

Impact of Application of Structural Linguistics and Communicative Theory on Public Senior Secondary Schools Students' Performance in Content Generation and Expression Skills in Written English

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Abstract

Learning adequate proficiency level in written English among learners of English as a second language is a very critical and challenging task for applied linguists, educators and governments. This study has investigated the relative impact of applications of provisions and principles of structural linguistics and communicative theory on performance in the written English of public Senior Secondary Schools Students in Kano State of Nigeria. The study has paid focused on two key pillars of any written discourse: content generation and expression skills. The stratified probability method of sampling has been used to select the six sample schools for the study and the systematic method of sampling has been used to select the twenty sample scripts for the study. The analytic scoring system has been used to score the sample scripts and descriptive statistics using percentages has been used to analyse the data. The results indicate that employing the principles and provisions of structural linguistics theory in written English among the subjects enables better content generation and expression skills than employing the provisions and principles of the communicative theory of language. The study recommends that both the teachers and textbook writers of written English in senior secondary schools should incorporate the provisions and principles of structural linguistic theory in the business of inculcating content generation and expression skills among the students.

Keywords: Structural linguistics, Communicative theory, Expression, Content generation, Written English.

1.1 Background to the Study

This research work is aimed at investigating the relative impact of the principles and provisions of the communicative competence theory of language and structural linguistics theory on rural and urban senior secondary school students' performance in content generation and expression skills in written English. Interest for the study has been developed out of the following circumstances:-

- 1- The general Nigerian public outcry, the various WAEC, and NECO annual Chief Examiners' Reports on candidates' written English and various research reports and other related academic works which describe the senior secondary school students' performance in written English as poor
- 2- The pivotal role that written English plays among Nigerians especially in formal settings
- 3- The "unnaturalness" and complex nature of written English compared to the other macro language skills
- 4- The researcher's long-term exposure to senior secondary schools students' performance in written English in his capacity as WAEC examiner in written English
- 5- The researcher's interest in investigating the possible impact of the two selected language theories as they relate to content generation and expression skills in secondary schools students, in order to arrive at tangible and cogent proof that would address the controversies mentioned above

Structural linguistics and communicative theories of language have been chosen for the study as the theoretical framework in view of the wide-ranging applications of their principles and approaches vis-à-vis written English.

Choice of senior secondary schools for the study has been due to the facts mentioned in (1) and (2) above.

1.2 Research Questions

The study has been designed to find answers to the following questions:

1. Do the applications of the principles and provision of structural linguistics theory lead to better content generation and expression skills than the applications of the principles and provisions of communicative competence theory in the written English of rural and urban public senior secondary schools students?
2. Which, between application of principles and provisions of structural linguistics and application of principles and provisions of communicative competence theory lead to better achievements in content generation and expression skills in the written English of rural and urban public senior secondary schools students?

1.3 Statement of the Problem

There has been a general consensus among linguists that writing to communicate effectively, particularly in a second language is a skill in which students all over the world have one problem or another (Arapoff, 1965; Nunan, 1989; Tribble, 1997). This goes on to show that problems in writing, especially in a second language, defy geographical, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Writing in a second language, even for professionals, isn't an easy linguistic task (Williams 1990; Nunan, 1989). What is unique in learning to write is not so much learning to state the facts, but how to organise and use them. Therefore when writing, second language users must keep in their mind their purpose, think about the facts they need and think about coherently organizing the facts. This complex process involved in second language writing is what prompts Arapoff (1965) to regard second language writing as a complex process fraught with problems.

One of the problems second language writers face is in the area of knowledge of the second language. Weigle (2002:35) calls it "limited second language knowledge" and Williams (1990:160) calls it "users' low levels of maturity vis-à-vis their control of basic lexis and structure in the target language". Since writing is the process of using grammar and facts as tools in carrying out a particular purpose (Arapoff, 1965; Aliyu, 2006; Williams, 1990), poor or inadequate mastery of the linguistic knowledge of the target language becomes an immediate stumbling block resulting in grave consequences.

