

**CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT OF ESSAY WRITING, AND STUDENTS' LEARNING OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN THE SOUTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON*****Dr. Rosemary M. Shafack, Dr. Fidelis L. Alemnge and Ebok Rachael Eta**

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Abstract

This study set out to investigate the impact of classroom essay tests on students' learning of English Language in Secondary schools in the South West Region of Cameroon. The main research question was; how do classroom essay writing tests influence students' learning of English language? The design adopted was the cross-sectional survey. From the population of secondary school students in the South West region of Cameroon, a sample size of 370 form five students and 7 English Language form five teachers were selected for the investigation. The convenience, purposive and cluster sampling techniques were used to select the sample population. A questionnaire, documentary protocols and focus group discussion guide were employed as instruments for data collection. Data were analyzed using frequency, proportion and Multiple Response Set. The findings showed that classroom essay tests did not enhance students' learning of English language. It further revealed an inadequate extensive writing skill acquisition in the English language. The study thus recommends continuous classroom assessment of essay writing.

Keywords: Classroom assessment, Essay writing, Expository essay, Narrative essay, Argumentative essay, Descriptive essay.

INTRODUCTION

The assessment of students' learning is one of the most important events in the Cameroonian education system. In fact, assessment is at the heart of education. Well-constructed classroom assessments are veritable tools for motivating students to learn. What is assessed and how it is assessed is hugely influential in determining what is taught and how it is taught. While assessment can motivate learners if they are successful, it can also undermine confidence and capacity to learn if they are unsuccessful (Black and Williams, 1998). Students' perception of classroom assessment has received increased attention in educational assessment research to determine their relationship to student motivation and learning (Brookhart, 2002, 2013; Harlen and Crick, 2003). These views provide education stakeholders another lens with which to improve classroom assessment processes (Cook-Sather, 2002). Assessment forms the bedrock of education and represents a commitment to high academic standards and school accountability. Teacher designed tests are used for evaluating students' progress in relation to established objectives and also for important decision making like; promotion to the next class, repetition of the class or carrying out remedial lessons. This implies that classroom assessments are an important tool used for enhancing teaching and learning in any educational system if well planned and implemented (Onuka and Atsua, 2017). They give teachers the opportunity and responsibility to design valid, reliable and usable assessment tasks that align with stated learning outcomes. When tests are too narrow a measure or are not properly aligned to standards, they provide little information that teachers and schools can use to improve teaching and learning. Classroom assessments show what is really learned, what the students know, how effective the teacher is and helps the students to show the depths of their understanding and tendencies (Acar-Erdol and Yildizli, 2018).

Research shows that the assessment category used by teachers in the classroom significantly affects the academic achievement, motivational beliefs, classroom teaching activities, and self-regulation skills of students (Alkharusi, 2013; Bell and Cowie, 2001; Brookhart, 2002; Dorman, Fisher and Waldrip, 2006; Heritage, 2007; Yıldızlı and Saban, 2016). This follows that teacher designed assessments should occupy a major arm in the educational process of students. The structure of classroom assessment especially in forms four and five is expected to have a corresponding structure with that of the General Certificate Examination most especially as the Cameroon GCE Board following the 1998 law on Education has the mandate to assess and certify candidates' achieved outcomes. So for students to adequately face the challenge at the end of course examinations, the structure of classroom assessments should align with that of the GCE. For as Rea-Dickens (2007) asserts, if English Language examinations use specific criteria for correctness it is obvious that in high stake situations, these criteria become the very criteria used as part of the teaching and learning of the English Language in schools. This follows that classroom assessment tasks that measure learners' use of the language skills should be made up of selected response items and performance assessment tasks as it is found in the official examination. Students' performance in English language leaves much to be desired. For the past five years, candidates' average performance in English language in the General Certificate Examination (G.C.E) is 26.81% (statistics from the GCE Board). According to subject reports for these years there are recurrent reasons for failure that cuts across the cognitive, psychomotor and affective domains. Candidates who write this examination are expected to have passed through classroom assessments for five years. Within this period teacher designed tests are expected to reliably assess the content of the teaching syllabus. Since there are no common tests for teachers to measure students' achievement, classroom assessments should help learners improve their learning as well as fulfilling other roles such as helping them gain certification, measuring the extent of

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their achievements and reporting to others (Gardner *et al.*, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

The English Language is the medium of instruction in the English-speaking sub-system of education as well as an official language in Cameroon. It is a compulsory subject with the highest coefficient (coefficient 5, just like Mathematics and French). Therefore, achievement in English language may have an effect on students' performance in English language and in their overall achievement in other subjects. Essay or extensive writing is one of the categories of classroom assessment which is used in ascertaining learners' achievement in the English language. Even though learners are assessed formatively and summatively, to ascertain their achievement in extensive writing, their subsequent performance in end-of-course certificate examination is still a cause for concern. Though the primary aim of classroom assessment of extensive writing is to ascertain learners' attainment of the learning objectives, it is also an opportunity to predict learners' future performance in the end of course certificate examination especially since 70 percent of the examination is assessed through writing skills. However, there remains a public concern that classroom assessment of essay writing maybe untrustworthy. This doubt is further strengthened by the performances of candidates in the English language certificate examination. According to chief examiners' reports for the past five years (2012-2017), candidates' performance in paper 2 (made up of Directed writing and composition writing) in the GCE English Language is below average. Candidates' average performance in this discipline within this periods stands at 26.81% while their average performance in all subjects stands at 45.98 % (GCEB, 2017). This suggests that candidates' poor performance in essay writing and English language in general has a negative effect on performances in the entire examination. According to the subject reports for the above years, candidates performance in the writing skill is poor because of; their inability to understand a given task; poor mastery of the formats for different texts types (letters, speeches, articles, reports etc.); inability to select relevant materials, poor mastery of paragraphing techniques; inability to correctly use transitional words, poor mastery of writing skills; inconsistency in the use of tenses, lack of appropriate vocabulary to appropriately express thoughts and imposing the syntax and structure of the mother tongue and pidgin English on the English language. These are major lapses which the researcher believes could have been taken care of through the use of adequate teaching and classroom assessment prior to learners sitting in for the end of course examination. It is based on these conjectures that this research was carried out to determine the degree to which classroom assessment of essay writing language skills in secondary schools influences students' learning of English Language.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

