How Achievable are the General Aims of The Senior High School English Language Curriculum in Ghana?

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Abstract
The study investigated from the perspectives of graduates of senior high school whether the general aims of the senior high school English language curriculum are being achieved. A total of 527 senior high school graduates participated in the study. A questionnaire with responses organized in four-point Likert scale with few open-ended items was used for senior high graduates to express their opinions. Quantitative data was analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics and presented in frequencies and percentages while common data from the open-ended items was "clustered" into themes from which conclusions were drawn. The finding is that the general aims of senior high school English language curriculum are partially achieved. Resultant suggestions include incorporating diverse methods of teaching English language by teachers of English to help achieve all the aims of the curriculum.
Keywords: Achievable, general aims, English language curriculum

1. Introduction

Quality and relevant education depends on how the curricula are designed and the aims the curricula seek to achieve. A curriculum usually contains a statement of aims and specific objectives; it indicates some selection and organization of content; it either implies or manifests certain patterns of learning and teaching whether because the objectives demand them or content organization requires them. The curricula place more emphasis on application of knowledge and, as such, students should be encouraged to apply the knowledge they acquire in different situations. That is why students who are nurtured by the English language curriculum are expected to perform well in tertiary education, function effectively at work, demonstrate creativity and exhibit communication competence.

The English language curriculum is designed to prepare students/graduates for higher education. As a result, graduates from senior high schools who seek admission to any of the accredited tertiary institutions are required to obtain a credit pass in English language or better. Scholars have studied possible factors associated with students' academic achievements. English language has proven to be one of the most important factors in students' academic performance (Chen & Sun, 2002). There is a positive relation between English language proficiency and academic achievement (Wille, 2006, Orgunsiji & Oje, 2009). Fillmore and Snow (2000) believe that students who are well prepared by the English language curriculum understand concepts and theories taught at the tertiary level.

Several studies indicate that the expectations of employers and future employers of graduates are high and encompass various skills and aspects such as linguistic capabilities in English language, information and communication technology skill (Pandian & Aniswal, 2005). This means that graduates are expected to possess excellent communication skills in English language apart from knowledge in their respective technical field (Dayal, 2005). Roshid (2013) also believes that English language skills are essential tool in the labour market. English language skill has become a major factor in the recruitment of graduates into industries and other cooperate organizations. It is of no surprise that senior high English language curriculum has an aim that emphasizes this. Proficiency in English language can help graduates to secure employment and also advance their knowledge and skills in the field of work (Leslie & Lindley, 2001; Singh & Choo, 2012).

Similarly, the English language curriculum is also designed to help its graduates to develop their creative potentials. Creativity, according to Cheon (2013), is a phenomenon whereby something new and valuable is created. Guilford (1950) has identified some processes that are involved in creativity. These include sensitivity to problems, creative fluency of production, the ability to develop novel ideas, flexibility of mind, the ability to

synthesize, the ability to analyze, the ability to redefine organized wholes, a high degree of complexity of conceptual structure, valuation and divergent thinking. Creativity language practices enable students to engage in imagination, unconventionality, risk-taking, flexibility, selection of strategies and creation of different ways of expressing ideas (Swain, 1985; Lubart, 1994).

Furthermore, the English language curriculum is expected to improve students' communication competence. These days, English language has become an international language and it is used for communication among different countries around the world. In the past, the goal of teaching English was the mastery of linguistic structures. However, by developing the communicative language teaching, the purpose of English learning is promoting "the learner's communication competence in the language" (Dornyei, 2005, p. 207). Hymes (1972) believes that the ability to communicate properly should be cultivated in language teaching. Students should learn how to use language in their daily communication in order to demonstrate mastery of the language. This theory of communication competence has been widely acknowledged and accepted by English educators and scholars (Canale & Swain, 1980; Kunschak, 2004). Canale and Swain (1980) assert that students who have excellent communication competence write and speak well in all circumstances.

Four key assumptions underlie this study: one, the senior high school English language curriculum should prepare its graduates for higher education. Two, the curriculum should prepare its graduates for the job market. Three, it should develop creative potentials in its graduates and finally, it should improve the communication competence in its graduates.