Weigle (2002) states three major consequences. First is that limited linguistic proficiency in the first language makes the cognitive processes of text interpretation (understanding the writing task) and text generations (encoding one's ideas into written text) more difficult for second language writers. Secondly, higher order issues in writing such as content and organization are given less emphasis because the writer is struggling with linguistic issues, which take the largest chunk of his devotion. Finally, limited linguistic knowledge in target language makes the written product of second language writers not to match the original writer's intention; this is because the second language writers lack the necessary linguistic skills to encode their thoughts into written texts. As a result of this, text generation may tax the writer's resources so completely that the idea is lost from working memory before it can be put down on paper. Consequent upon these, second language writing is more constrained, more difficult and less effective than first language writing. Second language writers plan less, revise for content less and write less fluently and accurately than first languages writers (Silva, 1993; Weigle 2002).

Limited Linguistic knowledge in the target language is not the only major problem confronting second language writers. Cultural intrusion into the style of writing of second language writers (Williams 1990) or social and cultural factors (Weigle 2002) is another problem. This is to say that writing in a second language situation is influenced by the writer's socio-cultural underpinnings, because writing, like language in general is a meaning-making activity that is socially and culturally

shaped (Sperling 1996). This being the case, a limited knowledge of socio-cultural rudiments of the target language could have negative effects on the appropriate ways in which various functions are expressed or expectations of readers from the target language.

Advances made in the area of contrastive rhetoric, first introduced in Kaplan (1966) shed more light on the cultural influences of second language writers. In Kaplan's study, a large number of ESL (English as a second language) essays from different cultures were analyzed and distinctive features were found. It was found that particular cultural preferences existed in which greater use of certain options among linguistic possibilities were preferred. ESL (English as a second language) essays whose writer's first language was Arabic were characterized by heavy use of co-ordination and parallelism. In a related study, Collarado, (1981: cited in Lekki 1992; cited in Weigle 2002), found that Spanish writers preferred lengthy introductions; they made use of digrations and do not focus on the main ideas of the essay as in English. In another instance, Chinese writers provide a series of examples without stating the main points of the examples or tying them together through generalizations, in contrast to the English preference for transparent, explicit connection in prose (Matelene, 1985, cited in Lekki, 1992; cited in Weigle 2002).

These "cultural ways" through which second language writing is undertaken can have a grave consequence. Since readers bring their cultural background knowledge and expectations, misreading of the author's intended message is possible. Hindus (1987, cited in Weigle 2002) differentiate between "writer responsible language" and "reader responsible language". In writer responsible language, the writer makes explicit the connections between propositions and ideas in the text, so that readers do not need to infer these connections on their own. In reader-responsible language, the writer leaves examples and details implicit and it is the reader's job to make inferences to get the intended meaning. The Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2004) recognizes English language to be a core subject at nearly all levels of education. From primary IV upwards English is supposed to be the medium of instruction. This being the case, it is only logical for one to expect the written English of senior secondary schools students to be generally good to meet this national demand. Unfortunately however, several research reports indicate a wide range of incompetence in the written English of secondary schools students making it far from meeting this national demand.

1.4 Basic Assumption

This study has been based on the assumption that using or applying the provisions and principles of structural linguistic theory and communicative competence theory enables rural and urban senior secondary schools students to achieve equal performance in terms of content generation and expression skills in written English.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The study has been designed to achieve the following objectives.

1. to determine the comparative impact of applications of provisions and principles of structural linguistic theory and communicative competence theory vis a vis their capacity in enabling senior secondary schools students towards achieving content generation and expression skills in written English
2. to compare the performances of rural and urban senior secondary schools students with regard to content generation and expression skills in written English

1.6 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to be of significance to the following:

1. Department of English in various colleges of education in Nigeria in their role as those who train English language teachers, guided by the findings of the study, they can best train English language teachers with regard to written English.
2. Departments of English in Nigerian universities as their products are very important stakeholders in English language usage in Nigerian secondary schools
3. English language textbook writers because they play critical role in English language usage in schools. The study is expected to make it easier for text book writers to identify and address more adequately the problems associated with students' written English
4. Literature on general knowledge in applied English linguistics useful to all intending researchers in the field

1.7 Delimitation of the Study

The study has been designed to investigate the relative impact of the provisions and principles of structural linguistics theory and communicative competence theory in the achievement of content generation and expression skills in the written English of students of some selected public senior secondary schools in Kano State of Nigeria.

