

Investigating ESL Learners' Socioeconomic Environment on Their Writing Competence in Lagos, Nigeria: Implications for Pedagogy

Adebola Adebileje^{1,*}; Akinniyi Adeleke¹; Teniola Ajilore¹

¹ Redeemer's University, Department of English, KM 46, Lagos-Ibadan Express Way, Redemption Camp, Mowe Ogun State, Nigeria.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

This study investigated the influence of Junior Secondary School (JSS) students' socioeconomic environment on their competence in writing in English. Ten schools from randomly selected private and public schools in Lagos State, Nigeria were used. A total of 300 randomly selected students constituted the sample. Data were collected through structured questionnaire and adapted essay writing tests. Students' tests were marked by considering content, organisation, expression, and mechanical accuracy (COEMA) as criteria and scored on 10 points: thus, 6-10 points was regarded as competent; while 1-5 points = incompetent. Information on students' socioeconomic environment was collected through the questionnaire. Results revealed 66% of the respondents demonstrated writing incompetence and 34% demonstrated writing competence. Of the 66% of incompetence, 45% was from the public schools while 21% was from the private schools. Of all the socioeconomic factors examined, language of communication at home was established as a determining factor. All stake holders, especially, teachers must focus on grammar for the improvement of students' writing skill.

Keywords: Socioeconomic environment; English writing competence; Private school; Public school

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INTRODUCTION

Cursory observations through personal contacts with students and interviews with teachers at the secondary school level revealed that many students are usually not competent in at least one of the four skills involved in learning the English Language. This is underscored by Adedeji (2008) who noted that the level of educational achievement in terms of competency and especially power of expression (written) in English in the country's schools has been quite low. A number of factors have been reported to be responsible for this. For example, while Adedeji (2008) identified one of the most potent factors as language barrier created by students' inadequate knowledge of English language, Duncan and Brooks-Gunn (2001) opined that poverty appears to have its greatest impact with school performance when measured in early years. Other responsible variables include parents' occupation and level of income, parents' educational attainment, cognitive stimulation, physical environment, neighbours' influence, physical well-being and parenting style (Jones, 2007).

It is against this background that this study attempted to investigate the influence of learner's socio-economic environment (parents' income, home environment, parents' educational background and occupation, language of communication at home) on English writing competence among students in some selected private and public junior secondary schools in Lagos State Mainland Local Government, Nigeria.

Over the years, there have been reports of poor performance of students in English Language examinations conducted by the Lagos State Examination Board in Nigeria. A critical look at the results of Basic Nine learners of English Language in five public and private schools in Lagos State Mainland Local Government established this assertion as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Analysis of Junior School Leaving Certificate Examination for Five Years

											% Passed for 5 years	% Failed for 5 years
2004			2005		2006		2007		2008			
Public schools												
School	Pass%	Fail %	Pass %	Fail %	Pass %	Fail %	Pass %	Fail %	Pass %	Fail %		
1	32	68	35	65	20.5	79.5	37	63	34.9	65.1	31.9	68.1
2	22.5	77.5	32.7	67.3	15	85	38.9	61.1	38.6	61.4	29.5	70.5
3	47	53	46	54	13.6	86.4	89.6	10.4	38.2	61.8	46.9	53.1
4	80.9	19.1	55.2	44.8	37.9	62.1	48.7	51.3	37.8	62.2	52.1	47.9
5	15.6	84.4	53.8	46.2	30.5	69.5	12.1	87.9	40.7	59.3	30.5	69.5
Private schools												
School	Pass%	Fail%	Pass %	Fail %	Pass %	Fail %	Pass %	Fail %	Pass %	Fail %	%Passed for 5years	%Failed for 5years
1	87	13	89.2	10.8	91.9	8.1	92.6	7.4	80	20	88.1	11.9
2	96.6	3.4	84.4	15.6	100	—	93.5	6.5	68	32	88.5	11.5
3	90.6	9.4	79.6	20.4	92.1	7.9	88	12	50.5	49.5	80.2	19.9
4	100	—	98.8	1.2	97.4	2.6	85.2	14.8	65.6	34.8	89.4	10.7
5	100	—	93.3	6.7	96.9	3.1	89.9	10.1	58.6	41.4	87.74	12.26

Table 1 shows students' results (private and public junior secondary schools (Basic Nine)) over five years 2004-2008.

