



TECHNIUM
SOCIAL SCIENCES JOURNAL

Vol. 7, 2020

**A new decade
for social changes**

www.techniumscience.com

ISSN 2668-7798



9 772668 779000

Language exposure and subject familiarity as correlates of senior secondary school students' achievement in narrative writing

Oladotun Opeoluwa Olagbaju¹, Nurudeen Oluwaseun Jimoh²

Department of Linguistic Education, College of Education and Social Sciences,
Legacy University of Gambia¹, Department of English and Language Arts - American
International Academy, Burundi²

dotunolagbaju@yahoo.com¹, jimohnurudeen1256@gmail.com²

Abstract. Narrative writing is often an option in English composition examination, especially in WAEC/NECO conducted English language Paper 1. Performance in essay writing has been found to determine the overall success in English language. Efforts to improve students' performance in the subject have largely focused on instructional strategies without much attention to process-based variables such as language exposure and subject familiarity that can influence learning outcomes in ESL classrooms. Despite the contributions of these studies to pedagogical practices in ESL classroom, students' achievement in English composition has not improved significantly. However, process-related variables such as quality and volume of exposure to the target language and subject familiarity have been found to predict learning outcomes in a second/foreign language classroom. Therefore, this study examined the relationship between language exposure and subject familiarity on achievement in narrative essay. The study tested three null hypotheses and a total of 350 participants were randomly selected from four senior secondary schools in Ibadan North Local Government Area, Nigeria. Data was collected using two research instruments and the results showed a positive non-significant relationship between the independent variables and students' achievement in narrative essay. Also, there were no composite and relative contributions of language exposure and subject familiarity to students' achievement in expository essay.

Keywords. Achievement, Language Exposure, Subject Familiarity, Narrative Essay, ESL Instruction

Introduction

Proficiency in the four language skills of the English language continues to accrue social prestige both in formal and informal settings in Nigeria. Literacy in English language has remained one of the hallmarks of an 'educated' Nigerian because the ability to speak, read, write and communicate fluently in English remains a significant factor when parents want to determine or assess the quality of education in schools. This is because English plays a significant roles in education, administration, legislation, business transaction, entertainment, and inter-ethnic relations as the official language and lingua franca in Nigeria. In education, for example, English plays a dual role of being the language of instruction progressively from the fourth year of basic/primary education to the higher institutions of learning (FGN, National

Policy on Education, 2004). English is also one of the core subjects in the Nigerian educational system and a minimum of a credit pass in the subject is a strong requirement for admissions into any of the higher institutions of learning in Nigeria.

English language remains indispensable vehicle of communication in the Nigerian educational and social systems. High premium is placed on proficiency in reading, speaking and the quality of students' writing in most schools. Therefore, there has been several research efforts aimed at improving the quality of instructions in schools through learner-centred strategies (Atanda & Jaiyeoba, 2011), social media-supported instruction (Olagbaju & Popoola, 2020), communicative styles (Ogunyemi & Olagbaju, 2020) and so on. In spite of these interventions in second language instruction in Nigeria, many students still find English language difficult as attested to by the perennial mass failure usually recorded in the subject especially in public examinations. Essay writing is allotted the highest mark in English Language Paper 1 and success in composition writing has been found to guarantee overall success in the subject.

Considering the importance of essay writing to students' achievement in English language, efforts at improving performance in English language have largely focused on improving instructional procedures in composition writing. However, performance in essay writing has been very poor. For example, WAEC Chief Examiners' Report (2019) states that although the essay questions were clear, candidates failed to show understanding of the questions they attempted. Also, errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation also dominated candidates' essays. The report concluded that teachers need to help candidates by teaching them how to read, understand and interpret the requirements of the different aspects of the examination, especially essay writing.

