

International Journal of Arts and Humanities (IJAH)
Bahir Dar- Ethiopia

Vol. 5(3), S/No 18, June, 2016: 78-88

ISSN: 2225-8590 (Print) ISSN 2227-5452 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ijah.v5i3.7>

**Writing Anxiety: An Affective Filter for Essay Writing
Instruction among ESL Students in Ibadan**

Fakeye, David O., Ph.D.

Department of Teacher Education
University of Ibadan, Nigeria
E-mail: Fako4best@yahoo.com

&

Ohia, I. N., Ph.D.

Department of Teacher Education
University of Ibadan, Nigeria
E-mail: inohia@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study which adopted the descriptive research design investigated the relationship between writing anxiety and students' achievement in essay writing. SS2 Students from six schools in Ibadan Metropolis were used for the study. The instruments used were Essay Writing Achievement Test($r=0.81$) and Writing Anxiety Questionnaire($r=0.86$). Data collected were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed a negative significant relationship between writing anxiety and students' achievement in essay writing. This implies that the higher the writing anxiety, the lower the achievement in essay writing. It was therefore recommended among others that the teaching and learning of essay writing in classroom should be devoid of unnecessary tension and stress so as not to heighten

students' anxiety in essay writing. Also, English language teachers should devise any means of reducing writing anxiety among students so they can write better essays.

Introduction

English language has four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. These four basic skills are interconnected and are all germane to the English language proficiency. This is particularly so because the four skills aid effective communication. Effective communication entails following instructions after reading what has been written, conversing, giving and receiving feedbacks which involve speaking and listening skills.

Perin (2007) stated that learning the four basic skills can be a satisfying and mind-expanding activity to those who have acquired them; but a frustrating and even aversive experience when the skills are lacking. For most people however, writing skill is often viewed as the most difficult of the skills. This is because it does not just involve presentation of words graphically, but development and presentation of ideas in an organized way. According to Kolawole (2003), writing skill occupies a more prominent position among other skills. Writing skill is particularly very important in academic advancement. Little wonder Muodumogu and Unwaha (2013) viewed it as foundational to success in academics, in the work place and in the global economy. It can be concluded from Muodumogu and Unwaha's view that the writing skill is an indispensable skill in educational advancement.

Writing is the act of communicating one's idea, opinion and thoughts through the inscription of signs and symbols. It is an activity that humans do not acquire naturally but learn formally and consciously regardless of their geographical location. 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 hand (Omaggio, 2013). According to Babajide (1996), writing is the act of expressing one's thoughts or feelings through the use of words and punctuation marks on the surface of the paper. Ahmed (2010) defined writing as a reflective activity that requires enough time to think about the specific topic and to analyze and classify any background knowledge. As opined by Adegbile and Alabi (2007), 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.

Ahmed (2010) perceived English as Foreign Language (EFL) writing as a multidimensional process composed of a cognitive activity affected by a number of linguistic and contextual factors; EFL linguistic proficiency, instructional, psychological, socio-cultural, and socio-political issues. If these factors are well addressed, it will make writing an unforgettable experience. Writing is of great

importance for learning to happen. Without writing, language learning remains incomplete (Elizabeth, 2014).

Individuals need writing skill in their day- to- day activities. As individuals mature and become working adults, competence in writing continues to be essential (Fakeye and Ogunyemi, 2010). Essay writing is a way of testing students' competence in writing. However, writing skill is not limited only to essay writing; it is needed in other aspects of English language examination such as comprehension and summary writing. If students cannot write effectively, they would not be able to put answers across effectively in comprehension, they would not be able to write correct sentences in summary writing and they would not even be able to take down lecture notes in class.

As one of the major aspects of the English language, writing is tested at examinations such as West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and National Examination Council (NECO) SSCE in the form of essay/composition writing and letter writing. Essay writing is a skill that needs to be learnt by all and sundry. As a skill that requires conscious learning, a child learns to write at a very early age till maturity. Students' ability to acquire basic skills needed for understanding and expressing their ideas in their own words is facilitated by essay writing. Studies have shown that it is related to students' ability to succeed in various academic subjects (Ohia & Ogunbiyi, 1999; Fakeye 2002; Ogunyemi 2014; Igubor 2015).

