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Investigating the academic writing potentials of freshmen at the University of Buea: Making a case for grammatical and lexical awareness

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Abstract

This study hypothesized “that one who has nothing to say has nothing to write” to investigate the effects of grammatical awareness on performance in language proficiency test among first-year university students at the University of Buea (UB). The sample comprised 100 first-year students purposively sampled from Use of English classes at UB. Using Piaget’s (1936) Theory of Cognitive Development, data for the study was collected and analysed using descriptive statistics. The findings revealed that pre-university students upon enrolment harbour stereotyped and somewhat erroneous forms and structures of grammar that eventually become difficult to get out of their minds, and these are often introduced by their teachers or sometimes the environment they come from. Based on the findings, the study recommends that teachers of English at every stage should endeavour to engage students with real-life language use as this has the potentials to improve the communicative abilities.

Keywords: academic writing, English as second language, grammatical awareness, lexical, proficiency, vocabulary

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Public Interest Statement

Writing is a vital skill especially for learners in higher institutions of learning. The success of this skill usually depends on learners’ mastery of grammatical structures. However, foundational issues in grammar instructions have often led to fossilised structures that continue to impair learners’ ability to write effectively upon enrolment in higher institutions of learning. As reported in this study pre-university students, upon enrolment harbour stereotyped and somewhat erroneous forms and structures of grammar that eventually become difficult to get out of their minds, and these are often introduced by their teachers or sometimes the environment they come from.



Introduction

One important skill for any University student is the ability to effectively engage in academic writing. Generally, writing requires a lot of practice because of the complexity of its phonological and morphological forms. This is explained by the fact that the English language has no one-to-one relation between what is said (sound) and its orthography. That is, the spelling of an English word reflects something else to what is heard. There is no gainsay therefore that English language learners (henceforth ELLs) find it difficult to acquire writing skills than the other three skills, i.e., listening, speaking and reading. While these complexities may vary considerably depending on the language in point, the English language exemplifies how difficult it is for second language usage to produce correct sentences and in formal and lengthy discourse. For them to communicate their message quite effortlessly usually requires a much longer duration for them to learn and master the language. Because of this, the daunting task for teachers has always been to implement new teaching techniques and pedagogic practices to enhance the writing skills of the ELLs. Given the challenges of teaching English as a second language, in especially multilingual contexts, educators aim at language teaching that eclectically comprise linguistic, communicative and interactional competences in the classroom. The trend in English language teaching (ELT) in Cameroon, today, exemplifies the situation. In response to the language situation in Cameroon, ELT strictly adheres to this. This is especially as approximately 283 language are used, including English language (Eberhard et al., 2019 as cited in Chiatoh & Nkwain, 2020) are spoken in Cameroon. In the language classroom, therefore, each of these competences has its own merits. For example, linguistic competence enables students to produce accurate spoken and written language (Hedge, 2000), and improve their receptive skills (Akbari, 2014; Liao, 2007). Receptive skills are the ability to listen and understand a language. Reading and listening are receptive skills. This research sampled first-year university students at the University of Buea (UB) in a bid to account for their grammatical awareness upon admission at the University of Buea. The study hypothesized that students' poor academic writing throughout their tertiary education could be traced to their secondary school training. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that apart from the Use of English course at the University of Buea, student (With the exception of students of Linguistics) hardly have any exposure to any rigorous grammar instruction.

Research has shown that linguistic competence enables students to produce accurate discourse (Akbari, 2014; Hedge, 2000; Liao, 2007). However, attaining this competence is where the challenge lies. Students increasingly struggle through the difficulties they face in school either brought about by the teaching materials or the teachers themselves (Achiri-Taboh & Lando, 2017, p. 21). According to Nation (2001), whether we design a language course or our own course of study, it is necessary to set learning goals that allow particularly the learners to use language the way we want. Nation (2001) explains that when the vocabulary goals of a long-term course are planned, there is need to watch out for three types of information: the number of words in the language, the number of words known by native speakers, and the number of words needed to speak the language. This is because vocabulary knowledge is the key factor to ensure that written production is understandable and meaningful. If there is no correct grammar nor appropriate vocabulary, writing results are hardly understood (see Nation, 2001). Other research works have shown that even the vocabulary acquired through direct teaching can improve the knowledge

of the words, increase words memory and ability to use the words, especially in spoken written English (Chen & Hirsh, 2012; Lee, 2003). These studies also confirm the view that the acquisition of receptive words affects words acquisition productively.

