

USE OF GRAPHIC STRATEGY FOR IMPROVING STUDENTS PERFORMANCE IN DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY WRITING IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SOKOTO NIGERIA**Mrs Suwaiba Umar Dodo, Fatima B. Attahiru**

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ABSTRACT

This work investigated motivational strategy for improving students' performance in essay writing in secondary schools in Sokoto State of Nigeria. Essay writing has become a very important part of academic life, even outside academic life most of what is done is communicate and often times in writing. In school a student is assumed to have done well when he or she performs creditably in the English language paper, and what constitutes a mayor part of this paper is writing. It is in this aspect that schools, teachers, parents and examination bodies complain of students 'poor performance. The reasons for this poor performance include poor methods adopted by teachers in the teaching essay writing and lack of motivational strategies among others. This paper sought to find out if using a visual organizer, the tree diagram writing strategy will improve the performance of the students. The researcher used two groups of students; control and experimental groups in a quasi= experimental design, for this purpose. A total of 323 students were involved in the study and two research instruments were used to collect data from the subjects including English language achievement test[EEAT] which contained an essay writing question, and a modified like scale questionnaire. It was found that students taught essay writing with the tree diagram writing strategy performed better in their essay writing than the control group taught conventionally. It was recommended that teachers should apply strategies that create lasting impression on the minds of the learners and also motivate them to want to involve in the writing task.

1. INTRODUCTION

The productive skills of speaking and writing are overtly needed for everyday activity and must be mastered in order to effectively transmit ideas and concepts. It is in these skills especially writing that students perform so dismally, (Rostami & Hoveidi 2014:299). In the West African School Certificate Examination, English Language and particularly the essay writing component carries a greater single load more then other components. Students see the writing task as a boring and unattractive one and as a result of difficulties they face in closing it, they fall back on defensive mechanisms and avoidance strategies among many attendant problems. It becomes therefore very necessary for the teacher to imbibe in the learner writing strategies that will motivate him her and enliven his &her interest to write and perform better in essay writing. Some writing strategies include the famed writing workshop (Graham & Perin : 20099) and many extended Communicative Language Teaching(CLT) Procedures including the use of Blog-based Strategies (Rostami&Hoveidi: 2014), the Critical Thinking Strategy, Clustering Technique, Online Writing, Action Adventure, Video games and the Tree Diagram strategies among other strategies.

1.2 The Problem

The WAEC Chief Examiner's Report (2012) confirmed that there is students', ineptitude in English language which affects their overall performance. An important and much weighed aspect of the English Language examination is the continuous writing section. Students are as a matter of compulsion required to attempt question from this section; unfortunately, the complaint is that candidates write incomprehensibly and perform poorly in it.

Rostani & Hoveidi (2014) said that English language classes are held with Traditional Methods against contemporary innovation practice in the teaching and learning of English language, and opined that the difficulty that students face in essay writing could be as a result of the conventional or Traditional Method of Teaching that is used by most teachers in schools to teach students. Akinbola (2009) criticized the conventional method of teaching saying that it is a poor method which produces reluctant students poorly motivated to write, and is responsible for students poor achievement in writing. There is therefore the need to evolve strategies that will help stem the tide of poor performance in essay writing. It is in the bid to find solution to the problem of lack of motivation to write qualitative essays, and students' poor performance in essay writing that the researcher has undertaken to study whether the use of Tree Diagram Writing Strategy, a communicative interactive strategy, would be more effective in helping students write better essays against the conventional methods of audiolingual Method of teaching.

1.3 Objectives

The objective of this study is to find out;

1. If there is any significant difference between the pretest and post-test performance of the experimental group in descriptive essay writing.
2. If there is any significant difference between the pretest and the post-test performance of control group in descriptive essay writing
3. Students exposed to the use of the Tree Diagram Writing Strategy should perform better in their descriptive essay writing than students taught essay writing skill using conventional teacher-centered methodology.
4. The use of the tree diagram strategy in the teaching of descriptive essay writing should motivate the student to write better essays

1.4 Research Questions

Four research questions were formulated to guide the research and they include:

1. Is there any significant difference between the pretest and posttest performance of the experimental group in descriptive essay writing?
2. Is there any significant difference between the pretest and posttest performance of the control group in descriptive essay writing?
3. Is there any significant difference in the performance in descriptive essay writing of students exposed to Tree Diagram Writing Strategy and students taught with conventional methodology?
4. Is there any significant difference between the motivation level towards writing of the experimental group before and after exposure to the tree diagram writing strategy?

