

## CURRICULUM TEACHING VERSUS TEACHING -TO-THE-TEST: TOWARDS AN APPROPRIATE CLASSROOM INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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### Abstract

*Nigerian teachers and students, similar to the Americans, are overburdened in this era of high stake and stressing standardized testing. They are under pressure to generate high test scores to the centralized power structure. Teachers are to be accountable to their students through test scores and they feel more and more threatened and terrified by the standardization of testing and teaching. To this end, some teachers have adopted teaching-to-the-test teaching strategies to compensate for this assessment practice (i.e. high-stake testing), while others teach to the curriculum. We, therefore, through our review shade more light on the concepts “teaching-to-the-test and curriculum teaching” and highlighted factors that promote inappropriate teaching in Nigeria. The researchers noticed that teaching-to-the-test instructional practices are not appropriate for our classrooms and quickly push forward the frontier knowledge of curricular teaching as appropriate classroom instructional practices that could promote in-debt learning of students. The researchers recommend that teaching according to the curriculum should be embraced among Nigerian teachers in schools. As well, education stakeholders should help in reducing the influence of factors that encourage inappropriate teaching practices such as “teaching-to-the-test” in a bit to promote Curriculum teaching.*

**Keywords:** Curriculum Teaching, Teaching-to-the-test, Classroom Instructional Practices

### Introduction

There have been corroborating evidence that a large number of efficacious practices and approaches promote students' performance and prepare them better for the future. However, there is no single method for excellent teaching, and different schools, operating in different countries and cultures, have strong traditions that should be respected (Approaches to teaching and learning (n.d.a)). It is therefore imperative that we be careful so that our present-day classroom instructions are not replaced with

inappropriate classroom instructional practices. In some years back, there were series of reports from American societies on the effect of high-stakes and high-stress standardized testing: one of which has brought the feeling of enormous pressure on classroom teachers and students in a bit to increase students' scores on high-stakes tests (Popham, 2001); having many unintended consequences (Rees, 2001) but, the most prevalent is the negative effect it has on teaching practices and, consequently, students learning. To this extent, American educators have taken up personal beliefs as well as teaching strategies to make up for this assessment practice (i.e. high-stakes and high-stress testing) known as teaching-to-the-test (Styron & Styron, 2012). And, it seems that Nigerian teachers and students shared similar beliefs as this practice is gradually dominating our normal classrooms.

Evidence from Nigeria's classroom revealed that teaching is gradually centering on promotion examination questions, thus countermining good education. Sama, Adegbuyi, Ani (2021) revealed that teaching activities that dominate the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination classroom revolved around examination preparation of those content areas that might be examined in future examinations, thereby sacrificing the whole prescribed curriculum content at the expense of students. Meanwhile, Shogbesan and Faleye (2016) had earlier proposed if the "teaching-to-the-test" approach could be an effective strategy used to enhance student learning i.e. mainly, for the promotion of assessment for learning. This implies that teaching-to-the-test might have some influence on students' test scores and might not be an appropriate classroom instruction for students learning in Nigeria as reported by Americans, since, student learning generally remain unchanged or decreased after high-stakes tests were implemented (Amrein & Berliner, 2002).

In human learning, the organisation of the elements of perception into a total meaningful structure (wholeness) is prime. As such, the logical structure (i.e. the inter-relatedness of the content domain of a subject) and psychological structure (i.e. the order of processes that most effectively copes with the developmental structures of the learner) must be balanced for effective learning to take place (Ngwoke, 2010). So, when teacher teach-to-the-test, it resulted to teaching the content at the surface, narrowing the curriculum as

well as the performance goal orientation (Sama, Adegbuyi & Ani, 2021) because what is to be learnt was not organised in common sense units. Contrary to this is teaching-to-the-curriculum (Sama, Adegbuyi & Ani, 2021) which may promote in-depth teaching and learning, active learning, learning goal orientation, full implementation of curriculum content, and instructional content aligning with curriculum content.

It is basically on this note that this paper which to push forward the frontier knowledge of curriculum teaching in a bit to foster students learning. As well as, highlight factors that promote teaching-to-the-test (also known as item-teaching) but affect curriculum teaching especially in Nigerian classrooms.

