



Difficulties of Learning Essay Writing: The Perspective of Some Adult EFL Learners in Nigeria

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Abstract

Good essay writing skills are necessary for composing correspondences, reports, term papers, research papers, homework, examinations and lots more. Essay writing provides the avenue for people to express themselves in a logical manner, develop their writing skill, vocabulary and grammar. Hence, its inclusion at all levels of the school curriculum of English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching in Nigeria. Despite the good intention of the curriculum planners, adult learners still perform poorly in the task as well as similar exercises after being taught, which is worrisome considering the predominant need for good essay writing skills in school and post school existence. This paper examines the causes of the difficulty which adult learners encounter that result in their inability to write acceptable essays during assessments and post school living. A questionnaire was used for data collection, and the conclusion of the findings is that students lack the basic motivation for understanding the topic due to non-realization of the importance of the topic. It recommends that teachers create the awareness of the relevance of Essay Writing among adult EFL learners prior to teaching them the topic as well as giving them essay topics which are specific to their courses rather than general ones.

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Keywords: Essay writing; causes; difficulty; lack; motivation

1. Introduction

As human beings, people have need to communicate all the time and every day. Although, majority of communication takes place verbally, much of it still takes place in writing. Whenever people communicate whether verbally or in writing, they do so engaging one or more essay types. Hoskings (2014) hints that Michel de Montaigne, a French philosopher, developed the essay form in the 16th century and that the term itself derives from the French word 'essai' meaning 'testing' or 'trying out' with the purpose to try out or test a proposition or idea in an organised context in the light of personal experience and judgment.

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An essay guides readers from the issue(s) raised in its title to a conclusion, by developing a clear and logical line of thought so that a reader is not side-tracked by points that are not directly relevant. It is normally in the form of continuous prose, using paragraphs but probably not using headings or numbers. This means that, while an essay may be broken up into paragraphs, generally the writing still flows along without interruption (Skills you need, 2017).

Hansen and Hansen (n.d.) consider that the acquisition of essay writing skills is the ticket to better grades and success in school the reason being because according to (Murrey, n.d.) students have many activities to perform as they need to take lectures, understand them, make notes, write tests or examinations, etc., in an essay format. Hosseni, Taghizedeh, Abedin and Naseri (2013) reported that the correlation between content score of all students and their writing skills is meaningful at 0.01 level of significance. Similarly, potential employers care about the possession of writing skills and place a high value on people who possess a good essay writing skill because more than two-thirds of salaried jobs require a substantial amount of written communication (Hosking, 2014), so that in a labour force full of mediocre writers, someone who writes well is bound to succeed. Going further, they add that academics and businessmen view essay writing skills as crucial, however, increasing numbers of professionals note a steady erosion in the writing abilities of graduates which indicates that schools dismally fail with at least two thirds of the people who pass through the education pipeline coming out unable to write a simple letter.

Based on the foregoing, Hansen and Hansen (n.d.) report that Grensing (1988) found that 79 percent of surveyed executives cited writing as one of the most neglected skills in the business world, yet one of the most important to productivity and from another survey undertaken in 1992, the Associated Press reported that executives identified writing as the most valued skill but said that 80 percent of their employees at all levels need to improve, this being the reason why major companies spend upwards of US\$3 billion (£1.8bn) per year training their employees in order to bring their writing abilities up to scratch.

Whether one wants to obtain good grades, succeed in school, is looking to impress an HR manager, secure promotion or improve everyday communication with one's boss, colleagues and clients, the acquisition of good essay writing skill may be one of the best things to do as it is beneficial for a life time. In fact, great writing skills go a long way toward establishing one as a more complete person with improved social life and a better professional (Jonson). Hence, its inclusion at all levels of the school curriculum of EFL teaching in Nigeria.

Meanwhile, it is possible for the learning of essay writing to be inhibited by many factors which could be possibly be related to poor background requirements of learners,

justification for learning essay writing and lack of awareness of the importance of essay writing.

1.1. Statement of the problem

In many academic careers, students are assigned essay writing as part of the many necessary activities performed. Students need to take lectures, make notes, write tests or examinations, etc., engaging essay writing skills which is why it has such numerous advantages to students that must be considered. In fact, it is beneficial for them all through their life to improve academically generally, and specifically to increase knowledge and undertake research.

The foregoing could justify its inclusion at all levels of the school curriculum of EFL teaching in Nigeria where on the average, students have a period of about ten years over which they are taught to write from time to time under the nomenclature of composition at lower levels, and then essay writing at higher levels. Thereafter, they do not study it as a topic but are request to engage it to answer assignment, test and examination questions as well as for seminar papers, conference papers and thesis writing.

However, the problem is that against the backdrop of the good intentions of curriculum planners and its mode of implementation so far, many adult learners, after so many years of being taught Essay Writing still perform poorly in the writing of Essays as well as similar write ups so that it seems that the problems that affect its learning are overwhelming and such a development is worrisome considering the predominant need for good Essay writing skills in school and post school existence.

1.2. Theoretical framework

This study was hinged on the claim of Currier (2008) that ... proficient writing instruction ... is becoming increasingly insufficient ... focusing mainly upon only final course test. On the other hand, course tests are the most widely accepted means for determining academic achievement of students. Although there seems to be no tendency to ignore the importance of such tests, there needs to be more emphasis on writing during the terms of study now more than before.

1.3. Significance of the study

This study portends the following benefits:

- In the sphere of education, it is never out of place to discuss educational practices and subject matters to see to their improvement when the need arises and this is no exception.