1.5 Research Hypotheses

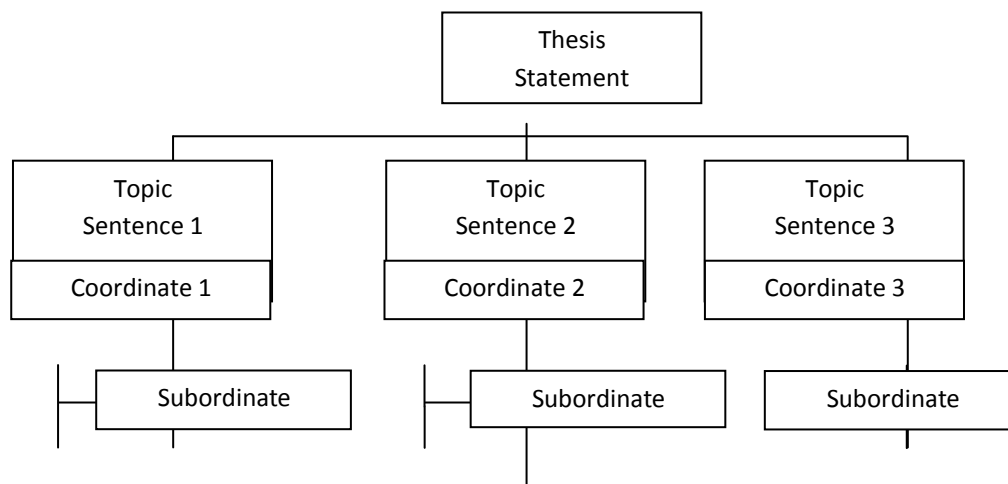
Four research hypotheses were formulated and tested in the study. The hypotheses are:

1. There is no significant difference between the pretest and post-test performance of the experimental group in descriptive essay writing.
2. There is no significant difference between the pretest and post-test performance of the control group in descriptive essay writing.
3. There is no significant difference in performance in description essay writing of students exposed to the tree diagram strategy and students taught with conventional method.
4. There is no significant difference between the motivation level towards writing of the experimental group before and after exposure to the tree diagram writing strategy.

2. WRITING STRATEGY AND THE TREE DIAGRAM WRITING

The tree diagram is a writing strategy developed by Chien [2004] from Smalley, Ruetren and Kozyrv'sp[2001] book titled 'Refining composition skills, Like the tree' name that it takes after, the strategy has branch-like sub-divisions. At every stage or level the diagram presents the learner with the step[s] to take towards an orderly and procedural presentation of materials. The tree diagram opens with thesis statement which could also be introduction. The thesis statement is quickly followed by the topic sentence this is also followed by the coordinate and lastly, the subordinate. This is shown below in figure 1.

Figure 1. The tree diagram



Source: Chien, C. L. (2004:3)

One overt problem admissible in the essay of novice writers is the lack of ability for proper or effective paragraph planning and therefore presentation of ideas (Gopala. 2012). The tree diagram serves as a handy tool and strategy for the L2 learner in the execution of the writing task; the step by step explication of and guidance on the 'how' to handle the writing task relieve confusion and engender motivation, (Chien: 2004). At the level of thesis statement, there is a general introduction of the central idea or message of the essay writing task. This dissolves into topic sentences. Each paragraph has an idea or thought that it hopes to expound. This gets stated while writing on topic sentence. So there is a topic sentence for every paragraph making for clarity and purpose. After the topic sentence follow the coordinate. As this is replicated in various paragraphs that form the essay writing task, the learner produces a comprehensible output, (Rostami & Hoveidi: 2014). The attendant joy of success makes the writer motivated to write.

