FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN ENGLISH

AT COLLEGES OF EDUCATION IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

The role and place of the English language in education in Ghana makes students' performance in the subject an important issue for stakeholders in education. Following the poor performance of Level 100 students in English in the 2013/2014 second semester examination in some public colleges of education, this study made an exploratory comparative investigation into why students in some colleges of education performed highly and others performed poorly. A qualitative study involving observation of lessons, interviews with 8 tutors, 8 heads of English departments, 8 principals of colleges and a focus group interview with 80 teacher trainees from 8 colleges made up of 4 colleges with high student performance and 4 with poor student performance was undertaken. The findings suggest that students' weak background in English, under qualified teachers, lack of logistical support and professional development training impacted negatively on teaching and learning, contributing to students' poor performance in the English examination. It was recommended that colleges screen student entry qualifications, ensure that only qualified professional English teachers teach the subject and that these teachers receive regular professional training and support to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

KEYWORDS: English Language, Academic Performance, Students

INTRODUCTION

An important factor underlying development is education. Formal education does not work in a vacuum. The quality of schooling is linked with the curriculum, qualification of teachers, teaching methodologies, educational resources, equipment and physical facilities. Student achievement is affected by several factors such as teacher competency, school environment, school management, physical facilities, the examination system, etc. Academic achievement at any point is a cumulative function of current and prior family, community, and school experiences. As Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain (2005) note, a study of the entire process would require complete family, community, and school histories, which are rarely available. They contend that in the absence of such information, the relationship between the level of achievement and school inputs for a single grade are susceptible to omitted variables biases from a number of sources. An alternative approach, they observed, is to focus on the determinants of the rate of learning over specific time period. This eliminates a variety of confounding influences including the prior and often unobserved history of parental and school inputs and controls for variations in initial conditions when looking at how schools influence performance during, for example, a given school year. While such an approach by no means eliminates the potential for specification bias, the inclusion of initial achievement as a means to account for past inputs reduces dramatically the likelihood that omitted historical factors introduce significant bias.

Students' academic performance has been an important issue for institutions and the role of the English language for enhancing educational achievement through improved communication cannot be over emphasized. If the learner is handicapped in the language of education, classroom interaction will be difficult and learning may not take place (Malekela, 2003). Students who have difficulties with English language may not function effectively, not only in English as a subject but in all their academic endeavours. The influence English as a medium of communication has on all the other subjects of the curriculum invariably point to the fact that students' performance in the English language influences their overall performance in other subjects.

Ghana has had more than three hundred years of contact with three European countries – Portugal, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. It is, however, the English language that has exerted the greatest influence. It is the lingua franca and the official language. It is the language of education. The need and importance of the English language is reflected in it being a compulsory subject from primary class four, and a credit in the subject is required for progression up the academic ladder. Indeed, the Association for the Development in Africa (ADEA)'s (2005) argument that "Language is not everything in education, but without language, everything is nothing in education" (p. 5) resonates the importance of the English language in education in Ghana. Given its importance as a subject, common sense demands that students should perform well in it. However, the Chief Examiner's report on the West African Secondary School Examinations (a national qualifying examination to tertiary and higher education institutions) over the years point an accusing finger at the English language as the cause of students' low performance generally and in the English papers in particular. The record trend of poor performance in English seems to follow through to post secondary institutions. In consonance with Rivkin et al.'s (2005) views, factors in the school context are reviewed below.

Teachers and Learners

Teaching and learning involves two active participants in the classroom - the teacher and the learner. It is the pedagogical relationship between teachers and students that actively works (or fails) to enable the student to appropriate the curriculum in ways meaningful to him/her (Barnett, 2009, p. 432). Teaching and learning are not two distinct phenomena. Teachers constitute an important part of the learning context for students just as students in turn constitute an important part of the teaching environment for teachers. Qualitatively different approaches to teaching are associated with qualitatively different approaches to learning (Ramsden, 2006), and subsequently to students' learning outcomes. Although students must assume responsibility for their learning, research demonstrates clearly that among the factors that lead to students' performance are qualities of teachers (Vuzo, 2010). However, empirical studies have shown that if the early years at school fail to provide the appropriate foundation, no amount of special provision at later stages will be able to achieve the full potential of the student in terms of how his/her learning will proceed, and his/her attitude towards learning the language.

