
Essay Writing in Contemporary Nigeria: Issues and Comments

By

Dr. Usoro Mark OKONO
Department of English
Akwa Ibom State University
Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This study set out to examine essay writing in contemporary Nigeria. The aims were to discover the nature and standard of essays our university students write, their grasp of English language vocabulary and their style of presentation of facts and issues in four genres of essay. The theoretical framework adopted for the study is error analysis theory. Four topics representing narrative, descriptive, argumentative and expository essays were given for students to voluntarily choose one. A total of 153 students from the departments of political science, public administration and religious and cultural studies participated in the exercise. The test was conducted under strict supervision. They were asked to write the essay in 400 words within 50 minutes. Fifty essays were selected through stratified random sampling for analysis. Students' essays were scored on expression/mechanical accuracy, content/focus, paragraphing/organization and introduction/conclusion. Each of the four variables carried 25 marks. Other linguistic issues were grouped under subject-verb agreement, lexis, number, structure and tense. Simple percentages and standard deviation were used to calculate the scores. It was found out that most of our subjects lack basic English vocabulary to present facts. Some have imperfect knowledge of the language, some cannot write expository essay in appropriate style while others engage in transliteration among other infelicities. Extension of the Use of English programme in Nigerian universities from one year to two years has been recommended.

KEYWORDS: Essay, narrative, descriptive, argumentative and expository writing, composition, paragraphing, subject, verb, agreement, lucid, prose, tense, lexis, syntax, structure, percentages, mode, mean, median, variance, logic, reasoning.

Introduction

Of the four language skills: speaking, reading, listening and writing the last one appears to be the most demanding. This is because the other three can be acquired effortlessly. Writing needs a deliberate, conscious and determined zeal to go through and excel in it. Writing also exacts from the practitioner multidimensional skills in the areas of language mastery, composition, rhetoric, aesthetics, philosophy and logic. It also requires a person to acquire a firm grasp of the subject of discourse as well as the world view and the vies of others (e.g. consumers) on the particular subject of discourse. Writing for example, in the nature of essay or composition is both an act and an art. It brings out the entire academic reservoir and personality of an

individual. As an art writing is equated with creativity. To be creative in the context of writing is also to be imaginative. Note that what is creative is imaginative; what is imaginative is stylistic; what is stylistic is unique; and what is unique is beautiful.

The skills of writing come with determination and practice. This is re-echoing the words of Ballenger (2009:2) that he cannot guarantee the readers of his book *The Curious Writer* at the end of the exercise that haters of writing will come to love it or that lovers of writing won't find it a hard work. Advising in the same vein, Arlov P. (2006:10) observes that writing is a process of trial and error and sometimes it feels like mostly error. Even experienced writers often find writing difficult, often wonder if they have anything worthwhile to say or the ability to say it. Continuing Arlov observes:

If you fear writing, even if you dislike it, you are not alone. But writing is a skill that improves with practice, and if you give it serious effort you will amaze yourself. (Arlov P. 2006:10).

As an act writing comprises the techniques and the procedures beginning from the general cases like introduction, main body and conclusion as well as paragraphing to the specific delineations such as the genres of narrative, descriptive, argumentative and expository writings. As a lecturer of English language in a State University in Nigeria the four point procedure which I have recommended for students learning English as a second language is: speak the language, make mistakes, get corrected and move to perfection. Though this procedure is offered for spoken language, it can as well be applied to writing thus: write your piece, make mistakes, get corrected and move to perfection. Arguably a person cannot actively work or walk and desires to sleep in action. He must lie on the bed or some other flat surface if he really intends to sleep. One must procure a paper or writing pad and a pen and take a position and start to write on any particular subject. After all, practice makes perfect.

