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A CORRELATIONAL STUDY BETWEEN TEACHER MADE SCHEMA TEST AND SECONDARY SCHOOL PUPILS' PERFORMANCE IN ESSAY WRITING

ODIAKA, Stella Ifeyinwa *PhD*

*Department of Adult Education,
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria*

Abstract

One area of language learning that constitutes great concern to secondary school pupils is writing. A lot of reasons has been given by various researchers as the causes of this weakness in most secondary school pupils. This study investigated the role of schema on pupils' performance in essay writing. A total number of one hundred and two (102) pupils' from two co-educational institutions was randomly selected for the study. The instruments used were Test on Pupils' Schema (TOPS) and Test on Writing (TOW). Two research questions were used in the study. Findings revealed that there is a significant correlation between pupils' schemata and writing ability. The study recommends that pupils' schemata be given serious attention by stakeholders in education and that good methods of teaching essay writing should be adopted by teachers.

Keywords: Essay writing; schema; pupils.

Background to the Study

Man's cognition is such a complex entity that it plays sophisticated intellectual role in individuals' language learning (Ubahakwe 1991). According to him, Selinger (1982) reported that "the grammatical processing functions are performed by the nerve cells located at the left hemisphere (LH) of the human brain". One of the surprising aspects of these roles or functions of man's cognition is its ability to cautiously organize past experiences in such a way that they have great bearing on learners' language skills (Anderson 1988). Essentially, what we actually read or listen to, including any language tasks we are asked to do, are stimuli that re-awaken our past experiences in a bid to create meaning (Tswana 1995). It is not possible for a reader or a listener, for example to build up meaning from a written or spoken text without recalling past ideas that have relationship with the text in question. (Goodman 1967, 1970).

According to Haertel (1995) the three key constructs—declarative, procedural and prior knowledge – describe the content and organisation of knowledge structures. He maintained that:

... they are "higher order structures" which are used to organize knowledge in all content areas. The ability to retrieve information depends on how the declarative structure is organized. Proceduralized knowledge is the organized knowledge that a student has acquired without must attention. The retrieval of the information in such structure is automatic. Prior knowledge refers to the units of knowledge and the skills a student brings to bear on an instructional setting.

The previous knowledge or prior knowledge referred to in the quotation above had been termed 'Schema' (Anderson and Pearson, 1988). Even though this theory appears to be commonly associated with reading, its effects are felt in other life activities (Wikipedia Encyclopedia on Schema). This research purposes to see the relationship between pupils' schema and writing abilities. It is likely that a secondary school pupil who has acquired extensive textual schemata, cultural schemata and other bunches of knowledge would present more acceptable write-ups than a pupil who has not.

The Schema Theory

A schema is an abstract knowledge structure (Anderson and Pearson 1988). Schemata are natural bunches of knowledge which people possess (Tswana 1995). These 'Schemata' are ideas gathered or created after years of experience. According to schema theory, any text, either spoken or written, does not, by itself, carry meaning. A text only provides direction for listeners or readers as to how they should retrieve or construct meaning from their own previously acquired knowledge. Also, people's exposure to happenings around them is accompanied by constant selective interpretation and building up of 'blocks of knowledge' based on their previous experience (schema). In explicitly reconstructing what has been internalized, there seems to be a link between what has been internalized and the reconstructed items. In other words, if a student is rich in his cultural schemata and formal schemata, writing about his culture and organizing his written items might not be a Herculean task.

Although the term 'schema' was first used in 1926 by Piaget, subsequent schema theorists like Bartlett (1932), Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), Anderson and Pearson (1988) have helped to develop the concept. According to Bartlett, the term refers to "an active organisation of past experience or past reactions". This attests to the fact that schema is not stagnant or unchangeable. It is constantly being organized as new knowledge is absorbed into one's cognition. Corroborating this view, Wikipedia Encyclopedia on schema provides the following interpretations regarding the meaning of schema;

- A structured cluster of preconceived ideas
- A mental framework centering on a specific theme, that helps us to organize information
- Structures that organize our knowledge and assumptions about something and are used for interpreting and processing information.

Perhaps, the contribution by Wikipedia Encyclopedia on schema creates that possibility that a link can exist between students' schemata and writing ability. According to Wikipedia Encyclopedia.