For assessment to have its desired goal of adequately measuring students' learning there should be a corresponding teaching of learning objectives. In secondary schools students are expected to write coherent essays with artfully chosen rhetorical and discourse devices. Writing should be taught to students learning English as a second language for reinforcement, language development, learning style, and writing as a basic language skill (Harmer, 1998). This implies

that in order to have the writing skill, students should write and they should have the ability to process the ideas to read (Ariyanti 2016). This follows that for classroom assessment of essay writing to yield the desired effect, teachers should effectively teach the writing skill especially as essay testing is one of the most reliable types of tests to evaluate students' productive language use.

According to the standards set by the Ministry of Secondary Education in Cameroon, by the end of the first cycle of secondary education, learners are expected to exhibit the following writing outcomes:

- 1 Present and develop ideas effectively in speech and writing for a variety of purposes and audiences;
- 2 Write legibly, coherently and cohesively for different purposes and audiences;
- 3 Demonstrate knowledge about language and text types from print and non-print/ electronic media;
- 4 Think critically and solve problem in everyday life situations.

Four out of seven learning outcomes for English Language in secondary schools are focused on the writing skill. So to measure learners' language achievement, it is incumbent on teachers to design good essay tasks. Essay writing assessment tasks will measure a student's successful management of all processes and strategies of writing for all purposes, up to the length of an essay, a term paper, a major research project report or even a thesis (Brown, 2010). Tambo (2012) considers this form of assessment as the extended response essay. Here the questions cover an extended amount of subject matter. The test taker has a lot of freedom to express his or her knowledge in the subject. Tests takers in this case focus on achieving a purpose, organizing and developing ideas logically, using details to support ideas, demonstrating syntactic and lexical variety (Brown, 2010). In secondary schools the main extended or extensive assessment types will include; narration, description, exposition and persuasion. Each of these types has its own peculiarity.

Generally, Brown (2010) asserts that learners must follow expected conventions for each essay type. They must convey the purpose, goal, or main idea. They must use effective writing strategies and demonstrate syntactic variety and rhetorical fluency. Aside from strategies of free writing, outlining, drafting and revising essay writers need to be aware of the task that has been demanded and focus on the genre of writing and the expectations of that genre. An essay test can broadly be defined as a form of assessment in which students are required to respond to a question by composing a piece of writing such as an essay or a paragraph. In second language acquisition, essay tests may be regarded by many teachers as one of the most reliable types of tests to evaluate student productive language use such as the use of vocabulary words and grammar structures to convey their ideas, opinions, or arguments. According to Richards (2008) learning to write in either first or second language is one of the most difficult tasks students encounter and one that few people can be said to fully master especially when it comes to free writing. Kroll (2003) also observes that writing is a complex process that involves the mastery of multiple skills that contribute to the overall difficulty of writing for any language user. Thus, it is a challenging and difficult task for both native and non-native speakers to acquire extensive writing skills. According to

Hyland (2003), writing requires composing, which implies the ability either to tell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Therefore, it is viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of writing to the more complex act of composing. Tangpermpoon (2008) points out that to have good writing skills require the writer to have a great deal of lexical and syntactic knowledge as well as principles of organization in order to produce a good written text. Myles (2002) observes that the ability to write well is not naturally acquired from the environment through exposure to the language. He argues that writing is learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional setting. Similarly, Byrne (2000) notes that writing is learned through a process of instruction in which the student is expected to master the written form of the language and to learn certain structures that are not common in speech but which are vital for effective written communication. He further observes that conscious effort must be made to equip language learners with writing skills which will enable them to organize their ideas so that a reader who is not present and even known to them can understand. In addition, Hyland (2002) asserts that writing is an activity which must be mastered in order for students to express their ideas effectively. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to help students to learn writing skills that will enable them express themselves appropriately and effectively in second language writing.

According to Chukwuma and Otagburuagu (1996) there are four major essay genres which teachers use to help students acquire free writing skills. It is worth noting that distinguishing between types of essays is simply a matter of determining the writer's goal. The writer may want to tell about a personal experience, describe something, explain an issue, or convince the reader to accept a certain viewpoint. The main essay genres that address these purposes proposed by Chukwuma and Otagburuagu (1996) include: expository, narrative, descriptive and argumentative essays. Each of these genres has its peculiarities but as Etherton (1976) highlights, composition or essay writing is a means of communicating a message of some sort with people outside the immediate environment of the writer. Whatever the genre, the overall aim is communication. Expository or informative essay is a very popular genre which is used in secondary schools to ascertain free writing skills. According to Broyles et al (1987) most of what we read in textbooks, reference books, and magazines is expository. They assert that when one writes a report or explain how something works one is writing an exposition. The purpose of an expository essay is to explain facts, opinions and ideas (Chukwuma and Otagburuagu, 1996). This is most likely the first essay type that one would learn to write. This kind of writing explains something, tells something, or it gives directions. The expository essay is an informative piece of writing that presents a balanced analysis of a topic, Chin *et al.* (2016). In an expository essay, the writer explains or defines a topic, using facts, statistics, and examples. Broyles et al (1987) confirms that expository writing relies more on facts and examples. Expository writing encompasses a wide range of essay variations, such as the comparison and contrast essay, the cause and effect essay, and the "how to" or process essay. Since expository essays are based on facts and not personal feelings, writers don't reveal their emotions or write in the first person.