The choice of narrative essay type in this study was informed by the fact it is one of the options mostly attempted by students in WAEC/NECO conducted examinations; it is only next to letter writing. The narrative essay requires the writer to retell or recount a past experience or event that they have witnessed, heard or imagined (Akinborewa & Olagbaju, 2010). It is an essay type preferred by most learners because it is more or less like a narration of a story or past event. The process of instruction and students' achievement in English composition has been bedeviled by several learner and classroom-related factors within and outside the ESL classroom in Nigeria. Therefore, it is important to examine other factors within the classroom that can contribute to students' achievement in essay writing. Some of these factors include subject familiarity, language exposure, teaching style, students' prior knowledge, phonological variations, verbal ability, language anxiety and so on.

Language exposure and subject familiarity are capable of influencing ESL students' achievement in essay writing irrespective of the quality of instruction delivered by the teacher. Language exposure deals with the number of contact hours in form of instruction and classroom interaction that students are able to access in a particular subject. In the context of this study, language exposure refers to the contact that the students have with the target language in and out of the classroom. The processes involved in the teaching and learning of a second language in a multilingual environment can be frustrating for both the teacher and learner. However, the ESL learning activities can be planned and enriched through quality and adequate exposure to the target language. Exposure allows ESL learners to progressively amass the knowledge and rules of the target language until they attain a high level of proficiency. Obanya (2002) avers that instruction in a second language classroom should be multidimensional in approach. In the process of instruction in ESL classroom, learners should have adequate exposure in terms of depth in quality and quantity of the target language that they come in contact with.

Exposure in second language learning refers to the contact that the learners have with the language that they are trying to learn within and outside the classroom. Language exposure

could be in the form of access to the target language in daily communication or the volume of the contact situations that the ESL learner has acquired through instruction in the target language over a period of time. Stressing the importance of language exposure in ESL classroom, Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) posits that activities in second language instruction are basically done through communicative inputs that are comprehensible to develop the skills and knowledge of the culture of the target language. Adequate and quality exposure to the target language can improve ESL students' mastery of the writing. However, when ESL learners are not adequately exposed to the target language through contact situations, Shumin (1997) posits that they cannot effectively master the skills of the target language.

Similarly, subject familiarity deals with the level of acquaintance with a topic, process or task that learners have master. Norman (2015) considers reading as the key to unlocking subject familiarity because the more readers read, the more they encounter general and specific words related to the topics. Learners with knowledge of the topic or essay type are likely to write better than those that are not familiar with what is required. This implies that subject familiarity gives an advantage to learners in language learning situation. Subject familiarity provides a platform for students to recall or transfer previous learning or experiences in actual classroom situations. Horiba and Fukaya (2015) reported that topic familiarity affected the processing and representing detailed information that is relevant to the topic of interest.

Also, Al-Shumaimeri (2006) investigated the effects of language ability and content familiarity on foreign language learning and found that subject familiarity had a significant effect on learnings in reading. However, studies on subject familiarity on ESL/EFL instruction have largely focused on the reading skill with little or no literature on the relationship between subject familiarity and language exposure on students' achievement in composition writing. Therefore, this determined the relationship between language exposure and subject familiarity and students' achievement in narrative essay.

Statement of the Problem

Learning to write in a second language can be a difficult experience because learners need to acquire knowledge of the rules and aspects of the target to be able to write effectively. Writing is a skill that is critical to success in formal education and preservation of information. In spite of the importance of this language skill to mankind, achievement in writing has been very poor largely because instruction procedures in writing are too structured and the role of factors such as language exposure and subject familiarity among others, are not being considered. Several efforts to address these problems have been made by researchers but the problem of mass failure and poor quality of essays still persist. To ameliorate these problems, it is important to examine other factors that can contribute to success in essay writing within and outside the ESL such as language exposure and subject familiarity. Past studies on the relationship between these two factors and students' learning outcomes in English language largely focused on reading. Therefore, this study determined the language exposure and subject familiarity as correlates of students' achievement in narrative essay.

Hypotheses

Based on the stated problems, the following null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance.

Ho1: There is no significant relative relationship between the independent variables (Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity) and students' achievement in narrative essay.