To Durairajan (2019) the assessment of high school students' language proficiency within the framework of continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE), tests and assessments are used as pedagogic tools, integral to teaching especially as English is rarely the language of thinking, organization and planning for the majority of the population. The research posits that students' receptive capability (read and understand English) are much higher than their productive capability (speak and write English). The language(s) capability of students in grassroots multilingual contexts must be tested and assessed together (p. 56). Based on this study, it should be important to get students to read complex texts in their more enabled language and respond orally in English, or read complex texts in English but write an essay in their more enabled language. With such practice, situations that require the constructive use of language would pose a problem to them. Namaziandostm et al. (2019) in their study compare analytic and holistic techniques for scoring in evaluating oral proficiency skills. The participants of this study were 70 second-grade university EFL students. The participants in this research were both male ($n=40$) and female ($n=30$) with the age range from 24 to 25. The findings confirmed that employing these two scoring techniques in the procedure of evaluation may be considered proper as they seem to complement each other; one augments the other and this leads to a more inclusive evaluation. The study concludes that integrating these two holistic and analytic scoring is a better option as it occurs in the evaluation of speaking skills, even though the trends of scoring have their benefits and deficiencies.

Ahmad and Juin (2014) investigated the role of the literature component as a compulsory test component of the ESL syllabus for secondary schools as one of the most significant developments in ESL learning in recent years. The study outlines that one of the aims of incorporating literature in an ESL classroom is to enhance students' proficiency and enjoyment of the English language through literature, even though one of the biggest challenges in the ESL classroom also is making learning meaningful, and project-based learning is but one of many ways to achieve this goal. The study therefore explored the acquisition of skills and language as part of holistic learning through the staging of a play. The findings revealed that the curriculum requirements of reading, writing, listening and speaking are no longer abstract personal choices but rather skills that the students acquire in the pursuit of completing the project.

When the EFL or ESL learners want to learn English, they have to get mastery over the four language skills, viz., listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among them, listening and reading are receptive skills whereas speaking and writing are productive skills. The EFL/ESL learners have to concentrate more on these four language skills as the main aspect of learning the English language mainly depends on learning these skills. As the primary goal of learning these skills is to develop the learning abilities of the learners to produce good oral as well as written communication, the teachers have to pay more attention towards the learners in improving these skills among the EFL/ESL learners.

According to Rao (2017) each language skill has its own importance in learning English. The main concern of EFL/ESL learners is to acquire good listening as well as speaking skills in English. In order to promote the learners' listening and skills, the teachers have to concentrate more on

the latest trends of aural-oral skills of English. Listening is an activity that involves the listeners to pay attention to the speaker's words and get the meaning of it according to the context. So, listening embroils understanding of a speaker's pronunciation and accent, vocabulary, grammar and a grasp the meaning of what the speaker expresses.

Writing developed from pictograms (picture-writing) to ideograms (idea-writing) to logograms (word-writing). The Sumerians' followed purely word-based writing system. Between 1700 and 1500 B.C., pictographs were replaced by the alphabet in the Sinaitic word. Then the Chinese philosopher, Tien-Lcheu in 2697 B.C. invented the ink and by 1200 B.C. In the same year, i.e., in 1200 B.C., the paper was also invented in China. Then onwards, writing has become more popular. According to Richards and Renandya (2002), "Writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners, since they need to generate ideas, organize them and translate these ideas into readable text which can be very difficult for students". Even though most of the written communication takes place electronically, the learners have to write their language exams by hand only. In addition, spelling also plays a dominant role in both literacy and writing. The main reason that the EFL/ESL learners have the difficulty in spelling is that the relation between the spelling of the word and its pronunciation. There is no connexion between the sound and spelling. In English, a single sound has got various spellings, whereas the same spelling has various sounds. That is the greatness of the English language and the EFL/ESL learners find it very difficult to get mastery over the spelling and pronunciation.

Methodology

This study purposively sampled 100 undergraduate students at UB. The sample comprised students from hard sciences, social sciences and the humanities, which was part of a population of 1000 first-year students, who had registered online and begun classes by the first week the 2018/2019 academic year. On the first day of their class, a 30-minute placement test was administered to the students, using a paper-based format. The test sought to assess their abilities in recognizing and producing appropriate grammatical forms and vocabulary. The test was scored and the frequency and type of grammatical inconsistencies were presented in tables. The test-takers were tasked to show (a) their knowledge of greeting forms, making introduction in social interactions and pronunciation, and (b) issues of subject verb agreement and mastery of English vocabulary.