A narrative essay is a very popular essay genre which many learners think it's very easy to handle. A narrative essay involves relating an event, a series of events or telling a story about a real-life experience, Chukwuma and Otagburuagu (1996). Simply put Broyles *et al.* (1987) insist that a narrative recounts a series of events and it is made up of paragraphs that tell about something that happened. While telling a story may sound easy to do, the narrative essay challenges students to think and write about themselves and their experiences. When writing a narrative essay, it is important that learners should try to involve the reader by making the story as vivid as possible. The fact that narrative essays are usually written in the first person helps engage the reader. "I" sentences give readers a feeling of being part of the story. A well-crafted narrative essay will also build towards drawing a conclusion or making a personal statement. Chukwuma and Otagburuagu (1996) assert that the narrative essay gives the learner an opportunity to freely relate his or her experiences and even give an anecdote to make the essay interesting. They also caution that though the narrator is free to arrange the details in a sequence that suits him or her best, the essay must conform to the features of good writing in clarity, coherence, accuracy and good usage. The narrative skill is one that teachers need to imbibe in learners by appropriately teaching and assessing to ascertain achievement of learning outcomes.

Another popular essay genre is the descriptive form which many consider is a cousin of the narrative essay. A descriptive essay paints a picture with words. It describes objects or situations as they are, thereby creating a precise mental image of such objects or situations in the reader (Jordan, 1980). A writer might describe a person, place, object, or even memory of special significance. However, this type of essay is not description for description's sake. The descriptive essay strives to communicate a deeper meaning through the description. The ability to describe requires good imagination on the part of both the writer and even the reader, Chukwuma and Otagburuagu (1996). In a descriptive essay, the writer should show, not tell, through the use of colourful words and sensory details. The best descriptive essays appeal to the reader's emotions, with a result that is highly evocative. Broyles *et al.* (1987) reiterate that the purpose of all descriptive writing is to create in the mind of the reader a clear picture of a person, a place, or a thing. Jordan (1980) cautions that; descriptive essays must be accurate, vivid and precise in terms of sequence and details. All unnecessary details that would not serve to focus on the subject or object being described must be avoided. In designing items for testing learner's knowledge on descriptive essays, teachers should give topics that will provide opportunities for learners to paint the picture which they are expected to describe. An argumentative or a persuasive essay is like an expository essay in its presentation of facts. The goal of the persuasive essay is to convince the reader to accept the writer's point of view or recommendation. It involves putting forward logical arguments for or against a given topic or situation, Chukwuma and Otagburuagu (1996). The writer must build a case using facts and logic, as well as examples, expert opinion, and sound reasoning. The writer should present all sides of the argument, but must be able to communicate clearly and without equivocation why a certain position is correct. Thus as Jordan (1980) asserts, in an argumentative essay a balanced, coherent and consistent point of view must be maintained. Broyles *et al.* (1987) argue that an argumentative writer has to devise his or her own order which is aimed at getting others to do something or think in a certain way. When

writing an argumentative essay the student should already have in mind specific details-facts, dates, names, reasons and examples to develop the paragraphs, (Broyles *et al.*, 1987). Generally, Graham and Perin (2007) insist that a well written essay focuses on the topic and has an organizational pattern that enables a reader to follow the flow of ideas. According to Siddiq (2013) essay writing involves the development of a designed idea (content), organisation skill, expression, and mechanical accuracy, the capture of mental representations of knowledge, and of experience with grammar. A good essay contains supporting ideas that are developed through the use of examples, appropriate vocabulary and follows the conventions of standard written English language such as correct spelling, capitalization and sentence structure. Tran (2012) observes that for second language teachers, essay tests deserve significant attention, as they are frequently used in the classroom. Moreover, students' ability to logically and clearly organize their writing can also be measured, (Tran, 2012).

Allison (2019) asserts that there is perhaps no perfect assessment tool, and that essay exams are no exception. However essay tests do offer much to instructors who might feel that multiple-choice, true-false, or other similar formats don't quite meet all their needs. According to Clay, 2001; Halpern and Hakel, 2003; Jacobs and Chase, 1992; Nilson, 2017; Parmenter, 2009; Reiner *et al.*, 2002; Scouller, 1998; Walstad, 2006, the first advantage that most educators likely associate with essay exams is their potential for eliciting higher level cognitive skills. For instance, essay-test items can allow an instructor to assess students' reasoning, critical thinking, creativity, or ability to synthesize material or compose an argument (Bean, 1996; Nilson; Ory and Ryan, 1993; Reiner *et al.*, 2002). Other researchers agree that essay tests can reward deeper knowledge of course material and assess more complex learning outcomes (Jacobs and Chase; Minbashian, Huon, and Bird, 2004; Parmenter; Scouller). Even students can perceive essay exams to be more appropriate for the purpose of reflecting one's knowledge in the subject matter (Zeidner, 1987).

In addition to considering essay examinations as a vector for eliciting higher level cognitive skills, many see essay exams as a more authentic form of assessment than selected-response tests (Jacobs and Chase, 1992; Lukhele *et al.*, 1993; Nilson, 2017; Reiner *et al.*, 2002; Wiggins, 2011). That is, by posing more complex questions or tasks and requiring responses which students must construct themselves rather than simply recognize the correct response in a predetermined selection (Walstad, 2006). Essay exams can more closely emulate tasks that students might be asked to do in the "real world" and help instructors identify student misconceptions more accurately. This implies that essay tests can be less prone though not immune to student guessing behaviour (Clay, 2001; Jacobs and Chase; Parmenter, 2009). Bean (1996) further insists that for those who locate knowledge and mastery, "in the ability to join a discourse" rather than in the ability to recall selected information, essay exams are often preferable to objective tests. It is important to also note that essay tests can avoid the perpetuation of misinformation that can arise from multiple-choice tests (Parmenter, 2009; Roediger and Marsh, 2005). Roediger and Marsh found that students taking multiple-choice exams tended to remember an exam's "distracter" answers, or the wrong answers presented as if they might be correct, and thus could actually leave an exam having absorbed false information. According to Allison (2019), some instructors

