

## Four Radical Panaceas for Reversing Mass Failure in Certificate English Language Examinations in Nigeria

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### Abstract

Given the present-day perspectives of Nigerians to the imperatives of qualitative education in the lives of youths, quite a lot of Nigerians have strongly bemoaned and condemned the recurrent woeful performances of students in Certificate examinations. Many research works have therefore concerned themselves with solving the problems of mass failure in public examinations. This paper, with special focus on improving English language teaching and learning in Secondary schools and improving students' performances in public examinations, reviewed the problem, and causes, of mass failure in English language as enunciated by scholars and, proposed four radical panaceas – introducing the reading of prose texts to all students; separating English Language and Literature-in-English in the JSCE curriculum; separating the aspects of English Language for teachers and, moving up the teachers as their students move up from class to class – of improving learners' performances in English language in internal and Certificate examinations. The paper reasoned that given a good background of discipline, the four panaceas would reverse the ugly trend of mass failure in Nigerian schools, improve academic performances in English language in internal and Certificate examinations and help foster improved performances in other school subjects. Presenting some public examination results of a school where the panaceas have been fruitfully practised, the author appealed to the educational planners and administrators, ministries of education, private secondary school managements and teachers to adopt the solutions for the overall improvement of the English language teaching and learning since a good mastery of English enhances improved performances in other school subjects.

**Keywords:** English language, mass failure, certificate examinations, literary texts, the teacher.

### Introduction

A lot of concerned individuals and groups have continuously decried the woeful performances of secondary school students in certificate examinations, with special focus on English language. In fact, governments, educational bodies and parents yearly bemoan the dwindling performances of their students in these examinations. Poor performances in English language become extremely nauseating to stakeholders owing to the importance of English language in the educational development of the students. For instance, admission to higher institutions is impossible without a pass in English just as a good understanding of English helps learners to grasp easily other school subjects. The problem of poor performances in English becomes increasingly worrisome especially when it seems to all that governments at all levels are doing all possible to redress the situation. What with the pride of place given to English language as spelt out in the National Policy on Education? What with the more time allotted to the teaching of English language (and Mathematics) on the school time-table? What with the constant use of English language as the major language of interaction among the students in the school environment? Despite all efforts, the trend of poor performance in English language has continually been downslide.

Banjo (1981) expresses in worrisome terms the deteriorating level of proficiency of English among secondary school and university products. That the condition of English language teaching and learning in schools is deplorable is also stressed by Oluikpe (1981). Year after year, results released by WAEC, NECO and JAMB have testified to the poor performances of our secondary school students. Jowitt maintains that:

‘though the general position of English in national life is perhaps stronger than it has ever been, the quality of the English spoken and written by Nigerians is perceived by most Nigerians qualified to judge to have been deteriorating over a long period’ (1991, p. 25).

Further, Adejare cited in Jowitt (1991) regrettably avers that:

‘the nation’s huge investment in the English language appears not to be yielding any substantial dividends. The percentage and quality of passes in the subject at the primary and secondary school levels are disconcertingly low nation-wide’ ( p. 25).

Researchers after researchers have towed the same line of lamenting the dastard performances of Nigerian students in English language. Some of these scholars include Odusina and Maduekwe (1992, 1993), Ogunleye (1999), Adegbile (2006), Oluremi (2012), Njemanze (2012) to mention but a few. This worrisome trend has followed these students into and out of tertiary institutions as quite a lot of graduates find it very difficult to

express themselves in English. If indeed English is the language of education and of opportunities, it is imperative that the language be effectively taught in schools so that our students achieve necessary competence in it. It is in this light that this paper proposes four radical panaceas to reverse the ugly trend and improve teaching and learning of English in our secondary schools so as to improve students' performances in certificate examinations.

