

DIAGNOSIS OF WRITING DIFFICULTIES OF FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATES

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Abstract

Proficiency in writing the English language is a very critical asset for students, especially those who are newly admitted in to the university. However, it has been observed that many of these students have challenges in their writing. This paper therefore sought to diagnose the writing difficulties of newly admitted undergraduates as well as the areas where most of the difficulties occur. The study employed the descriptive research design which enabled the researcher to examine the writings of subjects and identify the areas of difficulty of the subjects. It was found that students had a grasp of content in their writing but had most difficulty in their expression and mechanical accuracy. It was concluded that English language teachers of these students will do well to tailor their instruction to remediate these challenges so that the students can overcome them.

Keywords: Diagnosis, writing difficulty, expression, mechanical accuracy.

Introduction

Reading and writing are foundational skills in the impartation and acquisition of learning, especially in the academic setting. The first step on the part of growth for students is to learn how to read and write proficiently. This is why reading and writing challenges of students are viewed with utmost seriousness. But ever since the beginning of reading and writing instruction, learners and teachers have encountered difficulties of learning to read and write on the part of the learner. Even in the present, students' difficulties in reading and writing manifest in lack of proficiency in the use of the English language and their poor performance/achievement in internal and external examinations (see WAEC Chief Examiner's Reports, 2011, 2012), thus confirming the position of scholars (McGill-Fanzen, 1987; Learner, 1997) that failure to learn to read limits the life and future of students both academically and professionally. For example, Ogundipe (2004) found that polytechnic students had several areas of difficulty in the reading and comprehension of academic and non-academic texts and this affected their performance and achievement negatively. In the same vein, scholars, (Richards, 2015) have found that students with difficulties in writing are unable to achieve set academic goals in their disciplines.

Wawryk-Epp, Harrison and Prentice (2004) have described reading and writing difficulties as part of general learning disabilities. This is because learning difficulties in children may manifest in the inability to read and write. The Center for Excellence for Early Childhood Development (CEECD) estimates that between 20 and 40 percent of children will have reading difficulties and that out of this number, 75% of them will have this difficulty throughout schooling. Ugwuanyi, Onu, Eskay, Obiyor and Igbo (2012) and Heward (2006) contend that between 85 and 90 percent of children who are identified as having learning disability have difficulties in reading. Hence educationists, scholars and researchers have evolved means of identifying and addressing the learners' difficulties in order to help them

overcome their challenges and to move them forward. This became the genesis of educational diagnosis and remediation which gave birth to reading/writing diagnosis and remediation.

What are reading and writing difficulties?

Reading difficulty (sometimes called reading disability) is the inability of the learner to effectively read and comprehend texts. This inability is often without prejudice to the learner's age, level of instruction or individual intelligence. That is, a learner may have good quality reading/writing instruction, have good intelligence and be at an appropriate age but still be unable to read at grade level. Researchers (Connors and Schulte, 2002; Jacobs, 2007; Mathes, 2017) have found that reading difficulties are often in the areas of decoding (which affects speed and fluency of reading due to inability of the learner to match the sounds and letters of the language to decode words), phonemic awareness (the knowledge that words are made up of units called phonemes which change the meaning of a word and the inability of the learner to use them to relate written words to their oral equivalents (Connors and Schulte, 2002)), phonological awareness (the ability to link the sounds of a language to the written letters in the language), and that of comprehension (Mathes, 2017). Severe reading difficulties are called dyslexia. Pirttimaa, Takala and Ladonlahti (2015:6) consider dyslexia as “due not to poor teaching or laziness, intellectual challenges or traumatic brain damage,” but of “genetic origin and neurological background”. It is also said to be a lifelong challenge in which the learner finds it difficult to link written and spoken words. Therefore, whatever is the cause or nature of the reading problem, its result is struggle with learning as well as poor academic achievement. This is because most learning is got from reading and evidence of learning is demonstrated through writing, especially in the academic environment.

