

A Study of the Efficacy of Grade Seven English Essay Examinations: A Case for Selected Primary Schools in Harare

By

Caiphaz Luke Kapfunde, Tichaona Mapolisa and Nelson Chibvonga Madziyire

Department of Educational Studies, Faculty of Arts and Education
Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU)

Abstract

The study analyses the efficacy of the Grade 7 English Language essay examinations in selected Harare primary schools in Zimbabwe. One hundred respondents made up of heads and teachers in the selected primary schools participated in the study. The sample included participants from high and low density suburbs. Some were from government schools whilst others were from non-government schools. A questionnaire was developed and a pilot study was carried out to validate the instrument before it was distributed to selected Heads of primary schools and their current and former Grade Six and Grade Seven teachers. The objective for limiting the study to these groups was that these were the people presumed to have the information that was needed for the study. The study found out that essay examinations were perceived to: (a) be promoting the development of creativity and originality in the learners; (b) be a pre-condition to linguistic accuracy and language development in pupils; and (c) cater for divergent thinking in pupils. The study recommended that: (a) Grade 7 teachers must effectively plan their work with their pupils' learning needs in mind; (b) pupils should read more library books to broaden their knowledge base; (c) teachers and examiners should be in-serviced in the skills involving essay teaching, writing and marking; and (d) teachers should employ various strategies such as prompt speeches, debates, drama, poem, presentations and essay competitions at class, cluster, district and provincial levels to improve pupils essay writing skills.

Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms have been defined in the context of this article:

Efficacy refers to the adequacy of the Grade 7 English examination in preparing primary school pupils for further education and life.

Grade 7 English essay examination is a published or standardized test that marks the end of the primary school education in Zimbabwe. Learners write one guided essay usually of one page in length.

1. Introduction

During the second half of the last century, the question of the impact of the multiple choice examinations revolved mostly around the evaluation of its benefits and costs. Nowadays, in the context of the education system in Zimbabwe, there appears to be a paradigm shift. In this paper we analyse the efficacy of the Grade 7 English essay examinations with particular reference to primary schools in Harare. Essay examinations taken at the end of the primary school cycle in Zimbabwe are not new. This strategy was there for a long time but was abolished at independence in 1980. The re-introduction of the essay examinations at Grade 7 level in Zimbabwe has been in place for nine years now. While this practice appears to be relatively new in the schools, it is one that needs to be taken seriously in the wake of concerns for the achievement of quality education the world over. Most empirical studies show that there exists a weak and elusive connection between essay examinations and quality education.

Background to the Study

In the Grade 7 examinations in Zimbabwe, candidates write two papers in English and Shona/IsiNdebele Languages, Mathematics and General Paper. In the languages, candidates write Paper One which comprises two parts namely, guided and free response comprehension work. Most teachers seem to be of the opinion that use of well-constructed essay questions test higher-level knowledge than most objective questions (Doher, 1991; Everett, 1994; Perkins, 1993 and Steele, 1993). While essays can be highly regarded for the preceding reasons, Cuning (1998) notes that teachers might not effectively assess pupils performance due to lack of measurement skills, attributed to the training their backgrounds. Essay examinations seem to instill anxiety into the less intellectually developed learners (Gipps, 1995; Linn and Gronlund, 1995; Nitko, 1996; Ysseldyke, 2001). These academic views seem to appraise use of essay examinations to measure learning performance. They appear not to be analysing the efficacy of Grade 7 English Language examinations. The present co-researchers intended to analyse the efficacy of using Grade 7 English essay examinations to pursue quality education in selected Primary Schools in Harare.

Statement of the Problem

Essay examinations have been viewed as one of the complementary forms of assessing learners at any level of education (Brown, 2010). This view reveals that essay examinations are far from being a perfect tool for the measurement of learners' performance. In view of the above statements, we were prompted to provide answers to the following question: What is the efficacy of using the Grade 7 English essay examinations to assess pupils' performance in that subject area?