Methodology

An essay writing test was administered on year one students offering Use of English course coded GSS 101 in Akwa Ibom State University. The students were of the Departments of Political Science and Public Administration of the Faculty of Social Sciences and the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies of the Faculty of Arts. One hundred and fifty-three (153) students out of which sixty-one (61) were of the Department of Political Science, fifty-eight (58) were students of the Department of Public Administration and thirty-four (34) were of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies. The class was given a list of four topics out of which each student was required to write on only one of them. The topics were as follows:

1. *The Last Two-man Fight in the Public that I Witnessed. (Narrative)*
2. *Describe the Physical Appearance of Obio Akpa Campus of Akwa Ibom State University. (Descriptive)*
3. *Write Your Entry for or against the Proposition: Democracy is Better than Military Rule in Nigeria. (Argumentative)*
4. *How to Prepare My Village Traditional Delicacy (Expository)*

The students were asked to use a maximum of 50 minutes and write a maximum of 400 words. The test was conducted under strict examination conditions. At the end of the exercise it was discovered that 18 students of the Department of Political Science wrote narrative essay, 12 wrote descriptive essay, 20 wrote argumentative essay while 11 students write expository essay. From the Department of Public Administration 16 students wrote narrative essay, 13 wrote the descriptive essay, 21 students wrote the argumentative essay while 8 attempted the expository essay topic. 33 students of the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies wrote the narrative essay; no student attempted descriptive essay and no student tried argumentative essay. Only 1 student wrote expository essay. The spread of topic choice among the students was as follows:

Narrative	-	67
Descriptive	-	25
Argumentative-		41
Expository	-	20
Total	-	153

The method used in selecting scripts for the study was stratified random sampling. 20 scripts were selected from the three departments for narrative essay in the ratio 5:5:10. 10 scripts were selected from the Department of Cultural and Religious Studies since majority of them wrote narrative essay. For descriptive and argumentative essays 10 scripts were chosen from each of them: 5 from the Department of Political Science and 5 from Public Administration in each case. Finally, for expository essay 5 scripts came from Political Science, 4 scripts from

Public Administration and the only 1 script from Religious and Cultural Studies. The total number of scripts randomly selected for this study stood at 50. The performance of the students was scored on four variables of expression cum mechanical accuracy- 25%; content/focus- 25%; paragraphing cum organization-25% and introduction/conclusion- 25% making a total of 100%. Apart from the four variables highlighted above, other criteria in the analysis of students' performance were: subject-verb agreement, lexis, number, structure (syntax) and tense. For these five variables the scale for measuring students' performance is 1 for 4 marks. This means 20 marks per variable. An essay that had up to five instances of a particular error scored zero for that variable. The performances of students in this research were calculated in simple percentages. Standard deviation, mean, mode, median and variance of the students' henceforth subjects' scores were calculated to measure the statistical values.

Quantitative and Qualitative Limitations

It was not possible to analyze the 153 says. Only 50 essays were chosen using stratified random sampling technique. Secondly all the errors committed by the subjects could not be analyzed due to constraints of space.

Theoretical Framework

The major theory governing this research is error analysis theory. According to www.glottopedia.org error analysis as a branch of applied linguistics is concerned with the compilation, study and analysis of errors made by second language learners and aims at investigating second language acquisition. The concept of inter-language is closely related to error analysis. The theory of error analysis proposes that in order to learn a language a person

creates a system of rules from the language data to which he is exposed; and the system enables him to use it. The two major causes of error propounded in this theory are: inter-lingual and intra-lingual.

In support of this theory, Anefnaf (2017) opines that the occurrence of errors doesn't only indicate that the learner has not learned something yet, but also it gives the linguist the idea of whether the teaching method applied was effective or it needs to be changed. Similarly, Corder, P. (1976) observes that errors are significant in three things: first to the reader, in that they (errors) tell him if she or he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far toward that goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him to learn. Second, they (errors) provide the researcher with evidence of how language is learned or acquired and what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in his discovery of the language. Third, (and in a sense this is error's most important aspect) they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn. (p.167).