### **Classroom Instructional Practice: What it is and What it should be.**

The concept “instruction” from an expansive view, is the interaction taking place between the instructor and the student. To be simply put, it is what teachers and students do together (Arum, et al., 2014) because what students bring to the instructional context is as important as what teachers bring. Therefore, the constituents of classroom instructional practices should entail the materials, objectives, and activities of instruction. This is what Brown and Martin (2018) called instructional inputs. So, measuring how students respond to the constituent (instructional inputs) created by teachers is the same as measuring the instruction (Arum, et al., 2014). And, how students respond depends on students’ mastery of the content. This is what Brown and Martin (2018) referred to as instructional output. Students’ mastery/learning can only be achieved when students are engaged both cognitively and affectively, not just by students checking off boxes because they know the answers (Arum et al., 2014). Like, what happens when the focus of a classroom is Teaching-to the-Test (TtT). i.e. teaching students how to complete the greatest number of correct boxes, and precious little else, not minding whether such a skill is applicable to situations outside the testing environment (Ress, 2001).

Instructional practices that the teacher set up in our various classrooms is fundamental to students learning and might be appropriate when (Sogunro, 2017) quality instruction is manifested in the classroom to evoke enduring learning in students. And so, what is learned and how much is learned, rely significantly on the quality of instruction rendered by the instructor (Bess, 1997, as cited in Sogunro, 2017). Teachers have a critical and

tangible role in the delivery of quality instructions, not only for improved academic performance but to develop productive individuals who can live peacefully with members of society (Clugston & Calder, 2015). Thus, teaching/instructional practices are seen as one means that positively influenced a classroom learning environment.

Therefore, an active instructional practice that promotes students' learning ought to be appropriate for a normal classroom. Three active teaching practices identified by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2009) are Structuring practices, Student-oriented practices, and Enhanced activities. They emphasized that these practices were frequently used in all countries that regard students as active participants in the process of acquiring knowledge. However, the research report of (OECD) (2009) revealed that two of the teaching practices (i.e. Structuring and Student-oriented) were accentuated more than enhanced learning activities such as project work. Teachers in all countries do ensure that learning is well structured than on student-oriented activities which gives teachers more autonomy in the classroom. This implies that appropriate instructional practice goes beyond what the students can manage on their own but is achievable with the help of a teacher (more knowledgeable other, according to Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers are supposed to be active leaders of learning rather than transmitters of knowledge or facilitators of learning.

In the same vein, several researchers had advocated that classroom instruction should be quality. The essential and distinguishing attributes of a quality classroom instructional practice in Bellens, Damme, Noortgate, Wendt and Nilsen (2019) include classroom management, supportive climate, and cognitive activation. Meanwhile, Pianta and Hamre (2009) referred to these attributes as organizational, emotional, and instructional support. In the opinion of Eric, Rich and Shalli (2010), academic instruction is qualitative if: the learner spend a major portion of instructional time actively engaged in learning, the learner spends less time to assimilate, the teacher achieves a high level of success, content coverage is achieved, the teacher proceeds through the curriculum as specified by the regulatory agencies, and individual learners gain mastery of specific skills. The implication is that classroom instruction should go on in an orderly and regulated manner

with what the curriculum prescribed. As well, it must promote students' cognitive engagement and higher-level thinking, thus leading to learning.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that a positive connection exists between instructional improvement and student outcomes that relate to engagement, learning, course success, persistence, and retention (Brown & Kurzwell, 2018) since millions of students receive instruction in the classroom every day. Umbach and Wawrzynski (2005) found that students had higher levels of engagement and learning at institutions where instructors use active and collaborative learning techniques. They further emphasize higher-order cognitive activities when interacting with students. Hence, the importance of quality instruction in schools throughout the world cannot be underestimated. Alamirew (2016) shared a similar view and further argues that the quality of instruction is fundamental to the success achieved by the school and its students.