### **Mass failure in public examinations**

A great number of researchers have continuously been probing into the causes of mass failures in our schools and suggesting ways of reversing the ugly trend. The responsibility for the lacklustre performances has been characterised by a series of buck passing. Odusina and Maduekwe (1992, 1993) posit that a major challenge in the area of teaching English as a second language is the shortage of foreign textbooks, as available Nigerian books are not written within the readability level of the students. Hence, a lot of students read at frustration level. Ogunleye (1999) argues that incessant strikes by the Nigerian Union of Teachers (NUT) and Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) and constant closure of schools affect performances in English language. Adegbile (2006) argues that a reason for students' woeful performances in examinations is that the teachers lack communicative competence in English. If this is the case with many teachers, particularly teachers of English language, our expectation from the learners then should be nothing short of poor performances in examinations. The above stance calls to mind the instructive position of the Federal Government in the National Policy on Education (2004, p. 26) that 'no education system may rise above the quality of its teachers'. Faleke and Ibrahim (2011) aver that GSM text messages and its orthography 'is gradually being adopted by Nigerian students' and 'would invariably adulterate the standard of English usage in Nigeria' (p. 61). Oluremi (2012) subscribes to the view that infrastructure plays a major role in the teaching and learning of English Language and that negative consequences of lack of infrastructure are grave. The researcher concludes that a basic school infrastructure should be a part of any plan to improve students' performances in English. Njemanze (2012) speaking in a similar vein as Adegbile (2006) maintains that teacher quality is a strong determinant of learner performance as 'poor teacher performance impinges on learner performance' (p. 58). Other problems identified include inconsistency on the part of government, the emergence of Nigerian English (NE), mother-tongue interference (Maduekwe, 2007, pp. 42 – 45), poverty (Lacour & Tissington, 2011), imbalance in learner/teacher ratio, learner readiness/maturity, poor teacher/learner motivation, indiscipline among learners (and teachers) as well as examination malpractice (Njemanze, 2012, pp. 50).

There is no gainsaying that the litany of problems identified have been impeding on students' performances in examinations since decades but what is more worrisome than the problem of poor performances itself is that despite the series of solutions proffered to the problems, there seems to be no end in sight. This paper therefore proposes four radical panaceas.

### **Proposed radical panaceas**

As a result of the fact that numerous solutions proposed by scholars seemed not to be working or are not even experimented with for reasons, we have proposed some radical panaceas which, if employed in the administration of secondary schools, would improve English language teaching and learning, improve students' academic performances in English language and other school subjects and would translate into better results in certificate examinations. We subscribe to Obanya's (1981) submission that the students' 'lack of mastery of English also tends to make the mastery of other subjects which are taught in English difficult' and that 'the Nigerian child would perform better in school if the English language barrier to his understanding of other subjects was removed' (p. 21). We propose four radical panaceas as ways of improving students' competence in English language and, by extension, improving performances in other subjects. It is our hope that our proposal would, to a very large extent, incorporate almost all of the solutions earlier proposed to the problems of English Language teaching and learning in secondary schools as discussed by scholars, because it places certain demands on the students, teachers, school administrations and governments.

The first of such panaceas is to introduce the reading of prose texts in secondary schools to all students, such that a class reads a prose text per term. Federal and state governments as well as private secondary school managements should make prose texts available to the students. Quite apart from the texts they have to read for their Literature-in-English classes, these texts are to be read by the students on their own but the schools must ensure that the books are procured by all the students. Such texts, as prescribed by the authority, should take into cognizance the academic level of the students. By this is meant that while students in the JSS would read prose texts like *The Drummer Boy*, *Passport of Mallam Ilia*, *A New Life*, *The Beggars' Strike*, those students in the senior classes would read prose texts like *The Victims*, *Joys of Motherhood*, *No Longer at Ease*, *The Concubine*. Since today's secondary school students have a very poor reading habit, a bad habit that had been embraced right from their early school days, teachers of English themselves should be made to read the books and supervise the reading activities of the students. Teachers of English may also seize a period or two from their time-table to

discuss the text with the class and/or ask verbal questions so as to get the students interested in the narratives as well as whet their appetite to read the texts.

In fact, teachers should be enjoined to use excerpts culled from the prose texts as comprehension passages for students' examinations. Further, some context questions which demand a general knowledge of the prose text may be developed from the passage. In this way, students would read the texts since they are interested in performing well in their examinations. Teachers too would now learn the task of preparing marking guides/answers for such passages as there are no ready-made answers or marking guides. This implies that teachers themselves would assess their own performances with respect to such passages. Further, introduction of prose texts in this way would inculcate reading culture in both the students and their teachers of English Language as students (and teachers) would have read at least fifteen (15) prose texts on their own during their secondary school life-span. Having this collection of texts may also trigger the idea of building personal libraries in the students.