Finally, Dulay, Bunt and Crashen (1982) observe that errors take place when the learner changes the surface structure in a particularly systemic manner. Thus, the error, no matter what form and type it is, represents a damage at the level of the target language production. Part of error analysis theory is the classification of intra-lingual errors into six subtypes by Richard, J. and R. Schmidt (2002). These are: overgeneralization – inappropriate application of grammatical rule e.g. tooth/teeth,(teeth); simplification- application of simpler linguistic rules than those found in the target language; this type of error is committed through omission and addition of some linguistic elements at the level of either spelling or grammar as follows:

- 1 Spelling -no(know), doubt (dout), weit (weight)
2. Grammar – We wait the bus all the time. (for).
3. Addition – Both the boys and the girls they can study together;

Developmental errors. This kind of error is somehow part of overgeneralization. This is later subtitled into natural and developmental learning stage errors. For example, come - comed;

Induced errors also known as transfer of training errors are caused by misleading teaching examples. Note the pattern: Teacher: Iam looking at the box. Student: The cat is at the table. (under).

Errors of avoidance: In this type a learner may fail to apply certain target language rule just because they are taught to be too difficult;

Error of overproduction: In the early stages of language learning learners are supposed to have not yet acquired and accumulated a satisfied linguistic knowledge (competence) which can enable them to use the finite rules of the target language in order to produce infinite structures (performance) most of the time, beginners overproduce in such a way they frequently repeat a particular structure.

In addition to error analysis theory, other theories such as descriptive linguistics and systemic functional grammar which treat language as an observational (scientific) and humanistic discipline provide other bases for this research. A complete theory for this research must include some indices of creativity and composition for which there exists good literature. These aspects

include but not limited to the following: economy, simplicity, clarity and unity. In the application of this theory the major objective of this research is to assess the standard of essays written by young undergraduates in Nigeria with a view to discovering causes of mediocre performance and suggesting ways by which their performance could be improved upon.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the study show that two subjects coded 12 and 15 scored 60% in narrative essay while one subject coded 19 scored 57%. The rest scored below 45%. In descriptive essay one student scored 53% and another scored 52%. Five subjects scored between 45% and 49%. Our data also show that one subject coded 36 scored 62% in argumentative essay and was also the highest scorer in the exercise. Two other subjects scored 54% each while one subject coded 39 scored 46%. Two subjects coded 46 and 49 scored 52% and 51% respectively in expository essay. Two other subjects scored 49% and 48% each. The remaining subjects scored below 45%.

In another statistical analysis writers of narrative essay scored as follows: standard deviation henceforth SD -15.384, variance-236.67, mode – 15, 16, 34, 35, 60, median- 31, and mean-30.6. The figures calculated for writers of descriptive essay are: SD – 8.76, variance – 76.7, mode-47, median -47 and mean – 43.6. Writers of argumentative essay garnered the following statistics: SD – 14.2, mean-40.2, variance- 196. 6, median – 41.5, and mode – 24. The statistics for subjects who wrote expository essay is as follows: mean-40.3, SD- 10.72, variance – 114.9, median-42 and mode -40.

The data gleaned from the research show that for special purposes, subject-verb agreement, henceforth SVA, lexis, number, structure and tense marking written as tense, only one subject coded 36, had a cumulative score of 13 out of 25 which is 52%. Two subjects coded 45 and 49 scored 32% each. The remaining forty-seven subjects in our population scored below 30 %. The frequency of subjects who had any score shows the following figures: SVA-34%, lexis -12%, number-34%, structure-21% and tense-31%. The data are presented in tables 1 to 10 below.

Table 1: Showing Information on Subjects

S/N	SUBJECT’S CODE	DEPARTMENT	ESSAY TYPE
1	01	Political Science	Narative
2	02	Political Science	Narative
3	03	Political Science	Narative
4	04	Political Science	Narative
5	05	Political Science	Narative
6	06	Pubic Administration	Narative
7	07	Pubic Administration	Narative
8	08	Pubic Administration	Narative
9	09	Pubic Administration	Narative
10	10	Pubic Administration	Narative
11	11	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative
12	12	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative
13	13	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative

14	14	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative
15	15	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative
16	16	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative
17	17	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative
18	18	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative
19	19	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative
20	20	Religious and Cultural Studies	Narative
21	21	Pubic Administration	Descriptive
22	22	Pubic Administration	Descriptive
23	23	Pubic Administration	Descriptive
24	24	Pubic Administration	Descriptive
25	25	Political Science	Descriptive
26	26	Political Science	Descriptive
27	27	Political Science	Descriptive
28	28	Political Science	Descriptive
29	29	Political Science	Descriptive
30	30	Political Science	Descriptive
31	31	Political Science	Argumentative
32	32	Political Science	Argumentative
33	33	Political Science	Argumentative
34	34	Political Science	Argumentative
35	35	Political Science	Argumentative
36	36	Pubic Administration	Argumentative
37	37	Pubic Administration	Argumentative
38	38	Pubic Administration	Argumentative
39	39	Pubic Administration	Argumentative
40	40	Pubic Administration	Argumentative
41	41	Political Science	Expository
42	42	Political Science	Expository
43	43	Political Science	Expository
44	44	Political Science	Expository
45	45	Pubic Administration	Expository
46	46	Pubic Administration	Expository
47	47	Pubic Administration	Expository
48	48	Pubic Administration	Expository
49	49	Pubic Administration	Expository
50	50	Religious and Cultural Studies	Expository

Table 2: Showing Subject Performance in Narrative Essay

S/N	SUBJECT'S CODE	VARIABLES				
		EXP/MA (25%)	CONT/FOC (25%)	PARA/ORG (25%)	INTRO/CON (25%)	TOTAL (100%)

1	01	3	4	4	3	14
2	02	3	4	5	6	18
3	03	3	4	3	4	14
4	04	4	4	4	4	16
5	05	15	8	8	8	29
6	06	5	5	5	5	20
7	07	7	8	10	9	34
8	08	4	4	4	4	16
9	09	1	4	5	5	15
10	10	5	10	10	8	33
11	11	8	12	12	12	44
12	12	13	15	15	15	60
13	13	6	8	10	10	34
14	14	10	10	5	10	35
15	15	15	15	15	15	60
16	16	5	6	1	13	25
17	17	5	10	8	15	38
18	18	2	5	2	6	15
19	19	15	15	15	12	57
20	20	10	5	10	10	35

Table 3: Showing Subjects' Performance in Descriptive Essay

S/N	SUBJECT'S CODE	VARIABLES				TOTAL (100%)
		EXP/MA (25%)	CONT/FOC (25%)	PARA/ORG (25%)	INTRO/CON (25%)	
21	21	12	10	12	15	49
22	22	14	12	10	11	47
23	23	18	15	12	12	52
24	24	12	13	12	10	47
25	25	13	13	12	15	53
26	26	13	13	11	10	47
27	27	8	10	10	10	38
28	28	10	10	10	15	45
29	29	5	8	8	6	27
30	30	8	8	8	7	31

Table 4: Showing Subjects' Performance in Argumentative Essay

S/N	SUBJECT'S CODE	VARIABLES				TOTAL (100%)
		EXP/MA (25%)	CONT/FOC (25%)	PARA/ORG (25%)	INTRO/CON (25%)	
31	31	10	12	13	8	43

32	32	6	6	6	6	24
33	33	6	6	6	6	24
34	34	6	6	6	6	24
35	35	15	12	12	15	54
36	36	20	15	15	12	62
37	37	12	12	8	8	40
38	38	7	8	8	8	31
39	39	13	13	10	10	46
40	40	12	14	15	13	54

Table 5: Showing Subjects' Performance in Expository Essay

S/N	SUBJECT'S CODE	VARIABLES				TOTAL (100%)
		EXP/MA (25%)	CONT/FOC (25%)	PARA/ORG (25%)	INTRO/CON (25%)	
41	41	8	8	8	8	32
42	42	10	10	10	10	40
43	43	10	10	10	10	40
44	44	6	6	6	6	24
45	45	13	14	10	12	49
46	46	12	12	14	14	52
47	47	12	12	12	12	48
48	48	10	12	10	12	44
49	49	14	13	12	12	51
50	50	5	5	5	8	23