It is anticipated that if there are enough and well qualified teachers of English, availability of teaching and learning resources, they would contribute to students' high performance in the subject. Furthermore, if English language teachers could organize content, learning objectives, and apply current methods of teaching, students would perform highly in the subject at the end of the course. However, although current theories of learning such as constructivism has challenged the theoretical underpinnings of the traditional, teacher focused, "teaching by telling" approach, this method remains the dominant method of teaching in most colleges. Learners and many teachers often think that the ability to speak

a language is the product of language learning, but speaking is also a crucial part of the language learning process.

Motivation, Engagement and Language Learning

Motivation is the concept most used for explaining failure or success of a learner. Latifah et al. (2011), Wong, (2011) and Zhang (2012) all note the complex psychological construct called motivation which is regarded as one of the determinant factors in successful second and foreign language learning and regularly comes up when trying to explain individual differences among language learners. In fact, one of the main objectives of many second and foreign language teachers in classrooms is to increase student motivation, so that they may acquire a good command of the English language. The language-learning process has both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. The former has to do with knowledge and competence in the language itself and the latter to individual variables such as motivation and attitudes. Motivation influences attitudes and students' attitudes toward the language they learn could predict their academic success. Attitudes refer to the sets of beliefs that the learner holds towards members of the target group and also towards his own culture. Attitudes have a positive correlation with success in learning the second language because they facilitate learners' motivation to learn the language. Gardner (2006) aptly describes how "if one is motivated, he/she has reasons (motives) for engaging in the relevant activities" (p. 243). If students are motivated to use the language inside and outside classrooms, it would influence their level of performance in the language.

Extensive evidence exists that motivation and engagement are critical elements in student success and learning. Student engagement can be defined as the level of participation and intrinsic interest that a student shows in school work. It is generally considered to be among the better predictors of learning (Carini et al., 2006). Students learn more and are more likely to participate in school tasks when their teachers employ high-quality pedagogy assessed by three indices of instructional practice such as active teaching strategies, making connections and extensions, and student-to-student interactions. Active teaching is defined as engaging students in pairs or small groups to write, discuss, and/or manipulate learning resources. Making connections and extensions is defined as the degree to which students participate in activities that require them to connect what they are learning to real-world circumstances, solve novel problems and extend their knowledge to different situations. Student-to-student interaction is defined as the level of interactions between students in classroom activities that are designed to promote learning. However, class size influences opportunities for student engagement and effective teaching and learning practices (Nicol, 2009).

Assessment for Learning

Assessment is an integral component of the teaching and learning system. It is, therefore, not surprising that research has identified assessment as having the single greatest influence both on the effort put into studying and on the quality of learning. Feedback on students' work (information about how the student's present state of learning and performance relates to goals and standards) is necessary to enable them to monitor and adapt to the demands of the course (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 205). Students in the first year must have a clear understanding of what is required of them in the context of academic study. Such understanding can be facilitated through early and regular formative assessment tasks. Formative assessment can help clarify the meaning of goals and criteria and provide feedback to students so that they can continue to realign their work to what is required (Nicol, 2009). Indeed, research has shown that formative feedback does improve learning, and the gains in achievement are among the largest ever reported for educational achievements (Wake ford, 2006). Correspondingly, the use of classroom assessment provides the teacher with

data on teaching effectiveness and student comprehension.