also appreciate that essay exams in particular help them emphasize communication as a fundamental skill, regardless of discipline (Jacobs and Chase, 1992). Research has identified writing as a high-impact teaching practice linked to learning, and it is a skill often sought by employers (Walvoord, 2014). Essay exams can certainly aid instructors in gauging students' thought processes, organization ability, and logic (Nilson, 2017; Ory and Ryan, 1993; Walstad and Becker, 1994; Weimer, 2015) and give students the opportunity to "think and compose rapidly," which, as Bean (1996) highlights, can also be useful workplace preparation. It is also worth noting that assessing learners using essay tests is advantageous because students might actually study differently for essay exams than they do for objective tests, engaging in more "deep learning" methods (Nilson, 2017; Parmenter, 2009; Roediger and Marsh, 2005). Allison (2019) reiterates that research has demonstrated that students frequently perceive that multiple-choice tests require lower order thinking (not necessarily the case, of course) and thus prepare for those selected-response exams with surface learning methods such as last-minute cramming, whereas they perceive that essay exams require more higher order thinking and prepare for them less superficially and more thoroughly (Entwistle and Entwistle, 1992; Roediger and Marsh; Scouller, 1998; Scouller and Prosser, 1994). It is important to note that deep-learning strategies can also lead to greater student satisfaction as well as better performance on higher order learning activities and, as such, these study strategies could be an unexpected benefit for essay tests.

Another conceivable benefit of extended-response essay examinations is their potential to complicate traditional cheating methods. That is, students cannot simply memorize essay responses in advance of a test, or create a cheat sheet of sorts. As a result, such test items could reduce the incidence of academic dishonesty (Nilson, 2017). Most practically, essay examinations in particular have the potential to be constructed relatively quickly, compared to multiple-choice exams (Brown, 2010). Constructing a multiple-choice test can be quite time-consuming and challenging to design, especially those that assess higher order thinking rather than recall (Parmenter, 2009; Tambo, 2012). Essay examinations do not require the construction of lures or "distracter" responses, or the crafting of a long list of questions. In fact, the challenge of creating multiple-choice exams can unintentionally result in more recall-oriented tests (Suskie, 2018) or drive instructors to "protect their questions" for future use by not returning graded examinations to students (Parmenter), thereby preventing students from learning from their mistakes. Reiner *et al.* (2002) contend, however, effective essay tests absolutely require thoughtful construction, just as effective multiple-choice examinations do. Reiner *et al.* (2002) observe that although essay tests are one of the most commonly employed methods of assessing students' learning, many essay questions are poorly designed and ineffectively utilized. However, Hopkins *et al.* (1990) advance some key considerations for teachers to effectively utilize essay writing tasks. In this light it is important to make definite provisions for preparing students for taking essay examinations. Students should not be surprised with an essay test. Furthermore, it is important that essay questions are carefully focused and structured in terms of the content and length. If a teacher wants to find out learners' proficiency in writing a process essay for example, the topics should be structured as such taking into consideration the length and the subject under discussion. Also Hopkins *et al.* (1990) advise that teachers should have a colleague review and

critique the essay questions. This will to an extent ascertain validity of the test. Furthermore, it is also advisable to avoid the use of optional questions, except when one is assessing writing ability where a choice of questions is desirable. In addition, teachers should restrict the use of the essay as an achievement test to those objectives for which it is best. If for example, the objective is to refute the argument of an opponent in an argumentative paragraph, the teacher should restrict the test only to that objective. However, for general achievement testing, teachers should use several shorter questions rather than fewer longer questions. Despite the common belief that essay tests are an excellent way to elicit learners' productive language and are a relatively reliable way to evaluate learners' ability to use written language, some limitations of essay tests may be of interest to classroom teachers, as they often have to evaluate learners' essay tests for classroom assessment purposes, (Tran, 2012). Hopkins *et al.* (1990) outline some challenges with essay tests: the halo effect, the item-to-item carryover effect, the test-to-test carryover effect, and the order effect.

First, the halo effect, the tendency to be influenced by other factors or characteristics when evaluating one specific characteristic of a person, may have an influence on the score given. For instance, when rating an essay written by a very hard-working, dedicated, and cooperative student, the teacher may subconsciously take all those positive characteristics of the student into consideration when giving a score to that essay. To eliminate this effect, rating essays anonymously is desirable and will guarantee more objective evaluation of students' essays. Secondly, the item-to-item carryover effect refers to the situation when raters acquire an impression of the student's knowledge on the initial item that 'colors' their judgment of subsequent items (Hopkins, Stanley, and Hopkins, 1990, p.201). To avoid this problem, teachers should be acutely aware that a response needs to be evaluated based on its own merits and should not be influenced by preceding questions on the test. Thirdly, the test-to-test carryover effect is the situation when the score of one paper is affected by the score of the preceding paper. Teachers may subconsciously compare the quality of the paper being graded with the one graded immediately before it. To achieve objective scoring, relying strictly on the rubric and comparing the essay being rated with the description of the rubric may ensure more objective and fair scoring. Finally, the order effect refers to the situation when essays rated at the beginning of the scoring session receive higher scores than those at the end of the session. Hopkins, Stanley, and Hopkins (1990) suggested that raters may become weary and "in this physical and mental condition nothing looks quite as good as it otherwise might" (p. 202). This effect may be alleviated by taking frequent breaks after every one or two hours of scoring.

