

The Development of Writing Skills through Conceptual Writing

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Abstract

The study was to examine the development of writing skills through conceptual writing among English language in Kampala District Uganda. Specifically, the study investigated the effect, significance and role essay writing on development of writing skills among 145 students in the same schools in Kampala, which were selected using purposive and stratified random sampling strategies. There were pre-intervention and post-intervention tests as data collection instruments, which were analysed using frequencies, percentages and arithmetic mean. The main findings were that, generally, the level of English writing skills was relatively low among English language students in secondary schools of the Division because the students had not mastered the art of conceptual writing. It was concluded that essay writing, as potential conceptual writing education strategies, were significantly predictive but not practically-oriented. It was, therefore, recommended for better effectiveness in English writing, a lot more should be done to improve essay writing education. Such improvements should be the collective responsibility of all stakeholders in education.

Keywords: Writing; English Language; Language Skills; Development; Schools.

Introduction

English language was widely adopted and gained prominence in education systems in Uganda just as other countries colonized by the British and regarded as Common Wealth countries till date in Africa. In 1970s, Sub-Saharan Africa countries joined the rest of the world against imperialism but English had already taken its dominant lead and adopted as the official language (Nordquist, 2018).

Before then, English, as a social language and a study subject, was limited to the United Kingdom in which it was initially derived from *Angliss*. This was the original language used by the Angles, one of the three Germanic tribes that invaded England in the 5th century. The English language was first adopted elsewhere in the initial British colonies including Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States among others. It was later adopted as a second language in multilingual countries like India, Singapore and the Philippines (Naved, 2015; Nordquist, 2018).

Conceptual writing begins at elementary level as composition writing. At secondary school level, conceptual writing manifests in different forms as essay writing, summary writing, letter writing etc. Makindye Division, being a part of Kampala District, is among first areas of Uganda to access the first colonial schools that pioneered this colonial language, English, as a curriculum subject and medium of instruction (KCCA, 2015; Mwebaza, 2010). Uganda's first Secondary Schools were established in 1902 under the auspices of Christian Missionaries (Ssekamwa, 1997).

In secondary school English education, conceptual writing involves a set of cognitive textual approaches or experiments used to educate learners about distinct grammatical correlates and features essential for effective writing during and after schooling (Jay & Ecclestone, 2008). Approaches associated with conceptual writing include expository, descriptive, persuasive, and narrative writing styles (Hunbbel, 2016). In the context of this study, conceptual writing is a function of writing strategies such as expository writing, descriptive writing, narrative writing and persuasion writing. These can be used as modes of training English learners and equipping them with best practice principles of fluent writing which can be demonstrated in the same strategies as writing styles.

Tamura (2006) refers to English writing skills as the proficiency or habits and abilities of the learners to write accurately and prudently in English with capacity to structure and organize written content in an understandable fashion. According to Nidrang (2014), English writing skills are the manifestation of efficacy and or fluency in

writing an English text. This involves a multiplicity of basics which ideally were the focus of the current research. The list is long but these are basically variations, structural and grammatical essentials of textual writing.

The English language is a core study discipline and one of the compulsory subjects of Uganda's secondary school curriculum prescribed for a four-year Junior Education cycle, commonly known as Ordinary level (O' level) This is mandatory to all secondary schools including those in Makindye Division. The division is one of the five administrative divisions of Kampala District, the only capital and largest city of Uganda. Other divisions include Rubaga Division, Nakawa Division, Kawempe Division and Central Division (KCCA, 2015).

There are 33 secondary schools in Makindye Division (KCCA, 2013). However, for affordability and depth analysis, this study was randomly limited to six schools for field study purposes. Part of the English subject syllabus are conceptual writing studies such as composition writing, summary writing, comprehension, grammar, passage interpretations, and letter writing among other conceptual types of writing (Byabamazima, 2002; CASCO 2016; UNEB, 2016).

