

**STUDENTS' PREFERENCE IN ESSAY WRITING: THE IMPLICATION
ON THEIR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

Okon, Onyinyechi Lovelyn

English Unit,

School of General Studies,

Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, Abia State, Nigeria.

onyinyechioko29@gmail.com/mummyonyisteve@gmail.com, 08060986507

Abstract

Writing in school is challenging, especially for English as a second language learners. Many learners have acquired different kinds of attitudes towards the learning of writing in schools. That is evident even in their preferences. This work, therefore, investigated students' preference in essay writing and the factors responsible for their choice. Two hundred first year students of Michael Okpara University of Agriculture, Umudike, were randomly selected from four different departments in the university and four essay topics: factual and fictional were administered to them in the Use of English course. An interview was also conducted on the students to know the reason for their choice of essay. The scripts were sorted according to their essay types. It was observed that the students who chose to write the narrative essay were more in number, followed by expository essay, then descriptive essay and, lastly, argumentative essay. The findings revealed that most students run from factual essay writing such as expository, descriptive and argumentative essays. The survey further gathered from the students who have preference for fiction that the essay is easier to learn and is less technical to write, that they like story telling because of the fun. The paper concluded that the preference for fiction indicates lack of adequate skills in factual writings. It also suggests that majority of the students devote more time to watching home movies which are mainly fiction and have little to contribute to the development of their critical ability (Freedman, 1999). The study, therefore, recommended that more attention should be given to the teaching of factual writing to students at all levels of education, especially in the secondary school before they encounter various academic writings in the tertiary institution. Moreover, process approach to second language writing pedagogy should be adopted in schools to enable students enjoy learning the act of writing in the classroom.

Keywords: *Writing, second language learners, theories of L2 writing, process writing*

Introduction

For learning to take place, the four important skills in communication such as: listening, reading, speaking and writing need to be developed. Writing remains an indispensable tool in learning. When the skill is not developed, the goal of learning is jeopardized, and

the future of education seriously threatened. Raimes, 1983, p.243, “claimed that while students certainly need to pass examination, they also need to perceive writing as a tool that can be useful throughout their professional and personal lives”. The ability of a learner to develop an effective writing skill, especially in the second language, is not just dependent on the writing environment but also on the learner’s personal characteristics which have to do with his fore knowledge, beliefs, learning goals and learning histories, (Lin, 2014; Strobl, 2015). Writing is an aspect of pedagogy that determines whether learning has been acquired irrespective of the learner’s discipline or course of study. Some of the writing forms are more technical than others. These technical forms of writing tasks that are also known as factual writings affect the students’ achievement and development in their various disciplines (Harris,1999 & Freedman, 1999). Not only does writing enhance greater appreciation of any subject, its usefulness cannot be overemphasized, (Martins, 1985, Gonye, et al, 2012, Terry1987).

In White’ view (1986), writing lends deeper insight into other subject areas as it can be used to put down one’s innermost thoughts. The commonest way to assess students at all levels of education is through the production of written texts by way of assignments or examinations. Some of the questions can be in the form of: discuss, analyze, explain, enumerate, examine, describe, and so on. What determines whether a student will be successful in the examination is his ability to write convincingly in order to impress the examiner. His ability to employ the skill of writing he has developed in the writing class will place him at advantaged position over others.

All courses done in the universities make use of different factual essays in assessing the student’s abilities. The exam or assessment test questions take the forms of: exposition, description and persuasion. When a student lacks the skills in these essays, it becomes a problem for him or her to present answers to questions in a convincing manner. Besides, for the student to successfully do an academic research work, he must put into practice the knowledge of report writing acquired in the writing and communication skill class. Success in many fields is traceable to the development of the writing skills that are needed (Vandommele, Van den Branden, Van Gorp & De Maeyer, 2017).