Research Questions

This study intended to answer the following research questions:

- How effective are English Language essay examinations as tools for assessing the performance of Grade 7 pupils in selected primary schools in Harare?
- How does the use of Grade 7 English Language essay examinations affect the quality of primary school products?
- What measures, if any, can be put in place to improve the efficacy of the Grade 7 English essay examinations?

The Significance of the Study

Findings from this study are important in a number of ways. First, it was our hope that the study would be of great help to primary school teachers who bear the crucial responsibility of adequately preparing Grade 7 candidates for secondary education. Heads of primary schools may use findings of the study to make decisions on how best to improve performance of their pupils. Through findings of the study, teachers may be reminded of the ethical professional practices involved in preparing candidates for the Grade 7 English essay examinations. The study might be useful to educational planners, especially those in colleges of education, who might need the findings to design an overwhelming curriculum that can successfully prepare student teachers to efficiently and effectively handle issues involved in preparing learners for Grade 7 and post-Grade 7 examinations. Also, the Zimbabwe Schools Examination Council (ZIMSEC) officials and officials from the Ministry of Education, Sport, Arts, and Culture might have an interest in the findings of the study with the intention to facilitate programmes that pursue an efficient and effective use of the Grade 7 English Language essay examination system in preparing learners for post Grade 7 examinations.

2. Review of Related Literature

The efficacy of the Grade 7 English essay examination can be realised through a critique of essay examinations.

Advantages of Essay Tests and Examinations

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Essay examinations can test higher-level cognitive skills. While testing objectives require learners to apply knowledge, analyse data or situations, synthesize or evaluate issues, the essay test can be an effective test (Mnkandla, 1997; Linn and Gronlund, 1995; Salmon, 1995). Because essay examinations address higher-level cognitive processes, teachers can individually direct learners in their thought processes (Sax, 1989; Zindi, Peresuh and Mpofo, 1997). Students study more efficiently in preparing for an essay examination. Research has shown that students generally spend less time on rote memorization when they are preparing for an essay examination rather than a multiple-choice examination (e.g. Mayer, 1975; Shavelson and Stern, 1981). Essays also allow students to practice their writing skills. Many students can graduate from college without having much practice in writing (McCormick and Pressley, 1997). Essays can individualise teachers' instruction. Teachers' feedback on an essay can help students form insights into the subject material, organizational and writing skills. Teachers' comments can also be an important motivating factor (Salmon, 1995). Above all, essays provide feedback to teachers who need the insights gained to assess level of mastery and understanding of their children. Sometimes objective test scores do not portray a students' mastery of learning. Essays, however, can reveal the depth of students' knowledge as well as erroneous conclusions that are drawn (Liston, 1999).

Perceived Limitations of Essay Examinations

While essays tend to enjoy some advantages over multiple-choice examinations, they also have their own limitations. First, essay tests and examinations have the problem of grading unreliability. Unlike the multiple-choice format, the essay test is a subjective form of evaluation (Ogunniyi, 1984). Teachers often introduce their biases into the grading. If teachers know the pupil whose paper is being evaluated, the grade may reflect personal feelings for that pupil, or assessment results may reflect influence from past grades. For example, if the pupil/student received an 'A' on a past examination, the teacher may tend to give a higher grade than is actually deserved in this examination (McCormick and Pressley, 1997). Also, grades given on first papers may differ significantly from those that are graded later. Other influences include teachers' general mood and stress level at the time of grading, the time of day, and their feelings about the subject of the essay.

All the writers cited above focused on the effectiveness of essays in general and they did not particularise the level to which learners were tested. They also did not pinpoint the subjects to which learners were tested. In addition, the preceding findings lacked context specificity. In view of these gaps, it was, therefore, the interest of the current researchers to explore the efficacy of English essay examinations at Grade 7 level in selected primary schools in Harare.