2.0 Conceptualisation

The concepts of content generation and expression are very critical in any meaningful and successful written English. Expression in written discourse can hardly be successful if the content to be expressed is poorly generated. According to Weigle (2002), content generation is a critical cognitive process poor mastery of which results in poor expression skills among second language writers. According to the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) (2011 & 2014), content generation skills among candidates include two main requirements: adequacy of points/ideas/propositions discussed in a text and relevance of the points, ideas, and propositions to the essay. This means that

content of any written essay must satisfy the twin requirements of adequacy and relevance; otherwise, the candidate would score very low mark in this regard.

Expression in written English is the writer's ability to communicate the content of the written discourse appropriately. Generating a lot of content without the appropriate skills to express it would not result in a good written English discourse. According to the West African Examinations Council (WAEC 2015), skills in expression are dependent on appropriate use of register, appropriate level of formality/informality, use of correct sentence forms and use of contracted forms.

2.1 Structural Linguistic Theory

Structural linguistics is an approach to linguistics which treats language as an interwoven structure, in which every item acquires identity and validity only in relation to the other items in the system (Encyclopedia.com). This approach to language study originates from the post-humus publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916 (Wikipedia.com, Philip, 2009).

Structural linguistics methods and procedures are based on relational view of language. According to Eastman (1978:80) structural linguistics is based on the following principles:

1. the study of the structure of language
2. viewing the relationships between the various language units as more important than the units themselves
3. the assumption that the underlying structure of language is systematic
4. the discovery of general laws of language

Bloomfield is the linguistics scholar considered to be the major developer of twentieth century structuralism in America. For Bloomfield, the structure of language should be the central object of linguistic study. He stresses the use of empirical data only. To Bloomfield, the grammarian task was to collect as much language data as possible. Such linguistic data should be analyzed and classified, and on the basis of objective evidence alone, conclusion could be reached. This research work has borrowed and used the two central cruxes of Bloomfield's structural linguistic theory: (use of empirical language data as empiricist methodology in language study in which concrete language data in the form of sample text has been used and inductive generalization in language study in which generalizations on the sample text are adopted by the subjects to write their individual texts).

Language acquisition and language learning are two related concepts that have continued to capture the attention of linguists. In Chomsky's grammatical theory, for instance, the explanatorily adequacy aspect of the theory explains how it is possible to acquire knowledge of language. Adding to the applied contributions of structural linguistics theory to language learning, Paulston (1992:79) states that "linguistics as we know it today would never have existed if people had not tried to do things with language all the way back to Panini". Furthermore, according to Confucius, "The essence of knowledge is, having it, to apply it." (Confucius cited in Banjo, 1983:15). While all linguists necessarily maintain

an interest in theoretical linguistics in the study of language as pure science, many of them are keen on applying their research to the solutions of problems in other areas. To this end, applied linguistics has come to be known as a branch of linguistics where the primary concern is application of linguistic theories, methods and findings to the elucidation of language problems which have arisen in other areas of experience (Crystal, 1991). One of such areas is second language teaching and learning.

2.2 Communicative Theory of Language

According to Brumfit (1986:Vii), “the shift away from a view of language as a static observable system to be learnt to the view that it is fluid, negotiable system to be performed is fundamental to recent developments from a wide variety of sources”.

Communicative language theory dates back to the 1960s as a result of changes in the British language teaching tradition (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The term “communicative approach” comes to be associated with the writings of British applied linguists on theoretical basis of communicative approach to language usage. The theory of language underlying communicative approach starts from theory of language as communication.

According to Hymes (1972:281), “The goal of language teaching is to develop communicative competence”. Hymes coined the term communicative competence in order to contrast communicative view of language with Chomsky’s theory of competence which is captured vividly in Chomsky (1965:3) thus:

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal listener-speaker in a completely homogeneous speech community who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interests, and errors (random and characteristics) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance.