### **Challenges facing Classroom Instructional Practice in Nigeria and its Consequences on Schools**

Poor instructional quality is a great challenge to the education system in Nigeria. Akanbi (2014) and Romina (2013) noticed that the quality of education in Nigeria today is critical and cannot be compared with that obtained in the West. Students who have less time and resources to commit to their studies found poor quality instruction to be more frustrating (Sogunro, 2017). He stated further that, students in Nigeria tertiary institutions get dissatisfied when they receive mediocre instruction that fails to inspire them. They see it as a waste of their time and money. Several factors could be responsible for this. Ajadi (2020) connected poor instructional quality in Nigeria to teacher characteristics. He emphasized that inadequate preparation of lessons, poor delivery of lessons, use of inappropriate instructional materials, poor classroom management, and poor evaluation of lessons are all teacher factors. Idakwoji (2016) highlighted some challenges from Nigeria society that directly or indirectly affect teachers and cumulate to adversely affect teaching and learning in their secondary schools. But, poor remuneration and working conditions of teachers (Anchor, 2012); teacher absenteeism and corruption (Ugoani, 2014), student non-attendance, irrelevant and culturally unresponsive curricula, poor pedagogical content knowledge (Ogundeji et al., 2021), dilapidated structures,

inadequate funding and insecurity (specifically, the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East region of the country (Baikie, 2015) and banditry attacks which is more pronounced in the North-Western region of Nigeria) are critical limitations to instructional quality and even, instructional delivery.

These challenges, most especially insecurity, have led to the closure of schools temporary (primary, secondary, and tertiary institutions) in some parts of the country. For instance, schools in Zamfara State (one of the states in the North-Western region of Nigeria) have been locked for more than five months now and only schools within the Local Government Area headquarters were asked to re-open this January. A lot of good brains have relocated from the state and the impact of these teachers on Zamfara schools and classroom instruction, in particular, cannot be easily recovered. As highlighted earlier by Adesina (2012) constant decline in the quality of classroom teachers meant to impart the minds of the nation, teachers' inability to impart instructions effectively combined with ineffective interpretation of the curriculum, have always been the resultant effect on the classroom instruction and our educational system at large. Soon classroom teachers and students will be under pressure looking for a way to cover up these lapses, and what they will fall back to will be inappropriate instructional practices.

Apart from the challenges mentioned earlier and its consequential effect, high stake and high stressing standardized testing that is more vulgarly infused into Nigeria's education system is a great challenge toward an appropriate classroom instructional practice. The findings of Sama, Adegbuyi and Ani, (2021) revealed that the teaching process was distorted in Senior Secondary Certificate Mathematics classrooms because high-stakes West African Senior Secondary Certificate examination restricted teachers from using active teaching methods, instead, examination instructional practices dominated their classroom teaching. In a high-stakes examination context, Linn (2000) reported that the increase in scores seems to be a result of teachers' and students' acquaintance with examination requirements and formats rather than the real improvement in learning. To the extent that high-stakes testing has limited teachers' efforts to incorporate authentic instruction in schools (Saye, 2013) and has made them believe that such assessments are generally limited to lower-level content knowledge, thus encouraging narrowing of the

curriculum rather than in-depth content knowledge and active learning. Asma, Sabeen, and Isabel (2014) concluded that teachers are teaching towards examination after examining the washback effects of the Pakistan intermediate English examination. They reported that teacher focuses on examination-related activities to assist students to score better and such practices may increase test scores without necessarily increasing students' understanding. To this end, it is obvious that high-stakes tests only stimulate teachers and students to work towards performance goals rather than learning goals.

High-stakes standardized testing also puts both teachers and students under pressure. Au (2009) reported that non-white students ultimately feel intense pressures to perform well- even as their curricular environments are becoming increasingly limited and less rich. Teachers under the demands of high-stakes testing, are pressured to be accountable for their students through test scores and centralized power structure, which leaves them disempowered, and restricted simply as conveyors of information (Mulcahy & Irwin, 2008). These teachers feel pressure to generate high test scores which often force many to compromise excellence in education as they feel more and more threatened and terrorized by the “mindless demands for inappropriate standardization not only testing but in teaching as well” (Hilliard, 2000 as cited in Ekoh, 2012). And, inappropriate standardization of content as facilitated by high-stakes testing, not only prohibits a diverse curriculum in the classroom but works against the diverse ways in which students learn in the classroom (Au, 2009).

To this end, high-stakes testing has an enabling role in many of the issues facing Nigeria's educational system. For instance: high-stakes testing has worsened the issue of corruption in Nigeria education today especially issues that bordered on examination malpractice (Jimoh, 2009) because ill-prepared students want to pass at all costs. Sometimes against their wish, but might be victim to some factors, part of which was highlighted earlier, and many more like: Education corruption and teachers' absenteeism in Nigeria (Ugoani, 2014; Oko & Adie, 2016); Examination Mismanagement (Asadu & Abonyi, 2020). It seems a lot of Nigerian teachers have adopted “teaching-to-the-test” to compensate for the prevalent decadences in the education system since several home-



based kinds of literature which centred on high-staking standardized testing and teaching practice is been reported as revealed in the review.