Teachers' Professional Development and Student Achievement

There is an emerging understanding about the ways in which professional development impacts student achievement. Although an experimental study examining the features of high-quality professional development showed increased teacher knowledge and desired classroom practice, it did not find that this knowledge translated into improved student outcomes or sustainable changes in practice over time (Garet, Cronen, Eaton, Kurki, Ledwig, & Jones, 2008; Wilson, 2009). However, systematic reviews exploring the effects of professional development on student achievement found that programmes focused mainly on teacher behaviours demonstrated smaller influences on student learning than did programmes concerned primarily with teachers' knowledge of the subject, the curriculum, or how students learn the subject (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scar loss, & Shapley, 2007).

Context and Purpose of Study

Academic achievement like any attainable goal in life does not come by chance. In the quest to improve teacher education which is central to the proposed education reforms, the Government of Ghana upgraded teacher training colleges to tertiary education institutions. This resulted in a change in programme of the colleges from Certificate to Diploma. The change necessitated a change in the entry qualifications for admission into the colleges. The entry requirement thus moved from an aggregate of 24 or better in five subjects including at least a pass (Grade E) in English, Mathematics and Science for the Certificate to a grade C or better in all subjects for the Diploma. The Institute of Education of the University of Cape Coast has the mandate to maintain continual improvement in teacher education in Ghana by collaborating with stakeholders in education including the Ministry of Education (MoE), Teacher Education Division (TED) of the Ghana Education Service (GES), Principals of Colleges Conference (PRINCOF) etc. As the examination body of Colleges of Education in Ghana, the Institute examines and certifies students from thirty-eight (38) public and eight (8) private colleges in Ghana. Apart from its key role as an examining body, the Institute also monitors teaching and internal assessments conducted at the various colleges. The 38 public colleges have been put into five zones (PRINCOF Zones) for efficient and reliable interaction with the Institute and other stakeholders.

Student academic performance in general and performance in English language in particular have been an important issue for stakeholders in Education. Consequently, following the poor performance of Level 100 students in English in the 2013/2014 second semester examination in some public colleges of education, this study made an exploratory comparative investigation into why students in some colleges of education performed highly and others performed poorly. The utility of this exploratory study lies in the need to undertake corrective measures that improve the academic performance of students, especially in public funded institutions. It is believed that, the results of the study will be significantly beneficial to the Colleges of Education, Teacher Education Division of the Ministry of Education and students themselves. Research questions that guided the study are:

- What are the qualifications of tutors of English in the Colleges of Education?

- How is teaching and learning of English conducted in Colleges of Education?

- How is the syllabus for the English language /literature course and assessment requirements aligned?

- What factors affect students' performance in English?

METHODS

A qualitative study which involved observation of lessons, interviews with tutors, heads of academic departments, principals of colleges and students was undertaken. The population for the study was the 38 public colleges of Education in Ghana. Eight colleges made up of four Colleges with high student performance in English, and four Colleges with poor student performance in English in the 2013/2014 second semester examination were purposively selected for the study. The colleges selected were made up of one female and seven mixed colleges. Students' grades were used to measure their performance because the main focus is on students' performance for the particular semester. Since all the Colleges of Education follow the same syllabus designed by the Institute of Education, the focus was on teacher qualification and classroom interaction.

Instruments

Four interview schedules were used: Tutor Interview Schedule, Student Interview Schedule, Head of Department Interview Schedule and Principal Interview Schedule were developed for collection of data on English teaching and learning. The heads of department interview items were similar to the tutor interview items and data from the interviews were used to cross validate data from the tutor interviews. The University's Teaching Practice Assessment form was used as an observation guide to assess teaching and learning of English. Data was collected on qualifications of tutors; teaching; teaching load of tutors; topics students found challenging to learn as well as those their teachers found challenging to teach; and ways in which trainees' performance in English language could be improved. The content and structure of the English syllabus was examined in relation to the examination set.