Likewise, writing is said to be a challenging endeavour for a great number of students (Richards, 2015). This is because many of them have difficulty expressing themselves in writing, constructing good sentences, or having legible handwriting. Knoblauch (2008) indicates that students who have difficulty with writing may be overwhelmed and frustrated during writing activities and therefore avoid writing tasks. Thus they will be unable to achieve desired academic goals because writing is a tool used to demonstrate learning and also to assess it. The areas of difficulty in writing as enumerated by research include: originating ideas and developing them, organization, grammar, spelling and punctuation, among others (Richards, 2015). Such reading and writing challenges are diagnosed and treated to enable the learner achieve the desired level of academic performance.

Diagnosis

This is the identification of reading/writing difficulties or reasons for reading/writing challenges in students through investigation in order to find out what are the areas of difficulty, the causes of the difficulties, as well as the means and ways of remedying them. According to one untitled and undated document available to this writer, the discovery and evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of an individual learner are the first steps towards ensuring that minor difficulties do not develop into major disabilities. Thus diagnosis investigates and identifies the sources of learners' difficulties through classroom observations of students by the teacher, and through checking/weighing the trend of the student's performance both in the classroom and in examinations. This will lead to identifying the exact problems and pinpointing the causes of these problems. Thus the process of eradication of the difficulties through remedial measures will help the student overcome the problems and recover lost ground.

Remediation

Remediation can be said to be the flip side of the diagnosis coin because diagnosis leads to remediation. Remediation addresses the identified reading/writing difficulties through instructional measures taken by the teacher, the school and other stakeholders to help the student overcome his/her difficulties. The teacher modifies instruction based on the observed difficulties of the learner while the school and family contribute their own quota by providing an enabling environment or resources needed by the learner. All these are based on some general principles identified by research.

Studies in diagnosis and remediation of reading and writing difficulties

Oviedo and Gonzalez (2013) conducted in Spain what they described as a personalized case study on a seven-year-old boy who was assessed by his teachers, family and medical personnel as having the severe reading difficulty called dyslexia. In carrying out the study, they initially gathered background information on every area of the boy's life, from birth to the present when he was in the second year of primary school. Their diagnosis revealed that the boy had difficulties in the area of accuracy reading, spelling, reading fluency and writing. The remedial instruction made use of a combination of "auditory, tactile and kinesthetic" methods in the teaching of reading and writing in an environment that was made as natural and meaningful to the subject as possible. The case study was conducted in one hour lessons three times a week for 30 weeks. The results showed that the subject improved significantly in reading, fluency, spelling and writing.

Aaron, Joshi, Gooden and Bentum (2008) conducted a study investigating the relative effectiveness of the Component model of diagnosis and remediation of reading difficulties in the experimental groups, comparing it with the traditional Learning Discrepancy model for the Control groups. Three hundred and thirty students in Grade 2 to 5 from seven different schools in the south west of the United States of America were used as subjects. One hundred and seventy one students were assigned to the experimental group while one hundred and fifty-nine were assigned to the control group. All students were registered for a remedial program called the Reading Excellence for Academic Development (READ). The students in the control group were matched grade by grade with those in the experimental group based on their pre-test scores in the Gates-McGinitie Test of Reading, the Woodcock Language Proficiency Battery, and an informal letter naming tasks which were the instruments used in diagnosing the reading difficulties of the subjects. The remediation program using the component model was for one hour a day, four days a week for one semester for the experimental group. The reading components addressed were word recognition, vocabulary and comprehension. Also based on the pre-test, the students were placed in one of the three groups of word recognition, vocabulary or comprehension. At the end of the semester, a post test was conducted for all the students. The results reported by the researchers are for different groups of students over a period of seven years (1998 – 2005). Students who were in the experimental groups consistently and significantly performed better in the post tests than those in the control groups over the seven years reported. Nevertheless, the difference in the length of teaching of the control and experimental groups before post tests could be a confounding factor in the study, so the researchers recommended a longer teaching time for students being taught with the component model.