1.1. Research Context and Questions

Every curriculum is developed with a specific set of general aims to be achieved. The standard of English language has been a subject of great concern to educators and Ghanaians in recent years. The Chief Examiner's Reports on students' performance in English language show that the standard of English language has been falling (WAEC, 2010, 2011 2012, 2013 and 2014). The Chief Examiner's Reports on students' performance suggest that students' attitude towards English language has repercussion on their performance in the West Africa Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (WASSCE). The Chief Examiners' Reports suggest that there is a downward trend in the number of students who pass English language and even in other subjects.

Some scholars also believe that students from high schools come to the tertiary institutions with a baggage of experiences, attitudes and skills including English language skills that are not properly suited for higher education (Martin & Peters, 1985, Afful, 2007). Because of this situation, Communicative and Study Skills course has been introduced in tertiary institutions to help stem the downward trend in students' writing in English Language and even in other disciplines.

Adobaw-Bansah (2015) also believes that graduates from senior high school do not exhibit creativity at all in English language. These beliefs held by the above scholars mean that there seem to be a problem in achieving the general aims of the senior high school English language curriculum. This study attempts to find out whether the general aims of the senior high school English language curriculum are achieved. In view of the assumptions outlined earlier, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are the views of graduates of senior high school on how the English language curriculum has prepared them for higher education?
- What are the views of graduates of senior high school on how the English language curriculum has prepared them for the job market?
- What are the views of graduates of senior high school on how the English language curriculum has developed in them creative potentials?
- What are the views of graduates of senior high school on how the English language curriculum has improved their communication competence?

2. Theoretical Framework

There are several approaches to curriculum evaluation and each approach is determined by the purpose of the evaluation. This study which sought to evaluate the extent to which the general aims of the senior high school English language curriculum have been achieved adopted Stecher and Davis' (1987) approach to evaluation known as "Goal-oriented Approach". The goal-oriented approach to curriculum evaluation simply involves identifying, clarifying and stating the purposes of an educational activity and then assessing the extent to which the purposes have been or are being achieved. This approach therefore uses programme-specific aims/goals/objectives as criteria for determining success. Worthen and Sanders (1987) believe that information gained from a goal-oriented evaluation could be used to reformulate the purposes of educational activity, the activity itself or the assessment procedures and devices used to determine the achievement of educational

purposes. Stecher and Davis' (1987) goal-oriented theory was developed from Tyler's (1949) theory which examined curriculum evaluation along the following steps: establishing broad aims/goals/objectives, classifying the aims/goals/objectives, defining aims/goals/objectives, finding situations in which achievement of aims/goals/objectives can be shown, developing or selecting measurement techniques, collecting performance data and comparing data with stated aims/goals/objectives.

The strength of the goal-oriented approach to curriculum evaluation is that it is simple and this makes it easy to understand, easy to follow, easy to implement and produces information that educators generally agree is relevant to their mission (Worthen & Sanders, 1987). It also has considerable face validity because holding a programme accountable for what its designers say it will accomplish is obviously a legitimate exercise (Worthen & Sanders, 1987). Again, it helps to clearly delineate logical relationships between aims/goals/objectives and activities and thereby emphasize elements that are important to the attainment of programme aims/goals/objectives. Furthermore, the goal-oriented approach has led to a great deal of improvement in the techniques for measuring educational outcomes (Adentwi, 2005)**.** In analyzing these discussions, the approach advocates that the following questions be posed: what are the aims of a particular curriculum? Are the aims of the curriculum achieved or not? This is the goal-oriented approach's need to find answers to these questions.

3.   Methods

The study used both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. The use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, according to Creswell and Clark 2007, provides a good understanding of research problems than a single approach. In an attempt to find out whether the general aims of the senior high school English language curriculum are achievable, descriptive survey design was employed. A descriptive survey allows access to thoughts, opinions and attitudes of the population from which the sample is drawn (Shaughnessy, Zechmeister & Jeanne, 2011). The instrument for the study was questionnaire. This was designed to gather views of senior high school graduates on how the aims of the English language curriculum have been achieved. The questionnaires had both close-ended items and few open-ended items. The close-ended items on the questionnaire were rated on a 4-point Likert scale representing "strongly disagree", "disagree", "agree" and "strongly agree". These were crashed into only two (disagree and agree) for analysis. Participants were asked to rate what they thought about each item. Due to the relatively large sample size for the study, an interview was not conducted to get in-depth views of the participants. However, the open-ended items stood in for the interview.