### **Teaching -to-the-test: What is it and What not?**

The phrase “Teaching-to the-Test (TtT)” is used to describe teacher organization of instruction either around the actual items found on a test or around a set of look-alike items (Popham, 2001). He further stressed that look-alike items are items that are so similar to the actual test items and difficult to identify which one is it, also called "cloned items". Here, the words construction of the two constructs might be different but their cognitive demands are the same. Teaching-to the-test in this regard is what Popham (2001) called item-teaching. In practice, teaching students how to complete the greatest number of correct small hollows, and precious little else, disregarding whether such a skill is applicable to situations outside the testing environment (Rees, 2001). It can only be used to support instruction and not the instruction itself (Baker, Berliner, Yeakey, Pellegrino, Popham, Quenemoem, Rodriguez-Brown, Sandiger, Sireci, and Thurlow, 2001). However, (Phelps, 2011c) reported that encouraging the concept of “teaching to the test” is one way of imputing evil (pejorative) in the education system. To this end, teaching to the test became a controversial topic. Educators and administrators have mixed feelings surrounding the practice, with both sides making valid points either for or against the practice (Styron and Styron, 2012).

Teaching- to the -test in practice, has a negative effect on educational assessment and could be an inappropriate classroom instructional practice, when teachers put across knowledge in clear and structured ways, and demonstrate and explain solutions (Shogbesan and Faleye, 2016), of possibly the to be actual test exercise or cloned items. Teachers create time and adjust priorities to make available more time for the content likely to be covered in the tests, thereby narrowing down the curriculum (Mills, 2008, as cited in Shogbesan & Faleye, 2016) and promoting rote learning. Students merely have few opportunities to experiment with or apply new knowledge in another situation. Rather, are made to solve numerous practice test items in an attempt to prepare for high stake testing/examination. It is obvious that this practice is not a cognitively engaging activity for many students and relying on students' test results as an indicator of teachers'



instructional effectiveness will be incorrect. Hence, “Teaching to the test” in this context is what Shogbesan and Faleye (2016) described as assessment for learning, but a bad practice.

Teaching-to the-test was not included when documenting practices that produce better test results in the rigorous research of Ruth, 2006 as cited in Sama, et al., (2021). It implies that teaching to the test only provides limited opportunity for in-depth and quality learning (Mehmet, 2005). Students learning depth was limited because the practice gave opportunities to teachers to do selective teaching (i.e. picking some areas of the curriculum content) which adversely affected students learning and learning depth (Chinyani, Kadodo, Madugwe, and Mandiudza, 2013 as cited in Sama, et al., 2021). The findings of Safa and Jafari (2016) showed a stronger negative effect of the examination on EFL teachers’ assessment procedures. He further emphasized that the final exam adversely affected EFL teachers’ teaching methodology and promote teaching- to the-test practices as teachers taught according to the test’s content and format. Asma, Sabeen, and Isabel (2014) shared a similar view after examining the washback effects of the Pakistan intermediate English examination. They reported that the teacher focuses on examination-related activities to assist students to score better and such practices may increase test scores without necessarily increasing students' understanding. According to Phelp (2017), drilling on test format does not promote learning but reduces it, because it diverts the attention of the class from the subject matter instruction and consumes the time meant for instructional delivery. He further emphasized that money spent on test preparation services is money wasted if the service consists primarily of test-taking strategies, format familiarity, and practice test-taking. To this extent, Popham (2001) recommends deterrence procedures to help reduce the amount of teaching-to the-test found in the education sector.

