



Verbal Ability and Grammatical Competence as Determinants of Secondary School Students' Writing Competence

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Abstract

This study investigated verbal ability and grammatical competence as determinants of secondary school students' writing competence. This work evolved out of the need to provide an in-depth understanding into how verbal ability and grammatical competence affect students' writing competence in English as a second language (ESL). Three instruments were used for data collection: The achievement test in English Essay Writing ($r = 0.875$), the Verbal ability test ($r = 0.657$), and Grammatical competence test ($r = 0.889$). Simple random sampling was adopted in the selection of respondents for this research work. One hundred and fifty (100) students were randomly selected from four secondary schools in Akungba Akoko, Ondo State for the study. The Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used in analyzing the research hypotheses formulated in this research work. The results revealed that there is the need to improve students' verbal ability and grammatical competence as they have significant effects on students' essay writing competence. It is recommended that teachers should use appropriate strategies to teach essay writing in secondary schools in order to motivate students to develop a good attitude towards essay writing.

Keywords: English, Second Language, ESL, Essay writing, Grammatical Competence, Verbal Ability, Writing Competence.

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INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Language is an important vehicle of communication among human beings. English has assumed the status of ‘the language of international relations’ among different countries of the world is no exception. The language is used by different people from different parts of the world to perform different functions: such as Mother Tongue (EMT) in native countries like Britain, America, Scotland, Wales etc.; as a Foreign Language (EFL) in many Francophone African countries like Cote D’ Voire, Republic of Benin, Togo, among others; and as a second language (ESL) in former British colonies like Ghana, Gambia, Sierra-Leone, Kenya, Uganda, and also Nigeria. Though a second language, the English language plays a vital role in the day-to-day activities of people in Anglophone African countries such as Nigeria. For instance, Adegbite (2005) posits that the mastery of the English language holds high hopes for the individual Nigerian learner in his/her own social advancement and the socio-political cum economic growth of the nation. It is the vehicle through which Nigerian learners’ access knowledge in almost all the subjects in the school curricular from primary to tertiary level.

In recent times, there has been intense focus of research effort by language scholars on the need to attain a high level of competence in second language writing, particularly in English language (Osasiyan, 1990; Fakeye & Ogunyemi, 2010; Ogunyemi, 2014). Scholars have also formed consensus of opinion on the need for effective teaching of essay writing in Nigerian secondary schools (Ellis, 1992; Fakeye, 2001; Adegbile & Alabi, 2007). This is because a correlation has been found between students’ ability to write good essays and their performance in other aspects of English language. According to Fakeye (2001) candidates who are able to write good essay in English perform better in other aspects of the subject while those who are unable to write good essay in English perform poorly in the subject. In similar vein, researchers have observed a correlation between general intelligence and academic endeavour. Particularly, Verbal ability and Grammar competence as tests of intelligence which can be used as determinants in the usage of language and or way to predict learners’ performance in language skills in general (Richard & Rodger 1986). This notwithstanding, research efforts at examining the effect of verbal intelligence and grammatical dispensation on second language writers’ performance in writing in English has been minimal.

Generally, writing involves composing. This implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narrative or description or to transform information into new texts as in expository or argumentative essays. Writing is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from more mechanical or formal aspect of “writing down” on the one hand to a more complex act of composing on the other end (Omaggio, 1993).

This act of composing, no doubt, creates problems for students, especially those writing in a second language. Essay writing, which is the focus of the research, requires conscious efforts and practice in composing, developing and analyzing ideas. Compared with students writing in their native language (L1), students writing in second language (L2) have to also acquire proficiency in the use of language as well as writing strategies, techniques and skills. Unfortunately, second language learners, according to Myles (2004), have varying commands of the target language (competence) and measures of the extent to which they can use higher and lower language and information processing mechanism (verbal ability).

According to Richard and Rodger (1986) verbal ability is a test of intelligence that can be used to predict learners’ performance in language skills. Elements of verbal ability test include: word power, sentences arrangement, words arrangement, substitution of elements and

logical selections of appropriate words. Verbal ability may show substantial level of association with students' grades and in essay writing. A study carried out by Bell and Perfetti (1994) refer to verbal ability as essentially the extent to which learners can use higher or lower level language and information processing mechanism to read and comprehend written language.

