

Towards Improved Pedagogy in General Studies in Nigerian Universities: University of Agriculture, Makurdi's Experience

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Abstract

Classroom management is commonly cited as one of the greatest problems faced by teachers especially in large classes like General studies classrooms. The learning structure, processes, and environment presently in place in most Nigerian Universities for teaching in General Studies classroom tend to affect adversely learners attitude, interest, motivation and their participation. This study exposed students to a special group work activity. The sample consisted of seven hundred and sixty (760) 200 level students and five hundred and eighty-five (585) 100 level students who registered for GST 222- Peace and Conflict Resolution and GST 116- Communication in English respectively in the second semester of 2011/2012 session. Six research questions were answered through this study. A questionnaire which was designed to elicit information about their perception of the method was administered to the students at the end of the course. The responses showed that the method was worthwhile. Based on the outcome of the study, the researchers postulate that there would be an improvement in students' participation in the GST classrooms and academic performance if this method is adopted by the lecturers.

Key Words: *Large Class, Group Work, Communicative Competence, Academic Performance, Social Skills*

INTRODUCTION

The General Studies programme was introduced in Nigerian universities in 1998 by the Federal Government of Nigeria to expose students to courses that will help them to be useful and be better citizens or to perform better in their chosen careers. The number of courses varies from one university to the other but Communication in English (GST 111 & 116) and Peace and Conflict Resolution (GST 222) are offered in most universities with 2 credits each. Some universities call it GNS or GST or just GS. The General Studies courses are designed for all the first year or 100 level students as well as second year or 200 level students in the universities. They are core or compulsory courses that must be registered for and passed before any students could graduate. Students cannot afford to play truancy if they must pass these courses. This explains why the classes are always filled.

The enrolment of students in higher institution especially university is increasing on daily basis in Nigeria yet the number of lecturers to teach is reducing as a result of non employment of lecturers by the government, retirement of lecturers that are not replaced and the issue of brain drain. The case of General studies is pathetic because the programme only serves other programmes in the university and enough lecturers are not employed to teach the courses. As a result of this the General studies classes are always large especially in specialized institutions like Universities of Agriculture and Technology. In such institutions, few lecturers are employed solely for the purpose of teaching the General Studies unlike what obtains in conventional universities where the lecturers are selected from Faculty of Arts. Apart from the inadequate number of lecturers there is the issue of venue. In most cases most classrooms are occupied by other programmes and this makes it almost impossible for the students to have classroom for the General Studies lectures. It is therefore not uncommon to find five hundred 500 to eight hundred 800 students in a class with just one lecturer.

Most lecturers teaching the General Studies courses are new and inexperienced as the old and experienced lecturers find it —degrading! to teach such courses or first year students who the courses are designed for. These young lecturers find it difficult to manage the classroom well and are always at crossroad as to what to do in this chaotic situation.

General Studies courses deserve to be handled with utmost care because of their benefits to the students, the nation and whatever society the students find themselves after their education. This paper assesses one

out of many ways of improving the teaching of General studies as a result of its importance and peculiarity highlighted above.

As regards the effectiveness and impact of the GST/English sub programme, Akeredolu-Ale (2006) maintains that considerable progress has been made by the sub-programme since its conception some 18 years ago. As many as 10,650 students have been exposed to the two GNS/English courses since 1998. Since most of such students have completed their degrees successfully, it can be inferred that communication inadequacies which would have made it impossible for them to pursue their studies effectively had been removed, largely through their exposure to the GNS/English sub-programme.

Despite this assertion, there is, unfortunately, plausible evidence of shortfall in achievement and impact of this programme on students which Akeredolu- Ale (2007) alludes to in the statement below.

GNS/English lecturers have observed that many students avoid speaking English especially in their presence because of their numerous grammatical and pronunciation errors and limited vocabulary. In addition, there are frequent complaints from lecturers in other departments that the written English of the students is far below expectation. The course has also been unable to instil in the students a desire to read on their own to (sic) pleasure, for the development of their communication skills or for the extension of their knowledge beyond their field of specialization. Thus on the whole the GNS/English courses do not seem to be contributing adequately towards the achievement of the remedial goal (of raising the students' competence to a level adequate for effective university work) and the developmental goal (of empowering them in learning skills, enthusiasm, self confidence etc, to continue improving their mastery of the language).

The observations raised by these lecturers in Akeredolu-Ale's study are not peculiar to them alone. Most GST/English lecturers in other universities have observed the same scenario. Similarly other GST lecturers have complained about poor performance of students in the courses or have not reflected what they learnt in their attitude or behaviour.

The ineffectiveness of GST programme may be due to several reasons as indicated earlier. Similarly the problem may be attributed to the quality of the students and the teaching /learning environment.