Ho2: There is no significant composite contribution of independent variables (Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity) and students' achievement in narrative essay

Ho3: There is no significant relative contribution of independent variables (Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity) and students' achievement in narrative essay

Anderson's Schema Theory

Richard Anderson (1978) contributed to the development of the schema theory. The theory describes the processes involved in knowledge acquisition and organisation. Schema or schemata refers to a mental framework used by humans to represent and organise information which aids easy recall. Schemata are derived from learners' prior knowledge and used to modify behaviour, or predict likely outcomes of events. People use schemata to organise knowledge through a complex mental activity which also provides framework for future understanding. Language exposure and subject familiarity as considered in this study are capable of impeding or facilitating learning during the process of classroom instruction. Learning is constructed by students' schema (language exposure and subject familiarity) to create a connection between learners' schema and language instruction to facilitate self-regulated learning.

Classroom-Related Factors in Narrative Writing Pedagogy

The teaching of writing in ESL classrooms in Nigeria covers different essay types which include letter, article and speech writing, descriptive, expository, argumentative and narrative essays. Narrative essay requires the writer to tell story or retell a real or fictional event that he or she has witnessed, experienced or imagined. Current trends in pedagogy have shown that the teaching of narrative essay in schools has become more learner-centric but even at that, performance in essay writing has not improved significantly. This is because there are certain factors that exist in the classroom in terms of the learners' characteristics, classroom atmosphere, frequency of teacher-learner contact and so on, which can influence students' learning outcomes. Some of such factors are language exposure and subject familiarity in the teaching and learning process. Research (Ogunyemi & Olagbaju, 2020) lends support to the idea that the style of communication in teacher-students or student-context/text contact has a significant impact on students' learning outcomes in English language classroom.

Language exposure in classroom instruction goes beyond the amount of time the teacher spends in class. It also covers the quality of instruction that the ESL students are exposed to during those contact hours or periods on the timetable. Exposure in language learning situations comprises opportunities to make use of the target language within and outside the classroom, contact with teacher, interaction with texts and other learning materials. It is also logical to argue that high volume of teacher-student contact or student-content interaction and other forms of exposure to the target language will facilitate an improved students' achievement in the subject.

Subject familiarity on the hand deals with students' prior knowledge accounted for primarily by schema-based models of comprehension which propose that pre-stored schemata that enhances learning and reception of new ideas. Familiarity with the vocabularies and rules of the target language is an important aspect of second language learning. Second language learners with greater knowledge of a particular topic, skill or expertise in an essay type will obviously perform better than classmates that are novice with regards to the topic or task required. Martínez (2014) posits that the teaching of a foreign language classroom is affected by familiarity of content or readers' prior knowledge of the content of the text, and gender. McCrudden, Stenseth, Bråten, and Strømsø (2015) describe topic familiarity as a form of prior knowledge which is an important factor in the acquisition of new knowledge. Horiba and Fukaya (2015) posit that topic familiarity has a profound effect on both learning of the content of a text and incidentally vocabulary learning from the context; and it may influence content

recall. Thus, the level of subject familiarity is directly proportional to the comprehension of the processes involved in the task or knowledge to be accomplished or learned.

Language exposure and subject familiarity are two different factors in second language instruction that are interrelated because the former can determine the latter. When learners have unlimited access to a resource person or learning materials in the course of second language learning, the level of subject or topic familiarity will significantly improve. Exposure to the skills of the target language in and outside the classroom can improve the level of familiarity with the subject (language) and reduce language anxiety. When ESL learners are adequately exposed to rudiments of writing a narrative composition, they will become familiar with the requirements of writing a narrative essay in a public examination such as the length (L), content (C), organization (O), expression (E) and mechanical accuracy (MA). Other requirements include the essay format/outline, paragraphing, punctuations, consistency in spellings and so on. Therefore, this study determines the relationship between language exposure and subject familiarity and students' achievement in narrative writing.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Population

The study adopted a descriptive research design of survey type using qualitative and quantitative methods of data analysis. The study population consists of all the senior secondary school students in Ibadan North Local Government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. A simple random sampling was used to select three schools from the public schools in the LGA and a total of 280 SS2 students were randomly selected for the purpose of this study.

