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CONTENTS

DOES SCHOOL WRITING, 'O' LEVEL IN PARTICULAR, REFLECT PRIORITIES OF THE WORK PLACE?

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1.0. Introduction

This article publishes the results of a study conducted in Gweru Urban in 1988-1989 on the apparent mismatch between school and workplace writing. The objective of the study was to establish whether in fact there is a mismatch between school and workplace writing tasks as alleged by 'O' level school leavers and employers. The focus of the study was, therefore, on types of writing tasks taught at shcool, particularly at 'O' level, and those produced and requried at workplaces.

2.0. Some Key Questions Asked

Since the objective of the study was to analyse the complex relationship between school and workplace writing tasks, the following key questions were used to direct it:

1.   What is the nature of school writing tasks?

2.   What is the nature of workplace writing tasks?

3.   Should schools teach all the writing tasks produced and required at work places?

4.   Is there, indeed, a mismatch between school and workplace writing?

3.0. Limitations of The Study

In relation to all workplaces in this country - hotels, garages, restaurants, supermarkets, farms, banks, tourism and the public sector, the sample was very small. This, therefore, limited the extent to which findings of this study could be comfortably generalised to apply to all workplaces in Zimbabwe. Ideally, the sample should have been larger and representative of a greater variety of work environments. This was not possible due to limited time in which the study had to be conducted and completed.

Despite the limitations outlined above, it was believed that the study would yield patterns which would serve as pointers as to how school writing should be taught in order to make it more useful in the business world.

4.0. Review of Literature

In recognition of the importance of writing in both the social and business world, scholars and authorities on the subject have concerned themselves not only with its content but also with how it should be taught and learnt in order to make it an effective tool for communicaiton. While volumes of literature have been written and researches carried out, all intended to assist both teachers and learners on how best to communicate effectively in their writing, nothing in particular and specifically related to 'O' level writing tasks in so far as they relate to workplace writing has been done.

An initial review of literature revealed that most studies conducted on writing tasks were of a general nature.

In view of that, review of literature on 'O' level writing tasks vis-a-vis workplace tasks will focus on the following areas.

-        the nature of school writing
-        the nature of workplace writing
-        general principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) in so far as they relate to specific issues of teaching workplace writing tasks and other studies in manpower development.

4.1. The Nature of School Writing

On the nature of shcool writing, Thorpe, in his book, <u>Complete English Book Four</u> states :

This four-book course covers the following, Junior School English: Comprehension, language and research (spelling, vocabulary, dictionary work and topics). It is intended for the consideration of teachers who believe that children come to school to work to the limit of their abilities (1962:5)

Thorpe highlights the nature of school writing and language activities. Writing tasks seem to be entirely based on the production of compositions, comprehensions, grammar and summary. Malmstrom and Lee further support this and state that the language teacher:
         ... should have some understanding of Morphology, phonology and syntax; the sources and development of English vocabulary; semantics; and social, regional and functional varieties of English usage ... (1971:VII).

Again Malmstrom and Lee do not say anything new in terms of writing tasks. At best ,they are talking about the traditional compositions, comprehensions and language work. This lack of focus on work place writing is starkly exemplified on the contents page of **Structures and**

Skills in English Book Four (1978). This book is in current use in Zimbabwean Secondary schools. Its contents page is arranged thus:

Unit 1

Comprehension	Sebastian Part I
Language Work	Study Work:
More about prepositions	
Composition	Introduction to free composition
Supplementary Work	A specimen plan

The pattern continues in this fashion in every chapter throughout the text book. Writing tasks comprise compositions, summary, fillin-in-gaps with prepositions, adverbs, adjectives, and clauses. There is no study or practice work related to work place writing tasks.

Thorpe and many other writers seem to believe that writing tasks stated above help learners to develop their thinking capacities in the language class. Thorpe goes on to point out exactly where the stress should be laid in school writing:

Particular attention is given to common grammatical and spelling errors, to increased vocabulary and facility in the use of langauge. (1971).

The three authors quoted above stress the importance of linguistic competence in school writing. Learners are engaged in a variety of classroom writing excercises which, it is hoped, will give them unlimited opportunities to express a comfortable range of linguistic abilities. Dawson (1979) further makes a point about the nature of school writing. He identifies four areas in which school writing should be based. These include compositions, comprehensions, summary and language work. Dawson adds nothing to Thorpe, Malmstrom and Lee's list of school based writing tasks.

Neilson in his paper 'Communication Skills for the Public Sector' - a case study sponsored by the British Council - says that while he was working with the Ministry of Education - Zimbabwe, in a National Survey of English learning he discovered that:

> ... little or nothing was known about the needs of second language users in the public sector, particularly employees or prospective employees in commerce, industry and agriculture. This has serious consequences for industrial workers who hope to improve their prospects ... (1986:50).

Apparently, school writing seems to be geared to, and consequently governed by the existing formal examination system in this country. What is examined, naturally determines what is taught. Major items in the examinations are compositions, comprehension, summary and languge work.