Another important panacea towards the reversal of poor academic performance in secondary schools is the necessity to separate the two subjects – English Language and Literature-in- English – in the JSCE curriculum. Presently, the National Policy on Education (2004) has struck out Literature-in-English from the curriculum. Literature-in-English is now subsumed under English Language, such that students in JSCE are not exposed to the study of Literature-in-English per se. They are only given a faint glimpse of the subject during the course of learning English language. This tradition does not give enough room for the learning of English Language itself as Literature-in-English now encroaches, albeit uncomfortably, on the periods allocated to English Language. Separating the two subjects in the curriculum will grant five periods per week to English Language and three periods to Literature-in-English.

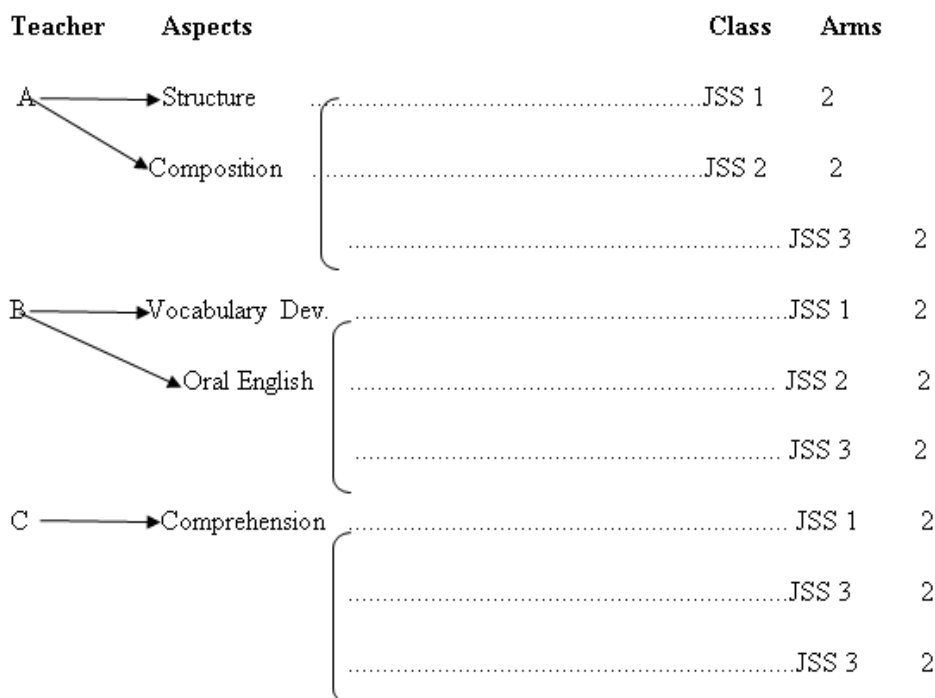
In a study on effective teaching of poetry in Nigerian Junior Secondary Schools, Ogunnaike and Akinbode (2011) reported that all the teachers responded that Literature-in-English be separated from English Language curriculum in the JSS. Students themselves will have the unique awareness that they are studying Literature, a subject that greatly promotes reading culture. Osisanwo (2008) succinctly captures the symbiotic relationship between language and literature when he points out that while 'language is a tool by means of which literature establishes an existence, literature is a tool with which language propagates itself, and manifests its own various potentialities' (p. 28). Ogunnaike and Akinbode (2011, p. 102) submit that 'poetry is a very important genre of literature which plays a significant role in the Junior Secondary students learning of English'. Literature is the best instance of language in use and, with Literature-in-English students develop and acquire a sound awareness of language use. Various important areas of English language education such as comprehension, vocabulary development, sounds of English, structural patterns and rhetorical expressions can be enhanced when students are exposed to Literature-in-English.