Allison (2019) adds more challenges that may hamper assessing essay writing properly. Essay examinations in most cases especially school based essay tests have limited restricted content sampling. Although essay tests may take less time for instructors to compose, time constraints are a factor in other ways for both instructors and students. Examinations that consist entirely of essay responses can assess only a limited selection of course content (Ory and Ryan, 1993; Parmenter, 2009; Reiner *et al.* 2002; Walstad and Becker, 1994). Essay examinations necessitate a great deal of writing and response time for students per question and thus restrict the range of content that a given examination can sample. As a result, a

student's performance or score might not reflect a comprehensive knowledge of the course material but rather whether the right questions, or those that by chance matched with student's knowledge and preparation, were asked (Bean, 1996). In addition, those same testing time constraints are undoubtedly inadequate for fostering productive and thoughtful writing (Bean; Jacobs and Chase, 1992; Walvoord and Anderson, 1998); timed writing certainly does not emphasize process writing and is unlikely to produce a finely wrought essay. Furthermore, grading essay scripts takes a lot of the teacher's time. From the instructor's perspective, grading essays can be tedious and time-consuming, especially for larger classes (Jacobs and Chase, 1992; Nilson, 2017; Reiner, *et al.*, 2002; Weimer, 2015). Unlike multiple-choice exams, essay cannot be graded quickly with a simple answer sheet. The variability in students' answers can be a double-edged sword, allowing for latitude but also making the grading process more challenging. Consequently, instructors who grade a large number of essays often limit the inclusion of other forms of more effective writing assignments and activities in their courses (Bean, 1996). Since essay grading process can be so labor-intensive and mentally taxing, the grading of essays can also foster inconsistencies. Allison (2019) cautions that though essay tests might not offer the tidy dualistic structure of a selected-response examination (i.e., "right" and "wrong" answers), with judicious design and the identification of clear evaluative criteria, assessing them does not have to be a free-for-all. Literature has suggestions for best practices for devising extended-response prompts and essay examinations.

According to Reiner *et al.* (2002), teachers should provide clear directions and articulate a well-defined task. It is not uncommon for students to feel as if they must fill an entire blue book to respond to an essay question, particularly when faced with a vague prompt. As such, it is imperative to provide clear objectives and distinct tasks for students. Much like guidelines for composing measurable learning objectives, the literature also recommends formulating questions that guide students to the preferred approach, avoiding ambiguous directives such as *discuss* or even *describ* which can elicit rambling responses (Jacobs and Chase, 1992; Reiner *et al.*). Instead instructors should embrace more defined action verbs, such as *justify*, *analyze*, *compare*, or *summarize*. Bean, (1996) adds that such imperatives should be adequately contextualized for students. For instance, providing a prompt such as "Discuss the impact of the crisis" provides few cues to students regarding the instructor's expectations; what exactly does "discuss" mean to the instructor? What kind of impact? And on whom? A clearer version of this question might read, "Identify and explain the impact of the economic crisis on the Cameroonian economy."

Transparency in articulating the desired tasks, skills, and knowledge to be demonstrated in assignments has indeed been shown to lead to improved student confidence and success (Allison, 2019). Ultimately, students should not have to speculate about what their instructor wants them to do. If learners have currently been thought how to write argumentative essays for example, the teacher should let the learners know the appropriate essay genre or task to be assessed. Another good practice for better extensive or extended response task is for teachers to plan for and articulate the amount of time students should spend responding to each essay question, (Centre for Research and Language Teaching (CRLT), 2016; Nilson, 2017). Without adequate limits,

students might provide responses that are too long, off task, or incomplete (Reiner, et. al., 2002). Nilson, (2017) suggests estimating 15 minutes to one hour of completion time per essay question; more comprehensive questions should likely fall toward the higher end of that range, whereas more focused or limited-content questions might fall toward the lower end. As such, it is beneficial to overtly specify the time expectations for students; there are vast differences between a 15-minute essay and a 45-minute essay. Furthermore, Allison (2019) cautions that a teacher should assign a reasonable task and estimate a realistic response time for that task and, of course, the more direct and clear that task is, the greater the likelihood that students will be able to respond effectively within the allotted time.

CRLT (2016) advises that teachers should score one examination item at a time, and consider establishing benchmarks. If you are administering an examination with multiple essay questions, research suggests that, instead of grading an entire examination before moving on to another, you should evaluate each response to a single prompt to stay focused and consistent. For example a teacher can decide to mark all the narrative essays before marking another type. Furthermore, you might consider skimming all responses to a prompt and sorting them into piles based on level of effectiveness before marking or scoring any of them (Clay, 2002). A similar (and perhaps slightly less time-consuming) strategy is to read a random sampling of responses to establish benchmarks for grades and get a sense of what "typical" responses look like (Bean, 1996; Jacobs and Chase, 1992), thereby facilitating a more uniform and efficient grading process.

According to Jacobs and chase (1992), when assessing responses to multiple items, literature also suggests reshuffling the responses each time you move on to a new item to help counteract the effects of location in the stack. When scripts are collected using an alphabetical order, there is the tendency to mark them following that order but if we reshuffle them it will help counteract the effects of the location of the scripts. In this case, student A's script will not always be the first one read, Student Z's will not always be the last one read, and Student M might not suffer from the previous paper quality problem. By the same token, Suskie (2018) recommends reassessing the first few responses after completing the stack to guard against *rater drift* i.e., double-checking to make sure the first few assessments are comparable to the last, and everything in between. Just as transparency regarding tasks in assignments is important, so is transparency of expectations and grading criteria (Allison, 2019). As with any assignment, students will want to know not only the total point value of each response, but also how you will evaluate their work and what components you will prioritize. Transparency also includes clarity about the writing expectations; and specificities about the role writing mechanics or other related factors will play in the assessment process (Clay, 2001; CRLT, 2016; Jacobs and Chase, 1992). For instance, will the teacher take into account such elements as spelling, grammar, or handwriting? Is he or she expecting a particular writing style or format? What kind of organization might the teacher be looking for? How many marks will be allocated for content, expression and accuracy? Without careful attention as far as grading essays is concerned the scores become unreliable. What is important here is for the students to know beforehand the scoring rubrics to be used for grading their scripts. These rubrics will help direct the

students' answer and will further serve as feedback which will eventually enhance students' learning. Whether teacher designed essay tests in schools measure learning objectives and contribute to student learning is a major preoccupation of this study.

