use a structured format to write an essay, one may find it helpful to prepare a topic outline writing a first draft. This can help to ensure that all relevant points are covered and repetition avoided. Preparing an outline can also be helpful in working out the best order in which to present ideas.

A typical process approach consists of four stages: pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing (Badger & White 2000). Learners can begin by brainstorming ideas for and against nature or nurture. They can then create a plan using their ideas, which would be used as the basis for producing a first draft. Learners can work in pairs or groups to improve the draft which they then edit. It is a non-linear approach so that learners can return to any stage if necessary Hyland (2003).

According to Fairbairn and Winch (1998), the following list of stages in a formal approach may be useful;

- i. What do you want to say?
- ii. Get yours points in order
- iii. Check your ideas
- iv. Check your examples
- v. Write an introduction
- vi. Write a draft of the remainder of the essay
- vii. Write the conclusion

On the other hand, if one decides to adopt a less rigid approach to writing an essay, the person might sit by a computer or with a piece of paper and pen and write freely for some time allowing ideas to pour out spontaneously. Often one may find that as he does this a plan of action begins

to form in his mind and he will jot this down as he goes along. Then he will re-read what he has written, tidy it up and move ideas into some kind of draft. After that the ideas might be put in a logical order.

4.3.2 Introduction

The introduction of an essay is like the foundation on which blocks are laid when building a house. Students were made to understand that one can decide on how to introduce an essay by writing a draft introduction and avoiding long-windedness. Introduction should do more than engage the reader by giving some kind of trailer for what is to come.

However, students may define or explain the key words in question and may also preview the main points to be covered.

4.3.3 Paragraphing

The above technique was also used to assist students write essay questions in Social Studies. Students were taught that paragraphing can be thought of as a container or a separate point in a topic or argument, and one should avoid beginning paragraphs in the middle of closely connected streams of ideas. They were also made to avoid lengthy paragraphs, instead, they should use short paragraph since short paragraphs communicate meaning easily.

4.3.4 Conclusion

One may wish to emphasis some points or recapitulate on the thread in one's argument or one may indicate areas in to which one has not entered because to do so would have taken more space available. However, one should avoid long-windedness in his conclusion. The above technique was also made known to students.

4.3.5 Good expressions

Students were further made aware that since one's reader cannot ask for clarification of their text, they need to ensure that what they write is clear. In the first place, it is most important to avoid ambiguity that is, using expressions with more than one meaning. In addition, they must ensure that they are aware of the implication that follows from the assertion they wish to make. Apart from that the text must also be coherent. That is, the argument must be consistent. The students must therefore not contradict themselves explicitly or implicitly.

Again students were taught in the classroom how to use punctuations correctly since a coma or a full stop can change the meaning of a sentence entirely.

4.3.5 The use of Terminologies

Students were also taken through descriptions, evaluation, and comparison essays. Descriptive essay require the students to describe something, for example an event, state affairs, theories or practice.

Discussion on the other hand requires more thought than descriptive essay. It compels students to give reasons for accepting various possible descriptions of the causes, effects, or solutions of a situation.

Evaluation essays also require definite commitment on the part of students and may be require definite commitment on the part of students who may be required by such a question to decide whether for example, a theory is valid or useful. He may have to give reasons for his conclusion.

Comparison can also take place at the level of description, discussion and evaluation depending on what students have been asked to compare. For example, a comparison of two theories about

the origin of the universe may require a detailed analysis and evaluation of evidence that may lead the students to favour one over the other.

Frequent class test and assignment

Students were given frequent class tests and assignments at close intervals. This strategy worked to perfection since the frequent assignments and class tests made it possible for students to practice effectively how to answer essay questions in Social Studies. Through this, students felt motivated and they practiced essay writing on their own.

Prompt and regular making of assignment and examination scripts

Prompt and regular marking of students' scripts and assignments were intensified. Students also became excited and willing to do more essay assignments and test when the questions they answered were promptly and frequently reviewed and the necessary corrections made.