It is obvious from the analysis of these results that there are two extremes such that the private schools perform extra ordinarily well while the public schools have extremely poor results. As a result, this study is aimed at investigating the factors responsible for this disparity.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Do Basic Nine learners' possess good English language writing competence?
2. What are the factors of the socio-economic environment of Basic Nine learners' in Lagos State?
3. Does the socio-economic environment of Basic Nine learners in Lagos State influence their writing competence?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

1. Parents' income will not make any significant difference on English writing competence of Basic Nine students.
2. Parents' level of education will not make any significant difference on English writing competence of Basic Nine students.
3. Language of communication at home will not make any significant difference in the English writing competence of Basic Nine students.

The scope of this study is limited to only Junior Secondary School Basic Nine students in ten (10) selected

schools, five of which are private and the other five, public schools within the Lagos State Mainland Local Government Area. The schools are:

Public Schools: Aje Comprehensive Junior High School; Ilogbo Junior High School; St. Francis Junior Grammar School; Mobalaji Bank Anthony Junior High School; and Wesley Girls Junior High School.

Private Schools: Reagan Memorial Baptist Girls Secondary School; Brilliant Child College; St. Finbar's Secondary School; Berlina College; and Methodist Girls' High School.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

English Language in Nigeria plays a pivotal role. This is expounded by Onah (2008) who affirmed that English is an official language and as a result, a major tool in the realization of the learners' dream of acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge taught in schools. Omomia and Adegbuyi (2008) fore grounded this view as they asserted that for any student to gain admission into any Nigerian institution of higher learning, he/she must obtain a credit pass in English language hence, a failure in English language results is no viable pass grade.

Coulmas (2003) identified writing as being more important than ever. She referred to it as a critical skill for shaping the future. She identified some meanings of writing, one of which is a system of recording language by means of visible or tactile marks. Thomson (2008) identified written language as one that requires more

concentration than speaking because the writer has no chance of correcting himself on the spot if not understood. He ascertained the fact that sentences are the basis of written language and words do not make sentences unless it is arranged in accordance with the rules of grammar, logic and common sense.

Also, Myles (2002) asserted that the ability to write is not naturally acquired; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings. However, students encounter some problems while writing or learning how to write; Pellino (2007) opined that ESL students encounter many obstacles in their efforts to become proficient in the English language. Thus, they become caught in a painful power struggle over the use of English and their native language. Abbott and Wingard (1981) identified spelling as a problem encountered by learners which is regarded more complex than problems of handwriting. Adedeji (2008) also exclaimed to the fact that cultural differences which ESL learners bring along with their communication affects their acquisition of communicative competence in ESL.

In relation to the socioeconomic environment influence on English Language writing, Halawah (2006) observed that the correlation value between family environment and students' achievement was the highest. Daulta (2008) deduced that home environment has positive impact on scholastic achievement of children. Parents who are educated and better achieved academically usually want their children to emulate them. So, such children usually struggle to be like their parents while on the contrary, parents who have never seen the four walls of schools have children who often see something better than being an academic achiever.

Caldwell and Ginther (1996) and Hobbs (1990) indicated that socioeconomic status is the best predictor of academic attainment and that low socioeconomic status forecasts low attainment in academics. Dietzman (2002) assessed the role of parental support in the home environment and students' academic achievement. He confirmed that the amount of parent's interest and time directly affect the amount of reading, writing and discussion between family members. Furthermore, he buttressed that knowing the whereabouts of children, respecting opinions and feeling important in the family are home environment factors that may positively impact student's academic achievement.

Oluwatelure (2008) examined the effects of parental involvement on students' attitude and performance in chemistry and biology in Ekiti State, Nigeria. His study focused on parental influence, attitudes and academic performance of post primary school students. He concluded that elite parents influence their children positively and train them to accept 'top of the class' roles while parents who are petty traders and others like that transfer their lukewarm attitude to the education of their children. It is therefore difficult for such children to make

meaningful academic progress.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a survey design. The sample population is Basic Nine students of some selected public and private secondary schools in Lagos State. Basic nine students sit for the Junior School Certificate Examination. Thus, they are expected to be competent in writing in preparation for senior secondary and tertiary education. Ten secondary schools [5 public and 5 private] in Lagos Mainland Local Government were randomly selected from a list of schools obtained from Lagos State School Directory. Having selected the schools, 30 Basic Nine students were randomly selected from each school to make up the sample of the study. This made a total of 300 students; 150 private and public respectively.

INSTRUMENTATION

To realise the objectives of the study, a two part questionnaire was designed to obtain information from students. The first part of the questionnaire provided information on the biographical data and socioeconomic characteristics of participants while the second part was an English writing test that measured the writing competence of students. Standard essay questions from Junior School Examination past questions were used to assess students' English writing competence and the scores each participant obtained formed his/her level of competence in writing.