Chomsky’s linguistic theory could be summarized in three theses. The first is that language should be pursued as a purely cognitive state rather than a type of behaviour. Secondly, language study should be pursued in abstraction from the socio-cultural matrix within which it is found. Finally, how humans acquire language knowledge should be pursued within the theory of grammar.

Canale and Swain, Canadian linguists, are perhaps two most famous linguists with regard to lending support to Hymes’s view of language. Canale and Swain (1980) could be claimed to be the most influential analysis of communicative competence in which four dimensions of communicative competence are identified. Rodgers & Richards (2001:160) identifies the four components of communicative competence as discussed by Canale and Swain (1980):

1. Grammatical competence: This kind of competence corresponds to Chomsky’s linguistic competence and Hymes’s concept of “formally possible”. It includes knowledge of lexical items and rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar etc (Canale and Swain, 1980:29)
2. Sociolinguistic competence: This involves knowledge of socio-cultural rules of language and of discourse, i.e. understanding of the social context in which communication takes place

including role relationships, the shared information of participants, and the communicative purposes for their interaction.

3. Discourse competence: This is the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and form meaningful whole out of series of utterances. Richards & Rodgers (2001:166) considers this aspect of communicative competence as the interpretation of individual message elements in terms of their connectedness and of how meaning is represented in relation to the entire discourse or text.
4. Strategic competence: This includes the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdown in communication due to performance variable or due to insufficient competence. This aspect of communicative competence is mainly coping strategies that communicators employ to initiate, terminate, maintain, repair and re-direct communication.

Employing communicative approach to impart skills in written language has been recommended by several scholars. For example according to Raimes (1983), writers do their best when writing becomes or is projected as a truly communicative act, with writers writing for real readers.

3.0 Literature Review

Several research works have reported a wide range of incompetence in the written English of secondary school students in Nigeria.

Abdul-aziz, I., Arogun, G. and Bello M. (1992), Sunusi A. Yusuf, S. Mohammed, A. and Raji, Y. (1997), Sunday, A. and Ohikhuare, C. (2001), Ringim, H.I (2005) and Abubakar, T.A (2003) all reported wide-ranging incompetence in the written English of senior secondary school students.

In its focus on previous studies and related works on the written English of senior secondary school students, this study has paid special attention to the various research designs, procedures followed and implications identified. The purpose of this is to see how this study relates to the previous ones, and how it can best be designed to achieve its purposes.

Achor, S. and Ohikhuare, C. (2001) studies the use of tenses and their implications on students' performance in written English at Federal College of Education Kano Staff School. 200 students have been sampled. It has been found that poor mastery of English tense, excessive use of Pidgin English and poorly trained English teachers as the main factors of the students' general poor performance in written English.

Writing from communicative point of view, Sunusi, A. Yusuf, S. Mohammed, A. and Raji, Y. (1997) is a case study on communicative problems secondary school students face in both written and spoken English. Thirty teachers and seventy-two students have been sampled. The study finds that the students are deficient in written communicative competence. The study recommends that grammar teaching should be approached indirectly, i.e. through the use of "bottom-down approach".

Samuel, R., Abdulaziz, I., Arogun G. and Bello, M. (1992) is a study on errors in the written communication or compositions of post primary schools in Kano State. A stratified sampling is used in which 40 respondents are selected from the sampled secondary schools. Structural errors, lexical errors, mechanical and miscellaneous errors have been found. The researchers recommend that students should engage in wide reading so as to improve on the use of grammar and that teachers should engage the students in drills particularly on the problematic areas the study has found.

Although each of several studies reviewed in this study has accounted to some degrees the problems of poor performance in the written English of secondary school students (rates and categories of errors found, recommendation on how to deal with the poor competence of the students in written English, etc.) none of the studies has investigated the impact of structural linguistics and communicative theory of language on the students' achievements in written English. The uniqueness of the present study lies in contrasting and investigating the possible impact of structural linguistics theory and communicative competence theory on the students' achievement in written English.

4.0 Methodology

This study has been focused on impact of application of principles and provisions of structural linguistic theory and communicative competence theory on public senior secondary schools students' performance in written English, with particular reference to content generation and expression skills.