Essay writing involves such practices as garnering content materials for the essay; organizing the materials into logical order (paragraphing); using appropriate expression in terms of appropriate vocabulary and sentence construction and mechanics: punctuation, capitalization, spelling and grammar (Fakeye 2002, Igubor 2015). As a skill, essay writing types include the development of the art of writing letters, memos and minutes of meetings, articles for publications, reports, and speeches. Others include description of various things, situations and experiences, narrations or accounts of happenings and presentation of reasoned persuasive thoughts. All of these skills are needed not only in order that a candidate may pass examinations, but also that he/she may navigate successfully through the chaos of existence. Essay writing therefore, can be a way of synthesizing meaning out of the chaos of existence.

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. Candidates who are able to write good essays in English perform better in other aspects of the subject such as comprehension and summary while those who are unable to write good essays in English perform poorly in the subject (Fakeye 2002; Igubor 2015). A cursory look at the West African Examination Council (WAEC) syllabus 2012-2015 reveals that marks are distributed along different aspects of English language as follows:

Essay/letter writing	50marks
Comprehension	20marks
Summary	30 marks
Total	100marks

It can be deduced from this analysis that although essay and letter writing carries 50 marks which is 45% of the total marks obtainable in English language paper one, the skill of writing is also required in the other two aspects (comprehension and summary). Therefore, by implication, a student that lacks good writing skills will not perform well in all the three sections of paper one which means that such a student's chance of passing the examination will be very low.

Poor writing skills have been identified as a major cause of mass failure of Nigerian candidates in English language examinations. According to the WAEC Chief Examiner's Report (2014), students' problem with writing include inadequate preparation manifesting itself in many forms like poor spelling, poor punctuation, inadequate exposure to idiomatic forms of English, lack of familiarity with the required formats, indiscriminate copying of passages in summary section, poor grammatical expressions, misinterpretation of questions, failure to adhere to rubrics, among others. When looking into the reasons for the students' weakness in writing, the Chief Examiner stated that it is clear that this aspect of the English language examination is not being properly taught in schools.

As a way of addressing the problems, scholars have carried out varieties of research ranging from effective strategies for teaching essay to addressing other teacher and student-related factors. Although most of these studies came up with good contribution to the teaching and learning of essay writing, they have not been significant enough to translate to improved performance in public examinations. This, therefore, perhaps means that there are more to the problems of teaching and learning essay writing than just improving teaching strategies. It is perhaps in realization of this that Obemeata (1995) remarked that improving teaching methods and strategies alone cannot solve the problem of poor performance in school.

Consequently, scholars have advocated a shift in research focus from what happens in the classroom such as teachers' teaching methods and strategies to student-related factors. This is perhaps plausible in view of the fact that in the teaching-learning process, it is not only the teacher that is responsible. In the process, the teacher, the learner and even the learning environment are accountable. This means that if the teacher and the learning environment are good and learners have certain problems, the desired results will not be achievable. Literature has documented some student-related factors that are strongly linked to academic success. They are: attitude, gender

influence, interest, peer influence and intelligence quotient among others. However, specific to the English language learning and essay writing achievement is student-related factor of writing anxiety. Besides, the influence of writing anxiety on writing performance of learners has enjoyed relatively less research focus than other student-related factors, especially, in Ibadan.

Writing being a complex activity (Hayes & Flower, 2007), it is very likely that it might be influenced by writing anxiety. In Nigeria, for instance, many students can experience different levels of second/foreign language writing anxiety, in that many of the writing products may be required to be written in English. Yet, it is found that few of the studies were conducted by looking into the area of anxiety in the writing practice in secondary schools. Writing anxiety is also known as writing apprehension or blockage. Writing anxiety is a pessimistic and apprehensive feeling a person has whenever he/she is given a writing task. According to Singh and Rajalingam (2012), the term, writing apprehension, was originally defined as the measure of anxiety about writing that outweighs the projected gain from the situation. Ibrahim and Noor (2011) defined writing apprehension as a subjective complex of attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural interaction which reinforces each other.