Reasons for Review of Pedagogy

In addition to the reasons for the ineffectiveness of GST programme highlighted above, Akeredolu- Ale (2007) opines that to a large extent, the lack of success of the programme may be attributed to a serious motivational problem among the learners. This is manifest in the form of inadequacies in concentration, participation and studiousness as regards GST courses. The students are not motivated because firstly, they consider the course unnecessary since they have fulfilled the English language requirement for entering the university. GST/English to them is an unnecessary imposition as a high-level proficiency in English is not needed since they are not going to specialize in English language (Adelabu, 2008).

Secondly, they resent the fact that GST courses take so much of their time, subject them to formal examinations and could affect the class of degree that they obtain even when they are science based students.

Thirdly, they consider the way GST courses are conducted at present somewhat too stiff, too dull and too technical. Finally they point to the hardships and stress which they are exposed to by the shortages of accommodation for lectures, infrastructural facilities and teaching aids which have been and remain constant features of GST courses.

With reference to the deficiencies in the teaching and learning environment, Akeredolu-Ale (2007) recognizes that in addition to the lack of facilities, there are deficiencies in the methods, curriculum and organization of the courses as well as in the competence of the teachers and the quality of teaching.

In view of the above, it is necessary to consider the right pedagogy that will motivate the learners and make learning interesting. Pedagogy, according to Random House Webster's College Dictionary (2010), is the art or science of teaching, or education and instructional methods. Similarly the Dale Group (2008)

defines it as the art or method of teaching as well as the function or work of a teacher. The Free dictionary defines methods as a way of doing something especially in a systematic way which implies an orderly logical arrangement. It is the activity involves in educating or instructing or activities that impart knowledge. Which activities should the lecturers of GST Courses adopt to motivate students?

There are many methods a good teacher could use and this study does not suggest that the method adopted in this paper is the one and only the best but believes that it could be of help. The method adopted in this study is group work method that embraces other methods like discovery, discussion, enquiry and possibly excursion or laboratory methods as well as listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

Group work method is a way of getting students to work together to solve a problem or learn new information (Feeney, Christensen & Moravack, 1991). By using group work, educators teach students how to learn from one another's ideas. Group work is essentially useful in large classes because managing a large class can be chaotic. Group work teaches students skills in collaboration and accountability similar to skills scientists must have.

When students have opportunities for interesting things to do, sufficient time to complete and access to lectures they are likely to enjoy learning. The students are giving opportunity to learn on their own without any rigid or formality that exists when they are not giving group work to do. Group work as described in this study encompasses other teaching methods like discovery, discussion, enquiry and excursion and the four language skills- listening, speaking, reading and writing. It creates room for creativities and therefore makes learning interesting to learners.

Group work gives responsibilities to learners. Smith & Strick (2010) declare that research indicates that giving children responsibility is highly important to their real development. And adults too! They maintained that learning to take responsibility for oneself is another key to successful independent living. One of the goals of General studies is to help students to have successful living. It is therefore essential that the students at this level are exposed to group work activities.

If group work activity must achieve its maximum benefits, the lecturers must guide the students properly. Feeny, Christensen & Moravick suggest that there must be rules. Rules are clearly stated expectations and guidelines for behaviour that are essential for making a classroom function effectively. The lecturer should say what he wants from the onset. For instance, they should know that attendance during the group meeting and in the class when a particular group is presenting is compulsory. Whoever violates this rule forfeits certain marks. The lecturer should indicate what to do rather than what not to do. He should also avoid giving choices that he is not willing to take or unable to allow. For instance, questions like, 'when will group 5 present?' gives room for laxity. It is better to say 'Group 5 should be ready to present next week'.

One of the major obstacles to group work is noise especially when the groups are presenting. The presenter should present himself in the right position where everyone will hear him. The lecturer should also position himself in a way that he can see what is happening throughout the classroom to check those that are not listening, talking, laughing or doing other activities not related to the lecture. He should call their names at random to ensure they are concentrating. They could be asked to summarize what the presenter has just said, repeat a point made by the last speaker or just comment on the topic or ask the speaker a question. As they do this, they are being corrected by other students or even laugh at. It enables them to learn how to control themselves when they are provoked.

Group work promotes social skills like self control and reduces low self esteem. While working with other members of the group, they are exposed to some social skills like how to start conversation, ask questions, say thank you, understand the feeling of others, dealing with one's fear, give and follow instructions etc.

Statement of the Problem

The highly formal approach to teaching of GST courses tends to weaken learners performance and the GST programme overall effectiveness. An activity oriented method would be ideal. This paper therefore presents the report of activity oriented method used to teach two major GST courses in University of Agriculture, Makurdi.

The aim of the study was to expose the GST students to Group work and assess the effectiveness of the method. It was also carried out to see if the method has improved their social skills and changed their impression about GST courses.