In another study, Ugwuanyi, Onu, Eskay, Obiyo and Igbo (2012) investigated the effects of remedial reading instruction on word recognition of subjects in primary three in a private school in Nsukka, Eastern Nigeria. Using the quasi-experimental design with treatment and

control groups, 20 students labeled as learning disabled, based on their continuous assessment records and teacher nomination, were the subjects. They were assigned into experimental and control groups by the use of proportionate stratified sampling procedure and simple balloting to allocate in to the experimental and control groups. The Diagnostic Checklist for Oral reading-Word recognition adapted from Rubin (1991) was used as the diagnostic instrument for the pre- and post-tests. The researchers found that remedial reading instruction had no significant effect on word recognition in the subjects. However, the researchers did not indicate the duration of the study as this would have given an indication of the effectiveness of the treatment on the students' performance.

Alfaki (2015) conducted a study with undergraduate students of a university in North Sudan. Using the simple random sampling procedure, 20 students were selected as sample. The subjects were asked to write a composition of 250 – 300 words to give a description of their village/hometown. The subjects' essays were reviewed twice by ten lecturers and the students' areas of challenge were identified. Such areas as use of tenses, spelling, use of connectives, paragraph development and unity, capitalization and punctuation were identified as problematic to the students. However, the researcher did not indicate that he proffered any remedial measures to help the students. Rather, he only made general suggestions of what ought to be done by the students and their teachers to help students who have these problems.

In another study, Bamigbola (2015) conducted a study using SS2 students from a secondary school in Ilorin, Kwara State of Nigeria. To diagnose the reading problems of the subjects, the researcher used observation, tests and survey to gather information. Students were found to have challenges in the appropriate use of vocabulary, contextual interpretation of words, spelling and grammar. The researcher used passages and questions from them to address the deficits in the subjects and recommended that a reduction in class size would be helpful to both teachers and students in the language classroom.

Al Badi (2015) investigated the academic writing difficulties faced by post graduate ESL students studying in a university in Australia. The subjects were made up of 19 females and one male from four different nationalities. Two survey questionnaires were used to collect information from the students. The data collected was analysed and results showed that the subjects had common difficulties irrespective of their background and previous experience. The areas of challenge included language use, cohesion, coherence, use of own voice, finding appropriate topics and sources, as well as referencing and citation. The researcher suggested some solutions that could alleviate the academic writing challenges faced by the students.

Statement of the problem

Fresh university students have been known to encounter difficulties in writing when they are admitted into institutions of higher learning. This can only be confirmed through a process of diagnosis in order to identify the areas of difficulty of particular students. Since proficiency in writing will determine the success or otherwise of their endeavours, it is needful to diagnose their areas of writing difficulty so as to devise ways and means to address them in order to enable the students overcome their challenges.

Objective of the study

This study aimed to identify the areas of difficulty in the writing of freshly admitted undergraduates in a university of technology.

Research Questions

Two research questions were used to address the study:

1. What are the difficulties identified in the writing of freshly admitted university undergraduates?
2. Which areas posit the greatest challenge for the students?

Methodology

The study used the Descriptive research design which will enable the researcher to understand what the writing challenges of the identified population are.

Sixty freshly admitted first year students of the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO) were randomly selected from four departments of the university – Biotechnology, Computer Science, Animal Science and Materials and Metallurgical Engineering. The students were all non-native/second language speakers of the English language aged between 16 and 22.

Research Instrument

An essay prompt titled “**The worst mistake I have ever made**” was used as the instrument for data collection. The test retest method was used to determine the readability and reliability of the prompt with a coefficient of 0.96 and 0.95 respectively.

Data collection procedure

The above writing prompt (The worst mistake I have ever made) was given to the students to write on for a length of about two to two and a half pages. At the end of 55 minutes, the students’ essays were collected and graded by two experienced lecturers of the Use of English Unit of the university. They identified all the mistakes contained in the students’ writing. The mistakes are grouped under the following headings:

Content: This relates to the key ideas, facts and details related in the story by each student. It reflects the subjects’ understanding of the task required of him/her in the writing prompt as well as the presentation of facts and treatment of the topic.