- The results from this study are relevant in advising curriculum planners of the other aspects to include in the syllabi of essay writing to make its studies more appealing and successful.
- The discussion of this problem among professionals of like minds is beneficial in improving the importance that teachers attach to the teaching of essays
- Students and teachers would profit more when valuable time is committed to more productive write ups rather than essays that are not well thought out and poorly structured with unimaginable expression and mechanical accuracy errors.
- The business world would be more productive with people who know what to say and how to say them while at the same time save the huge sums of money invested in the training of employers with poor essay writing skills.

1.4. Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study is to ascertain the category of problems alongside others which most influence students' poor acquisition of essay writing skills in order to narrow down on the solution to the problem to enable action on the most crucial factors responsible for the problem in order to find solutions to the most crucial aspects of the problem that would lead to the acquisition of adequate essay writing skills for study among students as well as career success and progression at the work place.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

The descriptive research design was engaged as an avenue to aid the provision of answers to the research questions of this study following which it is hoped that further action would be flamed for the solution of the problem.

2.2. Research questions

The following questions guided the actions of this study:

1. Do students understand the justification of studying essay writing?
2. Do students realise the importance of studying essay writing?
3. Are there curriculum and other matters affecting students' study of essay writing?
4. What are the measures that could aid a better understanding of essay writing?

2.3. Instrument

A questionnaire consisting of 13 items of Likert Scale format was specifically designed and administered to 1,931 adult students being 45% of Higher National Diploma 11

students, College of Administrative Studies and Social Sciences, Kaduna Polytechnic; 200 level students in the Faculty of Arts, Kaduna State University and Theology 1 students of the Good Shepherd Major Seminary, Kaduna. The questionnaire sought answers to questions which addressed the three categories under investigation namely: justification for learning essay writing (2 items) the awareness of the importance of essay writing (6 items) as well the curriculum and other matters affecting the study of essay writing (5 items).

2.4. Data analysis

The data obtained was analyzed using the Mean, a measure of Central tendency whereby any mean below 2.5 was considered negative and any mean above 2,5 was considered positive. The obtained results were interpreted for discussion according to the research questions.

3. Results

3.1. Research question 1: Do students understand the justification of studying essay writing?

Table 1. Students' understanding of the justification for studying essay writing

S/N	Questionnaire item	Item Mean (X) Score	Group Mean (X) Score
1.	2.	3.1	
2.	13	3.5	3.3

Okpe and Onjewu, Field work (2017)

Two items (2 and 13) provided answers to the issue of students' understanding of the justification for the inclusion of essay writing in their curriculum and the group mean (X) obtained was 3.3 which meant they understood the justification for learning the topic. Therefore, they accented to knowing the justification for acquiring good essay writing skills and knew that their ability to write good essays affirmed their understanding of grammar.

3.2. *Research question 2: Do students realise the importance of studying essay writing?*

Table 2. Students’ realization of the importance of studying essay writing

S/N	Questionnaire item	Item Mean (X) Score	Group Mean (X) Score
1.	3	2.3	
2.	7	2.2	
3.	8	2.5	2.3
4.	10	2.5	
5.	11	2.4	
6.	12	2.3	

Okpe and Onjewu, Field work (2017)

Six items (3, 7, 8, 10, 11 and 12) provided answers to the issue of students’ realisation of the importance they could derive from acquiring good essay writing skills and the group mean (X) obtained was 2.3 which meant they did not know. The implication of which meant that students did not know that acquiring good essay writing skills translated to the ability to write good letters, reports, understand any written text, pass examinations easily gain employment and perform better at work.

3.3. *Research question 3: Is the study of essay writing affected by curriculum and other matters?*

Table 3. The effect of curriculum and other matters

S/N	Questionnaire item	Item Mean (X) Score	Group Mean (X) Score
1.	1	3.7	
2.	4	3.6	
3.	5	4.2	3.7
4.	6	3.6	
5.	9	3.7	

Okpe and Onjewu, Field work (2017)

Five items (1, 4, 5, 6 and 9) provided answers to the curriculum and other matters preventing students from acquiring good essay writing skills and the group mean (X) obtained was 3.7 which meant such problems existed. It then meant that the time allocated to essay writing was not adequate, there was preference to write essays on

course related topics rather than general ones, they did not know of the aspectual method of marking essays, the components taught under essay writing are inadequate though they affirmed to like the study of essay writing.

3.4. Summary of findings

The results tabulated above with their interpretation could be summarised as follows:

- The students understood the justification of learning essay writing.
- However, the same students failed to realise the connection between acquiring good essay writing skills and the ability to write good letters, reports, understand any written text, pass examinations easily gain employment and perform better at work.
- With regards to the curriculum and other related matters, we deduced that the students views were that:
 - The time allocated to essay writing was not adequate,
 - There was preference to write essays on course related topics rather than general ones,
 - They did not know of the aspectual method of marking essays,
 - The components taught under essay writing are inadequate though they affirmed to like the study of essay writing.

4. Conclusion

The conclusion of this study is that students lack the basic motivation for understanding the topic due to non-realization of the importance of the topic. The nonrealization by students of the various benefits of acquiring good essay writing skills, the status of the factors relating to inadequacy of time allocation, as well as the components taught under essay writing and nonawareness of the method of marking essays all leave much to be desired with the now great need by all to possess good essay writing skills.

5. Recommendations

- The authors of this article should initiate a forum to address the findings in this paper with colleagues and explore possible solutions to the problem.
- The management of relevant departments should pursue an amendment of the component included in teaching of essay to include all necessary parameters. When aspects are taught separately, it more likely that student will be unable to relate or apply them on essay writing. In the same vein, the issue of the inadequacy of time allocation for the teaching of essay writing should be addressed.

- As much as possible students should be given essay topics that are related to their profession to write on.
- Teachers should endeavor to explain the benefits of acquiring good essay writing skills and also the aspectual method of essay writing in order to create enough motivation among students for a better acquisition of adequate essay writing skills.

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