4.2. The Nature of Workplace Writing

Commenting on 'Writing on the job' McCrimmon writes:
When you start to work at a particular job, you may be asked to draft external or internal business   correspondence. External correspondence involves writing letters to people in the 'outside world', customers and competitors not employed in your place of business. Internal correspondence involves writing memos and reports to people in the office - your immediate superiors or fellow employees (1984:582).

In the quotation above we are introduced to samples of workplace writing tasks. School based writing tasks are broad and generalised. Some people may argue and say, memos and letters, for instance ,are found under the broad topic composition. Do teachers in the

Secondary school system ever isolate these important types of writing tasks and teach them? We will get the answer when we examine teachers' schemes of work.

Mavor adds to the list of workplace or business writing:
Our aim in all writing should be to avoid monotony. This is not always easy. Essentially, we have to be interested in what we are putting down on paper. If we do this we are on the way to clarity and purpose in our writing, be it a letter, report, circular, lease agreement etc etc (1990:1).

To the list of workplace writing types stated, Mills, Standiford and Appleby (1986) add notices, advertising writing, telegrams, minutes, instructions, orders and estimates. The list on specific writing tasks produced in various workpaces is endless. As technology advances, the business world will find itself under increasing pressure to evolve specific writing tasks to suit the varied communication requirements of the highly specialised workplaces. Workplace writing has always been required to be specific. Gartside has this to say about workplace writing:
It must reveal the writer's ability to express himself in good English. It must have a clear purpose ,in other words, it must have some particular message to convey. It must have form, that is to say it must have unity and proportion and be well arranged (1987:117).

The point is, in all writing, we write to be understood. This is a particular feature of business writing. It is not practice-writing like school writing. It is an activity that must yield results. Workplace or business writing has basically two purposes. It is both a messenger and an ambassador to the people with whom we conduct business. As a messenger it carries and conveys what we want to say to the receipient; as an ambassador, it carries the image of the organsiation for which we

work. Learners must be taught to produce these various but specific types of writing. Does school writing serve the same purpose?

4.3. General Principles of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching)

Review of literature in this section is on the general principles of CLT in so far as they relate to specific issues on how teachers handle school writing tasks with a view of making them meet requirements of the workplace. CLT as an approach to language teaching encourages language teachers to critically examine key issues which include among other things, grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. In essence, CLT as an approach to language teaching stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use language to communicate. CLT further attempts to integrate school writing activities into a wider programme of business and social writing. This approach accords learners opportunities to use language to express meaning. There is great need among language teachers to prepare their learners for more realistic forms of writing. Johnson quoted in Teachers' Forum (August 1988) proposes a shift from the teacher-dominated structuralist approach, to teaching authentic communication. What is important and perhaps central to communicative writing is the information gap. Here the stress is laid on the conveying of information content to the listener. To achieve this pupils should be given real tasks to perform. Learners can write invitation letters to the school's open day or write posters for a district show or something. This process practice in writing creates activity sequences which are quite productive and more practical from a communicative point of view. Its benefits are only observed later in life. The immediate benefits are that it promotes genuine practical writing tasks in the classroom and introduces the key purpose of writing -to communicate.

Learners get a lot of practice in spoken language outside the classroom but not so much practice in writing. Chimbwanda quoted in Teachers Forum of August 1998 states:

To achive this, pupils should be given real tasks to perform. For example, pupils can be asked to write to the editor of a local newspaper complaining about, say the shortage of buses along a certain busy route.

Providing genuine purposes and genuine audiences for writing are valuable sources of stimulation for our learners. This creates a link between the classroom and the outside business and social activities. For the teachers, the approach has the advantage of providing them with opportunities to examine closely the structure of arguments students come up with and the evidence learners provide as suppoting detail. These ideas are also shared by Chimombo (1987) in his article **'Towards Reality in the Writing Class'.**

Even Byrne is also echoes the same views when he claims:

The importance of integrating writing with other language skills is particularly stressed ... both in the belief that this leads to more effective langauge learning but also because it provides more natural contexts for writing activities (1982:V).

The integrated skills approach involves, for example, reading a job advert in a newspaper, ringing up a firm which advertises the job, inquiring about it. This may be followed by writing an application letter. Someone at the firm will read the letter and eventually reply to it. The essence of this approach is that there is always a real stimulus - like the need for a job. This triggers off a practical communicative response, a letter is written.

The need to link writing tasks to practical writing is further stressed by Dubin and Olshtain:

Writing is tied to learners' real world needs as well: writing
a resume, writing a letter seeking a job interview, writing an
abstract for a professional conference presentation... The
objective of the writing activity is communicating to an audience
(1988:102).

Unfortunately, this enriching approach to teaching school writing which would make learners approximate their writing tasks to those of the business world does not seem to take place in Zimbabwean schools. For most teachers, writing tasks do not constitute a major goal of the language course.

