

Effects Of Verbal Ability On Second Language Writers' Achievement In Essay Writing In English Language.

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Abstract

Although process pedagogical approach to writing is currently making the waves and in fact, considered suitable for most English first language (L1) writers, scholars are particularly concerned that second language (L2) writers do not possess the necessary linguistic ability to reap the full benefit of the approach simply because language proficiency and competencies underlie the ability to write in the (L2) in a fundamental way. Besides, it could be theorized that measures of L2 writers' verbal ability should predict with varying degrees of accuracy their performance in writing tasks. This, no doubt, gave rise to the current efforts of researchers at empirically establishing a relationship between students' verbal ability and their writing skill. Notwithstanding, research attempts in this regard have been minimal, thus, creating the need for further empirical investigations. The present study, a quasi-experiment, investigated the effects of verbal ability on students' achievement. Verbal ability was found to have significant effect on students' achievement. Also, gender and verbal ability interaction was significant on senior secondary II students' achievement in English essay writing in Osun State. Thus, the study, based on the results, made some useful recommendations aimed at improving students' essay writing ability in Nigeria.

Introduction

In recent times, there has been intense focus of research effort by language scholars on writing in a second language, particularly, English language (Osasiyan,1990). Scholars have also formed consensus of opinion on the need for effective teaching of essay writing in Nigerian secondary schools (Ellis, 1992 Fakeye, 2001 and Adegbile, 1996). This is because a correlation has been found between students' ability to write good essay and their performance in other aspect 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 as a test of intelligence can be used to predict learners' performance in language skills (Richard and Rodger 1986). This notwithstanding, research efforts at examining the effect of verbal intelligence on second language writers' performance in essay writing in English 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 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). It is on this assertion that this study sought to investigate whether or not verbal ability has any significant effects on second language writer's achievement in essay writing in English.

It could be theorized that general intelligence is associated with success in any academic endeavour. Verbal and quantitative ability, for instance, should influence performance at tasks involving verbal and quantitative reasoning respectively. Measures of these abilities should predict with varying degree of accuracy, relevant performance criteria (Mitchell, Rothstein, Sampo paunonen, James, Rush and Gillian, 1994).

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, and substitution of elements and logical selections of appropriate words. Verbal ability may show substantial level of association with students' grades. In a meta-analysis of 165 students regarding gender differences in verbal ability, Hyde and Linn (1988) found a small mean effect size (favouring girls). However, the differences between the genders were not uniform across tasks. For instance, the effect of size an vocabulary was minimal ($d=0.02$) but more substantial for speech production ($d = .33$). In a similar study, Bell and Perfitti (1994) observed some correlation between verbal ability, gender and language performance. Also, Olaboopo (1999) noted significant interaction effects of treatment and verbal ability on the variation in students' scores in English composition. On the contrary, Iyagba (1994) found no significant differences in the performance of students with various verbal ability groups in composition achievement but discovered a significant difference in attitude of students belonging to various ability groups. Moreover, as a result of the various inconclusive findings, there arises the need for further empirical investigations into the effects of verbal ability on second language learners' performance in language skills. The study therefore examined the effects of verbal ability and gender on students' achievement in essay writing in English language.

Hypotheses.

Three null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

H₀¹: There is no significant effect of verbal ability on students' achievement in essay writing in English.

H₀²: There is no significant effect of gender on students' achievement in essay writing in English.

H₀³: There is no significant interaction effect of verbal ability and gender on students' achievement in essay writing in English.

Methodology

The study is a quasi-experimental one that used 3 x 3 x 2 factorial non-randomized pretest posttest – control group design. The independent variables are: verbal ability, error treatment strategies and gender. While verbal ability and error treatment operated at three levels each, gender operated at two levels. The dependent variable is students' achievement in essay writing in English Language.

Population

All senior secondary school students in Osun State, Nigeria, constituted the population for this study.

Sampling procedure and Sample

There are six educational zones in Osun State, namely; Ede, Ife, Ifelodun, Ijesa, Iwo and Osogbo. There are thirty local governments spread across these geographical zones. Using simple random sampling procedure, two local governments were selected and six schools, three from each local government were randomly selected using table of random numbers. In the selected schools, one arm of Senior School II (intact class) participated in the study. In all, a total of 263 students were involved and treatments were randomly assigned to schools.