The reliability of the instrument was measured at 0.79, indicating that the survey instrument was reliable. A total of 533 copies of the questionnaire were distributed to the participants. Of the 533 questionnaires distributed, 527 were returned, for a response rate of 98.87 %. The 527 senior high school graduates, who answered the survey, were proportionately selected from university, polytechnic, college of education, nursing and midwifery training college as well as senior high school graduates working in private basic schools and micro finance company (321 males and 206 females). Eighty nine (89) out of the 527 senior high school graduates were working in private basic schools and micro finance company in Cape Coast metropolis. Graduates from senior high schools are mostly employed in these institutions. They were selected through census survey. Graduates from senior high schools who were at the first year of the above tertiary institutions were chosen because they have been taken through the current English language curriculum so they stand the best chance to assess it. A multi-stage sampling technique was used for the study. The convenience and purposive sampling as well as census survey were employed to select participants. They were approached at the end of a scheduled lecture and the questionnaires were administered. The snowball sampling technique was used to sample senior high school graduates working in private basic schools and micro finance companies. These people were surveyed because graduates from senior high schools mostly get employed in the above mentioned institutions. Statistical Package for Service Solution (SPSS) version 20 was used to analyze the quantitative data from the questionnaire while common data from the open-ended items was "clustered" into themes from which conclusions were drawn.

4.   Results and Discussions

The results and discussion is presented in four parts to address the four issues in accordance with the context of the study. The data on participants indicates that majority, 60.9% (*n*=321), were males and 39.1% (*n*=206) were females as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

	Tertiary Students	Workers	
Gender	No.	No.	%
Male	267	54	60.9
Female	171	35	39.1
Total	438	89	100

4.1. Preparation of Senior High School Graduates with the English Language Curriculum for Higher Education

The extent to which the senior high school English language curriculum had prepared its graduates for higher education was investigated. Table 2 presents summarized results and responses gathered. It was found that majority (54.1%) had been prepared by the curriculum to take notes at lectures. Also, 251 representing (57.3%) said that the curriculum had given them confidence to ask questions at lectures. Again, 54.3 % (n= 238) believed they understood concepts and theories taught at lectures. Another 54.6% also believed they had acquired rich vocabulary at the SHS level for academic work at the tertiary institution.

Table 2: Extent to which the English language curriculum has prepared its graduates for higher education

Statement	Disagree		Agree	
	No.	%	No.	%
The SHS English language curriculum has helped me to take notes at lectures.	201	45.9	237	54.1
I am able to make notes at the library.	211	48.2	227	51.8
I memorize concepts/theories taught at lectures.	219	50.0	219	50.0
I read widely at the tertiary level on all concepts I come across.	216	49.3	222	50.7
I understand concepts and theories taught at the lectures.	200	45.7	238	54.3
I have the confidence to ask questions at lectures.	187	42.7	251	57.3
I have acquired rich vocabulary at the SHS level for academic work at the tertiary institution.	199	45.4	239	54.6

There is a positive relation between English language proficiency and academic performance at the higher education level. Thus, students who are well prepared by the English language curriculum will perform better at the tertiary level. These findings are consistent with Fillmore and Snow's (2000) and Miller's (1987) belief that students who are proficient in English language understand concepts and theories they are taught and also have rich vocabulary for academic work at the higher level.

4.2. Preparation of Senior High School Graduates with the English Language Curriculum for the Job Market

English language skills are essential in the labour market and occupational success is associated with language fluency. In this regard, this study explored how the English curriculum had prepared its graduates for the job market. The results of the responses obtained are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Extent to which the English language curriculum has prepared its graduates for job market

Statement	Disagree		Agree	
	No.	%	No.	%
I read work documents and understand them.	32	35.9	57	64.1
English language has helped me to work independently.	36	40.4	53	59.6
Proficiency in English language has made me marketable.	43	48.3	46	51.7
I use English language to carry out all official duties.	41	46.1	48	53.9
Proficiency in the English language helped me gain this employment.	39	43.8	50	56.2
English language has helped me to advance my skills at work place	37	41.6	52	58.4
English language has helped me to advance my knowledge at work	38	42.7	51	57.3

Majority (64.1%) believed they could read work documents and understand them. It was quite clear that proficiency in English language helped majority-represented by 56.2% to gain employment. Some (n= 51) representing 57.3 % believed English language had helped them to advance their knowledge at work. This is

quite consistent with a number of research findings (Dayal, 2005) that proficiency of English language helps graduates to gain employment. Similarly, Leslie and Lindley (2001) also believe that English language is needed for employees to advance in both local and international companies and institutions to improve their technical knowledge and skills.

