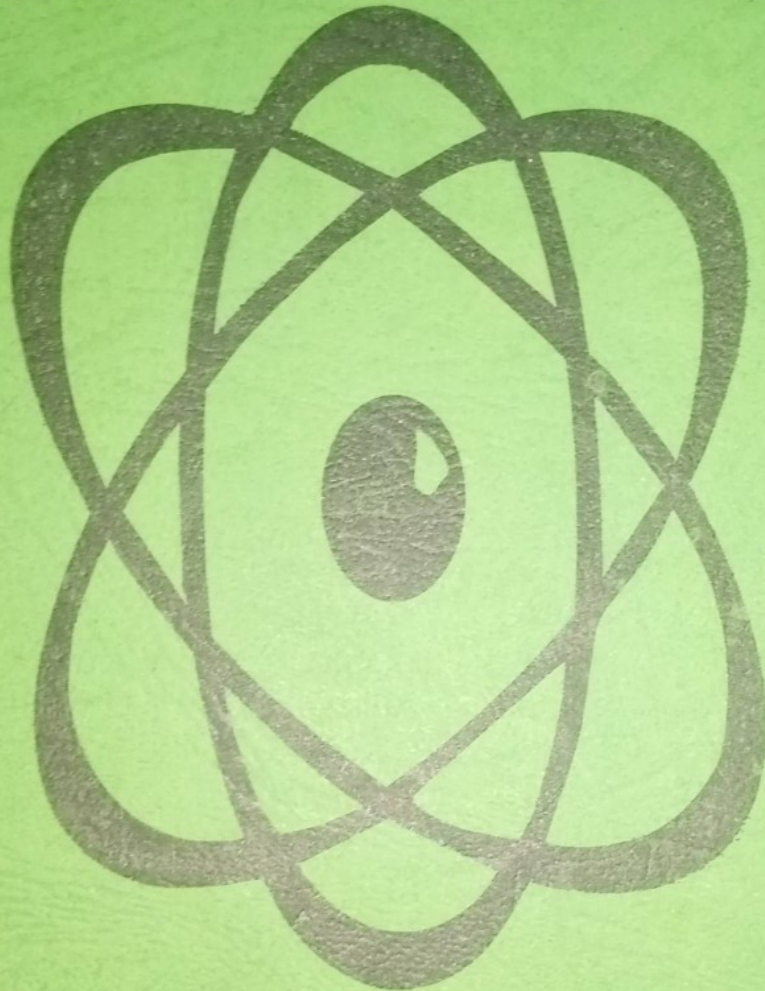


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ELTT Papers is devoted to the publication of articles, research reports and reviews on English Language Teaching for those involved in the teaching of English as a Second Language. It aims to:

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EDITORIAL

This is a slim but long-awaited edition of *ELTT Papers*, comprising papers from several conferences. This is due in part to the perennial problem of low quality of papers submitted and in part to editorial challenges.

Five of the papers deal with various issues at different levels of the educational system. Ezema examines how the National Policy of language in education is followed at the pre-primary school level. While Olabode evaluates LT programmes in the secondary school, Tafida suggests measures to solve some problems that secondary school students have in writing English. Njemanze focuses on the place of listening in effective classroom communication, drawing her examples from a secondary school. All the suggestions for improving knowledge delivery in schools are based on the assumption that there are well-trained and motivated teachers. Babatunde and Olubakin provide the link in their paper on teacher development. Omorodion's paper strikes an individualistic note by discussing the features of the language of political propaganda. Baba Sidi's paper appears on the remediation of phonological challenges of Nigerian Speakers of English appears posthumously.

Editorial Collective

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Writing Problems in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Suggestions for Improvement

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Abstract

Writing is undisputedly an important aspect of any educational system. It is used to gauge what the students know and where they have problems. It is therefore a means through which we assess our students' academic performance. However, in Nigerian secondary schools many students find it difficult to communicate effectively in writing. This is due to reasons such as poor linguistic background, lack of interest, unfamiliarity with the topic, bad reading culture etc. This is a matter of concern to teachers, parents, educational planners, and the government. Some things have to be put in place and one of these is the focus of this paper. The paper takes a critical look at the complex and cognitive processes of writing and the important roles writing teachers play in that regard. It also highlights the major problems which hinder effective writing communication by the students and offer worthwhile suggestions for improvement.