Observation of Lessons and Interviews with Tutors

Seven English lessons were observed. Each lesson was preceded by an observation conference at which the tutor informed us about both the students' background and the lesson that was going to be taught. The conference took the form of a 'conversation with a purpose' (Mason, 2005, p. 62) enabling the establishment of rapport and a relaxed interaction. This gave us an insight into how previous lessons had been taught. Each lesson lasted an hour, after which a post observation conference was held with the tutors to give them the opportunity to self evaluate the lessons they had taught, receive feedback on the lessons observed and suggestions for improvement in subsequent lessons. Tutors were further interviewed on issues about teaching the subject.

The objective of the interviews was to encourage tutors to talk freely about their experiences of teaching and to allow their perspectives to unfold. In addition to the data collected from tutors, heads of English department as well as principals were interviewed. A total of 8 tutors, 8 heads of department and 8 principals of colleges of education participated in the study.

Focus Group Interviews with Students

Eight focus group interviews were held with students (one in each of the eight colleges involved in the study). Focus group interviews with students were to give them a voice, to provide them with a comfortable and safe setting to explore sensitive questions, and to compare and share their ideas and experiences (Cousin, 2009). Each interview session

lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Ten second year students participated in discussions in each college. Each group comprised equal numbers of male and female trainees in the mixed colleges. A total of 80 students participated in the study.

Analysis of Data and Interpretation

Data collection and analysis were recursive, they proceeded in tandem. The analytical procedure involved transcribing, coding and contextualization and offering interpretation. Data analysis in this case included repeated review of all interview transcripts, observational notes and relevant documents such as course outlines, examination papers and marking schemes. The constant comparative method of data analysis was employed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data from various sources were triangulated to allow for refinement of interpretations and solidification of findings. While a two-step approach to data collection was used (observation and interviews), the data was treated as one corpus during analysis. This is because the research aimed to explore the same themes within the observation, focus groups and individual interviews.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are discussed in line with the research questions.

What are the Qualifications of Tutors of English in the Colleges of Education?

All the English tutors in the study had academic degrees. However, not all of them had first degree in English as a subject. Their professional and academic qualifications ranged from Bachelor of Arts (BA) - English to Master of Philosophy (MPhil). Specifically, of the eight tutors who participated in the study, 3 were professional teachers with Bachelor of Education (BEd) in English, 3 were professional teachers with a general degree in primary education (BEd. – Primary Education), 2 were non-professional teachers with Bachelor of Arts in English (BA – English). However, they have all pursued various Master degrees. Two have Master of Arts degree (MA) in English, 4 have either a Master of Arts or Master of Education (MA or MEd) in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL), and 2 have a Master of Philosophy (MPhil) in English. Apart from the 3 who are professionally trained English teachers, the five others either lack the requisite content knowledge or pedagogical content knowledge. Those with degrees in primary education are professional teachers but not specialised in teaching English as a subject. Those with Bachelor of Arts degree in English might have content knowledge but lack pedagogical content knowledge.

Although the majority of tutors have a masters degree in teaching English as a second language, this does not compensate for the professional training characteristic of the Bachelor of Education degree (BEd) which takes students through various Education courses and 200 hours of classroom practice. One can argue that some of the tutors are under qualified to teach English. They may not have a strong content base or pedagogical content knowledge and are therefore likely to have challenges in teaching aspects of the language. Previous studies indicate that successful teaching and quality of learning is closely related to the teacher's knowledge and understanding of the subject (Moshe, 2004) and appropriate teaching skills and practices, emphasising knowledge and presentation. The 3 professional teachers with a Bachelor of Education in English and a Masters in TESOL were found in colleges where students performed highly. There is the need to have trained, qualified, and competent English teachers who know how to motivate their students to learn the language, how to convey concepts and how to help students overcome difficulties in their learning.

How is Teaching and Learning of English Conducted in Colleges of Education?

Six lessons were delivered with varying levels of confidence. Going by the universities' Teaching Practice Assessment scale, some of the teachers performed well while others struggled. Not surprisingly, the best teaching was recorded in one of the colleges where students performed highly in the examination under consideration and the worst in one of the colleges where the students performed poorly in the examination. In the good lessons tutors:

- Encouraged both discussions and independent work.