People use schemata to organize current knowledge and provide a framework for future understanding. Examples of schemata include Rubric (Academic) social Schemata, stereotypes, social roles, scripts, world views and archetypes.

It appears obvious, therefore, that the schemata of a pupil would likely be reflected in the writing ability of such a pupil. The researcher is of a strong belief that if a pupils is exposed to various, experiences – social, cultural, scientific and domestic – he or she should be able to reflect such experiences in his or her write-ups. This study therefore examined the correlation between a teacher made schema text and pupils' performance in essay writing.

Writing as a Language Skill

Teaching English as a second language has many implications for the English teacher. It entails concentrating on all the language skills that can enable the second language learner to play many roles. According to Gathumbi (2009) "reading and writing are two crucial skills mostly used to retrieve information from various sources and to pass the same to others. If therefore means that writing skills should aim at enhancing the communication competence of a given pupil. Even in the current use of Information and Communication Technology, the ability to maintain clarity and coherence is naturally required to make e mail messages communicative.

Encyclopedia Britannica (2005) on writing, maintains that "writing is a form of human communication by means of a set of visible marks that are related by convention, to some particular structural level of language". This definition implies that writing makes ideas and opinions concrete and visible. Although animals communicate, only humans communicate through writing and writing gives permanence to knowledge. (Encyclopedia Americana 2003). Odejide (1980) and Sogbesan (2005) are of the view that there are prerequisites for good writing and they are: good listening, consistent reading and practical reading and writing exercises. There is no doubt that a learner of English language who wants to write a speech for a formal occasion for example, will do it better if he listens to speeches made by other people and reads same from books.

Writing, as a literacy or language skill, involves a systematic organisation of the syntactic, lexical and pragmatic elements of a language in order to expatiate on a theme for the benefit of a given audience. The following skills must be internalized and rehearsed on a regular basis by anyone who hopes to acquire the skill of writing:

- Listening (Listening for main ideas, details and thought patterns)
- Reading (intensive and extensive reading)
- Paragraphing and the use of cohesive devices
- The use of thought patterns (classification, problem-solution, comparison contrast, sequence etc).
- Acquisition of usual and special vocabulary
- Sensitivity to formal and informal expressions
- Good use of punctuation marks
- Possession of cultural, cross-cultural and textual schemata (this is acquired over a long period of time).
- Skillful combination of different sentence-types to achieve desired effects
- Immense power of imagination for creative writing.

Corroborating the views above, Maduwesi (1999) asserted that writing is an important skill that should be inculcated to a child. Such training encapsulates the three domains of learning for all-round development of the child. His views point to the fact that ability to write requires long term training, psychomotor skills, cognitive and affective learning. Perhaps, the absence of such preparations on the part of some young learners had led to failure in acquiring adequate writing skills.

Problems Experienced by Students in Essay Writing

Language teaching certainly involves exposing students to a conglomerate of skills needed for adequate communication (Kolawole 2002). These skills are listening, reading, writing and speaking. The curriculum for the teaching of these skills is not properly enriched and implemented owing to excessive emphasis on mere acquisition of certificates. This situation has bred short sightedness on students with regard to the skills they should internalize as far as writing is concerned.

According to Wiesendanger, Perry and Braun (2011) writing has become a serious challenge for some students. They therefore suggested the Suggest- Choose – Plan – Compose (SCPC) strategy as a method of helping pupils to write independently. Also, from the studies carried out by Odiaka (2009) on the interlanguage features of adult learners, the following weaknesses were identified as adult learners' major problems in continuous writing: grammatical errors in sentence construction; mechanical inaccuracy and lack of good paragraphing.

It was noted that such adult learners possessed adequate details that should produce good information for their various topics. However, these details were not well organized. For adolescent and adult learners to master the skill of writing, it is expected that they must have good knowledge of English grammar, rich vocabulary, content and textual or formal schemata. Formal or textual schemata refer to an individual's internalized knowledge of how spoken or written text is structured to reveal writer's or speaker's intention. Such learners must also be involved in constant writing exercises. There are the psychomotor and the cognitive aspects of writing: these are the mechanical and intellectual aspects respectively. While the mechanical aspects deals with spelling, handwriting, and arrangement of words, the intellectual aspect deals with the connectivity among ideas employed to give depth to the write-up. Coupled with these is, the need to expand pupils schemata for proper writing.