Acknowledging this, Cabrera & Bazo (2014) said that graphic representations and diagrammatic approaches are useful and effective essay writing tools. They said that most students who thought that essay writing was boring and therefore developed an aversion for writing appeared to get excited when presented with the tree diagram (P.14)

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

The theory underlying this study is the functional theory to language learning. This theory has been underscored by many linguistic theorists including Candling (1976) Finochario (1993), Wilkins (1996) and Williams (1990) among others. Communicative competence is a goal of the functional theory. It targets means and processes in the socio-linguistic parlance that will enable the learner use language in communication both in speech and writing (Williams: 1990). This theory views language as primarily intended for use in society and so communication of meaning and interactions are to be achieved. According to Williams (1990) skills such as dialogue, role-play, and use of extraneous but relevant materials should be used in the classroom against the teacher being the primary source of acquisition of knowledge. He further said that anything that helps the learner to acquire the target structures should be applied. This theory puts the spotlight on the learner as a social person; as such learning of functions should be in their settings; like asking for information could be done in a market, bank or post office setting. This theory requires that the learner interacts with situations, things and settings and so make his/her own meaning.

4. REVIEW OF RELATED EMPIRICAL STUDIES

Okwach and Indoshi (2013) conducted a research on teachers' and students' perception of methods used in teaching writing skills in secondary schools in Kenya using 31 teachers and 2580 students. Analyzing the collected data with T-statistic, they found that the students did not exhibit the required level of interest in the conventional method the teachers employed in teaching them language and that the teachers were not aware of the contemporary methods available for the teachers of various language skills.

Ibrahim (2010) studied the effectiveness of communicative and interactive mode activities in teaching aspects of language against conventional methodologies. He used 481 senior secondary school students in an experimental and control grouping. He discovered that the experimental group that he

exposed to a communicative methodology out performed the control groups exposed to a conventional method of teaching English language.

Ayeba (2009) did an assessment on students' achievements in writing of junior secondary school using two groups he exposed to the communicative teaching approach and another two he taught with the situational method. He found that the students he treated with communicative approach did better in their writing than those he taught with the situational approach.

Bing (2013) investigated the efforts of action-adventure video games on students' narrative writing skills. He exposed a group of four students to four gaming consoles. Using a pre-experimental design, the post-test result showed the video games contained interactive elements that impacted on the narrative writing skills of students

5. SUMMARY OF REVIEW AND UNIQUENESS OF STUDY

This review discussed the communicative functional framework to language learning which views the language learner as a social person and requires that he or she learns language functions in settings. Writing and in fact every aspect of language should be taught in settings where the learner interacts with concepts and so makes out meaning. This they say engenders interest. This study is unique because it investigates the use of the tree diagram, an interactive and communicative input, in the teaching and motivation of students to write descriptive essays. Further, this study has not been carried out in this specific study Area especially, in Sokoto State of Nigeria.

6. METHODOLOGY

The design used in this work was a quasi-experimental research design. It is quasi experiment as intact classes were used in the study. Two study groups were used for the study, the experimental and control groups. The experimental group was exposed to the experimental variable, the tree diagram writing strategy for a period of six weeks. The control group was not exposed to this strategy but taught conventionally for the same period. A pretest was administered to both groups before treatment to assess and control for the differences between groups prior to the start of experiment. And to ensure groups of equal ability were used thereby protecting against experimental bias. The researcher used simple random sampling technique to select four schools for the study and further used simple balloting to assign the intact classes to group of either experimental or control.

6.1 Population and Sampling

The Senior Secondary One [SS 1] class was used for the study. [SS1] students in the secondary schools in Sokoto metropolis totaling 7,011 formed the population of this study. Four schools were selected for this study with one intact ss1 class from each school. The total number of the students in the four selected schools for this study classes was 323. Two of the classes were used as experimental group with a population of 163 while the other two were assigned control groups and had a population of 160 students.

6.2 Instrumentation/Administration

Two instruments were used for this study. These were the English essay achievement test [EEAT] and a questionnaire the English essay Achievement test [EEAT] have an Essay question while the questionnaire was modified having four scales of strongly agree, disagree and strongly disagree on a scale of 4,3,2 and 1 respectively. The essay questionnaire was administered to all the respondents in a pretest and post-test and data collected. The questionnaire was administered only to the experimental group and was used to collect data on the motivational behavior before and after exposure to treatment

6.3 Validity and Reliability

The essay question and modified likert scale questionnaire were validated by experts in the Faculty of Education and Extension Services and Department of Modern European Language and Linguistics of Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto. The reliability of the instrument was carried out using the test-retest method and data collected were analyzed using person product Moment Correlation Coefficient. A reliability coefficient of 0.82 was obtained for the English Essay Achievement Test (EEAT) and a reliable coefficient of 0.76 was obtained for the likert scale questionnaire.