- Used analogies to clarify functions of word classes to facilitate understanding. All students were engaged in writing exercises.

- engaged students to write appropriate responses on the board and this helped them to share their ideas with their colleagues

- Used or improvised teaching/learning resources. For example, in one lesson, the teacher got the students to bring mirrors to class so they could observe how sounds are articulated. In that lesson, the teacher demonstrated production of sounds and gave a lot of examples and invited a lot of examples from students.

In the Bad Lessons Tutors

- Failed to use teaching/learning resources apart from the white board.

- Accepted chorus answers from students and also dominated classroom talk.

- Attempt at group discussions degenerated into student chats.

- Failed to help students who had problems with responding correctly to questions asked in the class.

- Failed to explain issues effectively.

- did not achieve lesson objectives at the end of the lesson or rushed through the lesson when they realised they were running out of time

- A tutor had problems with concord and question tags. For example, one teacher used "isn't it" for everything – e.g. "they name things, isn't it?" we are going to discuss in groups, isn't it? Another tutor spelt a word wrongly on the board.

Out of a maximum mark of 70, tutors' scores ranged from 40 to 65. The mean score for the group was 50 (out of 70) or 71%. The standard deviation was 6.4 indicating that some of the teachers did better than others. Even in the good lessons, on a couple of occasions, the development of students' independent learning skills was hampered by tutors' reluctance to encourage students to ask questions and challenge both themselves and each other. However, there was a clear distinction between good lessons and bad lessons. Tutors who taught good lessons improvised teaching learning resources, engaged students in teaching and learning, monitored learning and explained issues effectively. The contrary applied in the bad teaching situations.

How is the Content of the English Language /Literature Course and Assessment Requirements Aligned?

A thorough examination of the course content and examination questions found no significant mismatch between the content of the syllabus and the examination questions neither was there any discrepancy between the questions set and the marking schemes prepared.

What Factors Affect Students' Performance in English?

In answering this question, student and teacher interview data was compared. Six main themes were covered in all the interviews. The six themes, which were related mainly to teaching and learning of English in the second semester of the 2013/2014 academic year, were (a) English topics students found easiest/most interesting to learn (with reasons); (b) English topics students found hardest/most challenging to learn (with reasons); (c) major challenges students face in the learning of English (d) the level of support students receive from tutors of other subjects with regard to the learning of English; (e) efforts students are making to address the challenges identified and (f) what students think should be done to improve students' learning of English.

Student Interview Data

The data indicated that students' (weak) background in English accounted partly for their poor performance in the examination under discussion. It was also inferred from the interview data that students had limited opportunities to make up for their weak background in English due to a number of reasons outlined below:

- lack of motivation

- students do not interact with each other in English

- most tutors do not interact with students using English

- some tutors use the local language to teach

- Students do not use the library. Students' attitude towards reading is poor

- students' workload in other subjects in the programme

- some tutors skip teaching some topics on the course outline

- some tutors rush through some of the topics

- feedback on student work comes late and with hardly any comments, just grades

- Inadequate preparation towards the examination.

While all these militate against student performance, what stick out sorely are teachers skip the teaching of difficult topics in the syllabus and students receiving feedback on their work late. The skipping of difficult topics indicates that some students were partially taught which might have contributed to low performance in the subject. Of course there is no way one can expect these students to perform well if they were not taught as expected. Since the syllabus specifies the topics to be covered and the examination is set according to what the syllabus stipulates, it would be difficult for students to pass the subject without proper and effective teaching. The tendency of some teachers to skip difficult topics in the

syllabus may be due to inadequate content knowledge. Feedback needs to be interactive, purposeful, understood, timely and appropriate if it is to have a substantial impact on student learning behaviour and upon learning outcome (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In this case, students do not get usable feedback and are graded superficially enough for these to lose most of their educational value. Findings on the themes covered in the interviews are discussed below:

English Topics Students Found Easiest/Most Interesting to Learn (With Reasons)

Five topics were mentioned under this theme. Four of the topics were recorded in colleges where students performed well in the examination and one from the college where students performed poorly. The four topics recorded in the former groups were *grammar*, *story-telling*, *composition and word classes*, and the only topic recorded in the latter groups was *story telling*. The reasons given by the students (for finding the topics interesting and easy) were similar:

- The topics were taught well by the tutors

- Students are familiar with the topics since they had previous knowledge in them

- Teachers used teaching/learning resources in the lessons

- Students are free to express themselves in essays.

English Topics Students Found Hardest/Most Challenging to Learn (With Reasons)

Nine topics were mentioned under the theme. Three were mentioned in colleges where the students performed well in English and seven were mentioned in colleges where students performed poorly in the subject (including *reading comprehension*). The three topics recorded in the former groups were *comprehension*, *letter writing and phonetics*. The six topics recorded in the latter groups (in addition to reading comprehension) were *literature*, *word class function*, *sentence patterns, adjunct, active and passive voices and subject-verb agreement.* The two groups found different topics challenging. The reasons given by both groups (for finding the topics challenging to learn) were however similar. These were:

- Identification of speech sounds in words is difficult

- Difficulty in finding answers to comprehension questions in the text

- Formal letters are difficult to write

- Not familiar with literature and seniors make them feel literature is difficult

- Reading comprehension was not covered by tutors

- Inconsistencies about subject-verb agreement among tutors

- Word class functions are difficult to grasp

It is worrying that students find reading comprehension difficult. The ability to comprehend written texts is essential in order to gain access to written information available. If students have difficulty comprehending texts and tutors do not cover reading comprehension then there must be a fundamental problem with student learning.

Major Challenges Students face in the Learning of English

The challenges mentioned depended on whether students were in a college that did well or poorly in the examination. In colleges where students did well in English language, students tended to repeat the topics they found difficult to learn whereas in colleges where students performed poorly, they gave various challenges. Prominent among the challenges were five that were identified by the four colleges in which students performed poorly. These were *inadequate textbooks and teaching/learning resources; limited time for learning English*; *too much work in the first year and students get tired; use of local language; and inadequate staff.*

Level of Support Students gets From Tutors of Other Subjects

With regards to the level of support students get from others in the learning of English, all the students were of the view that their grammar gets corrected by other tutors in their non-English lessons. They also observed that tutors corrected their wrong oral expressions. Some students said tutors would normally *"deduct marks for wrong spelling and grammatical errors".* One can say that other tutors pay attention to students' use of language in their class.

Efforts Students are making to Address the Issue of Challenging Topics

With regards to what students are doing to help make difficult topics easier to learn, the following responses came up: "*spending time after normal lessons in the afternoon to do group studies in English"*; "*asking tutors to re-teach lessons";" protesting against too much weeding"; "appealing to the university to approve the sale of supplementary materials and fix the prices".* It appeared that the students concentrated less on what they themselves could do to improve their learning of English and more on what they thought the institution could do to help.

What Students Think should be Done to Improve Their Learning of English.

On what could be done to help students improve their performance in English, the following responses have been arranged in descending order of frequency:

- *"*Students should be encouraged to speak English".

- "Tutors should prepare well – no lecturing".

- "Teaching of English should be practical and done through the use of teaching and learning resources".

- "Tutors should explain topics well"

- "Tutors should complete the syllabus before examinations"

- "Tutors should motivate students to learn by spending time to explain things to students"

- "Tutors should return our assignments on time and discuss our work with us"

- "More professional tutors should be recruited*"*

Most of the claims students made regarding their performance and the challenges that influenced their performance were confirmed or supported by the tutor interview data.