4.1 Sampling Techniques

No concept is as fundamental to the conduct of research and interpretation of result as is sampling (Osuala, 2005:114). Suleiman (1998:17) defines sample as "that portion of a population which is studied closely in order to gain some knowledge and or make generalizations about the population it represents". Stratified probability method of sampling has been used in selecting the six schools (three rural senior secondary schools and three urban senior secondary schools). Systematic sampling has been used to select the number of scripts per school; after having jumbled the total number of the scripts per school, the tenth script was selected.

4.2 Research Instruments

Two researcher-constructed written tests have been used to elicit the data for the study (primary data). One of the tests has been constructed based on provisions and principles of structural linguistic theory and the other test has been constructed based on the principles and provisions of communicative competence theory.

4.3 Source of Data for the Study

Primary data in the form of written tests of the subjects is the source of data for the study.

Data Collection Procedure

- a) Preamble: After a short introduction, the subjects were given a popular topic on which they wrote an essay for thirty minutes. This is to ginger them for the forthcoming writing task.
- b) The subjects were exposed to the principles and provisions of the two language theories (structural linguistics theory in the case of rural senior secondary schools and communicative competence theory in the case of urban senior secondary schools).
- c) The subjects were given a new topic on which to write another essay using the structural linguistic theory (in the case of rural senior secondary school) and communicative competence theory (in the case of urban senior secondary schools) which they had been exposed to in (b) above.
- d) The scripts were collected from the subjects.
- e) The scripts were sampled and marked by use of analytic scoring system.

5.0 Data Presentation and Analysis

Introduction

This research work has been designed to compare the relative impact of the provisions and application of structural linguistics and communicative competence theories of language on rural and urban senior secondary schools students' achievement with regard to content generation and expression skills in written English. The data collected for the study has been treated according to the research questions of the study. The study contains research findings, discussions and conclusions.

5.1 Overall Performance of Urban Area Students in Content Generation and Expression Skills in Written English

The following table presents both the individual scores of the content generation and expression skills in written English and the total percentage of each of the sample scripts so that the fact can be more graphically represented.

Table 5.1 Scores on Content Generation and Expression Skills for Urban Senior Secondary Schools

School	Script	Content	Expression		Total
G.S.S Naibawa	1	5	7	$\frac{12}{30}$	40%
G.S.S Naibawa	2	5	7	$\frac{13}{30}$	43%
G.S.S Naibawa	3	4	2	$\frac{6}{30}$	20%
G.S.S Naibawa	4	3	7	$\frac{10}{30}$	33%
G.S.S S/Kofa	5	6	6	$\frac{12}{20}$	40%
G.S.S S/Kofa	6	7	6	$\frac{13}{30}$	43%
G.S.S S/Kofa	7	6	6	$\frac{12}{30}$	40%
G.S.S K/Nassarawa	8	8	7	$\frac{15}{30}$	50%
G.S.S K/Nassarawa	9	5	4	$\frac{9}{30}$	30%
G.S.S K/Nassarawa	10	4	4	$\frac{8}{30}$	26.6%

Table 5.2 Total Scores and Percentages of each of the Two Writing Components in Urban Secondary Schools

	Maximum Marks	Actual marks scored	Percentage
Content	100	54	54%
Expression	200	56	28%

Table 5.1 and 5.2 illustrate that although the performances vary among the subjects, such performances are generally low. The subjects performed better in the content generation skill component with 8 marks out of the maximum 10 marks being the highest score, and 3 marks out of the 10 maximum marks being the lowest score. The subjects did not do well in the expression component of written English. The highest mark is 7 out of the maximum 20 marks and the lowest mark is 2 out of the maximum 20 marks.

The total score of the content generation component skill is 54 marks out of the maximum 100 marks, representing 54%. The total score of the expression component skill is 56 marks out of the maximum 200 marks, representing 28%.

5.2 Overall Performance of Rural Areas Students in Content Generation and Expression Skills in Written English

The following table presents both the individual scores of content generation and expression skills in written English and the total percentage of each of the sample scripts so that the facts can be more graphically represented.