Grammar Competence has many meanings, both technical and popular. Akinbote and Komolafe (2010), while making a case for the need for grammatical competence in language learning, submit that basic grammatical knowledge is a prerequisite for the development of mature reading, writing, and speaking skills. They argue that since syntactic knowledge has been demonstrated to be the underlying component of language, instruction in the grammatical rules of the language (instruction aimed at enhancing growth in syntactic competence) ought to enhance growth in language performance. Greenbaum (1982) states, among other definitions, that "grammar refers to the properties and processes that underlie the use of the language-that underlie the ability of English speakers who must know the rules of the language and have the knowledge stored within their brain. They do not have to be able to analyze the language to be able to use it with proficiency. However, there is another meaning of grammar which clearly suggests that grammar is not just a question of competence. It is also a question of performance.

It is on the above assertions that this study sought to investigate verbal ability and grammatical competence as determinants of ESL students' writing competence.

Statement of the Problem

Research findings have shown a strong correlation between students' ability to write good essays and their overall performance in English language. On the contrary, scholars have also found that students, especially at the secondary school level, perform poorly in essay writing. Apart from improving students' writing competence in the area of sentence construction and usage, Verbal ability and Grammar competence can also supply resources for the variation of emphasis in an essay. Also taking into view, it has been noted that students ability and competence in writing is based on their speech and construct, although there have also been controversies over the issue. This then brings about the necessity to understand if and how Verbal ability and Grammar competence serve as determinants of ESL writers achievement in writing. It is with this that the researchers intend to investigate verbal ability and grammatical competence as determinants of secondary school students' writing competence.

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were tested in the study:

- H₁: There is no significant effect of verbal ability on ESL students' essay writing competence.
- H₂: There is no significant effect of grammatical competence on ESL students' essay writing competence.
- H₃: There is no significant interaction effect of verbal ability and grammatical competence on ESL students' essay writing competence.

Significance of the Study

The poor performance of students in both Junior Secondary School (JSSE) and Senior Secondary School (SSCE) Examinations (Internal and External) in English and essay writing in specific, has caused a lot of concern for parents and teachers. Researchers have recommended that strategies are put in place to enhance students' Verbal ability and grammar competence to enable them perform better in essay writing. Therefore it is pertinent to investigate verbal ability and grammatical competence as determinants of ESL students' writing competence.

The study is significant in various ways. It would expose teachers of writing, taking peculiarity to essay, in developing methods and strategies in teaching essay writing better and language skills in general. It would also help the teacher to plan his class work, bearing in mind the verbal and grammatical competence of students towards writing.

This study would also make the parents and guardians to be aware of the need to provide necessary materials to their wards for further learning and to enhance their learning of essay writing in particular and English Language in general.

The study also would have implication for Teacher Education programme as it affects the training of teachers of English Language.

METHODOLOGY

The study made use of a quantitative research, in which the survey research method was adopted. The independent variables are: verbal ability, and grammatical competence while the dependent variable is achievement in essay writing. One hundred senior secondary school two (SSS 2) were randomly selected from the four secondary schools in Akungba Akoko, Ondo State as samples for the study.

Three instruments were used for data collection: The achievement test in English Essay Writing ($r= 0.875$), the Verbal ability test ($r= 0.657$), and Grammatical competence test ($r= 0.889$). The researchers administered the instrument on the students with the assistance of their English language teachers to ensure full cooperation on the part of the respondents in completing the instrument. The reason for the research was explained to them as the essay test was distributed and treated with confidentiality. Time limit was allocated for the return of the essay paper, and the other tests as the researcher waited to collect the research instrument and left with compliments to the respondents.

The data generated was transferred into coding sheets before analyzing it, using the Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to determine the magnitude and direction of the main effects and also to ascertain the amount of variation due to each independent variable. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was also used to determine the interaction effect of the two independent variables on the dependent variable. This data analysis technique made it easy for the researchers to compare across the variables involved.

RESULTS

The results are presented below in line with the stated hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant effect of verbal ability on ESL students' essay writing competence.

Table 1: Pearson product moment correlation on effect of verbal ability on ESL students' essay writing competence

Correlations			
		Verbal Ability	Essay Writing
Verbal Ability	Pearson Correlation	1	-.042
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00*
	N	100	100
Essay Writing	Pearson Correlation	0.42	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000*	
	N	100	100

Table 1 shows the Pearson moment correlation of verbal ability on ESL students' essay writing competence. From the analyzed data, Pearson moment correlation of verbal ability on ESL students' essay writing competence is 0.42 at 0.05 level of significance, showing a moderate positive significant effect of verbal ability on ESL students' essay writing competence. We therefore reject the Null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis that there is a significant effect of verbal ability on ESL students' essay writing competence.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant effect of grammatical competence on ESL students' essay writing competence.