These following questions were asked to guide the study:

1. Will the group work method of teaching improve students' learning skills?
2. Will there be an improvement in students' social skills as a result of group work?
3. Will the group work have any effect on the students' impression about GST course(s)?
4. Does Group work have any effect on teacher-student relationship?
5. What are the disadvantages of group work activity?
6. Will the group work enhance students' academic performance in GST courses?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

All 100 level and 200 level undergraduate students of University of Agriculture, Makurdi constituted the population of this study. The students registered for GST 116- Communication in English 2 and GST 222- Peace and Conflict Resolution in the second semester of 2011/2012 session. The students were from all the nine (9) colleges of the university. The University of Agriculture is a specialized institution located in Benue State of Nigeria.

The students were grouped into five. Each group consists of five hundred to eight hundred students with one lecturer. One of the five groups of each set constituted the sample of this study. The first set i.e. 100 level students offering GST 116 has a total number of five hundred and eighty five (585) students while the second set, the 200 level students offering GST 222, has seven hundred and sixty (760) students. These intact classes, that these researchers taught, were used for this study. The students were from different departments. The table below shows the number of students in each set and their departments.

Table 1. Number of students and their Departments

Set A- GST 116		Set B-GST 222	
Departments	No	Departments	No
Animal Production	68	Physics B.Sc	128
Animal Breeding & Phy	52	Industrial Physics	130
Animal Nutrition	49	Chemistry	87
Food Science	112	Plant Breeding	55
Home Sci & Mgt	83	Crop Protection	71
Civil Engineering	96	Seed Technology	70
Micro- biology	126	Mechanical Eng	106
		Animal production	123
TOTAL	585	TOTAL	760

A questionnaire was designed to obtain information about their impression of the group work activities the students have been exposed to. The students' Impression about Group Work Questionnaire (SIAGWQ) was in two sections –A and B.

Section A sought to know the personal data of the students. The information required included the students' level of study, sex, age, departments and area of specialization. Section B contained twenty questions to elicit the opinion of the students concerning the Group work activities in relation to GST courses.

The students were required to indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement with each of the statements in a 5 point Likert scale type of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Indifferent (I), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD). The responses were assigned scores 5-1. Any item that has the mean score of 2.5 and above was accepted while below 2.5 was rejected. The students were also asked generally what they considered the disadvantages of the group work. This was done verbally.

A. The activities were for the whole session. The students were grouped into 20 with 25 -35 in each group and were informed about what they are expected to do. The group activities include the following.

- The contents of the topics were written to create awareness.

- A topic was assigned to each group (a topic to two groups in GST 222 class because of the number of students involved).
- Each group was given a number.
- They were instructed to work as a group and discuss the topic assigned to them extensively, write a comprehensive note and come and present to the rest of the class.
- Each group was asked to choose a time of meeting and select the group leader, secretary and the presenter.
- They were given two weeks to prepare and a roaster for groups' presentation was given.
- Before the group meeting, each member of the group should study the topic individually to enable him discuss meaningfully at the group meeting. They were asked to go to the library to search for materials in books, journal and internet (library skills).
- All the students were expected to read about the topics so as to be able to make their contributions when a particular group is presenting.
- All the members of the group must be present whenever the group was presenting. Failure to comply made them to lose 2 marks.
- All members of the class must also be in attendance, failure to comply made them to forfeit 1 mark each day. The total number would be deducted from the mark given to the members of a particular group.
- Copies of the write-up were given to every member of the group and other members of the class that were interested.
- Each member got the same mark but the presenter had additional 2 marks.
- In the class, the lecturer called students randomly to either summarize the lecture, comment, or ask questions. Whoever gave correct response or made reasonable comments was awarded 1 or 2 marks. This was done to test their listening and speaking skills.
- The presenters positioned themselves in a way that members of the class could hear them.
- The lecturers sat in their midst and moved around to check those that were making noise, discussing or doing something not relevant to the lecture. Such students were called to repeat what the last speaker had said or ask questions.
- The exercise served as the continuous assessment of 30% for the course.

B. After the exercise, the last lecture was devoted to revision of the topics. The questionnaire was also administered and collected the same day.

C. They were asked to comment on the disadvantage of the group activity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results are discussed in relation to the questions forming the objectives of the study.

Research Question 1: Will the group work method of teaching improve students' learning skills?

Table 2. Mean scores of students' responses on learning skills

Items	Mean score	Remarks
1. GW provides opportunity for me to learn from my colleagues.	3.54	Accepted
2. My competence in spoken English has improved	3.05	Accepted
3. Gw has improved my ability to study on my own	4.15	Accepted
4. GW has provided opportunity for me to participate actively in the class	3.75	Accepted
5. I enjoy discussing GST topic with my colleagues	3.7	Accepted
6. GW has increased my ability to listen carefully	4.2	Accepted

All the responses are accepted because their means are above 2.5. The result clearly shows that the students learning skills have increased as a result of the group work activities they were exposed to.