MARKING GUIDE

Subjects' essay writing tests were marked based on the following criteria:

Content, the relationship between the topic of the essay and thoughts of the student as presented on paper, Organisation i.e. coherence; division into introduction, body and conclusion, Expression, elements of grammar which include concord, spelling, tense structure etc. and Mechanical Accuracy involved the assessment of subjects' use of punctuation, paragraph, capitalisation and legibility of writing. Score below 6 is adjudged incompetent while 6 and above is considered competent in writing.

DATA COLLECTION

The essay test was administered on the randomly selected students in their classroom in the morning as students are expected to be alert. It was conducted with the help of class teachers and guidance counsellors of the schools. The teachers and counsellors read and explained the content to participants for proper understanding. Administration of test and completion of the questionnaire

lasted for about 1 hour 30 minutes in each selected school.

RESULTS

Out of the 300 subjects, 173 were females, while 126 were males. There was an almost similar gender distribution observed in both public and private schools. This was however a reflection of the Nigerian population distribution where females are more than males.

Learners' Competence in English Writing

Assessment of the essays reveals that majority are not competent in English writing. Based on the marking guide, 198 (66%) demonstrate incompetence while 102 (34%) demonstrate some level of competence in English writing. Out of the 198 subjects that demonstrate incompetence, 134 (45%) are from public schools while 64 (21%) are from private schools.

A careful and systematic analysis of the subjects' essays unravels some major problems that re-occur in almost all scripts. Below are some randomly selected examples:

Subject-Verb agreement

"She took me to Olumo rock in Abeokuta and that is my first time...

... and they bought some cloth...they make me contented...they take me to a place

My future ambition is to be an Accountant which means I had to go to a commercial department.

...when I rish (reach) there my uncle took me to many places like...after we eat finished we go back home...

...I went to go and visit my aunty for sometimes...

Spelling

'archetech' instead of architect

'diessing' instead of dressing

'lifes' instead of lives

'no' instead of know

'berial' instead of burial

Coherence

"I want to build a house... and take properly care of them. which is the population for the people and government"

"I want to study science and good in maths and English in order for me to become petrol chemical

engineer"

"I bath in the morning everyday she buy watch for me she go to is work everyday"

Punctuation

"I we like to be a doctor When I finish my education because I we able to try sickness people in my country because I we like to project my country from diseases because I we like to save my country from any dangerous diseases I we like to save my country from good health"

In this essay written by one of the respondents, there is no punctuation mark, no coherence, no paragraph and wrong use of words.

Paragraphing

Most of the respondents do not use paragraphs at all, only a few use in some places while some use it appropriately.

Capitalisation

This occurs usually in capitalising conjunctions like "and" and "because"

Problem of transliteration (Yoruba to English)

"I know the things I will like to do" (Mo mo awon nnkan ti mo fe se)

"Me and my parents" (Emi ati awon obi mi)

However, each type of school had a particular problem peculiar to the students. In the public schools, the major problems identified are in the areas of subject-verb agreement, punctuation, inability to express self, poor use of punctuations and illegibility in writing. In the private schools, there were problems of transliteration, wrong use of punctuations, wrong sentence formation and wrong use of words.

Influence of Socio-Economic Factors on Students' English Writing Competence

The socio-economic background of Basic nine students is examined to discover if it is responsible for observed incompetence in English writing. The socio-economic factors considered are parents' occupation and income, educational qualification, involvement in student's education and language of communication at home. Majority of the students identify their parents as entrepreneurs, while 12 and 15 students could not identify their mothers' and fathers' occupation respectively. Table 2 below illustrated this:

Table 2
Frequency Distribution of Parents' Educational Qualifications

Parent's educational level	Total
I don't know	11
Primary	13
Secondary	59
NCE/Diploma	70
HND/BSc/BA	68
Postgraduate	79
Total	300

Table 2: shows the distribution of parents' occupation as one of the variables of socio-economic environment considered in this study.

Table 3 below shows frequency distribution of parents' occupation. However, 12 and 15 students respectively could not identify their parents' occupation.

Table 3
Frequency Distribution of Private and Public Students' Parents' Occupation

Type of Occupation	Father	Mother
Entrepreneurs	123	184
Government workers	53	48
Professionals	80	34
Artisans and Traders	16	15
Menial workers	13	7
Total	285	288

Table 3 compares parents' occupations between private and public school students in order to establish students' socio-economic environment

Students' response to parents' educational qualification shows that although educational qualifications vary, parents are educated with many (79) obtaining postgraduate degrees.