Table 6: Showing the Performance of Students in Narrative Essay

<i>X</i>	Tally	<i>F</i>	<i>Fx</i>	<i>x</i> ²	<i>fx</i> ²
14	11	2	28	196	392
15	11	2	30	225	450
16	11	2	32	256	512
18	1	1	18	324	324
20	1	1	20	400	400
25	1	1	25	625	625
29	1	1	29	841	841
33	1	1	33	1089	1089
34	11	2	68	1156	3212
35	11	2	70	1225	2450
38	1	1	38	1444	1444
44	1	1	44	1936	1936
57	1	1	57	3249	3249
60	11	2	120	3600	7200
		3f=20	3fx = 612		3fx ² =30.6

Mean = 30.06
 SD = 15.384
 Variance = 236.67
 Mode = 15,16,34,35,60
 Median = 31

Table 7: Showing the Performance of Students in Descriptive Essay

<i>X</i>	Tally	<i>F</i>	<i>Fx</i>	<i>x</i> ²	<i>fx</i> ²
27	1	1	27	729	729
31	1	1	31	961	961
38	1	1	38	1444	1444
45	1	1	45	2025	2025
47	111	3	141	2209	6627
49	1	1	49	2401	2401
52	1	1	52	2704	2704
53	1	1	53	2809	2809
		3f=10	3fx = 436		3fx ² =19700

Mean = 43.6
 SD = 8.76
 Variance = 76.7
 Median = 47
 Mode = 47

Table 8: Showing the Performance of Students in Argumentative Essay

<i>X</i>	Tally	<i>F</i>	<i>fx</i>	<i>x</i> ²	<i>fx</i> ²
24	111	3	72	576	1728
31	1	1	31	961	961
40	1	1	40	1600	1600
43	1	1	43	1849	1849
46	1	1	46	2116	2116
54	11	2	108	2916	5832
62	1	1	62	3844	3844
		3f=10	3fx = 402		3fx ² =17930

Mean = 40.2
 SD = 14.02
 Variance = 196.6
 Median = 41.5
 Mode = 24

Table 9: Showing the Performance of Students in Expository Essay

<i>X</i>	Tally	<i>F</i>	<i>Fx</i>	<i>x</i> ²	<i>fx</i> ²
23	1	1	23	529	529
24	1	1	24	576	576
32	1	1	32	1024	1024
40	11	2	80	1600	3200
44	1	1	44	1936	1936
48	1	1	48	2304	2304
49	1	1	49	2401	2401
51	1	1	51	2601	2601
52	1	1	52	2704	2704
		3f=10	3fx = 402		3fx ² =17275

Mean = 40.3
 SD = 10.72
 Variance = 114.9
 Median = 42
 Mode = 40

Table 10: Showing Subjects' Scores in Special Issues

S/N	SUBJECT'S CODE	SPECIAL ISSUES					TOTAL	%
		SVA	LEXIS	NUMBER	STRUC-TURE	TENSE		
1	01	5	0	0	0	0	5	20
2	02	5	0	0	0	0	5	20
3	03	5	0	0	0	0	5	20

4	04	5	0	0	0	0	5	20
5	05	5	0	0	1	0	6	24
6	06	5	0	0	0	0	5	20
7	07	5	0	0	0	0	5	20
8	08	5	0	1	0	0	6	24
9	09	5	0	0	0	0	5	20
10	10	5	0	1	0	0	6	24
11	11	5	0	1	0	1	7	28
12	12	5	1	1	1	1	9	36
13	13	4	0	0	0	0	4	16
14	14	5	0	1	0	0	6	24
15	15	4	0	1	1	1	7	28
16	16	5	0	1	0	0	6	24
17	17	5	0	1	1	0	7	28
18	18	5	0	0	0	0	5	20
19	19	5	0	0	1	0	6	24
20	20	5	0	0	1	0	6	24
21	21	1	1	1	0	0	3	12
22	22	0	1	1	1	0	3	12
23	23	1	0	1	1	0	3	12
24	24	1	0	1	1	0	3	12
25	25	1	0	1	1	1	4	16
26	26	1	1	1	0	1	4	16
27	27	1	0	1	1	0	3	12
28	28	1	0	1	1	0	3	12
29	29	0	0	0	1	0	1	4
30	30	1	0	0	0	0	1	4
31	31	1	1	1	0	0	3	12
32	32	1	0	0	0	0	1	4
33	33	0	0	1	0	0	1	4
34	34	0	0	0	0	1	1	4
35	35	1	1	1	0	1	4	16
36	36	2	2	3	2	4	13	52
37	37	1	0	0	1	0	2	8
38	38	0	1	1	0	0	2	8
39	39	1	1	1	0	1	4	16
40	40	2	1	2	0	1	6	24
41	41	1	0	1	0	0	2	8
42	42	1	0	1	1	1	4	16
43	43	1	1	1	0	1	4	16
44	44	0	0	1	0	0	1	4
45	45	1	0	2	1	1	5	20
46	46	1	2	1	2	2	8	32
47	47	1	0	2	1	1	5	20