3. Research Methodology

The study employed a descriptive survey design. This design was preferred because it has the advantage of allowing the use of relatively large samples (Punch, 2004; Thomas and Nelson, 2001) as is the case in this study where N=100. It was viewed as an appropriate design where perceptions of participants were sought (Punch, 2004). This study made use of views, opinions and impressions made and projected by primary school heads and their teachers. A carefully selected sample of respondents was surveyed and a description of the population was inferred from what was found out about the sample.

The Sample

Thirty primary schools in Harare were randomly selected. Some of these schools were in high density suburbs such as Mbare while others were from low density suburbs such as Mabelreign. Some schools were government and others were private schools managed by the churches or Boards of Governors. All the schools selected were accessible to the researchers who worked at the Zimbabwe Open University's National Centre in the Central Business District of the City of Harare. The total population in the thirty schools was 105. It was made up of teachers of Grades 6 and 7 and their school heads. Some of those approached for data were former Grade 7 teachers who had been allocated classes lower than these two

on rotational basis. The researchers conveniently sampled 100 teachers and heads of schools which were available at the time of the study.

Data Collection Instruments

Two questionnaires, one for school heads and the other for teachers with closed ended items were developed. Respondents rated the various items on a 5 point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Disagree; to 5 = Strongly Disagree to indicate positive and negative responses (Best and Khan, 1994). Respondents were further probed through open-ended items on the questionnaire. They were given the opportunity to suggest the way forward. Thus, questions which asked the respondents to rank responses were analysed quantitatively and those with open-ended responses were analysed qualitatively. Additionally, a small group of eight teachers was interviewed to cross validate questionnaire data. Interviews were based on items on the questionnaire. Questionnaires were personally handed in to the respondents and later collected from them by the researchers. This strategy assured a 100 percent return rate.

3. Results

Analysis of data revealed a number of indicators on the efficacy of the Grade 7 English language essay examinations in schools that were studied in Harare. To interpret data, the researchers were guided by the following questions:

- How effective are the English language essay examinations as tools for assessing performance of Grade 7 pupils in selected primary schools in Harare?
- How does the use of Grade 7 English language essay examinations affect the quality of primary school graduates?
- What measures, if any, can be put in place to improve the efficacy of the Grade 7 English language essay examinations?

Characteristics of the Respondents

Key characteristics of the study's respondents include gender, age range, highest academic and professional qualifications, current status in education and length of experience in education. Table 1 on page 9 shows distribution of the study's respondents by their gender, age ranges, academic and professional qualifications, current status and length of experience in education.

An analysis of the findings indicates that 75 percent of the respondents were female while 25 percent were male. Thus the study revealed that there were more female teachers in schools that were studied. The explanation for this gender imbalance could be due to the fact that many female teachers request for teaching posts in urban areas where their husbands work in industries other than teaching. Respondents were asked to indicate their age ranges. The data reveal that 67 percent of the respondents were over 40 years of age; 23 percent were aged between 31 and 40 years; 6 percent were aged between 21 and 30 years, while 4 percent did not indicate their age ranges. These results indicate that teachers in the selected schools were mature enough to carry out their professional duties.

As to their academic qualifications, 50 percent of the respondents held the 'O' Level qualification, 24 percent had a Bachelor's degree, 16 percent held an 'A' level qualification and 5 percent held a Master's degree as their highest academic qualification. The remaining 5 percent did not indicate their highest academic qualifications. When asked about their highest professional qualification, 43 percent held a Diploma in Education, 33 percent held a Teacher's Certificate, 23 percent said they had a teaching degree such as the Bachelor of Education. One respondent did not indicate his/her highest professional qualification. These findings reveal that all the respondents held at least the minimum academic and professional qualifications to teach the Grade 7 English language course. The policy in Zimbabwe is that for any applicant to be enrolled in a teachers' college, s/he must have passed English language course at

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'O' level, among other requirements. These findings seem to confirm the hypothesis that respondents possessed requisite professional qualifications for them to provide valid and reliable data on the efficacy of Grade 7 English language essay examinations.