Adindu (1998), described writing as the hub on which students’ educational preoccupations oscillate. To Silva and Matsuda (2001), writing remains one of the least well-understood, if not misunderstood, subjects in applied linguistics. Writing is a skill that needs patience and discipline on the side of both the teacher and the students. White and Arndt (1991, p.112), described writing as “a complex cognitive process that requires sustained intellectual effort over a considerable period of time”. From the academic socialization and orientation point of view, writing is seen as a tacit aspect of learning to be a member of the discourse society of a particular discipline, (Dysthe, 2001). Writing,

as Canale and Swain (1980) viewed it, is a manifestation as well as the process of manifesting sociolinguistic, strategic and grammatical competences. Writing involves negotiating with readers, (Zhang & Warschaur, 2017). Ken & Fiona, (2006), enumerated some of the forms of writings to include: writing for academic purpose such as research paper, dissertation, technical report, thesis, translation, academic research article, and so on; personal forms such as: autobiography, diary, memoir, and so on. There are also learning-induced writing such as: essay writing in class and examination sessions. Other forms include legal texts, experimental research, report, letters of reference, summaries, creating (plays, poems, novels), and so on.

Writing in Second Language

Research on writing in second language has, in the recent years, been on the spree of development with many newer in-depth areas of interest and approaches generated by scholars. This makes the field more challenging and, at the same time, interesting. Some of these areas include: the diagnostic and (automated) corrective feedback (Lee & Conian 2013; Liu & Kunnan 2016), rater performance (Shaefer, 2008), computer assisted writing (CAW) or computer-mediated communication (CMC), social media and other forms of tele collaboration (class-based on line exchanges), (Godwin-Jones, 2018) and other areas of studying writing in applied linguistics. Writing is a controversial subject especially in the area of its teaching approaches and theories. Zerniewska (1999) puts it that writing is a dynamic and complex area of study. Although Silva and Matsuda (1990) contended that there are yet no comprehensive theories of L2 writing, there are two theories worth discussing in this study. They are: the communicative act theory and the cognitive act theory.

Communicative Act Theory

In communicative act theory, writing is viewed as an act of communication between the writer and the reader(s) (Connor, 1999). In a genuinely communicative social interaction, as Connor proposes, a writer should give priority consideration to the reader's needs so as to make sure that the message of the writing is not lost. This theory incorporates the socio-cultural approach and social constructivist perspectives in L2 writing which see writing development as the learning of the genres, values and practices of the target community, (Barkoui, 2007; Kern et al, 2017). There is emphasis on the role of context and audience in learning L2 writing. In this orientation, proficient L2 writers are 'those who can act effectively in new cultural settings', (Hyland, 2002 p.60). The writers are not in the oblivion of the values (that is, what, how and why to write) of the target communities because of the socialization process they went through.

Kinneavy (1971) developed four rhetorical models that are useful in explicating reader-audience relationship in writing as Connor (1999) describes it. It distinguishes the aims

or purposes of discourse from the models or means of discourse, for instance, classification and description. These Kinneavy's models include: encoder (the writer), decoder (the reader), *reality*, which signifies situation and *signal*, which means language. These models were widely accepted above Jacobson's (1960) model of the functions of language that identified six factors: *addresser*, *addressee*, *context*, *message*, *contact* and *code*. Britton (1975) also developed a model of writing that focused on the mutual dependence between the writer and the audience.

Cognitive Theory

The cognitive theory of writing is the most effective in aiding the actual practice of writing, (Cary, 2012). It maintains that the act of writing should happen in steps. Flower and Hayes (1981) developed a cognitive process model that represents writing as consisting of four interactive components—task, environment, the writer's long-term memory and the composing process. The task environment comprises: the writing topic, the audience, the degree of urgency of the task, and the text produced. They suggested that composition writing and teaching should show students how to explore and define their own problems, even within the constraints of an assignment. After the teacher had given her assignments, it is now left for the students to discover what language can do and what they can do with language.

To be able to write convincingly, the right approach to learning writing must be developed. Both process and product approaches in writing have roles they play. However, many scholars advocate the adoption of process approach in teaching writing to non-native speakers of the English language. (Connor, 1999; Nunam1999; Silva & Matsuda, 2000; Zerniewska, 2000). Process-oriented writing sees learning L2 writing as the acquisition of successful writing strategies. It is the acquisition of both macro strategies which include - planning, drafting and revising. Micro strategies include attending to content and form concurrently and automatic searches for words and syntax, (Cunning, 2001). Process writing guides students from the initial stage of understanding the essay title through note making and paraphrasing to the organization of the essay, multiple drafts, automated feedback, and so on, (Godwin-Jones,2018).