Linguistic Framework

This research was guided by the Schema Theory. The theory was first adopted into Psychology and Education by a British Gestalt psychologist, Sir Frederic Bartlett (Bartlett, 1932). It has since been successively used in Education Research (Jian-ping & Li-sha, 2016). The Schema theory is an appropriate linguistic framework in conceptual English education because it provides an explanation on schemata that allows people to absorb, retain and process new information. Schemata, plural for schema, are abstract mental structures. People build on these structures to understand the word. People use schemata to organize current knowledge and provide a framework for future understanding because they are effective tools for understanding the word. In fact, the use of schemata makes automatic processing an effortless task (Bartlett, 1932; Shuying, 2013).

In addition, people can quickly organize new perceptions into schemata and act effectively without effort. When learners build schemata and make connections between ideas, learning is maximally facilitated and is optimally made more meaningful. According to the theory, prior knowledge is important and is a prerequisite for the understanding of new information (Bartlett, 1932; Jian-ping & Li-sha, 2016; Rhalmi, 2018; Zhao & Zhu, 2012). The schema theory was perceived as useful for this research on English language learning due its critical relevance in developing reading and writing skills attainable from any form of conceptual writing, be it expository, descriptive, narrative and persuasive writing styles.

Carrell (1984) classifies Schema into three types, namely linguistic schema, content schema and formal schema. Linguistic schema refers to learners' prior linguistic knowledge, including the knowledge about phonetics, grammar and vocabulary as traditionally recognized. According to Jian-ping and Li-sha (2016), usually for non-English students, the first problem is their limited vocabulary and syntactic knowledge. In that case, accumulated linguistic information is a necessity for such learners to gain capacity to express meaning when faced with complex texts such as a passage. Also, particularly this category of second language learners should be helped to master certain linguistic knowledge to decode and manipulate the text.

Content schema, according to Carrell (1984), is the background knowledge an essay or the topic relates to. It involves several things, such as topic familiarity, cultural knowledge, conventions and previous experience of the domain. As culture-centred, this type of schema is, among the three, the very one which decides learners' understanding of a textual version, since whatever kind of writing there is, it must be interpreted under a cultural context because it is a product of that culture. For students with low language proficiency, content schema is a very important problem to deal with (Liu & Zhu, 2010).

Formal schema is abstract, encoded, internalized, coherent patterns of meta-linguistic, discoursed, and textual organization that guide expectations in attempts to understand and use a meaningful piece of language (Carrell, 1984). It is the knowledge of different text genres and their respective structural organization, language structures, vocabulary, grammar etc. Shuying (2013) points out that with this schema, argumentative, expository, descriptive and narrative types of writing are the relevant types that can be presented for student learning and subsequent fluency.

The Schema theory was useful for this study based on the conviction that schemata enable learners to apply conceptual writing knowledge as prior experience to future textual writing. By bridging the new with the old,

inexperience in textual writing is decreased and interest is aroused. Schema was helpful in explaining the remedy for the reading and writing difficulties that may be associated with expository, descriptive, narrative and persuasive textual types. Whatever the effect, there is inadequate knowledge about the implications of English conceptual writing. That is why this study is timely

Objectives of the Study

The research was intended to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To assess the writing skills' proficiency among English language students in secondary schools, Makindye Division, Central Kampala.
2. To demonstrate the impact of conceptual writing in improving writing skills among the selected English language students in the secondary schools.
3. To relate conceptual writing to the development of writing skills among the students.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive research design based on both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The design was used for description and predication. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used to collect and analyse data for this purpose. The use of this integrated design was particularly driven by the research objectives.

The study population included school communities of the six random secondary schools of study in Makindye Division. The total number of research subjects was 145 students. The types of conceptual selected for the study were the four types. These are narrative, descriptive and expository and persuasive essay writing. Writing tests, pre-test and post-test, were administered on the students according to the types of conceptual writing.