Students that are apprehensive while writing may misinterpret questions, may not have enough points to write, may not be able to present their points logically and if they do, they may lack correct expressions to put their points across. Whether professional writers, amateur or students, writers generally at one point or another have been discovered to experience 'the terror of blank page' (Murray, 2008). This can either stimulate a writer to write smoothly or prevent the flow of any writing. It is believed by many that most writers allow the fear of committing errors to affect them.

Atkinson (2010) estimated that 10%-25% of all people experience writing apprehension to some degree. Shaughnessy (1997) asserted that some writers inhibited by their fear of error produce but a few lines an hour or keep trying to begin, crossing out one try after another until the sentence is hopelessly tangled. According to Ahmed (2010), writing anxiety negatively influences both the learners' motivation and their academic achievement on one hand, and their attitudes towards writing on the other hand. In all, writing anxiety is associated with a writer's fear of errors, unfamiliarity with the composition process and a lack of voice; all of which can prevent a writer from communicating properly in written word (Reigstad, 2011).

Some scholars have identified the causes of writing anxiety to include expectation for oneself, expectations of one's teacher or peers, fear of committing errors, unfamiliarity with the craft of writing and a lack of voice. Students who are anxious about writing, have been discovered to likely turn in papers late, not turn in papers at all, fail to complete tasks, turn in papers that are not well thought out nor properly edited, turn in papers with vague, dull and general writings.

Quite a number of researches have been carried out and findings have been made concerning writing anxiety. One of them is the Basic Writing Program at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo. Research has shown that high apprehensive writers, in comparison with other low apprehensive ones, tend to stop more while composing and are less concerned with planning the overall structure of their essays. Studies have also shown that writing anxiety has a strong link with academic success (Magno, 2008; Ifawumi, 2012). For example, students with high level of writing apprehension produced papers of less quality than low apprehensive writers, avoided tasks whenever possible and procrastinated in their work (Hanna, 2010). According to her, writing apprehension might influence students at all levels even after they had graduated from the universities. Learners who experience L2 writing anxiety will most likely avoid situations that require them to write in the second language (Al Ahmad, 2003; Ibrahim & Noor, 2011). A study within the Egyptian context highlighted that students with low apprehension wrote better quality pieces of written composition and had higher self-esteem than those with high apprehension.

However, Effie, Ayodele and Akinlaja, (2012) in their work, found that writing anxiety did not yield a significant correlation with performance. Some researchers have also discovered that in the relationship between writing apprehension level and writing proficiency, the higher the writing apprehension level, the better the students' proficiency (Horwitz, 1991; Bailey, Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 2000). This implies that a writer that exhibits apprehension while writing performs even better than a writer that does not. In view of the fact that some of these findings are contradictory, there is need for more research to be done.

Statement of the Problem

Essay writing is an important aspect in the learning of the English language as students' competence in the English language would go a long way in helping them pass all their academic courses successfully. However, studies have shown that students have poor essay writing skill and this account for their poor performance in English language examinations. As a way of addressing the problem, researchers have concentrated efforts on different strategies of teaching essay writing and in spite of the contribution of these studies to the teaching and learning of essay writing, the problem of poor performance still persists. Scholars have therefore, advocated a shift in research focus from teachers' teaching methods to student-related factors such as attitude, gender, interest, peer influence, intelligence quotient, vocabulary knowledge and writing anxiety. However, with specific reference to essay writing, writing anxiety has not enjoyed much research focus especially in Ibadan. Studies have shown that this affective factor has a strong link with academic success especially in the areas of mathematics, sciences and in other aspects of English language such as comprehension and summary. The extent to which the factor would correlate with achievement in essay

writing has not received much research attention. Therefore, the study investigated the extent to which vocabulary knowledge and writing anxiety would predict students' achievement in essay writing in some selected schools in Ibadan Metropolis, Oyo State.

Research Question

- (a) What relationship exists between writing anxiety and students' achievement in essay writing?

Scope of Study

The study investigated the relationship between writing anxiety and students' achievement in essay writing. The study covered Senior Secondary School Two (SS2) students from six schools in Ibadan Metropolis.

Significance of the Study

This study revealed that there is a relationship between writing anxiety and students' achievement in essay writing thereby identifying an important affective filter that must be reduced for improved essay writing. Also, the study would add to the pool of research on ways of improving students' performance in English language.

Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive research design. The total sample of 450 respondents was used for the study. A multi-stage sampling technique was employed for the study. In the first stage, out of 23 public senior secondary schools in Lagelu Local Government, six schools were randomly selected. In the second stage, purposive sampling technique was used to select SS2 students from each of the schools. This was because SS2 students were more available for the study than SS3 students and more exposed to essay writing than SS1 students. For the third stage, proportionate sampling technique was used to select twenty-five (25) students from each of Art, Commercial and Science classes to ensure that all the students were involved in the study making a total of 75 students in each of the schools and 450 students in all the six schools involved.

The instruments used were Essay Writing Achievement Test($r=0.81$) and Writing Anxiety Questionnaire($r=0.86$). Data collected were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation at 0.05 level of significance.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What is the relationship between writing anxiety and student's achievement in essay writing?

Table 1: Pearson Correlation of writing anxiety and student's achievement in essay writing

Variables	Achievement test	Writing Anxiety
Achievement test	1.00	
Writing Anxiety	-.351**	1.00
Mean	51.71	2.390
Standardized Deviation	7.999	3.049

*Significant at $P < 0.05$

Table 1 shows that writing anxiety ($r = -.351$; $P < 0.05$) has a negative significant relationship with students' achievement in essay writing. This means that there is an inverse relationship between writing anxiety and students' achievement in essay writing.

Discussion

Finding revealed a negative significant relationship between writing anxiety and students' achievement in essay writing. This implies that the higher the writing anxiety, the lower the achievement in essay writing. Conversely, those who reported lower writing anxiety had higher achievement in essay writing. The findings confirmed the findings of Cheng (2004), Hassan (2001), Erkan and Saban (2010), Zhang (2011), Ifawumi, 2012 and Asmari (2013) who, in different studies, reported negative correlation between students' writing apprehension and their writing achievement. However, this was inconsistent with Onwuegbuzie, Bailey and Daly's (2000) and Daly's (2012) studies which found that the higher the apprehension level, the better the respondents' performance in writing. The result is also inconsistent with Fowler and Kroll (1980) who found that there was no correlation between writing anxiety and grades.

Conclusion

The study investigated vocabulary knowledge and writing anxiety as predictors of students' achievement in essay writing in Lagelu Local Government Area of Oyo State. Based on the findings, it can be concluded from this study that writing anxiety is an affective filter that affects students English essay writing.

Recommendations

It is, therefore, recommended that the teaching and learning of essay writing in classroom should be devoid of unnecessary tension and stress so as not to heighten students' anxiety in essay writing. Also, English language teachers should devise any means of reducing writing anxiety among students so they can write better essays.

Some of such devices may mean ministering to students' self-efficacy, motivating the students and making them conscious of their ability to write well. Guidance counsellors should be alive to their responsibilities in schools by engaging students in career and guidance counselling so as to remove any atmosphere that could depict fear and tension in students. In other words, before students embark on writing assignments, counsellors should give pep talks to reduce their tension.

References

- Adegbile, J.A. and Alabi, O.F. (2007). Effects of verbal ability on second language: Writer's Achievement in Essay writing in English Language. Institute of Education, University of Ibadan, Ibadan. *International Journal of African and African Studies*. Vol. vi (1).
- Ahmed A.H. (2010). Students' problems with cohesion and coherence in EFL essay writing in Egypt: Different perspectives. Helwan Faculty of Education, Egypt. *Literacy Information and Computer Education Journal (LICEJ)*, Vol 1 (4).
- Ahmed, A. (2011). The EFL essay writing difficulties of Egyptian student teachers of English: Implications for Essay Writing Curriculum and Instruction. University of Exeter Graduate School of Education.
- Al-Ahmad, S. (2003). The impact of collaborative learning on L1 and apprehension about and attitudes towards writing. *Unpublished doctoral dissertation*, Indiana University of Pennsylvania.
- Ayodele, K.O., & Akinlana, T. (2012). Writing apprehension and Nigerian undergraduates' interest in dissertation's writing: The moderator effects of self-efficacy, emotional intelligence and academic optimism. *The African Symposium: An Online Journal of the African Educational Research Network*, 46 vol 12 (1).
- Onwuegbuzie. A.J., Bailey, P. & Daley, C.E. (2000). Correlates of anxiety at three stages of the foreign language process. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 19 (4), 474-490.
- Cheng. Y., Horwitz, E.K., & Schallert, D.L. (2004). Language anxiety: Differentiating writing and speaking components. *Language Learning*, 49(3), 417-446
- Daly, J.A. (2009). Writing apprehension in the classroom: Teachers' role expectancies of the apprehensive writer. *Research in the Teaching of English*. 13(1), 37-44.
- Elizabeth, M. (2014). *Methods of teaching English*. New Delhi: Discovery Publishing House, Aurora Offset.