Statement of the Problem

Writing, a complex language skill, has remained a problematic literacy skill among secondary school pupils as well as adult learners. These problems range from reluctance to write, to inability to develop required writing skills. (Graham 2006). According to Graham, these problems can be solved through adequate teaching strategies. This study examines the extent to which pupils' schemata can predict their performance in essay writing.

Research Questions

In order to address the problem of the study identified above, the following questions were raised:

1. Is there any significant correlation between students' schemata and performance in essay writing?
2. How can the teaching of writing be improved in secondary schools?

Research Methodology

In a survey research that is correlational, a randomly selected number of one hundred and two (102) students was drawn from two co-educational institutions in Ibadan for the study. These were Command Secondary Schools in Odogbo Barracks, and Apata, Ibadan. These schools were chosen because of the high level of discipline enforced by the teachers in ensuring that writing exercises are regularly carried out. Their co-educational nature was considered to enable the researcher to take care of both genders. Two instruments were used for the study and they were: Test on Pupils' Schema (TOPS) and Test on Writing (TOW).

The Test on Pupils Schema was made up of eleven items covering numerous life activities that could give a true picture of pupils' schemata. The face validity of this instrument was ascertained by experts in the field of psychology. Questions on pupils culture, reading ability, talents, inventions, hobbies, creativity and beliefs make up this instrument. Through test retest method, a reliability index of 50 was obtained on the instrument. Test on Writing (TOW). This was a test item in which students were required to write an essay on: "A Nightmare I Experienced and its Effects on me the Following Day".

Analysis of Data

The two sets of scores obtained on pupils schema and pupils' writing were analysed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient. Descriptive Statistics of frequency counts and percentages were used to analyse the qualitative data collected during the study – suggestions on improvement on writing skills.

Research Question 1: Is there any significant correlation between pupils schema and performance in essay writing?

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient Showing the Relationship Between Pupils' Schema and Writing Ability

Variable	N	Min	Max	Mean	St. Dev	r	P value	Remark
Schema	102	30	85	54.95	11.428	.377	.000	S
Essay Writing	102	40	75	57.04	7.325			

S= Significant correlation at 0.05.

Table 1 presents the descriptive values on the two variables investigated, Schema (mean = 54.95; SD = 11.43) and Essay writing was 0.377; $P < 0.05$. Since the P value is less than 0.05, then conclusion can be drawn that there is a significant relationship between pupils schema and their performance in essay writing.

Research Question 2: How can the teaching of writing be improved upon in secondary schools?

Table 2: Frequency Counts and Percentages of Pupils' Suggestions on Improvement on Writing Skills

Areas to be improved on	Frequency	Percentage
Vocabulary	16	15.7%
Extensive reading	12	11.8%
Teachers' methods	23	22.5%
Project/homework	12	11.8%
Attentiveness by students	08	7.8%
Teaching aids	06	5.9%
Model essays	08	7.8%
Consistent writing	14	13.7%

Out of one hundred and two (102) pupils that made suggestions on how writing could be improved on, 23 pupils (22.5%) attributed failure in writing to teachers' methods. 16 pupils (15.7%) blamed weaknesses in writing on dearth of vocabulary while 12 pupils in each case (11.8%) believed that extensive reading and regular projects would enhance their writing skills. A few considered the use of teaching aids and model essays as possible solutions to poor performance in writing. Fourteen pupils (14) which make up

13.7% of the population agreed to the fact that consistent writing would be of great help in alleviating problems in essay writing.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Language skills are highly interwoven and are of great necessity if individuals must play their roles adequately in society. Writing, a unique language skill noted for giving permanence to knowledge, needs to be studied in depth. This study carried out on the relationship between pupils' schema and their performance in writing shows that there is a significant relationship between the two variables. ($R=0.377$ at 0.05 level of significance). It therefore, implies that efforts must be made by educators to enhance both the cultural, textual and cross-cultural schemata of language learners in order to boost their performance in writing skills in particular and language skills in general. Pupils' schemata can be enlarged through constant reading, traveling, exposure to the media, participation in cross – cultural activities and through exploiting Information and Communication Technologies.

Apart from the widening of pupils' schemata, the teaching of vocabulary should be regularly done to avoid handicap in generating ideas for essay writing. Vocabulary acquisition can be made possible through constant reading of relevant books and by listening to resource persons. Finally, methods used by teachers in teaching essay writing should give ample room for pupils' maximum participation.

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