Another highly rewarding method of achieving excellent results in English Language examinations is by separating the various aspects of English Language for the teachers of English language in the school. The different aspects of the subject – Structure/Grammar, Vocabulary Development, Comprehension, Sounds of English, Composition/Essay Writing, Summary – need to be shared by two or three teachers, such that a teacher teaches only a particular aspect(s) of English. Experience has shown that teachers of English Language usually have preference for certain areas of the subject over others. This bias for certain aspects over others may be due to a number of reasons ranging from poor training, incompetence in certain aspects of the subject to sheer lack of interest. Even those who claim to have competence in all the areas of the subject still have special interest in certain areas over others. Further, the present trend in which a teacher is made to handle all the various aspects of English gives room for laziness as certain teachers may concentrate on teaching only an aspect or two which s/he is well at home with at the detriment of the other areas of the subject.

Cumbersome as this may initially appear, separating the aspects of the subject will assist the teachers to function optimally, as teachers of English in a school now have the chance to teach the aspects of the subject they can handle with competence and confidence, and which they enjoy most. Much as this strategy will assist the teachers by taking care of their preferences, it will also force the teachers to study and work hard to prove their competences in their chosen aspects. After all, they now have the freedom to choose which aspects they love to teach. Students too will now have the unique advantage of being taught English Language by more than one teacher and, this will expose the students to the various teaching strategies that the different teachers may utilise, just as the different attitudes and personalities of the teachers would rub off on the students. Further, students would easily escape being wrongly taught since they only need to pose questions on grey areas to the next teacher of English.

In a Junior Secondary school with students from JSS 1 to JSS 3, for instance, where there are three teachers of English language, each teacher is often drafted to teach an arm, handling all the various aspects of the subject. But what we propose is that the three teachers share the various aspects of the subject in each arm. The diagram below, we hope, sheds more light on the strategy.

**Figure 3.1: The aspects of English Language as shared by teachers in JSS classes.**



According to the table above, teacher A is to teach both Structure and Composition aspects of English language to JSS 1, JSS 2 and JSS 3 classes. Teacher B teaches the aspects of Vocabulary Development and Oral English to JSS 1, JSS 2 and JSS 3 students while teacher C handles the Comprehension aspect. From the table, teachers A and B have more periods to take with a maximum of about 12 periods per week, given that each class has two arms.

Our educational system has failed miserably because it has not made the teachers fully responsible for the academic successes or woes of the students particularly in the secondary schools. Teachers should therefore be made to take full academic responsibilities of their students. By this is meant that teachers should be made to move up the classes as their students move up from one class to another, say from SSS 1 to SSS 2 and to SSS 3. In this way, a teacher becomes fully worthy of praise or blame at the end of the Certificate examination, be it JSCE or SSCE. Imagine the teacher as a football coach who has three years to prepare his team for a competition and given all the necessary support and facilities to produce good results. Failure on the part of the coach would definitely not be applauded. A secondary school teacher, who moves up with his/her students in his way, has three years to prepare his/her students for either the JSC or SSC Examinations. S/he should do all within his/her capacity to ensure the success of the students, as the students' success is the teacher's pride. The idea of a teacher handling only the JSS 1 or JSS 2 students does not give room for proper measure of the teacher's competence. Rather, it helps to shift responsibilities from one teacher to another. If at the end of a three-year programme the students' results are good or poor, it would be really impossible to determine who among the teachers prepared the students well or not.

In this approach, the teachers have to start grooming their students, right from the beginning of the three-year programme, preparing them for the series of internal exams but with the ultimate aim of presenting them for the Certificate examination. Along the line, the teachers have to work continuously on the students, assess them and communicate the results of such periodic assessments to the school administration. This feedback will keep the school authority abreast of changes in behaviour as it will also enable it to assist the teachers when necessary. Assistance from the school may be in the form of counselling programmes and career talks for students, disciplinary actions for uncooperative students, Parents-Teachers (PTA) meetings (to notify the parents of their wards' performances), etc. The teachers also need to seek assistance from the school to get the necessary learning materials and facilities that would aid the success of their task because a teacher is successful only when his/her students have performed excellently in their examinations.

If this approach is adhered to by the teachers, by the end of the second year they would be competent enough to predict individual student's performance as well as general expected performances of all the students in certificates examinations. This prediction must be communicated to the school management so that, together with the school authority, the teachers would map out fresh plans of action to further prepare seemingly below-average candidates and, begin the final grounding of all the students for the final examination.