METHODOLOGY

The cross-sectional survey design was used to carry out the investigation. The population for the study was made up of 547 English language teachers of form five and 65276 students in 382 public general education schools of the South West Region of Cameroon. The sample for the study consisted of 10 schools, 370 students and 7 teachers. The convenient sampling was used to select the schools, purposive sampling was used to participants for the focused group discussion and simple random sampling to select students. Four instruments, a documentary protocol, a check list, focused group discussion schedule, and a questionnaire were used to collect data for the study. A documentary protocol was used to collect data from 90 student's report cards, a check list to collect data from evaluation of test questions, and marked essay tests scripts, a Focused group discussion schedule to collect data from the focused group discussion, and a questionnaire, to collect data from form five students. Data collected from the, checklist, and questionnaire were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The questionnaire was made of categorical variables and data were analyzed using counting techniques namely frequency and proportions while Multiple-Responses- Analysis was used to calculate the aggregate score for conceptual components.

The documentary data; (records from test questions, marked scripts and students report cards) were analyzed qualitatively. The values were scale/continuous and were described using measures of central tendencies. The data from the focus group discussion were analyzed thematically whereby concepts were grouped under umbrella terms. Documentary evidence from records from test questions, marked scripts and student's report cards was collected during a one week period. The focused group discussion was carried out in one day, and lasted one hour thirty minutes in one of the researcher's office for security and convenience purposes; it was tape recorded and notes taken. The questionnaire was administered and response collected within one month.

FINDINGS

Table 1 shows that students were mostly satisfied with the attainment of the objectives of essay tests with weight of 73.2%. Generally for individual items, the level of satisfaction was very high, ranging from 54.6% to 88.3%. The effect of essay tests on students' learning was appraised using Binary Logistic Regression Model. The variability explained by this model was not significant (Omnibus Test of Model Coefficient: $\chi^2=7.668$; $df=8$; $P=0.467$). This was supported by the Likelihood Ratio Test ($P>0.05$). This therefore implies that essay tests did not significantly predict learning outcome in terms of classroom performance. The effect though not null was very negligible, with an Explanatory Power (EP) / Predictive Power of 11.8% (Nagelkerke R Square=0.118). Table 3 shows that none of the 8 predictors making out the predictive component 'classroom essay test' emerged as significant predictor of learning.

Table 1. Students' Characterization of Essay Tests

Items	Stretched				Collapsed			
	Strongly agree	agree	disagree	Strongly disagree	Not sure	Agree	Disagree	
At the beginning of the academic year the English teacher presented all the different types of essays which we are expected to know and be able to write.	56.8% (204)	31.5% (113)	4.7% (17)	1.9% (7)	5.0% (18)	88.3% (317)	6.7% (24)	
The teacher gives a test each time an essay type is taught.	25.6% (92)	29.0% (104)	28.4% (102)	8.6% (31)	8.4% (30)	54.6% (196)	37.0% (133)	
I have written tests in								
Narrative essays	46.0% (165)	35.1% (126)	10.9% (39)	2.2% (8)	5.8% (21)	81.1% (291)	13.1% (47)	
Descriptive essays	43.2% (155)	34.0% (122)	12.3% (44)	2.2% (8)	8.4% (30)	77.2% (277)	14.5% (52)	
Argumentative essays	48.2% (173)	24.0% (86)	17.0% (61)	3.6% (13)	7.2% (26)	72.1% (259)	20.6% (74)	
Expository essays	39.8% (143)	26.7% (96)	20.3% (73)	6.4% (23)	6.7% (24)	66.6% (239)	26.7% (96)	
Open ended (vague) essays	48.2% (173)	24.0% (86)	16.7% (60)	4.5% (16)	6.7% (24)	72.1% (259)	21.2% (76)	
Picture prompt essays (picture composition)	47.4% (170)	25.9% (93)	15.9% (57)	7.0% (25)	3.9% (14)	73.9% (263)	22.8% (82)	
MRS	44.4% (1275)	28.8% (826)	15.8% (453)	4.6% (131)	6.5% (187)	73.2% (2101)	20.3% (584)	

N_{cases}=359; N_{responses}=2872

Table 2. Model Fitting Information and Predictive Power for the Predictive Component Essay Test on Learning

Likelihood Ratio test	Omnibus Tests of Model Coefficients	Explanatory/predictive power of the model (Pseudo R-Square) based on Nagelkerke R Square
$\chi^2=6.839$ df=8 P=0.554	$\chi^2=7.668$ df=8 P=0.467	0.118

*Dependent variable: Learning (classroom performance).

Table 3. Predictive Effect of Individual Predictors of Essay Tests on Learning

Predictors	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
At the beginning of the academic year the English teacher presented all the different types of essays which we are expected to know and be able to write.	.187	.374	.250	1	.617	1.205	.579	2.509
The teacher gives a test each time an essay type is taught.	.046	.238	.037	1	.848	1.047	.656	1.669
I have written tests in								
Narrative essays	.409	.311	1.731	1	.188	1.506	.818	2.770
Descriptive essays	-.373	.322	1.344	1	.246	.688	.366	1.294
Argumentative essays	.634	.388	2.675	1	.102	1.885	.882	4.030
Expository essays	.171	.341	.252	1	.615	1.187	.608	2.317
Open ended (vague) essays	-.167	.287	.337	1	.562	.847	.482	1.486

Table 4. The Standard Structure of the Essay Test

Essay types	Mark rubrics	No of questions
Narrative		
Open-ended		
Descriptive	-Content and organisation	
Argumentative	-expression	8 and 2 picture prompts for students to choose ONE topic
Expository	-accuracy	
Picture prompt		

Table 4 shows the standard for assessing extensive writing skill. This implies that for an essay test to be valid it should have the components as shown on table 4.