Variables

The independent variables are Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity while the dependent variable is ESL students' achievement in narrative composition.

Instruments and Validation Process

Two research instruments were used for the purpose of data collection and these are Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity Questionnaire (LESFQ) and Students' Achievement Test in Narrative Writing (SATNW). The instruments were designed by the researcher to elicit responses from participants. LESFQ has two parts, the aspect on language exposure is a 10-item instrument with two-point scoring scale. The aspect on subject familiarity equally has 10 items with a four-point likert scale of High (4), Average (3) Low (2) and Novice (1). The second instrument, SATNW was a past WAEC question on narrative essay. As a standardised test, it was written under similar examination conditions and was marked using the same procedures by WAEC examiners using WAEC-recommended raters' guide. LESFQ was trial-tested on a sample of 40 students which were not be part of the study sample. Their responses were analyzed using Cronbach alpha statistics and a coefficient of 0.64 was recorded.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using inferential statistics such as Pearson Product Moment Correlation (PPMC), Multiple Regression Analysis (MRA), mean and standard deviation.

Results and Discussions

H₀₁: There is no significant relative relationship between the independent variables (Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity) and students' achievement in narrative essay.

Table 1: Relative Relationship of Each of the Independent Variables with Students' Achievement in Narrative Essay

Variables	Students' Achievement in Narrative Essay	Language Exposure	Subject Familiarity
Students' Achievement in Narrative Essay	1		
Language Exposure	.039 (.466)	1	
Subject Familiarity	.078 (.146)	.076 (.157)	1
N	350	350	350
Mean	19.84	17.04	31.70
Standard Deviation	5.18	1.81	5.34

Table 1 shows the relationship each of the independent variables (Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity) and students' achievement in narrative essay. The result indicates that language exposure had a positive non-significant relationship with students' achievement in narrative essay ($r = .039$; $p > .05$). This implies that the more students were exposed to language, the more their achievement in narrative essay, hence, language exposure could have a positive influence on students' achievement in narrative essay. The table also indicates that subject familiarity had a positive non-significant relationship with students' achievement in narrative essay ($r = .078$; $p > .05$). This also implies that the more students were familiar with the subject of discourse, the more their achievement in narrative essay. Based on these result, the null hypothesis one is hereby accepted that there is no significant relative relationship between the independent variables (Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity) and students' achievement in narrative essay.

Ho2: There is no significant composite contribution of independent variables (Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity) and students' achievement in narrative essay

Table 2: Regression Analysis of the Composite Contribution of the Independent Variables with Students' Achievement in Narrative Essay

R = .085 ^a ; R Square = .007; Adjusted R Square = .001; Std. Error of the Estimate = 5.18579						
Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	67.361	2	33.680	1.252	.287 ^b
	Residual	9331.679	347	26.892		
	Total	9399.040	349			

Table 2 shows that there was no significant composite contribution of Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity to students' achievement in narrative essay ($F_{(2, 347)} = 1.252$; Adj. $R^2 = .001$; $p = .287 > .05$). This implies that the two independent variables when pulled together did not significantly contribute to students' achievement in narrative essay. Therefore, the null hypothesis 2 is hereby accepted.

Ho3: There is no significant relative contribution of independent variables (Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity) and students' achievement in narrative essay

Table 3: Regression Analysis of the Relative Contribution of the Independent Variables with Students' Achievement in Narrative Essay

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	15.894	2.999		5.299	.000
	Subject Familiarity	.073	.052	.075	1.404	.161
	Language Exposure	.095	.154	.033	.622	.535

Table 3 shows that the relative contribution of each of the independent variables (Language Exposure and Subject Familiarity) and students' achievement in narrative essay. The result indicates that there is no significant relative contribution of language exposure ($\beta = .033$; $p=.535>0.05$) and subject familiarity ($\beta = .075$; $p=.161>0.05$) to students' achievement in narrative essay. This implies that the Language exposure and subject familiarity did not individually have significant contribution to students' achievement in narrative essay. Therefore, the null hypothesis 3 is hereby accepted. However, subject familiarity ($\beta = .075$) had higher beta weight and more contribution to students' achievement in narrative essay than language exposure, though this contribution was not statistically significant.