Organisation: This is the logical organization of facts, sentences and paragraphs in the student’s writing. It also refers to the student’s writing having a beginning, middle and ending with proper use of transitional devices.

Expression: This is the use of grammar and cohesive devices to present facts in the writing of the subjects.

Mechanical Accuracy: This is the students’ use of spelling, capital letters and punctuation appropriately in their writing.

Data Analysis

The students’ written texts were scored under the headings of Content (30%), Organization (30%), Expression (20%) and Mechanical Accuracy (20%) by two lecturers in the Use of English Unit of the General Studies Directorate. An average of the scores by the two raters on every paper was used as the score for each student. The raw scores were then analysed using percentages. The students’ mistakes and areas of difficulty were also identified.

Findings and discussion

Research Question 1: What are the difficulties identified in the writings of the students?

From their essay writings, the students’ areas of difficulty were:

Content: Although most students had a grasp of the facts and ideas they wanted to pass across, some of the students had a not-too-legible hand writing which made it difficult for the graders to read and understand their text.

Organization: Some of the subjects had difficulty in organizing their paragraphs logically but some did, may be because the task required narration.

Expression: The students exhibited difficulty in grammatical sentence construction. For example, a student (Christian) wrote, “For me been the first child of the family much responsibilities is on me”. Another student (Franca) wrote, “... he told me that if I happens to get educated in white man’s land that I will be ...” while Christabel wrote: “... I saw a group of guys stearing closely at both of us. As we approached the place they where standing, my friend Immediately screemed and huged them all one after another ...”

Use of appropriate vocabulary was also a problem they encountered. John wrote: “It was a faithful morning as I rushed to the bathroom to take a sweat shower ...” while Chukwuma wrote: “That was my greatest mistake and sumtimes I wished I could go back to high school, but unforuntely is not possible”.

Mechanical accuracy: One of the major difficulties the students exhibited in their writing was that of spelling and use of capital letters. For example, one student wrote: “I was born in a village called Nteje in oyi local government area of Anambra state into the family of Mr pius Adokwe”. Another student (Judith) wrote: “I was surprised at this invitation as this was too sudden ... but I hurriedly accepted.”

Punctuation was also an area of challenge. One student (Cynthia) wrote: “Finally I became pregnant for Charles and when I told him he said we had nothing to do than to abort the baby I said no I can’t because I was scared of losing my life I refuse and continually he turned his back on me because I refuse to abort the baby and to crown it all, he denied the pregnancy.”

The total number of errors by the students was counted and is given in the table below.

Number of errors	Content	Organisation	Expression	Mechanical Acc.
	30	114	645	372
Percentage	2.6	9.8	55.6	32

Research Question 2: Which areas posit the greatest challenge for the students?

From the table above, the students’ greatest challenge was in expression which constitutes grammar and use of cohesive devices, followed by mechanical accuracy which is the appropriate use of capital letters, spelling and punctuation. The least area of challenge was content, followed by organization. Their performance in organization could be attributed to the fact that narration naturally follows a chronological format in which students tell of their greatest mistakes from the beginning to the end result. The content is also a replay of the facts of what happened to produce their mistakes which must have made deep impressions on

them. But their grammar, use of capital letters and punctuation show their actual proficiency in writing the language. From the data in these two areas of expression and mechanical accuracy, it follows that proper remedial measures must be put in place to enable the students overcome these challenges.

Conclusion

Wherever students are admitted to study, the need for reading and writing proficiently is very germane since this would determine their performance and achievement in their academic endeavours. This is especially relevant to students who use English as a second language as is the case in Nigeria. To address these challenges, diagnosis and remediation of their reading and writing difficulties will help them to achieve better success in their academic efforts. Therefore the teachers, parents and all stakeholders in the education sector in Nigeria should take a cue from the advanced countries of Europe and America who have done a lot of work to diagnose and address the reading and writing difficulties encountered by their students. Our own peculiar environment and challenges should be factored in to these solutions since no two countries have the same environmental, educational, social and other peculiarities.

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