Research Question 2: Will there be an improvement in students' social skills as a result of group work.

Table 3. Mean Score of students' responses on social skills

Items	Mean Score	Remarks
7. GW helped me to socialize	4.7	Accepted
8. It has provided opportunity to learn how to deal with low-esteem	3.6	Accepted
9. GW has made me to overcome stage fight	2.7	Accepted
10. GW exposes me to social activities like taking turns and convincing others	3.2	Accepted
11. It has enabled me to respect others	2.8	Accepted
12. I learnt how to deal with group pressure	4.35	Accepted

The group work had positive impact on the social skills of the students that participated in this study as the results indicated there was no mean score below 2.5.

Research Question 3: Will the group work activities have any effect on the students' impression about GST course(s)?

Table 4: Mean Score of Students' Responses on their impression about GST Courses

	Mean score	Remarks
13. I do not like missing GST classes because of GW	4.4	Accepted
14. GST course is relevant and meaningful to me	3.2	Accepted
15. GST course is less stressful now	3.6	Accepted
16. GW enables us to finish the syllabus	4.2	Accepted
17. I prefer doing other activities instead of GST courses	1.82	Accepted

The table above shows that the students have benefitted from the group work as all the mean scores is greater than 2.5. The last item in the table was to test whether they prefer other activities to GST. The mean score was below 2.5 and thereby rejected. The students did not prefer other activities to GST course.

Research Question 4: Does the group work have any effect on teacher-students' relationship?

Item number 18 of the questionnaire attended to this question. The students agreed, with the mean score 4.2, that the barrier between the students and the lecturer was removed as a result of the group work activities.

Research Question 5: What are the disadvantages of the Group work activities?

Table 5: Mean score of students' Responses on the disadvantages of the group work

Items	Mean Score	Remarks
19. GW wastes our time	3.7	Accepted
20. GW makes teachers to be lazy	2.3	Rejected

The table shows the mean score of 3.7 for item number 19. This is an indication that they considered the money spent to print the essay a wastage. The mean for the second question is below 2.5 and is therefore rejected. This shows that they did not see the lecturers as being lazy.

However when they were asked verbally what they considered as the disadvantages of this method some of their responses included the two items cited in the table. Others include:

- The presenters were not teaching like lecturers.
- The presenters were too fast.
- The students were laughing at those who made mistakes and therefore discouraging them.
- They were not able to make notes when students were presenting.
- Some students did not participate in the group work yet they would get the same mark.

Research Question 6: Will group work enhance students' academic performance in GST courses?

Table 2 shows that the group work activities had impact on learning skills of the participants. If they have improved in their learning skills, there is tendency that they would perform better in the examination. In addition to that, the percentage of failure in the two courses were low- 12% in GST 222-Peace & Conflict Resolution and 18% in GST 111- Communication in English. However, this result was not compared with the previous results because the data was not available then.

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

This study exposed some GST students to group work activities and assessed the impact on the students learning and social skills as well as their impression of GST courses as a result of the activities. The results showed that the students learning and social skills have been enhanced as a result of the method. They were exposed to listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. These are the basic language and learning skills they need for good academic performance irrespective of their areas of specialization. The implication is that through activities like these students are likely going to do well in their academic pursuits.

Through these activities, they were exposed to social skills like how to take turns, ask questions, respect other peoples' opinions, and argue meaningfully, among others. They must have overcome stage fright; even though not all of them had the opportunity to present, they know that if their colleagues could do it, they could as well do it too! They also learnt from other peoples' mistakes. This implies that they would be able to socialize and be good citizens.

Generally the activities provided opportunities for students to appreciate GST courses. The implication is that the experience gained in this could be transferred to other GST courses and other courses. They could group themselves or maintain the group for other courses without been told by any lecturer. Therefore they become high achievers.

CONCLUSION

The group work activities have been proved, in this study, to be useful in teaching large classes in our universities. If this is adopted, the students' academic performance will be enhanced and their social skills shall improve. So go ahead and give it a trial.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the results and the implication of the study, we recommend that group work activities should be practiced in large classes and not only for post graduate class as being practiced by lecturers. For the group work to be effective, students, lecturers and the universities have positive roles to play. Students should ensure they make themselves available when their groups are meeting and for lectures. They should also listen attentively and take meaningful notes which must be studied later.

The lecturers should give proper guidelines and instructions which must be followed by the students. They should not be partial in the marks being awarded. They should encourage those who did not do well to try more rather than condemning them. It is not an opportunity for them to be lazy. They should read extensively and contribute meaningfully in the class.

The university administration should provide classroom and instructional materials that will aid the students' presentation like overhead projector for power point presentation.

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BIO-DATA

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