Table 1. Sampling characteristics: Faculty, age, gender and languages

Programme	No.	Average age	Male	Female	Languages
Arts	10	19	4	6	3
Education	20	19.6	15	5	2
Sciences	20	18	10	10	2
Social sciences	25	20.4	12	13	3
Laws and political sciences	25	23	14	11	2
Total	100	20	55	45	2.4

To measure the English language proficiency of the students, a sample Use of English language exam was administered to them. The examination paper measured their general understanding and competence in the following aspects: socializing, speaking, grammar and vocabulary. The

English language proficiency of the sample is reported in percentages to show correct scores at four levels: (1) the socializing and speaking scores; (2) the grammar scores; (3) the vocabulary scores and (4) the combined scores.

Results

Table 2. Socializing and speaking scores

Programme	No.	Average age	Male	Female	Score on 10
Arts	10	19	4	6	6(7)
Education	20	19.6	15	5	2(18)
Science	20	18	10	10	2(16)
Social sciences	25	20.4	12	13	6(10)
Laws and political sciences	25	23	14	11	3(21)
Total	100	20	55	45	19

Having noticed that students who enrol at UB for a first degree usually find it difficult to express themselves in offices and among their mates, we sought to investigate the abilities in social interaction and speaking. As shown in Table 2, the highest score is (6/10) for the section on socializing and speaking from 7 students in the Faculty of Arts and 10 students from the Social and Management Sciences. This was followed by 3/10 out of 21 students from the Faculty of Laws and Political Sciences. Students from the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Science scored 2/10. 40 per cent of the respondents (18 from Education and 16 from Science respectively) scored 2 or less than 2. The findings reflect the language commonly heard on campus by first year students.

Table 3. The grammar and vocabulary scores

Programme	No.	Average age	Male	Female	Score on 10
Arts	10	19	4	6	8(7)
Education	20	19.6	15	5	2(15)
Sciences	20	18	10	10	2(14)
Social sciences	25	20.4	12	13	7(10)
Laws and political sciences	25	23	14	11	3(3)
Total	100	20	55	45	22

Data for Table 3 was aimed at testing their grammar and vocabulary awareness. Here, out of the 100 respondents and out of this number, 7 respondents from the Faculty of Arts scored 8. This was followed by 10 respondents from the Social and Management Sciences who scored 7. 3 respondents from Laws and Political Sciences scored 3 and students from the Faculties of Education and Sciences (15 and 14 respectively) scored 2 or less than 2. Because Cameroon the Cameroonian classroom has diverse speakers of other languages, the findings of Durairajan (2019) are relevant to our study because they create the awareness of necessary input in terms of vocabulary, no matter the source that learners require to be proficient in a second or foreign language classroom. As shown in the Table, a majority of the respondents were weak in grammar and vocabulary.

Table 4. The combine score for socializing and speaking and grammar and vocabulary

Programme	No.	Average age	Male	Female	Score on 20
Arts	10	19	4	6	14
Education	20	19.6	15	5	4
Sciences	20	18	10	10	4
Social sciences	25	20.4	12	13	13
Laws and political sciences	25	23	14	11	6
Total	100	20	55	45	35

Table 4 presents the total scores by the respondents in socializing and speaking, grammar and vocabulary. Here, respondents from the Arts scored 14 followed by 13 for respondents from Social and Management Sciences. Respondents from the Faculties of Laws and political Sciences, Science and Education did not score above 10. This is represented by 6, 4 and 4 respectively.

Discussion

The data for Table 2 investigates students' abilities in social interaction and speaking. The highest score is (6/10) for socializing and speaking from 7 students in the Faculty of Arts and 10 students from the Social and Management Sciences. The rest of them performed considerably poorly as indicated by 3/10 out of 21 students from the Faculty of Laws and Political Sciences, which is followed by students from the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Science who scored 2/10. In all, 40 per cent of the respondents (18 from Education and 16 from the Faculty of Science respectively) scored 2 or less than 2. The findings reflect the language commonly heard on campus. Good speaking skill paves way for effective adaptation of students in schools and for excellence in oral examinations. Good writing skill alongside is essential for students to perform well in all written examination (Akabogu & Nkwuda, 2017). Therefore, the acquisition of productive language skill is required for all the students especially those in senior secondary schools since their examinations are basically in form of written exercises. Given the poor writing skill, they are likely to perform poorly or failure in all written examinations. This finding is consistent with Achiri-Taboh and Lando (2017) who confirmed that the teacher is one of the major problems responsible for the continuous falling standards of English in Cameroon (p. 25). Namaziandostm et al. (2019) have contended that the teachers should also teach the students how to write in English using certain vocabulary. The teachers have to demonstrate the learners what type of vocabulary they have to choose when they start writing. As there are different terms used for different purposes, the learners are taught how to use the appropriate vocabulary that suits the situation. Once the learners know which vocabulary is suitable for a certain context, they will use them accurately in their writing.