4.3. Development of Creativity in Senior High School Graduates with the English Language Curriculum

Certain policies and practices in our education do not really help to train creative students. As a result, the views of senior school graduates were sought on how the English language curriculum had developed their creative potentials. Table 4 represents the view of the respondents.

Table 4: Extent to which the English language curriculum has developed creativity in its graduates

Statement	Disagree		Agree	
	No.	%	No.	%
I identify problems and deal with them independently in English Language.	326	61.9	201	38.1
I am able to reformulate ideas to form new ones using English language.	319	60.4	209	39.6
I depend solely on other people's views/ideas.	205	39.1	321	60.9
English language helps me to think fast to tackle issues.	346	65.7	181	34.3
I adjust my language to meet a particular demand.	317	60.2	210	39.8

Most senior high school graduates (61.9%) believed they could not identify problems and independently deal with them. Also, some (n=319) were of view that they could not reformulate ideas into new ones in English language. Sadly, 60.9% believed they depended solely on other people's ideas/views. All these give indication that graduates these days are not really creative. These findings contradict Guilford's (1950) findings that students who are creative in the use of language are able to use the language to solve problems independently and to reformulate ideas to form new ideas in that language.

4.4. Improvement of Communication Competence in Senior High School Graduates with the English Language Curriculum

The ability to communicate properly should be cultivated in language teaching. Hence, students should practice how to use English language in their daily communication in order to gain mastery of the language. In this respect, the views of senior high school graduates were sought on how the English curriculum has improved their communication competence. Their responses are shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Extent to which the English language curriculum has improved graduates' communication competence

Statement	Disagree		Agree	
	No.	%	No.	%
I present my thoughts in a precise manner using English language.	264	50.1	263	49.9
I control the direction of my communication in English language.	260	49.3	267	50.7
I use appropriate English language to convey message.	266	50.5	261	49.5
I write efficiently in English language in all situations.	265	50.3	262	49.7
I speak good English in all circumstances.	267	50.7	260	49.3

More than half (n= 264) of the graduates surveyed believed they could not present their thoughts in a precise manner using English language. However, (50.7%) of them said they could control the direction of their communication in English language. Also, (n=266) did not believe they use appropriate English language to convey message. It was therefore not surprising that most (50.7%) did not speak good English in all circumstances. These findings affirm studies by Fang (2010) and Johnson and Johnson (1999) who discovered that students do not exhibit evidence of communicative competence.

4.5. Findings from the Open-ended Items

When asked to give evidence that indicates that the English language curriculum had prepared them for higher education, a greater number (61%) of respondents explained that:
"… can read and write effectively and efficiently at the tertiary level."

"… can make notes and read and understand concepts and stuffs taught at lecture"

This supports the findings from the quantitative data that the English language curriculum has really prepared them for higher education. Most of them (54%) also gave evidence of the fact that the curriculum has prepared them for the field of work.

"…can read works documents and understand them"

"… are able to carry out all officials duties in English Language"

This is also a confirmation of the responses from the close-ended items.

Participants were asked to give evidence that indicate that the English language curriculum had developed their creative potentials. Majority (63.2%) of the graduates explained that they did not really have evidence that the senior high school English language curriculum had developed their creative potentials.

"…only reproduce what is/are sometimes taught without any change in idea, structure and style"

This confirms findings from the quantitative data that they cannot actually use English language in novel situation.

On evidence to show whether the curriculum had improved graduates' communication competence, 59.3% of them had this to say;

"…feel shy talking to other people in English language for the fear of making a mistake"

This also gives evidence of communication deficiency.

5.   Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of the study indicate that the general aims of the English language curriculum could be achieved. The English language curriculum had prepared its graduates for higher education and the job market. Unfortunately, the same curriculum had not developed creativity in its graduates and also had not been able to improve communication competence in its graduates. This means that the general aims of the curriculum are partially achieved.

The findings have implications for curriculum implementation and reform; since successful education demands that the general aims of curricula are achieved, it is possible that the implementation of the English language curriculum be looked at in order to help achieve all the aims stated in the curriculum. Also, the curriculum can be reformed to incorporate aims that are achievable if all the successful implementation factors are looked at and the problems still exist.

It is recommended that studies be conducted into factors that affect the implementation of the English language curriculum. Again, this same study can be expanded by looking at the perspectives of other stakeholders of education either than that of the graduates.

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