Furthermore, to determine parents' income and financial status, students were asked the amount they received for lunch break per day. Students who receive less than fifty naira are considered to have low income earning parents and vice-versa. Expectedly, analysis

reveals that majority of students from private schools have high income earning parents while those from public schools have low income earning parents. Generally, many parents belong to middle and high income earners categories.

It is apparent from Table 4 that most homes mix English and Mother Tongue (MT) as language of communication.

Table 4
Language of Communication at Home

LOC	Public	Private	Total
English	39	43	82
Mother tongue	29	7	36
Mixed	82	100	182
Total	150	150	300

Table 4 reveals languages used at home by students to identify their socio-economic environment.

Lastly, parents' involvement in students' education is examined. Students are asked if their parents provide recommended texts and other books and if they assist them in doing take-home assignments. Majority (269) confirm that their parents bought all recommended texts and (242) reported that they also bought other books. However, more parents of students in private schools (81%) tend to show interest in the education of their

children as against (57%) in public schools.

TEST OF HYPOTHESES

1) Parents' income will not make any significant difference on English writing competence of Basic Nine students.

Hypothesis 1

Parents' Income	Mean	SD	T	Level of significance	Decision
English Writing Competence			-2.221	0.028	Accepted

2) Parents' level of education will not make any significant difference on English writing competence of

Basic Nine students.

Hypothesis 2

Parents' Ed. Level	Mean	SD	T	Level of significance	Decision
English Writing Competence			3.740	0.000	Accepted

Language of communication at home will not make any significant difference in the English writing

competence of Basic Nine students.

Hypothesis 3

Lang of Comm.	Mean	SD	T	Level of significance	Decision
English Writing Competence			0.056	0.955	Rejected

SUMMARY

This study revealed that:

Majority of basic nine students were not competent in English writing.

Incompetence was demonstrated in all aspects of writing including content, organization, expression and mechanical accuracy.

Each type of school had its own peculiar writing problems but common to all were improper use of punctuations, incoherence, subject-verb agreement.

Socioeconomic status of parents did not influence English writing competence.

It is obvious from the discussed set hypotheses that some variables identified in socio-economic environment were not the determining factors except language of communication at home in the English writing competence and overall performance of Basic nine students. This is in line with the findings of Williams (2004) who isolated cultural intrusions into writing style as a problem confronting ESL learners.

The private school students demonstrated some level of competence more than that of public school students based on a variety of socio-economic factors like home environment, language of communication at home amongst others. The reason for this had been identified by scholars. For example Hoffer and Kilgore (1999) recognised provision of high quality education in private schools as a reason. A clear difference can be drawn between private and public school students' and their environment. Thus, the private school students had an edge over public school students.

Grammatical problems identified included wrong use of subject-verb agreement, punctuations, paragraphing and capitalisation which could be as a result of students' weak foundation in second language learning. Students might not have been taught the techniques of writing appropriately in their foundational classes, that is, Basic Seven and Eight or at the primary school level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

English writing is germane to official transaction in Nigeria and international communities; therefore, every

stakeholder has roles to play. Since there are many stake holders in the education of Basic Nine learners, it is imperative that all hands be on deck to improve students' writing skills. This study is an eye-opener to the strengths and weaknesses of English language teaching and learning in schools. Therefore, ESL teachers must not assume that students already understand some basic grammar to writing proficiently in English. Spellings, use of punctuation marks, and subject-verb agreement must be patiently treated with enough exercises. They must ensure that exercises are marked, corrected and returned to students. ESL teachers must always be conscious that students already have LI which naturally interferes in the use of L2. This implies that only trained English language teachers must be employed by the government to teach English in secondary schools. Moreover, schools' management should look beyond the four walls of the classroom to discover solutions to perennial appalling performances in English Language examination. Taking students on excursions to interesting places could stimulate new ideas in them. This inspires them to write and as they write, teachers mark and return their scripts for corrections. Remedial classes should be organised for weak students to develop their writing skills.

Parents, also, must be more involved in the academics of their wards. Assignments/home-work must be supervised and relevant school materials must be adequately provided. Illiterate parents must be advised to engage the service of private teachers to help their children/ward with assignments and other necessary assistance needed. This could be arranged at affordable costs by schools to complement class activities and most importantly, to keep students busy with constant practice. Such parents must also pay regular visits to their children's schools for follow-up on their performance.

The use of English at home is helpful as revealed by this study but must not be enforced at the detriment of LI.

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