Data Collection and Analysis was conducted where two groups were first subjected to a pretest before the administration of treatment and data collected. At the end of the six weeks of continuous treatment they were also subjected to a post-test. Further, the experimental groups were expose to the likert scale questionnaire before the commencement and after the end of the experiment. This was used to collect data on the level of their motivation to write English Language essays. The

data collected were analyzed using frequency counts, mean, standard deviation and the t-statistic to find difference in behavior between the groups' pretest and post-test scores.
 Findings Ho1: there is no significant difference between the pretest and post-test performance of experimental group in descriptive essay writing.

Table 1: T-test Result of Pretest and posttest scores of experimental group

| Experimental Group | N | Mean | SD | Df | t-cal | p-value |
|--------------------|-----|-------|------|-----|-------|---------|
| Pretest | 163 | 16.30 | 4.27 | | | |
| | | | | 324 | 33.05 | .001 |
| Posttest | 163 | 32.33 | 4.48 | | | |

Sresearch Question 1: is there any significant difference between the pretest and posttest performance of the experiment group in discriptive essay writing?

The descriptive analysis in table 1 above showed that the experimental group had a total of 163 samples and their pretest mean was 16:30 with SD 4.27 while their posttest mean was 4.48. this showed a substantial increase in their performance. The data was further analyzed with the t-test statistic. The df was 324, the t-cal was 33.05 and p-value .001. the p-value of the experimental group at .001 is less than 0.05 alpha level significance, Ho1 is therefore rejected. Meaning that there is a significant difference between the pretest and post-test performance of experimental group in descriptive essay writing.

Ho2 there is no significant difference between the pretest and post-test performance of the control group in descriptive essay writing

Table 2: T-test Result of Pretest and posttest scores of experimental group

| Experimental Group | N | Mean | SD | Df | t-cal | p-value |
|--------------------|-----|-------|------|-----|-------|---------|
| Pretest | 160 | 16.13 | 4.27 | | | |
| | | | | 318 | 10.98 | .001 |
| Posttest | 160 | 21.53 | 4.29 | | | |

Research Question 2: is there any significant difference between the pretest and post-test performance of the control group in descriptive essay writing?

The descriptive analysis in table 2 above shows that the control group had a total of 160 samples. The pretest mean was 16.16 and SD 4.47. The posttest mean was 21.53 and SD was 4.29. The description here showed that the method recorded an improvement although it was minimal. The improvement in the posttest mean of the experimental group was far more encouraging. This data was further analyzed with the T-test statistic. The Df for the group was 318, the t-cal was 10.98 and the p-value of the group at .001 was less than 0.05 alpha level significance, Ho2 is therefore rejected.

Ho3: there is no significant difference in performance in descriptive essay writing of students due to the Tree Diagram Writing Strategy

Table 3: Result T-test of Posttest of Experimental and Control Groups

| | N | Mean | SD | Df | t-cal | p-value |
|----|-----|-------|------|-----|-------|---------|
| EG | 163 | 32.33 | 4.48 | | | |
| | | | | 321 | 22.12 | .001 |
| CG | 160 | 21.53 | 4.29 | | | |

Research Question 3: is there any significant difference in the performance in descriptive essay writing of students due to the use of Tree Diagram Writing Strategy?

Table 3 showed that the mean score for the experimental group was 32.33 and the standard deviation was 4.48 the mean score for the control group was 21.53 and the standard deviation 4.29. The mean score of the experimental group was higher than that of the control group.

Further calculations to answer Ho3 using the t-test showed that the Df was 321 the t-cal 22.12 and the p-value .001. This further shows that the p-value of .001 is lower than 0.05 alpha significance level, hence Ho3 is therefore rejected.

Ho4: there is no significant difference between the motivation towards writing of the experimental group before and after exposure to the Tree Diagram Writing Strategy.