The findings of this study showed that language exposure and subject familiarity had positive non-significant relationship with students' achievement in narrative essay. This result implies that higher level of language exposure and subject familiarity in the ESL classroom can predict improved achievement in narrative essay. The findings of this study is in support Bhelda (1999) and Gilakjani and Ahmadi (2011) that quality exposure to the target language correlates with ESL/EFL students' achievement. Obayan (2002) also stressed the importance of quality linguistic inputs through exposure to the target language in ESL classroom. When learners are exposed to the target language through quality instruction that encourages communicative inputs and interactions, they become more familiar with the topic and this improves their achievement in the subject. The result also supports the findings of Chan (2013) that modelling and exposure to the target language contributes positively to students' achievement in ESL learning classrooms. Similarly, subject familiarity had no significant relationship with students' achievement in narrative essay. The findings of this study support Horiba and Fukaya (2015) that topic familiarity has a profound effect on students' achievement, recall and learning of text content and vocabulary from the context. Martínez (2014) also found the relationship between subject familiarity and students' achievement to be positively significant.

In addition, the findings of this study showed that there is no significant composite contribution of language exposure and subject familiarity to students' achievement in narrative writing. It is logic al that the composite contribution of language exposure and subject familiarity to students' achievement in English language because if learners have adequate access to resource persons and learning resources or materials in the course of second language learning, the level of subject or topic familiarity will significantly improve. Exposure to the target language skills within and outside the ESL classroom can improve subject familiarity and students'

achievement. When ESL learners have adequate exposure to the rudiments of narrative composition, there is likely to be an improvement in their performance.

Similarly, the findings of this study showed that there is no significant relative contribution of learning exposure and subject familiarity to students' achievement in narrative essay. By implication, the findings of this study showed that when the contributory effect of language exposure and subject familiarity were examined separately, they do not contribute to students' achievement in narrative essay. This result is at variance with the findings of Chan (2013) and McCrudden, Stenseth, Bråten, and Strømsø (2015) that each of language exposure and subject familiarity have significant relative contributions to students' achievement in English language and English vocabulary respectively. However, the result supports Nelson-Sathi (2013) that factors like phonological variations and exposure are capable of hindering students' learning outcomes in ESL classrooms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Narratives are taught in both reading and writing skills as part of instruction in English studies in ESL classrooms in Ibadan North LGA. Almost all the public examination bodies in Nigeria set question on narrative essay annually because such a composition requires learners to retell or recreate an encounter that they once read, heard, witness or experienced. Therefore, the students are expected to be familiar with the right choice of tenses, and the rudiments of writing a story. This study examined the relationship between language exposure and subject familiarity and ESL students' achievement in narrative essay. Results showed that there are no significant relationships between language exposure and subject familiarity and achievement in narrative essay. Also, there are no composite and relative contributions of the independent variables to students' achievement in narrative essay in Ibadan North local government Area of Oyo State, Nigeria. Based on this result, the following recommendations are made:

1. ESL teachers should pay close attention to language exposure and subject familiarity as processes within instructional delivery in ESL classroom and ameliorate the effect of such factors through adequate exposure and students' involvement during instructional delivery.
2. Teachers should ensure that students are adequately exposed to human and material resources in terms of volume and quality during instructional delivery till they are able to 'own the new knowledge'.
3. Students should be encouraged to interact with instructional resources within and outside the classroom to familiarize themselves with the topic or process.
4. Learning should be engaging and student-material focused in ESL classroom.