The study also aimed to test students' grammar and vocabulary awareness. Here, 7 respondents from the Faculty of Arts scored 8/10. This was followed by 10 respondents from the Social and Management Sciences who scored 7/10. 3 respondents from Laws and Political Sciences scored 3 and students from the Faculties of Education and Sciences (15 and 14 respectively) scored 2 or less than 2. This highlights how pertinent it is for teachers to focus aspects of their lessons to developing students' vocabulary. Because Cameroon the Cameroonian classroom has diverse speakers of other languages, the findings of Durairajan (2019) are relevant to our study because

they create the awareness of necessary input in terms of vocabulary, no matter the source that learners require to be proficient in a second or foreign language classroom. As shown in the Table, a majority of the respondents were weak in grammar and vocabulary. Another important aspect of developing the EFL/ESL learners' writing skills is by adopting collaborative work or cooperative work in the classrooms. The main concept of collaborative or cooperative work is to allow the learners to perform the given task in groups where they share their ideas among the members of their groups. With this type of learning environment, the EFL/ESL learners can perform the given writing task effectively by their active participation. There is no doubt that some learners can perform better when the work is given for the individuals. But when the same work is done in collaborative or cooperative classrooms, the writing process takes place in groups and it also welcomes a thorough and constructive feedback. In this regard, it is wise to quote the sayings of Harmer (2007), "To write in groups, whether as part of a long or short process, is very motivating for students to develop this skill". Therefore, the English teachers should always encourage the learners to maintain good relations with the group members in order to perform the given tasks well.

The overall score revealed that respondents from the Arts scored 14 followed by 13 for respondents from Social and Management Sciences. Respondents from the Faculties of Laws and political Sciences, Science and Education did not score above 10. This is represented by 6, 4 and 4 respectively as seen in Table 4. Based on this score, there is need to improve on students' writing abilities. Research has also shown that creative writing is another approach to implement in EFL/ESL classrooms as a way to improve students' vocabulary. Being the concept of imagination as the main base in writing stories, poetry and plays, the EFL/ESL learners can produce high quality writing with their own imagination. When the writing is done with more imagination, the readers also find interest in them to read such type of writings. In this regard, Ur (1996) has explained "Most people feel pride in their work and want it to be read". It is true that readers pay more attention on imaginative and creative writings than some other written products. Moreover, creative writing is a journey towards self-discovery which promotes effective and active learning. EFL/ESL learners concentrate on the topics related to imaginative writing as the learners are very much. With this assertion in mind, there is no gainsay that if students are exposed to relevant vocabulary in the other rungs of the academic ladder before they enrolled on any programme at the university, their writing abilities will significantly be improved. This is especially as their overall performances suggests that the input received in secondary school was not enough or relevant to enable them display competence (1) the socializing and speaking, grammar and vocabulary which we think constitute the score of language proficiency.

Implications of the Findings

The findings in this study have implications for policy and practice as far as English language teaching at the University and preuniversity levels is concerned. First, the findings of this study imply the need to revamp grammar and vocabulary instruction at preuniversity levels especially as this has the potential to boost learners academic writing skills while at the University. Secondly, the results highlight the importance of grammar and vocabulary as far as overall academic achievement is concerned. This is because success for university students generally depends on

their ability to produce academic texts, and the role of grammatical awareness in this cannot be overemphasized. It is also vital for English language teachers at the level of the university to conduct a needs assessment of freshmen's grammatical awareness as a prelude to their training in the Use of English course. This way, the content of the Use of English course will be reshaped to reflect deficiencies identified at entry points. Finally, this study challenges learners of English at the level of the university to review their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary as tools of trade as far as academic writing is concerned.

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Conflicts of Interest

We had no Conflict of interest before, during or after engaging in this research enterprise.

Disclaimer Statement

This work is not sponsored by any organisation, neither are the results generated intended for use to either sponsor or discredit any organisation or individual. The findings are intended for research purposes only.

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