Introduction

By writing we are not concerned with students' handwriting because Coate and Castle (1989:517-518) believe that "from the time a child holds a crayon and marks a piece of paper or grasps a letter block and places it with another, that child is writing; and if the child talks about what was made, he is reading". In other words, children begin to write long before they enter school. The writing we are therefore concerned with is the one involving creating meaningful texts such as stories, descriptions, letters, invitations, and other forms of informative pieces. This writing according to Aliyu (1997: 70) involves stringing together ideas in words, sentences and paragraphs to convey some message to the readers. Writing is therefore a means of communication involving more processes than other forms of communication. Written communication also involves many channels.

In writing communication, there must be the subject (topic) and the message which goes to the reader or audience. There is therefore a problem if the message is not clear to the audience. The writer has to do audience analysis because the audience determines one's choice of words and the entire message has to be in tune with the level of the audience. The writer has to construct the message in clear terms to sustain the readers' interest. Writing is therefore a complex activity. Glendinning and Mantel cited in Okoh (2002: 5) point out that many students find writing the most difficult skill to acquire. But, every student in every discipline needs writing to be able to succeed educationally. The teacher and the larger society use writing to find out how much knowledge a child has acquired in his field of specialization. Writing could therefore be seen in four perspectives:

1. Writing is a cognitive activity that involves thinking. Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 47) opine that learners will learn when they actively think of what they are learning.
2. It is a form of linguistic and language activity.
3. It is a communicative process
4. It is a form of learning that is contextualized and purposive.

For any writing to be successful, it has to undergo different processes of brainstorming, outlining, articulating,

translating, transcribing, reviewing and revising. Thus, Oyetunde (1979:66) opines that the process of writing involves five basic steps which are:

1. Organizing the classroom;
2. Selecting the topics;
3. Modelling writing;
4. Revising; and
5. Publishing.

The complexity of the writing process as shown above explains why many teachers do not like to teach writing and why most students fail to write and communicate effectively. Our students' essays and other forms of writing even in tertiary institutions are matter for concern. Students' results at internal and external examinations (WAEC, GCE) and class performance in writing in English are not encouraging. The causes and the solutions to the problem need to be sought and that is the focus of this paper.

Many problems contribute to hinder effective writing communication in secondary schools. Aliyu (1997: 81) summarizes these problems to include the following:

1. Mixed tenses e.g. present and past;
2. Poor topic identification;
3. Awkward sentence construction;
4. Poor spelling;
5. Inappropriate words and expressions; and
6. Lack of adequate ideas to write on.

Moreover, anyone who has the opportunity of classroom experience in Nigeria will know that writing poses numerous problems to the students. Okoye (1990: 3) points out that one problem facing teachers of English Language is how to help students to overcome writing problems.

What then are the causes of these problems?

1. Poor linguistic background

Students who lack sufficient background in reading and speaking are likely to have difficulties in writing. If they are not exposed to books and other reading materials at home or at the elementary stage, they are likely to have problems in writing. Lack of the ability to discuss the topic they want to write about would also make writing a problem to them.

2. Unfamiliarity with the topic

For students to write well on a topic, they have to be familiar with it, for this will help them generate enough materials on which to write. Students write better on topics that are culture-based. For instance, if a secondary school student is asked to write on a topic that is not appropriate to Nigerian culture or environment, he would find it difficult to generate ideas to write on. For instance, a topic like 'Thanksgiving Day' is appropriate for American students but would be problematic for their Nigerian counterparts. As Zamel (1983: 171) points out, "the controlled conditions of asking students to compose about an artificial topic may result in writing that is not truly representative". Freedman and Pringle (1980: 312) also add that writing done in such a context implies a composing process that is radically different from the process each of us undergoes in the course of our normal writing.

3. Lack of knowledge of different types of writing

Students at secondary school are expected to have knowledge of different types of writing such as essay, letter, short speeches etc. They are therefore expected to be taught the conventions of different types of writing and lack of knowledge of these kinds of writing would be a problem to them.