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (N=100)

Gender	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Male	25	25
Female	75	75
Total	100	100
Age range (in years)		
21-30	6	6
31-40	23	23
Over 40	67	67
Did not indicate their ages	4	4
Total	100	100
Highest academic qualification		
O' Level	50	50
A' Level	16	16
Bachelor's degree	24	24
Masters degree	5	5
Did not indicate	5	5
Total	100	100
Highest professional qualification		
Teacher's certificate	33	33
Diploma in education	43	43
Teaching degree	23	23
Did not indicate	1	1
Total	100	100
Current Status in Education		
School head	4	4
Deputy school head	4	4
Teacher in Charge	4	4
Senior Teacher	10	6
Teacher	80	80
Did not indicate current status	2	2
Total	100	100
Length of experience in Education		
Below 6 years	6	6
6-10 years	15	15
11-15 years	20	20
Over 15 years	56	56
Did not indicate	3	3
Total	100	100

Respondents were asked to indicate their current status in education. Eighty (80) percent of the respondents were made up of classroom teachers; 10 percent were of senior teachers, 4 percent was of teachers-in-charge; another 8 percent were made up of school heads and deputy school heads. Two (2) percent of the respondents did not indicate their current professional status. To a certain measure, the respondents' professional status is indicative of the degree of efficacy of the Grade 7 examinations in the studied schools.

When respondents were asked to indicate the length of their experience in education, 56 percent said they had over 15 years of experience; 50 percent had experiences of between 11 and 15 years; 15 percent had between 6 and 10 years experience, 6 percent indicated the length of their experience to have been below 6 years. Three (3) percent did not indicate length of their experience in education. From these data, one can conclude that our respondents had enough educational experience to provide valid data about the efficacy of the Grade 7 English essay examinations on educational quality. This becomes more so when it is realised that all the respondents including the school heads and deputy heads had experience in teaching Grade 7 classes.

The Efficacy of the Grade 7 English Essay Examinations

Respondents were presented with a variety of items regarding English essay examinations as an alternative to using multiple-choice examinations. A five point rating scale ranging from SA = strongly agree to SDA = strongly disagree was used to explicate respondents ratings on each issue raised. Table 2 below shows respondents’ perceptions of the impact and effectiveness of the Grade 7 English essay examinations.

Nearly 52 percent of the respondents indicated that the Grade 7 English essay examinations had improved fluency of pupils in the English language while 34 percent strongly agreed, 7 percent were neutral, 5 percent disagreed and 2 percent strongly disagreed. Cumulatively, 86 percent of the respondents agreed with the view that Grade 7 English essay examinations had improved the fluency of pupils in the language. These results are consistent with previous observations by Salmon (1995) who found out that essays could improve learners’ fluency. By implication, pupils may learn to express their ideas on paper logically, coherently and convincingly through the use of essays.

With regards to the issue of creativity, 37.5 percent strongly agreed with the above view and 53 percent agreed with the view that essay examinations had made pupils to be more creative than before. The data also reveal that 5 percent were neutral, 1 percent disagreed, and 4 percent strongly disagreed.

Table 2 Respondents’ Ratings of the Impact and Effectiveness of the Grade 7 English Essay Examinations (N=100)

Question No.	Variable	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Total
7	Grade 7 English Essay examinations have improved fluency of pupils in the language	34%	52%	7%	5%	2%	100%
8	Essay examinations have made pupils to be more creative than before	37	53	5	1	4	100%
9	Today’s Grade 7 pupils study harder than before the introduction of essay examinations	39	48	7	4	2	100%
10	Essay examinations enable pupils to be more original than before.	34	58	2	3	3	100%
11	Unlike multiple-choice exams, essays discourage rote learning	34	58	3	2	3	100%
12	Pass rates at Grade 7 level have dropped due to essay examinations	39	46	6	4	5	100%
13	Pupils now spend more time reading in the library than before	40	50	6	1	3	100%
14	Essays predict more accurately performance of pupils	24	70	3	1	2	100%