Widdowson (1984) Yalden (1987) and Brumfit (1984) all call for increased learner participation in language classes. They support ideas by Chimbwanda, (1988) Byrne (1982), Dubin and Olshtain (1987) and Prabhu who encourage the notion of simulating real world situations which accord learners opportunities to use language to express meaning. This ties up neatly with Prabhu's conceptualisation of language learning. He wants learners to be presented with concrete objects such as maps, timetables for buses and other physical objects in class on which to base their activity, be it speaking or writing. He argues that:

... development of competence in second language requires not
systematisation of langauge inputs or examination of planned practice,
but creation of conditions... in an effort to cope with communication
(1987:1).

The message which comes through in Prabhu's statement above is that concrete objects provide the learner with a lot of stimuli to comment

and write or talk about. This is what is often required at the work place.

5.0. Research Design

In view of the objective of the study stated in the introduction, both primary and secondary data were gathered and analysed. Primary data were gathered through structured questionnaires and interviews while secondary data were mainly drawn from 'O' level langauge teachers' schemes of work and pupil's excercise books.

The sample comprised 150 'O' level school learners, 20 'O' level school teachers and 10 employers owning various firms and workplaces in Gweru. In all, a total of 180 people was targetted for the study.

Questionnaires were prepared, pretested and taken to respondents in schools, firms and other places of work. Each group of respondents had a different type of questionnaire, I delivered the questionnaire myself and collected them after a week. Out of the 180 questionnaires delivered to the respondents, 100 were completed and I collected them. This represented a response rate of 55.6%.

Interviews were arranged at the respondent's convenient time. It was less painful to meet teachers and managers or supervisors of companies. Arranging interviews with workers was difficult as they were not always readily available. I recorded the interviews as they proceeded.

I went from school to school asking teachers to give me access to their schemes of work, plan books as well as pupils' language exercise books. I got maximum co-operation on this aspect and extracted the information I needed. Most teachers allowed me to take away their schemes of work and learners' exercise books to work at home.

6.0. A Summary of Results

Information from each group of respondents is presented separately.

The workers ('O' level school leavers) questionnaire sought to collect informatin on the nature, focus and preoccupation of school writing.

Responses were:

- writing tasks focus on the correctness of grammar - linguistic competence.
- writing tasks are meant to get learners to practice for 'O' level examiantion.
- writing tasks comprise summary, composition, comprehension and langauge work.
- writing exercises do not relate to workplace writing.

The teachers' questionnaire sought to collect information on the types of writing they teach at school.

Responses were:

- teachers believed there is no need to teach e.g. circulars, minutes, leases, memos, notices under those specific headings as they are taught under compositions.
- teachers felt that school writing forms a satisfactory base for workplace writing.
- teachers thought there was no point teaching specific writing tasks because their brief was to provide general education.

Teachers' schemes of work and learners excercise books revealed that school writing tasks were of a general nature. These were stated in general terms, e.g. compotitions, comprehension, summary and languge work. Out of fifteen teachers' schemes of work and fifteen learners exercise books I looked at, I did not come across topics such as leases, reports, notices, minutes or memos. The only workplace related writing I saw schemed for and found in the pupils' books was letter writing.

The third category of respondents was employers. Their questionnaire sought to collect information on the relationship between school and workplace witing.

Responses were:

- 'O' level job seekers are not familiar with business or workplace writing.
- school writing tasks are at variance with workplace writing.
- school leavers need further training in specific types of writing at workplaces.
- workplace writing is specialised.
- school writing forms the basis of workplace writing.

7.0. Analysis of Results

The basic concern of the research was to find out whether there was indeed a mismatch between school and workplace writing. The results above show that, at a superficial level, yes there is. What was not apparent to all parties interviewed was that the various types of workplace writing are taken care of under compositions. Teachers seemed to hold a strong belief that the school system offers general education and that it would be impossible to teach all the types of workplace writing and meet examining targets. The majority of

teachers were not even aware that such types of writing existed and should be taught.

The school leavers only discerned the mismatch when they got employed. It would seem they held a narrow view of the term composition. They confined the term to the traditional school tasks which do not go beyond a narrative or descriptive piece of work. Some teachers did not even know that some pieces of work such as circulars, minutes, memos, leases etc. fall under compositions.

It turned out that a good number of employers believed school writing formed the basis for workplace writing. They pointed out that it did not go far enough and hence trained learners in general writing skills.

This, however, was not adequate for business writing which demanded certain specific skills. The problem of the two types of writing (school and workplace) is further compounded by the fact that the school system is aware of the tertiary institutions, technical and polytechnical colleges which futher refine the learners' writing skills. The point is, how many workers enrol at these specialised institutions before getting employed? I believe that the school system has an obligation to provide basic writing skills to enable school leavers to function at a variety of workplaces they are engaged in. It is true they can not teach all types but it is time to depart from the rigidity of school writing and work out something which will at least equip the 'O' level school leavers with some basic writing skills which will enable them to be operative in the job situation. For all we know, not all of them will get the chance to enrol at tertiary institutions.

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