Table 4: T-test of Motivational Scores of the Experimental Groups Before and After Treatment

| Variable | N | mean | SD | Df | t-cal | p-value |
|----------|-----|-------|------|-----|-------|---------|
| EG | 163 | 31.70 | 3.61 | | | |
| | | | | 162 | 37.48 | .001 |
| CG | 163 | 20.34 | 2.31 | | | |

Research Question 4: is there any significant difference between the motivation towards writing of the experimental group before and after exposure to the Tree Diagram Writing Strategy? Table 4 showed that the total of 163 subjects responded to the questionnaire. The mean score before was 20.31 the standard deviation was 2.31. The mean score after was 31.70 and the standard deviation was 3.61. The description of data above showed that the students' motivation to write or involve in essay writing was heightened after they were exposed to the writing strategy under experiment. This data was further subjected to t-test analysis to find out if the observed difference in the mean scores were significant and so answer to research question 4 and Ho4. The DF was 162, the t-cal was 37.48 and the p-value is less than 0.05 Alpha level significance and so Ho4 is rejected.

7. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Students exposed to the Tree Diagram Writing Strategy and those treated with conventional method showed improvement in their descriptive essay writing. Student treated with the Tree Diagram Writing Strategy performed better in their descriptive essay writing than students treated with the conventional method. Students were better motivated to write good descriptive essays after they were exposed to the tree diagram writing strategy.

8. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Students of the two groups taught with the Tree Diagram Writing Strategy and the conventional method respectively exhibited a sizeable quality of improvement. The students exposed to a visual experience showed improvement in performance over and above the performance of those taught conventionally. Writing as a skill requires students to be effectively motivated to overcome their phobia for it and begin to see it as fun [Raocetal 2007]. It is clear from this finding that the introduction of a handy approach or strategy like the Tree Diagram in teaching essay writing will make students perform better than they would have. This is in agreement with the findings of Rostami and Hoveidi [2014]. The conventional methodology has not proved totally discardable because students taught with it have also shown some appreciable level of improvement. This agreed with the position of nwali [2012] who had insisted that conventional methods of teaching essay writing still have a lot to offer language teaching.

Students in the experimental group treated with the experimental variable performed better in their descriptive essay writing task far and above the group treated with the conventional variable. The Tree Diagram formed an interactive and communicative input presenting the learners with concrete and motivating procedure for the execution of a rather abstract and disinteresting task'. The visual effect of the diagram also made the students want to find out more. This cumulated in higher performance in comparison to their pretest scores and the posttest performance of the control group.

The performance of the experimental group after exposure to the Tree Diagram Writing Strategy was enhanced showing that the treatment variable had impacted on their interest and motivated them to write more and better. This finding is in line with Bing;s [2013] finding and cabrero and Bazo.s(2014) position that graphic presentation and diagram approaches are useful and effective means to affect students writing.

9. CONCLUSION

As much as the conventional approaches have impacted the much they could, the best have not been achieved from their continuous use hence the search for more result oriented approaches. The Tree Diagram Strategy has proved a strategy worthy of use to improve student's performance in essay writing. The students taught conventionally. They were also found to have been motivated to write better essay after they have been exposed to the application of this strategy in their descriptive essay writing. It is therefore needful that this strategy be applied in the teaching of essay writingto secondary school students

10. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF WRITING

This work has shown that students performed better in descriptive essay writing when they are taught with the visual representation strategy of tree diagram, meaning that if students' essay writing lessons are couched in this similar communicative packages they will do better in their writing.

Teaching the students descriptive essay writing using conventional methodology will not yield the optimal expected result; there should therefore be a minimal application of these methods in the teaching of essay writing in our schools.

Lastly, as this work has revealed that the use of Tree Diagram Writing Strategy motivated the students to write better essays, it implies that a continuous use of this and similar graphic strategies will help make the writing task an interesting activity for the students.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

English Language teachers should endeavour to use communicative graphic strategies that make essay writing teaching and learning a realistic and interesting activity and so engender students' enthusiasm to write. The use of conventional methodologies in the teaching of aspects of language as descriptive essay writing should be drastically reduced while aspects that are overly relevant to contemporary practice should be integrated into the communicative modules. Graphic representation should apply in areas of Language Teaching and learning to re-awaken the students' interest and motivate them for better performance.

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