Harston (1982) called process writing 'paradigm shift'. Bizzel (2011) said it is the 'emptiest box'. They are the advocates of product writing which is interested in grammaticality of a text - the organization of an idea takes precedence over the idea itself. This study advocates the application of both the product and the process approaches to L2 writing because of their relevance and complementary roles in the writing pedagogy

Many researchers have done different works on school-based writing. Petric (2004) studied the acquisition of culturally based elements in the writings of Russian students

studying at an English medium university. The case study comprises students' argumentative essays written before and after a short writing course, which aimed at addressing cultural differences in writing within a contrastive rhetoric (CR) approach. It was discovered that the essays written displayed a higher occurrence of thesis statements and less variations. The study makes a plea for more investigation into the relationship between CR and writing pedagogy and that teachers should encourage their students to overcome some culturally based elements which may affect their attitude to writing. This study is on contrastive rhetoric but related to the present study in the area of the factual writing administered to students in the tertiary institution.

Gonye, Marewa, Dudu, & Sibanda (2012), in a research similar to the present study, administered essay writing to university students in order to uncover the levels of writing weaknesses inherent in their writing. A population of five hundred and fifty students and fifteen lecturers from the Zimbabwe University constituted the sample size. Document analysis, interviews and questionnaire were used as data collecting instruments. Results were presented and discussed both qualitatively and quantitatively. The study, among other discoveries, revealed that first year undergraduate university students' written papers are riddled with a multiplicity of weaknesses, and suggests that students should view writing as different from speech and that they should treat writing as a process rather than a product. The paper also recommends that there be a paradigm shift in the teaching of academic writing at universities in Zimbabwe, from a study skills orientation to an academic illiteracy orientation.

Chen, Nassaji & Liu (2016), in a related study on students' preferences, investigated learners' perception and preferences of written corrective feedback in an English as foreign language class (EFL). Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 64 intermediate, advanced-intermediate and advanced English learners across the three proficiency levels in a university in China. The result of the data collected from the extensive written questionnaire showed that students have favourable disposition towards error correction but a strong preference for comments on both content and grammar.

Ismaili & Alshekhl (2012) carried out an investigation on ESL students' performance and strategies when writing direct and translated essays and the strategies they employ when writing in second language (English and Arabic), using a mixed research method of quantitative and qualitative method of data collection and analysis. The study used a population of thirty-six university students who participated in writing three different essays and also responded to a questionnaire and some follow-up questions. The result showed that, statistically, there were significant differences in students' writing performance and the direct/translated essays; but there was no significant difference in their use of strategies. All the works reviewed above are relevant to the current study

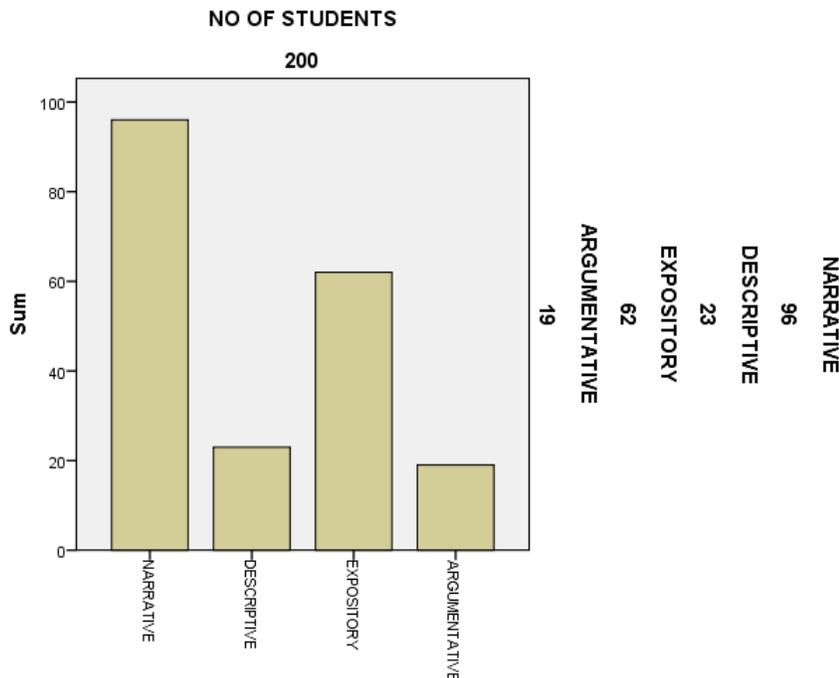
because of their pedagogical implication in the area of writing, especially writing in second language.