48	48	1	0	2	1	1	5	20
49	49	2	0	2	2	2	8	32
50	50	0	0	1	0	0	1	4
Frequency		43	12	34	21	31		

Discussion

Subject-Verb Agreement (SVA)

Agreement means concord. The beauty of English language is that a plural subject goes with a plural verb and a singular subject takes a singular verb. Seven subjects failed to score 1 in SVA in this exercise (cf table 10). Ordinarily concord errors are widespread in the narrative essays used in this study. The near absence concord errors is due to the fact that this genre is rendered in past tense and the past tense has no inflection for both singular and plural subjects. Otherwise, SVA errors in the other three genres are nightmarish. Some of the subjects show serious hatred for the morpheme [s] either for SVA or plurality. For example, concord errors in expository essays were: ingredients include, palm oil and already steamed meat is added. In argumentative essay SVA errors included: military rule often come in which will eventually leads, military rule in that it makes provision. In descriptive essay some SVA errors were: the football pitch, classic basketball court and also the volleyball pitch which is built, two faculties which is separated from. This is where the affairs of general studies in this campus is been run.

The subject coded 25 in descriptive essay is typically averse to letter ‘s’ in word final position where it comes to naming objects but employs it for plural subjects. Example: palm oil trees is predominantly, cash crops and the animal farming is properly.... Concord errors exemplify imperfect knowledge of the language and impede free flow of reading the write up.

Lexis

This is perhaps the greatest issue in the essays of our subject. Lexical infelicities in the essays range from misunderstanding and misuse of homophones, modal auxiliary, wrong words, misspelling, misuse of articles to the strange use of the verb ‘being’, inappropriate preposition and transliteration. Homophonous errors were: presences for present, being for been, to for too, of for off, acts for arts, pass for past, there for their, had for heard, degree for decree and the for they among others. The presence of these errors shows imperfect knowledge of the English lexis and is also capable of distorting meaning. Subject 38 for instance wrote: the military rule is a degree rule which cannot be criticize by individual citizens, So many things are wrong here. The definite article is out if place; the entire sentence needs a re-ordering.

In narrating the event: the last two man fight in the public that I witnessed, subjects erroneously used, will were would should be applied either as past tense or modal auxiliary. For instance, some of them wrote: to see whether they will separate themselves. This error depends on low level of mastery of the language. Using pack instead of park, naked (her) instead of stripped, head booting for head butt, grappling for grabbing, crouching for encroaching, grinded for ground, complains for complaints, ghosting for coasting away to victory, kneels for knees,

choose for chose, faithful for fateful, sit of government for seat of government, where for were among many others portrays an imperfect knowledge of the language. Wrong spellings in the study included bidevil for bedevil, exheled for exhaled, arguement for argument, and tied (road) for tarred, etc. The articles 'the' and 'a' were applied indiscriminately just as the example quoted above. Of particular interest is the use of 'being'. The word 'being' is a form of the verb to be. It is in one sense used to mark a progressive action as in the match is being played now. It can also mark a progressive action in the past as I the match was being played then. Our subjects recklessly used the word for been which marks a completed action. For example, the job has been done. Some of our subjects use being instead of be. Subject 40 wrote: dictatorships and autocratic system ruling has being put to annihilation. This could have been: dictatorship and autocracy have become a thing of the past. English language has its nature.