Tutor Interview Data

The tutors' interview data was organized under nine themes as follows: a) topics student found easy to learn with suggested reasons; b) topics students found difficult to learn with suggested reasons; c) topics tutors found most interesting to teach with reasons; d) topics tutors found most challenging to teach with reasons; e) challenges tutors face with regard to the teaching and learning of English; f) efforts tutors were making to address identified challenges; g) support tutors received from their institutions; h) factors that contributed to students' performance in English in the first semester of the 2013/2014 academic year; and i) the way forward. The data showed that the tutors interviewed shared students' perception regarding the relationship between their background in English and their performance. Tutors, particularly those in the colleges where students performed poorly lamented the weak background of students despite their grades which gained them entry. They noted that "*learning is a cumulative process*", thus a student should be prepared for the course. *"It seems students come in with the requisite qualifications but cannot speak to it"* resonated in interviews. Some tutors suggested the need for an entry examination to validate students' grades or to screen students.

What also came out clearly was that the topics students found difficult to learn were the same topics tutors found challenging to teach. This situation creates a vicious cycle which partly explains the poor performance of student in English in the programme. The converse was also found to be true because the topics students found easier or more interesting to learn were the same topics tutors found easier to teach. This situation suggests that a change in the opposite direction in one of the variables can result in a corresponding change in the other variable. Thus, if for example tutors find a way of making it easier to teach topics they find difficult to teach, this might result in students finding such topics easier to learn.

The issue of workload of English tutors came up. They had an average of 20 periods per week. The situation contributed to low motivation on the part of tutors. Having such a load made it difficult for them to deliver content effectively in a way that would raise the quality of teaching and thereby contribute to students' high performance. Lack of teaching /learning resources resonated in interviews. Class size was a concern to tutors who noted that the benefit of close interaction with students is lost (Nicol, 2009). Tutors talked about the absence of in-service training to raise the quality of teaching. This implies that tutors were not being developed professionally to cope with current methods of teaching English that would improve students' performance (Yoon et al., 2007). To have tutors who have not received any professional development training for many years since their initial training contributed to learning that is ineffective, hence, students' poor performance.

Heads of Department and Principals' Interview Data

All the heads of department were qualified professional English teachers with at least three years' teaching experience at the college level. Notably, heads of department of colleges where students performed poorly in the examination were somewhat negative about the support tutors of English received in the colleges. One head said*: "none"* and another said *"no support whatsoever"*. In another college in the same group, the support the teachers received was *"small financial support as a result of the extra lessons they teach"* and yet in another, *the responses was "nil"*. On the other hand, in the colleges where students performed well, the heads' responses included *"they get manila cards"*, *"tutors are provided with teaching resources...the college gives resources produced by students on teaching practice to the English Department to use in English lessons."*

The data from the Principals' interviews simply confirmed what the heads had said about institutional support towards the teaching of English. According to one Principal, when tutors request teaching resources, they are always supplied, indicating that resources are available but tutors do not take advantage of them. This contradicts teachers' stance that there are no teaching/learning resources. Another Principal outlined how tutors also use library books, the distance education modules and their own resources to teach. Apart from these, "*there is no special support for them*". She observed further that "*all the tutors in the college are treated equally; no subject area receives special support*". Touching on challenges faced by the colleges, one Principal mentioned class size as the major challenge, lamenting on the ban on recruitment which made it impossible to appoint more tutors. This made teaching of different aspects of English difficult. Another challenge was the college's inability to buy books for the library. Other challenges mentioned were the calibre of students entering colleges of education. These were described as "*people who want to be spoon-fed because their secondary education prepared them in that manner*". The mode of lesson delivery in colleges was also cited as a problem (Ramsden, 2006). With large numbers, the principal speculated that tutors may not be able to give individual attention, and may rush through lectures to complete the course outline.

Summary of Key Findings

The following key findings were made with regard to the teaching of English:

- Students' weak background in English contributed to their poor performance in the English examination in the first semester of the 2013/2014 academic year.

- Students had had limited opportunities to make up for their weak background in English due to a number of reasons including students' workload in English and other subjects in the programme.