The implementation process was carried out interchangeably to achieve results. The interventions were executed separately and results were achieved at every stage. It was therefore evident that this chapter had successfully dealt with the implementation of the interventions.

5.0 Presentation of Findings and Results

This area analyzed the data collected and discussed in detail the research findings in respect of the research assumptions of the study. It focused on all the responses that have been analyzed and expressed in simple tables.

5.1 Description and Interpretation of Data

Out of the ten (10) interventions designed, five (5) of them were successfully implemented.

Table 2.0: Progress made in writing essay questions

No. of students/weeks	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week4
Male	8	12	25	53
Female	3	6	20	27
Total	11	18	45	62
% Equivalent	13.8	22.3	56.3	77.5

From the table 2.0, 11 students representing 13.8% out of the total of eighty (80) participants in the study did a slight improvement in their performance in their approach to essay writing in the first week. This increased gradually up to the 4th week where sixty-two (62) students representing 77.5% showed a remarkable performance.

From the table above, the progress made has been indicated. It progressed steadily from 13.8% to 22.5% and then to 56.3 and 77.5% respectively from weeks one to four in the action research.

UNDER PEER REVIEW

Table 3.0: Introduction to Essay Question Writing. This was taken for another Four Weeks as shown below.

No. of students/weeks	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week8
Males	10	16	30	39
Females	7	10	25	31
Total	17	26	55	70
%Equivalent	21.3	32.5	68.8	87.5

The table above indicated that 17 students representing (21.3%) were able to introduce their essay in the fifth week. This number increased steadily from the sixth week up to the 8th week representing corresponding percentages of 32.5%, 68.8% and 87.5% respectively.

This also shows that teachers must assist students to introduce their essays.

This will help them improve in their essay writing in Social Studies.

Table 4.0: Paragraphing of Essays: This was done for four weeks. The table below shows progress made

No. of students/weeks	Week 9	Week 10	Week 11	Week12
Boys	12	17	33	42
Girls	9	12	28	29
Total	21	29	61	71
%Equivalent	26.3	36.3	76.3	88.8

From the table above, it is clear that at the close of week nine, 26.3% were able to paragraph their essays. This trend continued to increase from 26.3% to 88.8% in the 12 week. This implies that students could be assisted in paragraphing their essays.

Table 5.0: Conclusion of Essays: this was taken for another four weeks

No. of students/weeks	Week 13	Week 14	Week 15	Week16
Boys	11	15	28	36
Girls	8	10	22	29
Total	19	25	50	65
%Equivalent	23.8	31.3	62.5	81.3

Assisting students to learn the technique of concluding their essays also brought about a dramatic improvement in their answering of essay questions in Social studies. This is evident by the table above. Here, 19 students representing 23.8% did well in the 13th week as far as conclusion of essays is concerned. This increased steadily in the subsequent weeks up to the 16th week, where 65 students representing 81.3% were able to conclude their essays well.

5.1.1 Good Expression

This was stressed and students guided right from the onset of the research. Progress indicated 12.5% from the start of the 17th week to about 78% at the end of the 20th week.

5.1.2 Examination Terminologies

Guidelines involving the use of terminologies in examinations such as description, discussion, evaluation, comparison and so on were also looked at. This also went on for four weeks.

Right from the 22nd week, progress increased from 31.3% to 96.3% in the 24th week.

5.1.3 Frequent Class Test and Assignment

This formed one of the tasking aspect of the project since exercises had to be marked in good time for discussions. It formed part of the progress in class tests and worked from start to end.

Table 6.0: Effects of Regular Marking of Exercises. This was also done for four weeks. The table shows progress made.

No. of students/weeks	Week 29	Week 30	Week 31	Week32
Boys	14	20	27	40
Girls	11	18	25	33
Total	25	38	52	73
%Equivalent	31.3	47.5	65	91.3

From the above table, 25 students representing 31.3% out of the total of eighty (80) students making up 100% of the population used in the study did show improvement in students' performance through prompt and regular marking.