Descriptive and inferential statistical methods of data analysis were used based on the computer Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS). The analysis included frequencies, percentages, and arithmetic mean. Tables were generated from the results of data analysis to enhance easy discussion on the basis of 5point linker scale.

Analysis and Discussion

The dependent variable in this study is the level of student English writing skills in selected secondary schools in Makindye Division. This was measured along 10 constructs regarded as indicators of development of such writing skills. In the research context, these constructs are explicit dependent variables used as research items in the instruments of data collection, especially the questionnaire. The constructs were used for presentation of the related findings as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on the level of student English writing skills from pre-test

	Constructs	N	Mean
1.	Senior Four students good at planning their essay writing	145	2.67
2.	Students good at paragraphing essay texts	145	2.44
3.	Students know how to structure sentences	145	2.27
4.	Coherence or logic in students' writing style	145	2.70
5.	Students know how punctuate written work	145	2.77
6.	Students stick to the subject or question when writing	145	2.53
7.	Students accurate in written texts	145	2.10
8.	Students know how to structure essay texts	145	2.30
9.	Students have good writing grammar	145	2.58
10.	Students have varying textual skills	145	2.51
	Valid N (listwise)	145	

Basing on the rating scales adapted, the following interpretations were made:

According to Table 1, statistics on essay writing planning generated a moderate arithmetic mean (\bar{x} = 2.67). This means, about half of the Senior (S.) 4 students in the 6 secondary schools of study were good at planning their essay writing. Another half was not. Statistics about paragraphing of essay texts yielded a low arithmetic mean (\bar{x} = 2.44). This implies, most of the respondents were closely in agreement that almost two thirds of the students of research were not good at paragraphing essay texts. Only a third could do that effectively.

Table 2, also shows results about written punctuation recorded a moderate arithmetic mean (\bar{x}) of 2.77. This indicates that, of the S. 4 students known to most respondents, only a third knew how to punctuate written work, almost a quarter relatively knew how and almost a half knew little or did not. According to the table, the statistics on keeping track when writing show that a less moderate arithmetic mean (\bar{x} = 2.53). This suggested that less than half the students of study could manage to stick to the subject or question when writing. The statistics generated about writing accuracy include a low arithmetic mean (\bar{x}) of 2.10. These meant that two thirds of the students under study were hardly accurate in their written texts.

Results on structuring essay texts show that a low arithmetic mean (\bar{x} = 2.30) was generated. Accordingly, only more than a third of the students knew how to structure essay texts according majority of the respondents. The table also specifies that scores on written grammar generated a less moderate arithmetic mean (\bar{x}) of 2.58. This implies, for most respondents, more than half of S. 4 students in the 6 schools of study did not have good writing grammar.

According to statistics on variety of textual skills, a less moderate arithmetic mean (\bar{x} = 2.53) was also computed. This result suggests that less than half the students, according to majority of the respondents, had varying textual skills. Individual statistical constructs above were transformed into the Average Index, "Engwrtskls" to generate an accurately binding statistical description of how respondents rated students' English writing skills. Transformation involved computing the average of arithmetic mean Table 1.

With the foregoing statistics, interview and documentary reports, the level of English writing skills was relatively low among students in the 6 schools of research. It can be inferred that development of conceptual writing skills was virtually modest among English language students in secondary schools of Makindye Division, Kampala District on Uganda.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics on the level of students' English writing skills from post-test

	Constructs	N	Mean
1.	Senior Four students good at planning their essay writing	145	3.74
2.	Students good at paragraphing essay texts	145	2.86
3.	Students know how to structure sentences	145	2.38
4.	Coherence or logic in students' writing style	145	3.75
5.	Students know how punctuate written work	145	3.80

6.	Students stick to the subject or question when writing	145	3.43
7.	Students accurate in written texts	145	3.15
8.	Students know how to structure essay texts	145	2.35
9.	Students have good writing grammar	145	3.68
10.	Students have varying textual skills	145	3.32
Valid N (listwise)		145	