Table 2: Pearson Moment Correlation on effect of grammatical competence on ESL students' essay writing competence

Correlations			
		Grammatical Competence	Essay Writing
Grammatical Competence	Pearson Correlation	1	.072
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.00*
	N	100	100
Essay Writing	Pearson Correlation	.072	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000*	
	N	100	100

Table 2 shows the Pearson moment correlation of grammatical competence on ESL students' essay writing competence. From the analyzed data, Pearson moment correlation of grammatical competency on ESL students' essay writing competence is 0.72 at 0.05 level of significance, showing a High positive and significant effect of verbal ability on ESL students' essay writing competence. We therefore reject the Null hypothesis and accept the alternate hypothesis that there is a significant effect of grammatical competence on ESL students' essay writing competence.

Hypothesis 3: There is no significant interaction effect of verbal ability and grammatical competence on ESL students' essay writing competence.

Table 3: ANOVA^a table showing the interaction effect of verbal ability and grammatical competence on ESL students' essay writing competence

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1096	2	548	59.799	.000 ^p
	Residual	889	97	9.164		
	Total	1985	99			

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	101.222	4.587		22.065	.000
	Verbal ability	1.000	.104	.608	9.600	.000
	Grammatical competence	1.071	.110	.614	9.699	.000

- a. Dependent Variable: Essay Writing
- b. Predictors: (Constant), Grammatical Competence, verbal Ability

Table 3 shows that the independent variables significantly predicts the dependent variable, $F(2,97) = 59.799, p < .05$, therefore we say, the regression is a good fit of the data.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The present study investigated the effect of verbal ability and grammatical competence on senior secondary school students' writing competence in selected secondary schools in Akungba Akoko. For the purpose of this study, three hypotheses were formulated. This research arose due to the call for investigation into factors or variables (Verbal ability and Grammatical competence), if they have significant influence on secondary school students' writing competence. Results revealed that there is a significant effect of Verbal ability on students' writing competence. However, different people at different times have blamed the poor writing competence of students on other variables such as Gender, instructional materials, etc. The above results go in line with the work of Adegbile and Alabi (2007) where verbal ability was found to have a significant effect on students' achievement in essay writing.

The second hypothesis revealed that there is a high significant effect of grammatical competence on students' essay writing competence. This finding is in agreement with Mohammad (2008), whose findings show that Iranian TEFL sophomores are neither competent writers (the mean score being 65.8 out of a possible maximum score of 88) nor do they command a good proficiency of English language (as the mean score was only 428.7 out of a possible maximum score of 533). As such, they generally fall short of international standards of the proficiency of English language required of Iranian TEFL university students. Significant correlations were also found between the subjects' writing competence and their language proficiency, between their writing competence and the sub-skills of language proficiency, including their listening, reading and grammatical competence respectively. In sub-skills, the strongest correlation was found to be between their writing and grammatical competence with a coefficient of 0.721 at 0.05 level of significance. The third result revealed that both Verbal

ability and grammatical competence have significant effect on students' essay writing competence, which is a new finding based on the researchers' investigations and results.

CONCLUSION

In view of the findings of this study, it is clear that students' verbal and grammatical competence actually set a limit to what they can do as far as essay writing in English is concerned. By implication, teachers of English should pay more attention to the teaching of various linguistic structures of English. Students need more linguistic input so as to improve their verbal ability level and grammatical competence and thus enhancing their performance in essay writing in English.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made in line with the findings of the study:

- Teachers of English should pay more attention to the teaching of English structures in order to assist their students develop acceptable level of competence in English grammar.
- There must use of appropriate strategies to teach essay writing in secondary schools in order to motivate students to develop a good attitude which will bring about high achievement.
- For effective teaching of essay writing among students, efforts need to be made by teachers to stimulate their students and help them build a positive attitude to essay writing. This could be done by being innovative in the use of strategies of teaching essay writing.
- The teachers of essay writing should give students assignment regularly and ensure that they mark them in order to give the students prompt feedback. This will be effective in making learners improve on writing task.

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