4. **First language interference**

A child's mother tongue may interfere with his learning of a second language. This interference is noticed in terms of spelling, grammar, pronunciation etc. This affects the student's constructions at sentence level and the organization of the discourse. Students at times also make direct translations of the experiences in the L1 which may not be appropriate in the L2 situation and this becomes a problem to them. Thus, Tafida (1998: 50) opines that, "the influence of the mother tongue in learning a second language cannot be ignored because it facilitates or hinders the learning of some aspects of English depending on the similarity or difference of the aspect being learnt.

5. **Bad reading culture**

This is a problem not only to students at secondary school level but even to those at higher levels. Students generally do not cultivate the habit of reading extensively these days most especially with the advancement in modern technology. They instead prefer to watch television, satellite dish transmitted programmes, video, etc., giving little or no room to reading to obtain information and ideas necessary for writing.

6. **Poor teaching method**

Students at secondary school also face the problem of poor teaching methods used by the teachers. This situation is expressed by Zamel (1983: 165): "ESL writing continues to be taught as if form preceded content, as if composing were a matter of adopting preconceived rhetorical frameworks, as if correct language usage took priority over the purposes for which language is used". The above situation obtains because it is thought that all language teachers are automatically writing teachers and this should not be the case. A writing teacher must be trained in the field. He has to be familiar with the steps involved in teaching and assessing writing and be patient as he directs the students through the different processes of writing.

Oyetunde (1979: 63) maintains that some teachers do not like to teach writing because they do not know how to teach it and they regard writing as the most abstract of all languages skills. Therefore, if teachers' attitudes and methods of teaching writing are not favourable, their students are likely to have problems with writing.

7. **Lack of proper writing skills**

Arising from the above, most students at this level also lack adequate knowledge of the writing skills such as punctuation, organization, spelling and proper use of the tenses and connectives. This affects their writing negatively because their message is not normally well conveyed. Students writing at this level are graded based on how well they are able to use these writing skills. These skills are assessed under mechanical accuracy and organization which carry a big portion of their entire score. The improper use of these skills would be a big problem to them.

8. **Lack of interest**

Students at secondary schools have problems with writing because they do not find writing interesting. Okoh (2002: 55) suggests that quite often, our students do not appreciate the true nature of writing, and are thus unable to approach the task with the seriousness it demands. Our students' attitude to writing is not unconnected with our culture's emphasis on the oral skills. The society gives preference to the traditional method of oral transmission of facts. Moreover, uninteresting topics and disinterested teachers make writing a boring exercise for them. It should be known that the urge to write does not develop automatically in the course of schooling. Therefore, Oyetunde (1979) believes that if students are to write, they must be given the opportunity to write.

9. **Lack of motivation to write**

Encouraging students to write develops in them positive writing habits and attitudes. It also helps develop comprehension and composing skills as well as promotes their spelling and decoding skills. Bruning and Horn

(2000: 26) describe the complex processes that are undertaken in writing, noting that motivational issues will assume particularly prominent status. They went on to suggest four conditions which are required to enhance the motivation to write. They are:

1. Nurturing functional beliefs about writing;
2. Fostering students' engagement through authentic writing goals and context;
3. Providing a supportive context for writing; and
4. Creating a positive emotional environment in which to write.

10. Inadequate provision for writing on the timetable

The time table in Nigerian secondary schools is not favourable to English language teaching generally and this also affects the teaching of writing which in most cases is lumped together with the teaching of other language skills. As Aliyu (1979: 65) shows, when students write they need a quiet classroom environment to think, to consider words, to organize ideas, and to get them on paper. Nigerian students are usually not given the relaxed and quiet atmosphere under which to write.

The causes of writing problems explained above exist in ESL learning situations most especially in secondary schools. However at the university level some of these problems reduce due of length of learning and other forms of exposure to the language. Nevertheless, problems such as first language interference, lack of interest, inadequate time to teach writing as well as bad reading culture also persist in higher institution. This is largely due to the fact that the number of contact hours an English language teacher has with the students is seriously inadequate as there are numerous other courses competing with the subject. This paper has therefore offered some recommendations which would ameliorate the problems highlighted in this paper.