Inappropriate preposition makes an essay clumsy apart from distorting meaning of a sentence. A typical example was exemplified by subject 14 thus: everybody ran off instead of ran away. Similarly, subject 31 wrote: Military rule often come in a way of coup d'etat, the appropriate construction could have been by way of or through. Transliteration exemplifies a style by which users of the language write language the way they speak it: other example includes on like for unlike. To seek the concern of the people in which they are representing shows an example of intrusive preposition in. They use the first language structure to write the L₂. For example, subject 44 whose L₁ is perhaps Ibibio language of Akwa Ibom state of Nigeria wrote: the pot is then cleared (allowed) to boil..., the waterleaf will die during the process too. This is a clear case of transliteration. A typical case of transliteration was exemplified by subject coded 05 where she wrote: the queue instead of shunting the line or jumping the queue. Cutting is a typical Ibibio lexis for translating the action. Several cases of transliteration abound in the essays under study. Another example was exemplified by subject 01., where she wrote Big big, periwinkle. Doubling of adjective is Ibibio language form. Some of the subjects who wrote expository essay lack the basic English vocabulary to label kitchen utensils and ingredients.

Number

The number system in English is a case of polarity: either plural or singular. This is why it is classified under closed class elements. So many of our subjects are either too careless as to ignore the plural marker or simply naïve. More than a half of the subjects would write: in different office(s), the bungalows are, where student in the campus go, all ramification, for student that come from a distance, faculty of art, the building are etc. This aversion to the plural marker particularly 's' may also affect the subjects handling of the genitive marker 's' and the apostrophe. These two are almost completely absent where they are supposed to be applied in most of the essays used in the research. This omission shows a certain naivety of the English language form and style by our subjects.

Structure

After lexis comes structure. Structure here means syntax and morphology. Some of our subjects exemplify awful and clumsy syntax in their essays. For constraints of space a few will be discussed. Subject 07 typifies a bad English structure thus: After saying my morning prayers, brushed my teeth, arranged my bedroom and showered, ate and was set for school. This was his full sentence with a full stop! The above sentence offends the rule of parallelism and lacks a

subject. It is a subordinate clause and therefore a sentenceless sentence. Subject 35 exemplifies sentence fragment thus: democracy is a form of government whereby the people elect the government they want into power, giving them sovereignty. The last part of the sentence is incomplete. Subject 32 wrote a sentence typical of bad structure: Mention any problem that we have in Nigeria today such as corruption, a deficit infrastructure etc. were caused by military interventions. The use of interrogative 'which' and negation 'not' could have made this sentence appropriate, i.e. which were not caused by military interventions. This is an example of clausal error. Subject 21 larded his descriptive essay with many phrases that look like pleonastic doublets: the phrases included: built and constructed, built and sited, gate entrance, trees and shades plants. These phrases resulted in tautology in what otherwise would have been a good essay.

A little pinch of salt is tautology or unnecessary repetition, a pinch is equal to little. Another inappropriate style of our subject in terms of structure is intrusive definite article the. A typical example included: it is far better than the military rule, from the both of them, using the mortar and pestle. The inclusion of this article is actually intrusive. Dried fish as used by the subjects is hypercorrection. The normal phrase is dry fish. Similarly chop stick is nonsensical. The normal language is chopping board.

As a matter norm only one subject (subject 49) tried to write expository essay in passive voice, of course she scored 59%. The other nine subjects wrote in dialogue form always beginning each sentence with the second person pronoun you. Some of subjects wrote their expository essays in the form of laboratory manual or kitchen instruction manual. This attitude is a negative one which should be corrected by the teachers. What is needed in this regard may be transitional markers.

Tense

Tense marking for instance past tense presented a lot of difficulties for our subjects particularly the twenty that wrote the narrative essay. The topic of the essay made it past event. Ideally the suitable tense form is simple past tense. Unfortunately, one subject wrote entirely in present tense while some used both past and present tenses alternately albeit awkwardly. Reading through such essay gets one highly irritated. Subjects 06, 13, 14, 16, 17 and 18 exhibited this behaviour. Most of the errors particularly spelling and syntax are phonologically conditioned; the students write what they speak. If the goal of communication of thought is to be achieved. English language teachers at the university level must focus attention on writing as they do in other areas of the discipline.