According to the study findings, none of the writing skills studied was highly rated until after intervention. There was never a great writing skill noticeable among English students in secondary schools of study in Makindye Division. The highest of the skills moderated were led by student's ability to punctuate written work, then coherence in students' writing style, their ability to plan essay writing, their quality of writing grammar, ability to stick to the subject or question when writing, and possession of varying textual skills. Other related students' skills investigated were poor led by accuracy in written texts, structuring sentences and essay texts and lastly paragraphing. The study generally shows that the level of English writing skills was relatively low among students of research. Despite the contextual differences, this is comparable to Adegbile's (2007) report, which indicates that there was such underachievement among second language writers (students) in secondary schools of Osun State, Nigeria. This was specifically depicted in the student learning practices used to measure education of this kind of conceptual English writing. Similarly, Omuna et al. (2016) indicate the same fate with students English reading materials in secondary schools in Teso North Sub County, Kenya. According to the study, such consistency levels of writing education were not without consequences. This is because writing education had a positive and significant study relationship with development of English writing skills. Thus, moderately consistent conceptual writing led to relative development student writing proficiency. Where such textual writing practices were poor the outcome was equally poor. The study disclosed that the conceptual writing education strategies of expository, descriptive, narrative, and persuasive writing significantly predicted English writing skill development.

Conclusions

The English language is designed and expected to enhance learners' writing skills. Apparently, this prospect seemed to be frustrated among secondary schools of research in Makindye Division. None of the writing skills examined was outstandingly good. The study presents no noticeably great writing skill among students of such schools. To some extent, conceptual writing skills were virtually modest among English language students in secondary schools of Makindye Division, Kampala District in Uganda. The potential conceptual writing education strategies were significantly predictive. For better English writing skills, more practice should have been done mostly in order to propel students' writing skills. This is especially possible if better and consistent teaching and is done. The study findings provided evidence of the students' English writing proficiency in the secondary schools in Makindye Division. This is useful for policy making in the Ministry of Education. In the same vein, the study is beneficial to school authorities and teachers of the secondary schools of study. It examined the importance on conceptual writing strategies on student writing effectiveness. School management and individual teachers can, therefore, use the findings to correct and improve where there are inconsistencies for effective student writing proficiency. Indeed, students could also benefit from the study because it will prompt change in their attitude on English writing education. As a result, they will be committed in their English writing exercises for the better of examination performance and after school achievement. The study is, indeed, a contribution to the body of knowledge on English writing education.

Recommendations

Regular student instruction on conceptual English writing: Comprehensive class instruction of such expository, descriptive and narrative English writing will enhance sustainable students' learning, if teaching of varied explanatory, events texts, and story texts is done on a regular basis. Thus, school teaching supervisory authorities such as the DoS and Heads of English Departments should ensure that there is such regular class teaching from English teachers. Exciting teaching style: English language teachers should take individual initiative by respective schools to ensure that teaching of such conceptual writing is exciting and appealing to learners. Teachers should be creative in their teaching and those who cannot, should be introduced to related professional development programmes like workshops to boost their competencies. Regular reading and practice of conceptual English writing: Students should be self-motivated to read and practice expository, descriptive and narrative English writing. If they cannot, they should be encouraged or obligated to do so by parents, teachers and/ or school management. Enough reading materials should be provided for learners: School management should ensure that there are enough reading materials for expository, descriptive and narrative English writing at the learners' disposal. Where schools

may not manage sufficiently, head masters can advise and follow up on parents to buy for their children relevant reading materials.

Regular students' assessment and feedback: English Teachers should ensure that they adopt the culture of regularly assessing students' writing. UNEB can consistently sensitise teachers about the benefits of regular student assessment in such English textual writing. Schools should motivate teachers enough, both extrinsically and intrinsically, to do so. English teachers should upon completion of student assessment in give prompt feedback to students. They should return students' assessment scripts or scores for students to learn about their performance and gauge their potentials perhaps for personal effort to maintain or improve where necessary.

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