[1] References

- [2] Akinborewa, T. and Olagbaju, O.O. (2010). *Simplified Composition Workbook*. Ibadan: Joytal Printing Press.
- [3] Al-Shumaimeri, Y.A.N. (2006). The effects of content familiarity and language ability on reading comprehension performance of low and high-ability Saudi Tertiary students studying English as a Foreign Language. *Journal of Educational Sciences & Islamic Studies*, 18(2): 1-19.
- [4] Anderson, R.C. (1978). Schema-directed processes in language comprehension. *Cognitive psychology and instruction*, 67-82.
- [5] Atanda, A.I & Jaiyeoba, A.O. 2011. Effects of school-based quality factors on Secondary School Students' Achievement in English Language in South-Western and North-Central Nigeria. *Journal of Emerging Trends in educational Research and Policy (JETEKAPS)* 2(2), 93-99.

- [6] Bhela, B. (1999). Native language interference in learning a second language. *International Education of Journal* Vol. 1(1): 27-35. Retrieved 17 February, 2020 from iej.cjb.net.22
- [7] Chan, J.Y.H. (2013). Exposure to accents and pronunciation modelling: A case study of a secondary school in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 24(3): 84-93
- [8] Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National Policy on Education* (Revised). Abuja: NERDC Press.
- [9] Gilakjani, A.P. and Ahmadi, M.R. (2011). Why is pronunciation so difficult to learn? *English Language Teaching* Vol. 4 (3):74-83. Retrieved online 10th January, 2020 from www.ccsenet.org/elt
- [10] Horiba, Y. and Fukaya, K. (2015). Reading and learning from L2 text: Effects of reading goal, topic familiarity and language proficiency. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 27 :22-46
- [11] Martinez, A.C.L. (2014). Analysis of the effect of content familiarity and gender on English as a foreign language reading comprehension by Spanish University students. *Porta Linguarum*
- [12] McCrudden, M. T., Stenseth, T., Bråten, I., & Strømsø, H. I. (2015). The Effects of Topic Familiarity, Author Expertise, and Content Relevance on Norwegian Students' Document Selection: A Mixed Methods Study. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Advance online publication. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu000005>
- [13] Nelson-Sathi, S. (2013). Reconstructing the lateral component of language history and genome using network approaches. Chapter in book: Reconstructing the lateral component of language history and genome evolution in biology. Fangerau, H., Geisler, H., Halling, T. and Martin, W. (Eds). Publisher: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- [14] Norman, A. H. (2015). Topic familiarity and vocabulary knowledge: Implications For instructions. National Seminar Proceeding. Universitas Negeri Malang.
- [15] Obanya, P.A.I. (2002). Curriculum Overload in the Language Education Programme for Basic Education in Adebayo, L., Isiugo–Abanihe, I., and Ohi, I.N. (Eds) Perspectives on Applied Linguistics in Language and Literature. Ibadan: Stirling-Horden Publishers (Nig) Ltd.
- [16] Ogunyemi, K. O., & Olagbaju, O. O. (2020). Effects of Assertive and Aggressive Communication Styles on Students' Self-Esteem and Achievement in English Language. *Cross-Cultural Communication*, 16(1): 96-101.
- [17] Olagbaju, O.O. & Ogunyemi, K.O. (2020). Phonological Variations and Language Exposure as Correlates of Achievement in Silent Sounds in ESL Classrooms in Ibadan South-East LGA, Nigeria. *International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics*, 6(1): 255-262.
- [18] Olagbaju, O.O. & Popoola, A.G. (2020). Effects of Audio-Visual Social Media Resources-Supported Instruction on Senior Secondary Schools Students' Learning Outcomes in Reading. *International Journal of Technology in Education* 3 (2): 92-104.
- [19] Shumin, K. (1997). Factors to consider: developing adult EFL students' speaking abilities. Forum 25 (3), 8. Somali: A language of Somalia. (n.d.) Ethnologue report for language code; SOM.
- [20] West African Examinations Council (2019). Chief Examiners' Report for the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE). Lagos: WAEC Press.