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15	Pupils are more eager to get help from teachers	19	76	4	0	1	100%
16	Essay examinations are encouraging divergent thinking in pupils	29	70	0	0	1	100%
17	Scoring essay examinations is disadvantaging pupils with poor hand writing unlike multiple-choice examinations	37	61	0	1	1	100%
18	More pupils now participate in school debates to improve their performance in essay exams and in the language	50	50	0	0	0	100%
19	Pupils of today have better self-expression than before	37	61	0	1	1	100%
20	English essay examinations are encouraging greater use of the language in pupils' day-to-day conversation	25	70	5	0	0	100%
21	Technical skills such as sentence construction and punctuation have improved since the introduction of essay examinations.	25	60	5	5	5	100%
22	Grade 7 essay examinations have had a positive impact on performance at secondary school level	25	25	25	25	0	100%
23	Essay exams are encouraging pupils to organize their ideas better than when it was multiple-choice tests and exam only	80%	10%	5%	5%	0%	100%

These quantitative findings appear to support earlier findings by McCormick and Pressely (1997) who noted that essays provided learners with opportunities to creatively put across their ideas on paper. We also feel that when pupils put their ideas on paper they may be using their imaginative skills to convince 'reader audience' about particular topics. Unlike multiple type tests and examinations, essays require learners/candidates to supply the responses rather than to select from a given list.

We asked our respondents whether essay examinations made pupils to work harder than during the time of multiple-choice tests only. An examination of Table 2 reveals that 39 percent of the respondents strongly agreed with the suggestion that essay examinations made pupils to study harder, another 48 percent agreed, 7 percent was neutral, 4 percent disagreed and another 2 percent strongly disagreed with the suggestion. The fact that the majority (87 percent) of our respondents were positive about the efficacy of essay examinations on pupils' work habits is not surprising. Essay examinations by their very nature demand that learners be creative as they have to supply information rather than select from a given list. These findings supported by McCormick and Pressely (1997) who argue that through multiple-choice tests and examinations, many college students can graduate without having much practice in writing. Essays permit pupils and students to use their own ideas to describe, analyse, discuss, examine and evaluate issues in real life situations (McCormick and Pressely, 1997).

Current researchers asked the respondents to indicate their perceptions of the efficacy of essay in rote memorization by pupils today. In their responses, 34 percent strongly agreed with the assertion that essay examinations discouraged rote memorization unlike multiple-choice tests. Another 58 percent agreed

with the statement, 2 percent was neutral, 3 percent disagreed and 3 percent strongly disagreed with the assertion. Those who perceived essay examinations as having a positive effect on rote learning seem to have argued that pupils cannot resort to rote learning when they are required to be creative and supply answers that are unique. This kind of reasoning is supported by Mayer (1975) and Shavelson and Stern (1981). These pointed out that research studies elsewhere has shown that students generally spend less time on memorization when they study for an essay examination unlike the case with multiple-choice tests and examinations. Essay examinations enable pupils to be deep thinkers rather than superficial thinkers. They do not look at peripheral issues, but have to think deeply about what they will be writing on.

An examination of data on Table 2 reveals that the introduction of essay examinations has had a negative effect on Grade 7 pass rates in our sample of schools. A total of 85 percent of our respondents rated that introduction of essay examinations was responsible for a lowering of Grade 7 pass rates in these schools. Nevertheless, 9 percent of the sample disagreed and argued that the introduction of essay examinations had no negative effect on Grade 7 pass rates. An examination of some records at some of the primary schools in our sample seems to confirm this opposing view. This is because pass rates had remained stable since the introduction of essay examinations. Reflecting further on these findings, we were able to conclude that pass rates are determined by factors such as the degree to which individual teachers and schools are committed to issues of educational quality, teacher quality, lack of teacher absenteeism, and a host of other resources such as supply of learning materials that promote quality instruction.