Table 5. Characterization of Respect of Classroom Essay Testing from Expert Perspective

School	Administration of essay tests								No. of questions	
	1 st Term				2 nd term				1 st Term	2 nd term
	ND	MD	AD	WD	ND	MD	AD	WD		
GHS Great Soppo. class: form 5	√							√		4
School: GHS Buea. Class: form 5	√				√					
GHS Buea Town. Class: form 5	√							√		8

Key: ND=not done MD=mildly done AD=averagely done WD=well done

Experts' Perspectives

Classroom essay tests represent the independent variable of the study-extensive writing. The marked scripts of 90 students, that is, 30 from each of the schools selected for the documentary cluster were examined to ascertain the attainment of extensive writing skill. The essay tests questions administered for the term and students marked scripts were analyzed to find out if they enhance the learning of extensive writing skills. This analysis was then contrasted with the standard as presented on the table below. Table 5 shows that only a total of 2 essay tests were administered in the three schools for 1st and 2nd terms instead of twelve essay tests which is expected. It also shows that even the two times when the class teachers administered essay tests it was just averagely done (4 and 8 questions). One of the schools didn't make any attempt to test students' learning of extensive writing skills for the 1st and 2nd terms. On the whole one could not ascertain or predict students' learning based on classroom essay testing to a

great extent because essay writing tests were mildly administered. Table 6 shows some specificities of essay writing tests were mildly respected. Even though the test specificities for the administered essay tests were well observed from a general perspective, the respond to classroom essay writing specificity is mild because two of the schools averagely observed the essay types and specificity just for one term while one school didn't administer any essay tests. Table 7 shows that the writing skill which is the main skill to be assessed in essay writing was well observed where it was administered (two schools). However, from a general perspective, the extensive writing skill which is the main skill tested here is mildly observed because though two schools observed the writing skill it was done just once for the 2nd term. Table 8 shows assessment principles were respected in schools that administered classroom essay tests. From an overall perspective these assessment principles were just mildly observed because the standards of writing essay tests were not respected.

Table 6. Characterization of Respond to Classroom Essay Tests Specificities from Expert Perspective

School	Essay type and specificity	Respond to essay writing test and specificity							
		1 st term				2 nd term			
		NO	MO	AO	WO	NO	MO	AO	WO
GHS Great Soppo. class: form 5	Narrative				✓				✓
	Open-ended				✓				✓
	Descriptive				✓				✓
	argumentative				✓		✓		
	Expository				✓		✓		
	Picture prompt				✓		✓		
	Mark rubrics				✓				✓
School: GHS Buea. Class: form 5	Narrative				✓				
	Open-ended				✓				
	Descriptive				✓				
	argumentative				✓				
	Expository				✓				
	Picture prompt				✓				
	Mark rubrics				✓				
GHS Buea Town. Class: form 5	Narrative				✓				✓
	Open-ended				✓				✓
	Descriptive				✓				✓
	argumentative				✓		✓		
	Expository				✓				✓
	Picture prompt				✓		✓		
	Mark rubrics				✓				✓

Table 7. Characterization of Respect of Language Skills in Classroom Essay Writing Testing from Expert Perspective

School	Language	Respect of each language skill				Remarks
		NO	MO	AO	WO	
GHS Great Soppo. class: form 5	Listening					The main skill assessed here is the writing skill. grammar and vocabulary are slightly tested here because they serve as enabling skills
	Reading					
	Writing				✓	
	Grammar		✓			
	vocabulary		✓			
School: GHS Buea. Class: form 5	Listening					
	Reading					
	Writing					
	Grammar					
	vocabulary					
GHS Buea Town. Class: form 5	Listening					
	Reading					
	Writing				✓	
	Grammar		✓			
	vocabulary		✓			

Key: NO=not observed

MO=mildly observed AO=averagely observed

WO=well observed

Table 8. Characterization of Respond to Assessment Principles in Classroom Essay Testing from Expert Perspective

School	Assessment principles	Respond to assessment principles							
		1 st term				2 nd term			
		NO	MO	AO	WO	NO	MO	AO	WO
GHS Great Soppo. class: form 5	Practicality	√							✓
	Content validity	√							✓
	Test Reliability	√						✓	
	Authenticity	√							✓
School: GHS Buea. Class: form 5	Practicality	√				√			
	Content validity	√				√			
	Test Reliability	√				√			
	Authenticity	√				√			
GHS Buea Town. Class: form 5	Practicality	√							✓
	Content validity	√							✓
	Test Reliability	√						✓	
	Authenticity	√							✓

Key: NO=not observed; MO=mildly observed; AO=averagely observed; WO=well observed