Methodology

This work is a descriptive survey that used a mixed research design of both assessment test and a structured interview. The population of the study were first year students from four departments in the Science and Engineering Colleges of Michael Okpara University, Umudike, Nigeria. A total of 200 students were randomly selected and were administered an assessment test with questions drawn from four different essay topics that comprised factual and non-factual essays such as: narrative, descriptive, expository and argumentative essays. They were asked to choose and write an essay on any of the topics. At the end of the exercise, the scripts were gathered and sorted according to the different essay types. The data were analysed through simple percentage and represented in a bar chart to show the students preferences. Another set of data was collected from the same group of 200 students through the instrument of a structured interview. The questions were structured in a way to also find out their preferences in essays and the reason for their choices. The results of the findings are shown below:

Finding 1:

BAR CHART SHOWING CHOICE OF ESSAY TYPES OF THE STUDENTS IN THE ASSESSMENT TEST



From the bar chart above, it could be seen that majority of the students (96 in number), representing 48%, wrote the narrative essay, followed by 62 students, representing 31% who wrote the expository essay; 23 students representing, 11.5% wrote the descriptive essay; and 19 students, representing 9.5% wrote the argumentative essay.

Finding 2:

From the structured interview, it was observed that a greater number of the students have preference for the narrative writing. Then from those students who preferred narrative to other essay types, we gathered various reasons for which they have such preference. The reasons included, but were not limited to, the following:

- They are easy to write.
- They are less-technical in their procedure.
- They are fun to write.
- I like story telling.

Discussion

The findings above showed that non-factual essay (narrative) enjoys the highest preference among the students. This has proven that there is a lacuna in the second language writing pedagogy. In categorizing essays, narrative is a fiction or a non-factual kind of writing which requires less technicality among other essays. Factual writing explains a series of events in a chronological and unbiased way that allows readers to gain information that is not influenced by the personal opinions of the writer or publisher. Factual writing helps students to develop their abilities in writing for academic purposes. From learning how to write factual essays, students become competent in writing projects or long essays. Every factual writing in school has implications on the different professions students may choose in future.

The knowledge of expository essay will help students not only in answering questions well and being good researchers but also in teaching, marketing, preaching and many other relevant professions. The knowledge of descriptive essays can be of immense benefit in the armed forces and other security jobs. The knowledge of argumentative writing will help in the legal profession. For every subject, there is need for students to take the skill of writing seriously. Writing in school involves a second language learner (L2 learner) who has the task of acquiring the competence in writing in a language that is not his/her native tongue. This is the reason the act of writing in second language has

remained a herculean task for learners. According to Barkoui (2007), L2 writing involves the acquisition and mastery of a variety of linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural competencies.

Conclusion

From our findings, we hereby conclude that factual essay writing is more challenging to students. That is why they have preference for fiction. Most of the learners do not know the implication of the factual essays in their fields of study and this made them to settle for the kind of essay they find easy to write. Moreover, sociocultural factors like folk-telling and Nigerian home movie watching have effects on students' choices. It will not be foolhardy to say that most of our university students lack competence in essay writing because they could not get the adequate knowledge in their secondary schools. Unfortunately, the academic planning of most universities does not provide enough time, especially in the Use of English class for adequate learning to take place.

Recommendation

We recommend that teachers of English language in secondary schools should give adequate attention to the teaching of essays, having in mind that the skill has a lot to do with their students' success in school and in their professional lives. Besides, students should show interest in the development of skills in L2 writing because that is one of the bases for ascertaining their scholarship, especially in this era of integrating multimedia writing (Godwin-Jones, 2018). The government should occasionally organize training for English language teachers so as to become skilled in the newer forms and approaches to writing in second language.

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