We asked our respondents to indicate their opinions on the influence of the Grade 7 essay examinations on the use of libraries by primary school pupils compared to the time of multiple-choice only. In their responses, 90 percent either strongly agreed or agreed that essay examinations induced pupils to make greater use of libraries than before. Although 6 percent of the respondents were neutral, 4 percent either strongly agreed or disagreed with the suggestion. Of these 4 percent argued that in schools where there were libraries these observations may hold true but in many schools libraries were unavailable and teachers had to make do with what was available such as using the prescribed textbooks. In fact, it is a misrepresentation of facts to talk of libraries in the sample of schools for the current study.

When it comes to the efficacy of English essay examination on pupils' divergent thinking, 29 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that English essay examinations enabled divergent thinking amongst pupils than multiple-choice tests. Another 70 percent agreed with the suggestion and only 1 percent strongly disagreed. Therefore our data reveal that respondents were unanimous in suggesting that since the introduction of English essay examinations; learners were now showing greater evidence of divergent thinking than before. Essays invite multiple responses; hence they permit teachers to cater for individual differences.

Our data confirmed the hypothesis that scoring essay examinations is difficult and tends to disadvantage learners and examinees with poor handwriting skills. An examination of Table 1 shows that respondents were almost unanimous in suggesting that the introduction of essay examinations now posed scoring problems unlike multiple-choice tests. We note that 37 percent of the respondents strongly agreed, 61 percent agreed, while one respondent (1 percent) disagreed and another one strongly disagreed with the view that scoring essay examinations was disadvantaging pupils with poor hand writing skills This is confirmed by Liston (1999) who argued that sometimes essay tests and examinations do not have straightforward scoring. This may be true in cases where markers get distracted by candidates' poor handwriting.

Respondents were unanimous in their perceptions of the role of English essay examinations in encouraging school debates unlike the time of multiple-choice tests only. Fifty (50) percent of the respondents strongly agreed while another 50 percent agreed with the perception that more primary school pupils were now participating in school debates hoping that this would improve their performance

firstly in the English language and secondly performance in essay tests and examinations. It is through such debates that pupils' ideas are fine tuned, panel beaten and straightened. Further, 61 percent of the respondents expressed the view that introduction of the Grade 7 English essay examinations had improved pupils' self-expression while another 37 percent strongly agreed with the view, and 2 percent of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the argument that pupils today have better self-expression than before. These data may be true when it comes to factual writing. It may not be true when it comes to oral work because learners tend to perfect the art of writing faster than they do with oral work.

Related to the above, the introduction of English essay examination was encouraging greater use of the language in pupil's day-to-day conversation. From Table 2, we see that 25 percent of our respondents was very positive and so strongly agreed with the assertion that essay examinations were encouraging greater use of the English language in the sample of schools. Seventy percent of the respondents agreed with the assertion and 5 percent was neutral. Indeed essay tests and examinations provide a platform for learners to practice sharing ideas. They may do so during pupil-to-pupil interaction or in the classroom where they have the opportunity to practice essay writing. To encourage proficiency in oral English, some schools were reported to have adopted policies where pupils were required to communicate in English during certain periods of the school day.

In terms of linguistic accuracy, 25 percent of the respondents strongly agreed that English essay examinations had had an effect on the linguistic accuracy now being displayed by learners at the end of their primary school cycle. Another 60 percent agreed with this assertion, 5 percent were neutral, 5 percent strongly disagreed and 5 percent disagreed with the assertion. In this regard, 85 percent of the respondents noted that technical skills such as sentence construction and punctuation had improved since the introduction of essay examinations. These findings seem to confirm earlier findings by Sax (1989) and Zindi, Peresuh and Mpfu (1997) who argued that essays address higher-level cognitive processes and that teachers can individually direct students in their thought processes. By so doing essays expose pupils to thorough practice in language technical skills that will in turn, improve their mastery of the English language.