Table 5.3 Scores in Content Generation and Expression Skills in the Written English of Rural Areas Students

School	Script	Content	Expression	Total	Percentage
G.S.S.S. Bichi	1	8	11	$\frac{19}{30}$	63%
G.S.S.S. Bichi	2	8	8	$\frac{16}{30}$	53.3%
G.S.S.S. Bichi	3	6	7	$\frac{13}{30}$	40.3%
D/Kudu Science college	4	8	13	$\frac{21}{30}$	70%
D/Kudu Science college	5	8	10	$\frac{18}{30}$	60%
D/Kudu Science college	6	8	10	$\frac{18}{30}$	60%
D/Kudu Science college	7	7	7	$\frac{14}{30}$	46.7%
G.A.S.S.S Kura	8	8	12	$\frac{20}{30}$	66.7%
G.A.S.S.S Kura	9	8	12	$\frac{20}{30}$	66.7%
G.A.S.S.S Kura	10	8	12	$\frac{20}{30}$	66.7%

Table 5.4 Total Scores and Percentages of Content and Expression Skills in the Written English of Rural Areas Students

	Maximum Marks	Actual marks scored	Percentage
Content	100	77	77%
Expression	200	102	51%

Table 5.3 and 5.4 indicate that students' performance in content generation and expression skills in written English is generally above average. The highest individual student score is $\frac{21}{30}$ representing 70% and the lowest individual student score is $\frac{13}{30}$ representing 40.3%. The total score in content generation skills is 77 marks out of the maximum mark of 100, representing 77%. In the expression skills, a total of 102 marks were scored out of the maximum mark of 200, representing 51%.

5.3 Comparative Analysis of Rural and Urban Students' Performances in Content Generation and Expression Skills in Written English

The following table displays the comparative performance of the rural and urban secondary school students' achievements in terms of content generation and expression skills in written English. This has been done with the aim of comparing more easily the two components of skills in written English between the two the groups.

Table 5.5 Comparative Performances between Rural and Urban Secondary School Students in Terms of Content Generation and Expression Skills in Written English

	Urban Secondary Schools		Rural Secondary Schools	
	Total marks	Percentage	Total marks	Percentage
Content	54	54%	77	77%
Expression	56	28%	102	51%

In the content generation component, urban secondary schools have 54 marks representing 54% of the maximum mark and the rural secondary schools scored 77 marks representing 77%. In the expression component, urban secondary schools scored 56 marks out of the maximum marks of 200 which represent 28%. The rural secondary schools scored 102 marks out of the maximum mark of 200 which represents 51%.

6.0 Findings of the Study

After treating the students' scores, the following are the overall findings of the study.

1. Performances in content generation and expression skills are generally weak among the urban subjects.
2. Subjects in rural senior secondary schools performed better than the subjects in urban senior secondary schools in both content generation and expression skills.
3. Expression skills are more difficult for all the subjects, i.e. both the urban and rural senior secondary schools students.
4. Expression skills are particularly very poorly achieved among the urban senior secondary schools students.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

This study has investigated the relative impact of the provisions and principles of structural linguistics and communicative competence theory towards the achievement of content generation and expression skills in the written English of students of some selected public senior secondary schools in Kano state of Nigeria. To achieve this, the study has found answers to the research questions of the study by drawing the conclusion that using the provisions and principles of structural linguistic theory enables better content generation and expression skills in the written English of the senior secondary schools students.

In view of the problems and inferences drawn from this study, the following recommendations have been made:

1. A general reading/writing culture among teachers and students should be established. Reading culture could be enhanced through the setting of classroom and school libraries.
2. Samples of written articles, essays, sermons and advertisements as well as badly written materials should be made available in the school environment. Such provide sources of real models for discussion, emulating or rejection.
3. Senior secondary school students should be exposed to the structural and syntactic aspects of English language so that they acquire the correct structural and syntactic rules of English necessary for generating structurally and syntactically well-formed English expression.
4. Establishment of school clubs such as debate club, drama club, etc. should be emphasized. Written communication skills should be emphasized side by side with the usual oral skills usually associated with such clubs.
5. The school compound should be elevated to literacy – friendly environment. This could be achieved through creating periodically ever exciting signposts and miniature billboards with arresting write-ups and notices. Such innovations could heighten the enthusiasm for reading and writing.

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