We must warn strongly that the four panaceas discussed in this paper are very effective in bringing about improved academic performances in English language. However, they would not be productive in the absence of discipline. Discipline is therefore a necessity for the panaceas to be effective. Adesina (1980) believes that discipline is to teach the students to respect the school authorities, to observe the school laws and regulations and to maintain an established standard of behaviour. Rosen (1997) perceives discipline as a branch of knowledge and training that brings about self-control, character, orderliness or efficiency, strict control to enforce obedience and treatment that controls or punishes as a system of rules. Agbenyega (2006) is of the view that discipline is one of the major features of effective schools and many failing schools have been blamed on lack of discipline. We share the view that discipline in schools necessarily involves such self-control, orderliness and obedience that necessarily shape staff-students interactions. We also subscribe to the view that a focused teaching and learning task for the attainment of school goals is impossible if the teachers and students are not disciplined. Aguba (2009) is of the view that discipline is needed to produce a breed of well cultivated youths who will develop not only respect for themselves but also for others in the school and society. Hence school administrators should see it as a task to impose discipline on the staff and students while teachers should impose discipline on the students.

#### Some practical discussion

If our discussion of the four practical panaceas on reversing the ugly trends of mass failure in certificate English language examinations appears theoretical and impracticable, that is, if introducing prose texts to be read by all students every term; separating English Language from Literature in the JSS; separating the aspects of English Language for teachers, and making the students a full responsibility of the teachers for each three year of secondary education appear rather speculative, we shall present and discuss some results of students' performances in Mayflower school, Ikenne, a school whose academic success in internal and public examinations has been built and sustained chiefly around these four strategies.

Table 4.1: English Language Results of Mayflower School, Ikenne in WASSCE from (2001 to 2009)

Year	No of Candidates	No Released	A1 to C6 No %	A1 to E8 No %	F9 No %
2001	458	452	314 69.5	443 98	9 2.0
2002	373	365	186 51	345 94.5	20 5.5
2003	461	456	391 85.5	456 100	— —
2004	381	379	261 68.9	376 99.2	3 0.8
2005	437	437	181 41.4	402 89.9	35 8.0
2006	374	360	297 82.5	357 99.2	3 0.8
2007	358	224	203 90.6	224 100	— —
2008	561	558	403 72.2	551 98.7	7 1.3
2009	477	477	423 88.7	477 100	— —

According to the table, the total pass rate in 2003, 2007 and 2009 is 100% as there is no failure at all, despite the fact that very large numbers of 456, 224 and 477 candidates' results were released respectively in the years. In 2004 and 2006, only three students (0.8%) each failed English language out of 379 and 360 respectively. In 2001, only 9 (2%) out of 452 students failed English, and 20 (5.5%) out of 365 failed in 2002 while 35 (8.0%) students failed English in 2005. In 2008, only 7(1.3%) candidates out of 558 candidates failed English language. The above implies that quite a very large number of the students in each year, going by the English language results, are eligible for admission into institutions of higher learning as even a pass in English grants admission to colleges of education. All the other subjects too are replete with this same pattern of excellent performance witnessed in English language. We must state quickly however that the panaceas discussed in this paper have been in operation for decades and they work as the table above has shown, even in the face of numerous challenges some of which are shortage of books, inadequate facilities and equipment, inadequacy of teaching staff, ever-changing government policies, overpopulation (with class size of between 55 and 100 students) to mention a few.

#### Conclusion

This paper discussed the ugly trend of mass failure and its causes in public examinations among secondary school students in Nigeria with particular attention to English Language. It then proposed and discussed four radical panaceas which have been found practically useful in curbing the ugly trend of mass failure and improving learners' performances in English Language in internal and Certificate examinations. The

panaceas – introducing the reading of prose texts to all students; separating English Language and Literature-in-English in the JSCE curriculum; separating the aspects of English Language for teachers and, moving up the teachers as their students move up from one class to another – are an all-encompassing solution that would place some demands on the students, the teachers, school managements, Education Ministries and parents. The paper also presented WASSCE results of candidates in a school where the panaceas have been in yielding results. We appeal to the educational planners and administrators, ministries of education, private secondary school managements and teachers to collectively adopt and incorporate the trends in their curriculum for the overall improvement of students' performances in English Language and other subjects in secondary schools since a good mastery of English enhances improved performances in other subjects.

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