It is worthy to note that throughout the implementation of the interventions designed there has not been a single occasion where a hundred percent (100) results were attained. This was probably due to the difference in the intelligence level of students.

Based on the interpretation of the data gathered, one can see that some success has been chocked. Students could confidently approach essay question in Social Studies with confidence in future examinations.

Students were also motivated to practice the answering of essay questions on their own.

In conclusion, it was established that students did not only show improvement in their performance in class test and assignment, but were also more enthusiastic towards studying the subject.

6.0 REFLECTIONS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study helped the researcher to chock some achievements. The achievements are that, students in the area of study acquired skills of answering essay questions in Social Studies. This helped to boost interest in the subject.

The study enabled the researcher to see teaching Social Studies beyond subject matter or pedagogy to teaching students to include the skill of answering essay questions in Social Studies.

Again, the study enabled the researcher to develop some concern for the students like the biblical saying that, “what shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?” What profit or gain will students have if they have acquired all the knowledge in the world but cannot pass their final examinations? Any tutor, who will neglect the teaching of skills in answering essay questions in Social Studies, will be doing students a great disservice.

When students fail to pass their final examinations, the school will be taken to task and will be ranked low among the non-performing colleges especially now that colleges are rank according to their performance in the semester examination. Consequently, most students and parents will not patronize such schools. This study has therefore benefited students immensely.

6.1 Conclusion

Based on the implementation of the intervention design, students now introduce their essays when answering questions in Social Studies. They now use paragraphs instead of putting columns and also numbering their points when writing their essays. They also now conclude their essays. Students can now use good expressions than before and they also link their paragraphs with the right linking words in their essays.

The researchers also had discussions with the subject tutors on the need to teach students how to answer essay questions in Social Studies and also to endeavour to give them assignments regularly.

6.2 Recommendations

Even though the problem of answering essay questions has been reduced greatly, the problem of large class sizes is hampering tutors' ability to give and mark essay assignments given to students.

It is therefore recommended that, group assignments be given to students and tutors must ensure that all students participate in class and group discussions. Marked assignments should be read out to the hearing of fellow students for discussions.

Students should be encouraged to read story books, magazines, journals, listening to radio and television programmes to improve upon their expressions and words in their books for inspection.

Furthermore, parents should be encouraged to buy their wards many story books and practice essay writing individually and their scripts given to teachers to mark.

Finally, essay competitions should be organized based on Social Studies topics among students.

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APPENDIX I

McCoy College of Education, Nadowli, Ghana-West Africa

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL STUDIES

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear respondent,

This questionnaire is designed to solicit your views on issues relating to assisting students learn the techniques of writing essay questions in Social Studies in McCoy College of Education, Nadowli.

Kindly respond to the item below. Your response will be treated as confidential.

INSTRUCTION: **Tick** [] or fill gaps where appropriate.

1. Sex

- 2. Age
- 3. Occupation

SECTION A

Questionnaires on whether studies are taught how are to answer essay questions in Social Studies

- 4. Do students find essay questions in Social Studies difficult?
YES [] NO []
- 5. If yes, why
.....
.....
- 6. Do tutors give students essay questions in Social Studies to answer in class and at home?
YES [] NO []
- 7. If yes, how often
- 8. Are students taught how to introduce their essay? YES [] NO []
- 9. Do students understand terminologies such as 'justify', 'compare and contrast', 'discuss', 'comment', and so on ? YES [] NO []
- 10. Do students often number their essay instead of writing them in paragraphs? YES []
NO []

SECTION B

Questionnaire on whether teachers often review students essays with them.

11. Do tutors often mark student's essay? YES [] NO []

12. Do tutors go through students essays with them after marking? YES [] NO []

SECTION C

Questionnaires on how students can be helped to answer essay questions properly.

13. How will students be helped to answer essay questions properly?

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APPENDIX B II

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