Instrumentation

Two major instruments, namely; Achievement test in English Essay Writing (ATEEW) and verbal Ability Test (VAT) were used in data generation. ATEEW was used to measure students' performance in essay writing. This instrument contains an essay question (Narrative type) adopted from the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination English Language, paper I. It is a standardized paper which could be marked objectively based on WAEC's marking scheme. The instrument was administered on the students as pre and posttests. The second instrument, verbal Ability Test (VAT) is a 36-item test adopted for use from Australian Council for Educational Research Higher Test. The test was used to classify the subjects of the study into three verbal ability levels (High, Medium and Low). The test was revalidated. It was administered on 80 SS II students that did not form part of the main study sample. Using Kudar Richardson (KR-20), reliability coefficient of 0.85 was obtained.

Results

The data was analyzed using Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) using the pretest (ATEEW) as covariate. Multiple classification Analysis (MCA) was used to determine the magnitude and direction of the main effects and also to ascertain the amount of variation due to each independent variable and graph was plotted for interaction effect.

HYP0THESIS 1: There is no significant main effect of verbal ability on students' achievement in essay writing in English.

The analysis of the data on achievement in English essay writing is summarized in table 1 below. The summary of ANCOVA shows that the main effects of verbal ability on

students' achievement is significant, $F(2,262)=17.480$, $P < 0.05$. Therefore, the null hypothesis 1 is rejected.

Table 1 . Summary Tables for Achievement Test in English Essay Writing (ATEEW) by Treatment, Verbal Ability and Gender.

Source of Variation	Sum of Square	DF	Mean Square	F	Sig. of F
Covariates	48170.01	1	48170.01	1348.353	.000
Pre test	48170.01	1	48.170.01	1348.353	.000
Main effects	2240.691	5	448.138	12.544	.000*
Treatment Groups	671.931	2	335.966	9.404	.000*
Verbal Ability	1248.970	2	624.485	17.480	.000*
Gender	18.957	1	18.957	.531	.467
2-Way Interaction	1185.529	8	148.191	4.148	.000*
Treatment& Verbal Ability	398.236	4	99.559	2.787	.027*
Treatment& Gender	465.482	2	232.741	6.515	.002*
Verbal Ability & Gender	260.994	2	130.497	3.653	.027*
3- Way Interaction	124.442	4	31.111	.871	.482
Treatment* Verbal*Gender	124.442	4	31.11	.871	.482
Explained	51720.67	18	2873.371	80.430	.000*
Residual	8716.920	244	35.725		
Total	60437.59	262	230.678		

*Significant at $P < .05$

Drawing inference from table 1, it could be observed that verbal ability accounted for 16% $(.40)^2$ of the variation in students' achievement.. As further revealed in Table 2 below (MCA), students with high verbal ability performed better than students with medium and low verbal ability.

TABLE 2: Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA) of ATEEW by Treatment Verbal Ability and Gender

Grand Mean =56.539 Variable +category	N	Unadjusted Deviation	Eta	Adjusted for Independents and Covariates deviation	Beta
Treatment Groups					
1. SC					
2. TAC	83	-2.1271		2.150	
3. CF	96	2.1211		-.1341	
	84	-3223	.116	-.19711	.109