- Ellis, R. (1997). *The study of second language acquisition*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Erkan, D. Y. & Saban, A. (2011). Writing performance relative to writing apprehension, self-efficacy in writing attitudes towards writing: A correlational study in Turkish Tertiary Level EFL. *The Asian EFL Journal Quarterly*, 13(1), 164-192.
- Fakeye, D.O. (2002). Effect of instruction in componential and rhetorical strategies on students' achievement and attitude to essay writing in Ibadan. *Unpublished Ph.D Thesis*, Department of Teacher Education, University of Ibadan.
- Fakeye, D.O. and Ogunyemi, K.O. (2010). Effectiveness of reactive focus on form instruction and performance enhancement strategies in enhancing competence in essay writing achievement among secondary school students in Ogun State. *Journal of Applied Education and Vocational Research vol. 8 pp 8-15*.
- Hanna, K.J. (2010). Student perception of the teacher comments: Relationships between specific aspects of teacher comments and writing apprehension. *PhD Dissertation, The University of North Dakota*.
- Hassan, B.A. (2001). The relationship of writing apprehension and self-esteem to the writing quality and quality of EFL university students. ERIC Document, ED45167.
- Ibrahim, F. & Noor. H. (2011). Writing apprehension in English among Jordanian postgraduate students at University Utara Malaysia (UUM). *Academic Research International*, 1, 2, 190-198.
- Ifawumi, S.A. (2012) Affective factors as correlates of essay writing achievement in Okitipupa, Ondo State. Unpublished M. Ed. Project, University of Ibadan.
- Igubor, (2015). Effect of essay structure – based instructional strategies on students' achievement in expository essay in Benin City. *Unpublished Ph.D Thesis*, Department of Teacher Education, University of Ibadan.
- Kolawole, C.O.O. (2003). Feedback strategies and secondary school students' attitude to and performance in essay writing. *African Journal of Education Research* 9(1 and 2) 18 -23.
- Magno, C. (2008). Reading strategy, amount of writing, metacognition, metamemory and apprehension as predictors of English written proficiency. *Professional Teaching Articles*, 29. Retrieved from <http://www.asian-e-fl-journal.com/PTA/pta-July-08-cm.php>.

- Muodumogu C.A. & Unwaha C.O. (2013). Improving students' achievement in essay writing: What will be the impact of mini-lesson strategy? *Global Advanced Research Journal of Arts and Humanities (GARJAH)* 2(6) 111 – 120.
- Obeamata, J.O. (1995). Education: An unprofitable industry in Nigeria. *Post-graduate School Inter-disciplinary Research Discourse*. Ibadan: University of Ibadan Press.
- Ohia, I.N. & Ogunbiyi, M.O. (1999). Curriculum recycle theory: A new paradigm for making the reading-writing connection. *African Journal of Educational Research*, 5(1), 134-140
- Omaggio, H.A. (2013). *Teaching language in context*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
- Perin, D. (2007). Best practices in teaching writing to adolescents. In S. Graham, C.A. MacArthur, & J. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Best practices in writing instruction*, pp 202 – 221. New York: The Guilford Press.
- West African Examination Council (2014). Research Division monthly seminar, Yaba, Lagos. *Chief examiner's reports*. Yaba: Lagos
- Zhang, H. (2011). A study in ESL writing anxiety among Chinese English majors: Causes, effects and coping strategies for ESL writing anxiety.