Conclusion

The delineation of essay into four types: narrative, descriptive, argumentative and expository is an academic classification. A sound knowledge of the language (common core features) is required in the handling of each specific genre. Narrative essay is a story of an event which must include the title of the event, date, time, and venue among others. It is regrettable to find a university student who can start off writing missing these facts as some of our subjects have shown. The greatest difficulty of the subjects in this study is lack of adequate English vocabulary to use in descriptive writing. More than thirty subjects (60%) exhibited imperfect knowledge of

the language in communicating ideas in all the genres of essay. It is shocking to note that 80% of the students started off writing the argumentative genre without forma features. One of them wrote it haphazardly. (But for constraints of space I would have included some typical essays in this write up just for sighting) This is in addition to shallow reasoning and poor logic in the presentation of support (premise) for claims in academic argument. Indeterminacy featured in expository essays and I dare say here that indeterminacy is an editor's nightmare. For example, the subject coded 16 wrote the entire essay in one paragraph with very light punctuation just like the poetry of e.e. cummings and Taban Lo Liyong. Since expository essay that was used in this research was a process narrative our writers fell short of the Basic English lexis for specific utensils and ingredients. This situation rendered their essays amateurish. Our subjects write in the same manner they speak. Errors in this category are phonologically conditioned. For example, I had for heard, I eard fo heard, adrolic for hydrolic oil. Some of the writings are transliterations. Examples are: for the waterleaf to die, cutting the queue. These are real Ibibio language (L₁ of many of the subjects) forms. The general impression one gets from the scripts of ninety percent of our subjects is that their essays are insipid, vapid, amateurish and stylistically unscholarly.

An exception in this regard is the subject coded 15 whose portion of essay reads: *This changed the seller's mood, his face became red, his eyes shone like fire and he roared in anger.* This short extract from the subject's essay has shown aesthetics which is the hallmark of creativity in language. Of course this subject scored 60% in his narrative essay. Another exception is subject coded 36 who presented argument in clear and readable English. He is the highest performer in this research. Apart from few structural problems the argumentative essay of the subject coded 35 is the most hitch-free in the entire study. He scored 54%. The problems plaguing our subjects as second language learners of English include imperfect knowledge of the language, lack of basic vocabulary, shallow reasoning and poor logic, indeterminacy and lack of knowledge of writing formats. Suggested causes include brevity of freshers' English programme, (Use of English), students' apathetic attitude toward English language, teacher's incompetence and poor teaching methods.

Recommendations

Freshmen English course in Nigerian universities should be extended to two years by the National Universities Commission. Writing should have a large proportion of the Use of English syllabus. It may be offered for two semesters. Lecturers of Use of English are supposed to focus more on writing as a sub-discipline of English than has hitherto been the case. In this regard more writing assignment should be given to students. If lecturers mark students' essays, carry out corrections and return them to students learning would be enhanced. Discussion of well written and badly written essays during next lecture sessions can awaken students to the need of practicing creative writing.

Students need to be encouraged and aided at all costs to practice writing as there is no other way of attaining proficiency in the sub-discipline. Since some students in our study write the way they speak integrated approach comprising speaking, reading, listening and writing need to be pressed into service for complementary reinforcement of learning. These suggestions are likely to help Nigerian students write lucid and interesting prose and communication of thought and action will be greatly enhanced.

REFERENCES

- Anefnaf, C. (2017). *English learning: Linguistic flaws*. Sais Faculty of Arts and Humanities. USMBA. Retrieved from https://www.academic.edu/33999467/English_Learning_in_Moocco_Linguistic_Flaws
- Arlov, P. (2006). *Wordsmith: A guide to paragraphs and short essays*. Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing.
- Ballenger, B. (2009). *The curious writer*. New York: Pearson Longman.
- Corder, P. (1967). *The significance of learners errors*. *International Review Applied Linguistics* 161-170.
- Dulay, H., Burnt, M. & Crashen, S.D. (1982). *Language two*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Richard, J. C. & Schmidt, R.(2002). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. (2ndEdition) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Internet Sources

www.glottopedia.org retrieved 27 April, 2020.