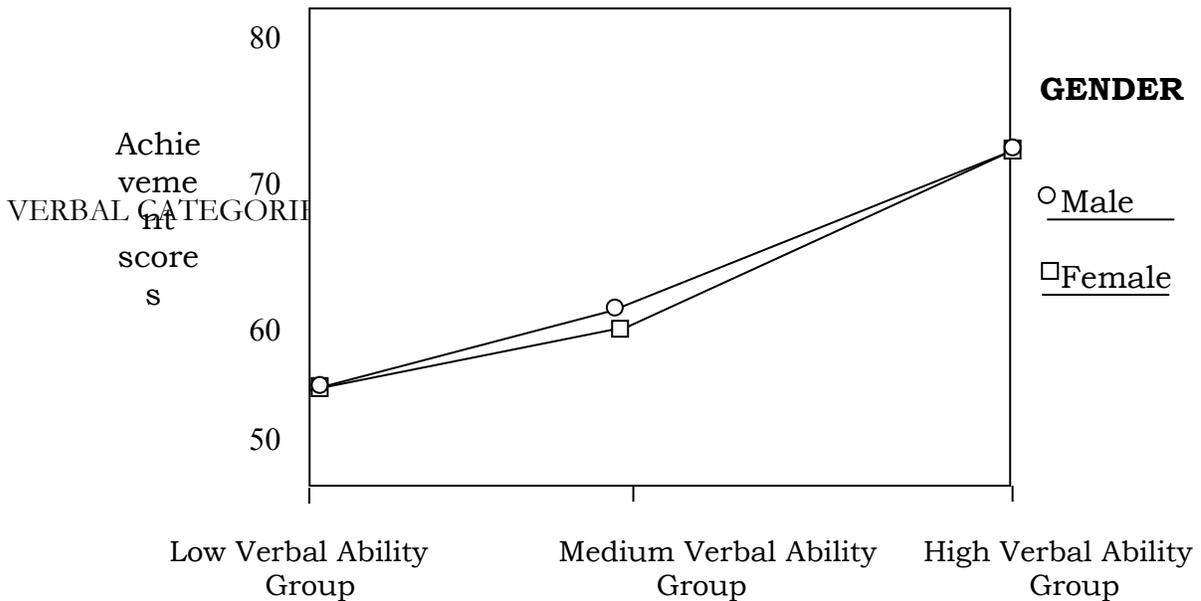
Verbal Ability					
1. High	67	12.7589		8.9565	
2. Medium	135	-1.2210		.3476	
3. Low	61	-11.3116	.55	-4.0166	.40
Gender					
1. Male	120	1.5003		.2964	
2. Female	143	-1.2590	.09	-.2487	.01
Multiple R ²					.834
Multiple R					.913

HYPOTHESIS 2: There is no significant main effects of gender on students' achievement in essay writing in English.

The summary of ANCOVA as presented in Table 1 shows that the main effects of gender on students achievement is not significant $F(1,262) = .600, > 0.05$, therefore hypothesis 2 is not rejected.

HYPOTHESIS 3: There is no significant interaction effects of verbal ability and gender on students' achievement in essay writing in English.

The summary of ANCOVA as presented in table 1 shows a significant interaction effects of verbal ability and gender on students' achievement in essay writing. The results in table 1 yielded a gender by verbal ability interaction, $F(2,262) = 3.653, P < 0.05$, thus, the null hypothesis 3 is not rejected. The graphical illustration of the interaction is presented below.



VERBAL CATEGORIES

Figure1: Interaction Effects of Gender and Verbal Ability on Students' Achievement in Essay Writing in English.

The pattern of interaction as revealed in the graph shows that both male and female tally in low verbal ability group but slightly different in medium verbal ability group. Male and female of both low and high ability have almost the same level of achievement and the performance of both gender increased as verbal ability increased.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATONS OF RESULTS

The study revealed that verbal ability recorded a significant main effect on achievement in essay writing in English. The finding is consistent with the findings of Ajiboye (1997), Hull (1997) and Austin (1987). Students with high, medium and low verbal ability recorded the mean of 59.4812, 56.8723 and 52.5081 respectively. This implies that students with high verbal ability performed better in English essay writing than students with medium ability while students in the medium ability groups performed better in English essay writing than those students in low verbal ability group. These results imply that verbal ability is a factor to reckon with as far as achievement in essay writing in English is concerned. Gender was found not to have significant effect on students' achievement in essay writing English. This finding contradicts the findings of Ogunkola (1997), Olaboopo (1999) Bell and Perfitti (1994) and Iyagba (1994). The result means that gender, as a simple factor did not significantly affect the variation in achievement scores of the subjects. The findings however revealed a significant interaction effect of gender and verbal ability on students' achievement in essay writing. The combination of the two variables influences achievement in essay writing.

The effects of gender on achievement varied with the levels of verbal ability. However, the two variables, when combined together hold a significant value as far as improving students' achievement in essay writing in English is concerned. Although the pattern of interaction shows that both male and female subjects tally in low and high verbal ability groups, the males in the medium ability group recorded more gain than the females. The performance of both gender, however, increased as their verbal ability increased.

Conclusion

In view of the findings of this study, it is clear that students' linguistic competence actually sets a limit to what they can do as far as essay writing in English is concerned. By implication, no longer should the teachers of English handle the teaching of various linguistic structures of English with levity. Students need more linguistic input so as to improve their verbal ability level and thus enhancing their performance in essay writing in English. In teaching various linguistic structures, teachers must follow the right sequence. Also, it is important to present the content of the curriculum of English language in accordance with the principle of sequence.

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