We asked our respondents to indicate whether essay examinations had had any positive effect on primary pupils' ability to organize their ideas better than multiple-choice tests. Respondents were very positive in their perceptions of the issue. Survey data reveal that 80 percent strongly agreed and another 10 percent agreed with the statement that essay examinations had profound effect on the ability of primary school pupils to organize their ideas better than was the case with multiple-choice examinations. However, 5 percent was neutral and another 5 percent disagreed. Thus, a total of 90 percent of the respondents felt that essay examinations had enabled primary school pupils to organize their ideas better compared to multiple-choice tests and examinations only. These findings support Salmon's (1995) observation that teachers' feedback on essays can help students form insights into the subject material, organizational skills and writing skills. Thus, essays enable pupils to logically present well thought-out ideas on paper.

4. Conclusions

The study explored the efficacy of Grade 7 English essay examinations in thirty selected Harare primary schools in Zimbabwe. One hundred teachers and school heads were approached for questionnaire data and eight of the teachers were also interviewed. The results appear to be a spring board for further research in the continuous search and pursuit of quality education. The use of English essay examinations was found to be directly associated with improvements in fluency in the language of primary school learners. When given the right guidance and opportunities, essays may be vehicles to advance fluency and technical skills in pupils. Further, pupils can develop a verbal facility that may advance their self-expression skills in debates, discussions and conversations.

The study concludes that the use of essays promotes the development of creativity and originality in learners. Pupils are not narrow in their thinking capacity but are encouraged to open up as much as possible as they write their ideas on paper. Essays motivate pupils to study harder in order to deepen their knowledge. In this regard, focused and committed pupils make frequent use of school and/or community libraries to further their knowledge base. In this way, they desist from memorization of facts. They become contemplative of the issues they write about.

The study also concludes that pass rates in any examination are not a result of the type of an examination alone. They are dependent on other factors such as teacher commitment, teacher quality, learner commitment and availability of resources to enhance quality education. Failure to provide requisite resources and appropriate opportunities for learning is tantamount to pupils' failure in the English language. Appropriate opportunities for pupils to learn are a pathway for effective pupil learning and active engagement in their learning. Additionally, use of essay tests and examinations has been highly regarded for its ability to cater for divergent thinking. This is because essay answers are not predetermined. They emerge from various pupils' responses.

The study also revealed that essay examinations are a pre-condition to linguistic accuracy and language development in primary school learners. Pupils master technical skills better with essay tests and examinations such as punctuation, spelling, grammar and sentence construction skills unlike multiple tests. Furthermore, essay examinations train pupils to organise their ideas well. However, the study confirmed the hypothesis that essay tests and examinations tend to disadvantage learners with poor handwriting skills.

5. Recommendations

The current study makes the following recommendations as a way of improving the quality of education:

- Grade 7 teachers should effectively plan their lessons with their pupils learning needs in mind in order to cater for the principle of individuality.
- Pupils should be provided with appropriate and conducive learning opportunities that motivate them to learn how to write essays competently.
- Teachers should ensure that pupils are exposed to challenging experiences that deepen their thinking capacities by letting them discuss, analyse, examine, critique and evaluate real life situations in essay writing.
- Teachers should give their pupils more opportunities in essay writing skills in order to improve their skills.
- Pupils should be encouraged to read library books because it is said where there are no community libraries, class libraries are one of the greatest benefits after the teacher in the classroom. Pupils can have access to supplementary books in the library.
- In terms of linguistic accuracy and language development, emphasis should be on construction of sentences and analysis as opposed to sentence completion and filling words in blank spaces. This will help in developing pupils' powers of self-expression.
- Teachers could employ strategies such as prompt speeches, debates, drama, poem presentations and essay competitions at cluster and provincial levels to improve pupils essay writing skills.
- In-service training for teachers and examiners in the skills involved in essay writing and marking is not only for great need, but an obligation.
- Provision of more topics for selection in the examination is necessary to widen pupils' choice and cater for individual differences when writing essays.

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- Further research in the same area needs to be carried out at national level in order to come up with more valid and authentic knowledge regarding the efficacy of Grade 7 English language essay examinations.

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