On the other hand, “Teaching-to the-Test” when appropriately used by teachers can be another strategy to ensure assessment for learning (Shogbesan and Faleye, 2016). i.e. when the teacher used a test to clarify the construct taught before developing valid measures to assess it (assessment of learning). Shogbesan and Faleye (2016) further emphasize that “teaching -to the- test” in this regard is an innovative assessment for

learning strategy, if adopted appropriately. To them, the concept of teaching to the test might be misconceived. Using an exercise (not to be an actual test item or cloned item) to clarify a construct or assess learning in the classroom during instruction cannot be termed “Teaching to the test”. Moreso, blending the two tasks (i.e. developing a teaching/lesson plan and developing a testing plan) as mentioned in their article, connotes a shift in the meaning of teaching- to the- test. The fact that the curricular content will be fully covered as stressed in their teaching and testing plan strengthens our opinion. Added to this, is the fact that test items practices were not the actual classroom instructional practice but, (Shogbesan & Faleye, 2016) as evidence of learners’ capacity to know, understand, apply, analyze, synthesize and evaluate what they have learnt. Meanwhile, the implementation of the teaching/lesson plan developed by the teacher as emphasized in Shogbesan and Faleye, (2016) could be described as “curriculum teaching”. Sama, Adegbuyi, and Ani (2021) called it “teaching to the curriculum”. From the foregoing, we have the feelings that it seems as if educators still have not understand the difference or relationship between: teaching to the test/exam, item-teaching, cloned items, actual items, curriculum teaching, and teaching to the curriculum (Styron & Styron, 2012; Popham, 2001). However, this is the gap the literature intends to fill.

### **Curriculum Teaching: Meaning and Relevance to Students Learning.**

Curriculum teaching according to Popham (2001), is the teaching technique that is directed at the curricular content knowledge or skills represented by a given test. Here, the target of the teacher instruction is on test-represented contents rather than the -to be- test items. i.e. Classroom instructional content will align with curriculum content (Sama, Adegbuyi, and Ani, 2021) and teaching to the curriculum content will therefore lead to; in-depth teaching and learning, learning goal orientation, active learning and full implementation of curriculum content. Under this teaching practice, learners have the opportunity to build up their knowledge through deep thinking, and manipulation of relevant instructional materials and activities. Rees (2001) advised that teachers must concentrate on teaching the curriculum chosen by the test-designers as to promote critical thinking in students rather than rote memorization.

The curriculum is the cornerstone of the academic experience within the classroom. It is the systematic reconstruction of knowledge and experience with the guidance of the school and relevant agencies, enabling the learner to have a better mastery of learning experiences for the learner and society's well-being (Sama, Adegbuyi, and Ani, 2021). And, the classroom teachers, build opportunities for students to participate in learning activities and events that help promote and advance the development of learner attributes. The learner attributes apply across the curriculum and need to be supported both through the school's curriculum and co-curricular programmes. Subject curricula are more than subsets of knowledge to be taught and assessed by teachers and learned by students. They are the basis for the teaching and learning programmes that teachers use to express and deliver their wider expectations of learners. Excellent teaching – including the development of the learner attributes – is the single most significant factor impacting learners' academic performance and personal growth that a school can influence. (Sogunro, 2017) quality instruction embraces the soundness of all teaching and learning transactions in the classroom. It manifests itself in the use of appropriate instructional strategies to evoke enduring learning.

## **Conclusion**

Instructional practices that teachers set up in our various classrooms are fundamental to students learning. It develops learners' attributes when appropriate instructional practices are manifested in our classrooms. Although, the “teaching-to-the-test” approach has some influence on students' test scores, not an appropriate classroom instruction practice since evidence from literature revealed that student learning stayed the same or decreased after high-stakes tests were implemented. Students learning decreased because both teacher and students wasted a lot of time practicing how to answer high stake tests and teachers could not engage the students actively in the full implementation of curriculum content. To this end, curriculum teaching was strengthened in the literature, since, subject curricula are more than subsets of knowledge to be taught and assessed by teachers, and learned by students.

## **Recommendations**

1. Teachers should develop teaching plans according to the prescribed curriculum and create an active instructional process to promote students learning. This will enhance in-depth knowledge of the subject matter.
2. Even in this era of High-stake standardized testing, teachers should ensure that they embrace a practice that is appropriate professionally and educationally.
3. Stakeholders in Education (i.e. Universal Basic Education Commission (UBEC), Ministries of Education, States and Federal Government) should help reduce the influence of factors that encourage inappropriate teaching practices such as “teaching to the test” through educational laws and policymaking.
4. Teaching to the curriculum should be embraced among teachers in schools.
5. Teachers should not direct instruction specifically towards the actual items on the test itself; rather he/she should endeavor to teach the content represented by the test as stipulated in the curriculum.
6. Regular training and re-training should be conducted for teachers using Seminars and Workshops in order to update their knowledge on the most appropriate instructional strategies.

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