- Tutors in the colleges where students performed poorly were under qualified to teach English as a subject and therefore some of them skipped difficult topics in the syllabus, paving the way for the already weak students to perform badly (VUSO, 2010).

- Some students did not have the opportunity to practice the use of the language in the classrooms. Out of 80 students interviewed, fifty five students (68.75 percent) admitted to being engaged in group discussion while twenty five students (31.25 percent) did not get the opportunity to discuss with their peers. It was noted that all students in the latter group were in colleges where students performed poorly.

- All tutors in the study almost never speak English among themselves hence motivation for students to communicate among themselves in English is totally nonexistent (Gardner, 2006).

- The topics students found difficult to learn were the same topics teachers found challenging to teach. This situation creates a vicious cycle which partly explains students' poor performance in English.

- English tutors receive very little or no support from their department and the college administration.

- The majority of tutors observed failed to use teaching/learning resources. Some improvised. The fact that tutors had difficulties in getting the suggested teaching and learning materials to a large extent hindered not only the learning process but also the effectiveness of teaching, lower motivation, hence, students' low performance in the subject.

- Although formative assessment takes place in all colleges as prescribed by the examining body, the Institute of Education, feedback on student work is not delivered on time and in enough detail to be useful (NICOL, 2009, Wake ford, 2006)

- Some English tutors in the colleges where students performed poorly had many periods to teach. This situation to a great extent contributed to ineffective teaching and low motivation on the part of the tutors.

- Classroom observation revealed that in two out of the four colleges where students performed poorly tutors did not achieve the objectives stated in their lesson plans by the end of their lesson. In another, the tutor was not organised, rushed through the lesson and students were not allowed to ask questions. In the fourth, the tutor had

- Grammatical problems and difficulty in expressing ideas.

- The absence of professional development training for teachers to raise the quality of teaching also contributed to students' failure in the subject.

- There was no significant mismatch between the content of the English syllabus used by tutors and the examination questions set.

- There was no mismatch between the English examination questions set and the marking schemes used.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The key findings of the research showed a plethora of factors that affect the performance of students in the English examination. Conclusions drawn from the findings are that students' background in English influence their performance in English and they struggle with many topics in the English course because of their weak background in the subject. Consequently, some students need extra help in English in order to improve their performance in the subject. Lack of logistical support in the form of teaching/learning resources hampered effective teaching of English. Tutors need help in the preparation and use of teaching/learning resources. The English syllabus at the college level is not delivered efficiently because some of the tutors are under qualified to teach the subject. The workload of some of the tutors makes a bad situation worse. The English syllabus at some colleges is not delivered efficiently because some of the teachers could not manage large class sizes. Tutors need regular professional development training to keep them abreast with current trends in teaching the language and managing large classes. Following conclusions drawn from the study, it is recommended that:

- The teaching of English should be the preserve of only qualified professional English teachers

- English teachers in colleges of Education must be provided with and use teaching and learning resources

- English tutors should be given training in the preparation and use of teaching/learning resources

- The place and role of the English language in education in Ghana warrants that colleges of education should give the English department more attention and support

- The English syllabus should give explicit guidelines on teaching and learning activities as well as appropriate assessment methods to guide tutors in their teaching

- There should be regular professional development training for all teachers in colleges of education to enhance

teachers English teaching skills

- Colleges must make it mandatory for teachers to communicate in English among themselves and with students in and outside of the classroom. Teachers are role models in the teaching/learning environment and must lead by example

- Colleges should encourage students to improve on their communication skills through the formation of debating clubs, form subject associations and collaborate with the mother associations to provide academic support to both students and tutors from time to time

- The colleges of education are without language laboratory. Language laboratory should be built where necessary

- Students' entry qualifications need to be verified from the online database of the examining body, the West African Examination Council (WAEC) or they could be screened through a qualifying English paper to ensure that students have the requisite background for the programme.

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