Table 9. Summary of Analysis of Focus Group Discussion

Themes	Sample Respond	No.
Teachers' awareness of category of assessment for language skills	'I use MCQs to assess listening, reading, grammar and vocabulary'	4
	'I use essay questions to assess composition writing'	3
Teachers' provision of learning outcomes(program) for essay writing to students at the beginning of the school year	'Yes, so that students can read ahead''	2
	'partially, for students to evaluate syllabus coverage '	2
	'no, because the students will not use it'	3
Regularity of classroom essay tests	'Once a term'	5
	'once a month'	2
Continuous classroom assessment of essay writing skills.	'difficult, because my class size is too large'	2
Teachers' source of questions used for classroom tests	'-At times from the course book'	7
	'Sometimes I design questions'	7
	'-I also adapt course book questions'	6
	'I use past GCE questions'	6
Teachers' administration of tests in all learnt outcomes for essay writing	'not really, since I can't mark the scripts'	3
	'no, can't administer a test each time I complete teaching a main topic because of the large class size'	4
Alternatives for assessing achieved outcomes apart from testing students	'I give assignments and do general discussion the following day'	4
	'I give assignments and randomly check students' books in the next class'	3
Use of mark rubrics in scoring essay test questions	'I use the rubrics used in scoring candidates scripts in the GCE'	4
	'I use the GCE mark rubrics and also make remarks on students' test papers'	3
Scoring methods used on essay writing scripts	Analytic scoring method	2
	GCE marking method	5
Representation of the recorded scores	'I didn't assess essay in the 1 st term so I didn't have scores for essay.'	4
	'the scores represent their performance in essay in the 2 nd term'	1
	'my students' scores represent their performance in grammar and vocabulary and directed writing'	2
Possibility of including scores from students assignments in the final evaluation mark	'Not possible because at times I can randomly put a tick or a cross on portions of a task'	2
	'I don't have marks for classroom assignments because most of the time students don't even do the assignments'	5
Possibility of recorded scores to represent essay writing skills	'Possible if the class size is drastically reduced'	3
	'Possible if my work load is reduced'	5
	'Possible if class size is reduced and the administration provides necessary resources'	4
Whether the essay test impact students' learning	'not quite since I didn't really administer essay test'	2
	'many don't take any cognizance of the rubrics'	4
	'some have not even collected their scripts'	2
Suggestion for essay tests to impact students' learning.	' Teachers assess all the learnt skills progressively and at the end of the evaluation period the totality of the scores are put together, rather than testing just one aspect at the end of the evaluation period'	4
	'Teachers can test students for each essay writing aspect and later on add all the scores for each evaluation. In that way students will learn from the assessment rubrics'	4

Conclusion for research question

Classroom essay tests did not enhance students' learning in the observed schools to a large extent because it was mildly done, as supported by Logistic Regression Model, but contrasted by students appreciation as they were to a high extent satisfied with classroom essay tests.

Qualitative appraisal of classroom essay writing and learning based on the focus group discussion

The findings showed that the attainment of the objectives for essay writing was generally very low. The loopholes for classroom essay tests were:

- Students do not have adequate testing situations to access their achievement in writing extensively
- The number of tests administered for essay writing could not ascertain the achieved outcome in extensive writing.
- Assessment principles were not well respected.

However, some strong points were highlighted. These were:

- A mild attempt was made to assess achieved outcomes in essay writing
- Teachers made an attempt to respect the official assessment rubrics for the few essays that were tested

Summary of findings

Research Question: To what extent do classroom essay tests enhance students' learning?

Statistical test used: Descriptive (Frequency, proportion and MRS).

Inferential (Binary Logistic Regression: Omnibus Test of Model Coefficient to test model fitting parameters and Explanatory Power measured with Nagelkerke R Square).

Comments: In overall, students were mostly satisfied with the attainment of the objectives of classroom essay tests with weight of 73.2%. Only a weight of 20.3% was not satisfied with classroom essay tests while 6.5% could not take a stance. The effect of classroom essay tests on students' learning was appraised using Binary Logistic Regression Model. The variability explained by this model was not significant (Omnibus Test of Model Coefficient: $\chi^2=7.668$; $df=8$; $P=0.467$). This was supported by the Likelihood Ratio Test ($P>0.05$). This therefore implies that essay tests did not significantly predict learning outcome in terms of classroom performance. The effect though not null was very negligible, with an Explanatory Power (EP) / Predictive Power of 11.8% (Nagelkerke R Square=0.118).

The findings revealed that essay tests did not significantly predict learning outcomes in terms of classroom performance, even though students were mostly satisfied with the attainment of the objectives of classroom essay tests. In other words classroom essay tests did not predict students learning of extensive writing skills to a great extent. The outcome of the classroom essay tests was not in line with the views of Jacobs and Chase (1992); Walstad (2006); Parmenter (2009); Brown (2010) that essay tests provides the teacher an opportunity to

illicit high level cognitive skills like critical thinking, creativity, ability to synthesize material and compare an argument. The findings showed that classroom essay tests did not predict extensive writing learning outcomes due to the limited respect of evaluation norms meant to judge students' achievement in essay writing. The findings from the focus group discussion, tests questions and marked scripts confirmed the significant limit of measures to assess achievement in essay writing. This to a large extent according to the teachers is due to the large class size which made it impossible to assess extensive writing skills continuously. The findings equally showed students were generally satisfied with the attainment of the objectives for testing essay writing. This satisfaction implied they had attained competences in extensive writing. However findings from the focus group discussion, test scores, marked scripts and test questions revealed students' achievement in essay writing were not adequately assessed for any informed decision making. This revealed that students were not skillful enough to make a fair judgment concerning their competences in essay writing. This is in line with Zeider (1987) who asserts that students can perceive essay writing exams to be more appropriate for the purpose of reflecting their knowledge in the required subject matter.

Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

The investigation showed students' achievement in essay writing is below average owing to the non-respect of essay writing assessment norms. This is in line with the study by Siddiq (2013) which revealed among others, that the proficiency of senior secondary school students in the content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy aspects of essay writing was below average. Among other weaknesses the study basically revealed the inadequacy of classroom assessment of essay writing in English Language. Since students were unable to judge the standards of their achievements they were convinced they had achieved the essay writing learning outcomes. With the remediation of these weaknesses, success rate may increase in the end of course official examinations

From the investigation it was concluded that Classroom essay tests did not enhance students' learning of extensive writing skills. Teachers' inability to adequately assess achieved outcomes in essay writing showed limited acquisition of extensive writing skills. Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are addressed to all stakeholders involved.

- In order for students to develop the skill to write extensively, teachers should continuously assess students' writings in the different essay types.
- School administrators should provide the resources needed for teachers to adequately assess their learners extensively.

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