Suggestions for Improvement

The following suggestions are proposed for the improvement of the situation highlighted in this paper.

Students should be exposed to different reading materials such as magazines, novels, newspapers, texts etc. Parents should give their children a head start by buying these reading materials and encourage them to read at home. Teachers should also make the classrooms and the school environment print-rich to enrich students' vocabulary and get them accustomed to the English language. If the students are adequately exposed to the language, the problems of L1 interference in L2 learning would be adequately addressed. They should also be taught the different types of writing such as the different essay types, letters, and paragraphs during English language lessons, etc.

In addition, English language teachers should be taught specifically to teach writing. The role of a writing teacher is more complex than that of the teacher of other language skills. They need some theoretical knowledge about the communicative process or writing. They should know what writing means and how it takes place. Oyetunde (1979: 64) lists five essential qualities that make professional writing teacher. They are:

1. He gives encouragement, acceptance and understanding as he helps them to write. He should be aware that students need this kind of emotional support, particularly in their first attempts at composing.
2. He is readily available to give students help with spelling, punctuation, structure, handwriting and all the mechanics of writing that they are struggling with.
3. He is aware that all students are not equally gifted with writing ability and so individualizes his instruction as much as possible and is patient with slow learners.
4. He is aware that often girls are more fluent with words than boys are particularly in the primary school.
5. He knows that certain readiness factors may affect students' ability to write and therefore willing to diagnose and provide instructional intervention as may be necessary.

The whole success of a student's writing largely depends on the roles played by the teacher and that is why he has to be committed and trained for the job.

Moreover, the teacher also has a role to play in the assessment of student's work. Merely assessing students and correcting their errors do not enhance learning. He should just point out the problems areas e.g. in spelling grammar and allow them to find out the corrections themselves. This enhances learning and the interest to learn. He should not rubbish their essays with red ink as is being done by our teachers but find other means of reacting to their writing. He should also allow some flexibility in what they write rather than forcing them to comply religiously with given points on the topic.

Furthermore, students should be given interesting topics to write on. A birthday party is not necessarily an interesting one because not all students celebrate birthdays. They should be given varied topics to choose from and such topics should be relevant to their background and at the level of their imagination. They should also be allowed the opportunity to explore their ideas with reference to a topic that truly engages them, and make decisions about the most effective way to communicate these ideas. They must be made to understand that writing is a problem-solving exercise, since writers discover solutions as they go along, which enables them to modify their discourse as it becomes necessary.

Moreover, student should be taught punctuation, grammar and spelling. They could be given a distorted sentence, paragraph or passage to punctuate. They should be given practice in words that are often misspelled and be encouraged to consult a dictionary for guidance. The teachers should themselves use correct spelling.

Students need encouragement to invest time in the development of their writing skills. Many spend most of their time watching television, video, satellite dishes etc. thereby discouraging them from doing assignments, writing and reading. The parents have a role to play here. They should encourage students to write more by placing on the times they can watch television or browse on the internet. Also, television programmes they are allowed to watch should be educative ones that enlighten them and serve as added advantage to what the teacher teaches.

Moreover, the writing attitude of the students should be developed through motivation. The teacher promotes writing habit if he shares some of his letters, notes or stories with the students. This idea is being practised in some secondary schools and I also adopt same because it among others prevents over-dependence on teacher's hand-outs. Students should also be encouraged to share ideas in class and such ideas should be accepted and commended. Oyetunde (1979:66) opines that anything the teacher can do to communicate his love of writing will be helpful and that if the teacher values writing, his students are likely to value it, too. Moreover, in view of the limited hours allocated to teach English language, teachers should encourage students to write on topics of interest as assignment which may be exchanged in class by students themselves and supervised by the teacher. The teacher should however go through these essays at a convenient time.

Conclusion

This paper has taken a critical look at writing as a process and its importance to the learning situation. It has also examined the causes of students' poor performance in writing as noticed in the ESL classrooms and in internal and external examinations. Recommendations were also proffered to minimize the occurrence the problems highlighted. These recommendations are workable and can work in all language learning situations. Stakeholders in the educational sector should be conscious of these problems and the suggestions provided for improvement. This could go a long way in enhancing the academic development of our students.

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