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### An Analysis of Descriptive Essay Writing Among Nigerian Undergraduates: An Analysis of Variance in English Writing Skills

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#### ABSTRACT

**Background:** English writing among Nigerian students prove to be difficult at various academic levels; including pre-university and university levels. Precisely, poor command in English writing among Nigerian students hinders proper academic achievement of most undergraduates. **Objective:** The objective of the present article is to ascertain the level of variation in English writing among Nigerian undergraduate students' in terms of gender and in terms of major ethnic groups. **Results:** The findings indicated that the mean scores for the overall scores of the students' descriptive essay are at an average score. **Conclusion:** This study affirms that there is crucial need for intervention concerning Nigerian undergraduates' English writing. As such, the results of the findings are hopeful to contribute and provide insights to Nigerian education administrative personals, the national education boards, as well as the international education planners concerning ways of enhancing students' English writing.

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#### INTRODUCTION

The present study detect that attainment of fluent English writing among non-English natives' remains an integral factor in today's needs as a globalised world. Jones, Turner, and Street (1999) stresses that the capability to write proficiently is not a naturally acquired talent; it is more often a learned or culturally transmitted procedure through practices which mostly originate from academic or other forms of literacy settings. In acquiring writing proficiency, learners find it difficult to relate concepts of cognitive requirement needed to be achieved through practice and learning through experience (Grabe and Kaplan, 2014).

In essence, the principal concern of the present article is to address the linguistic variation across three major ethnic groups in Nigeria. Nigeria as a country has "over 500 ethnic groups" (Deuber, 2006, p. 262) among which Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba ethnic groups were the major ethnic groups in the country approved by the Federal Government Decree of 1979. Moreover, English has been in existence in the country since before independence in 1960 as the official language, as the language of education and as the language of administration (Balogun, 2013). As

such, the paper investigates on the variation of English writing proficiency that manifest in the descriptive essays written by the undergraduate students originating from the three major ethnic groups in Nigeria.

##### Problem Statement:

English language has penetrated languages across the world (Crystal, 2003) and has made way into the languages as well as the cultures of those societies. In most cases, the prominence of English language originated from colonisation, and keep on existing as a second language (ESL) to some, and to others as a foreign language (EFL). English writing was found to be the most difficult and challenging language skills to be mastered by both ESL and EFL learners (Javadi-Safa, Vahdany, and Sabet, 2013; Saputra, 2014). To mark the difficulty of writing, even English natives face a strong challenge (Coulmas, 2003). The only difference is that an English native can possibly correct certain committed mistakes if drawn into attention (Sawalmeh, 2013). But, a non-English native could even commit more mistakes if not corrected due to ignorance (Huwari, 2014; Zheng and Park, 2013).

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Indeed, studies have proven that in Oman (Abdul-Rahman, 2013), in China and Korea (Zheng and Park, 2013), in Indonesia (Saputra, 2014), in Tanzania (Msanjila, 2005), in Iran (Javadi-Safa, *et al.* 2013), in Algeria (Azzouz, 2009), in Palestine (Hammad, 2013) and in many other nations around the world, students lack good command in English writing resulting low level of academic performance.

In Nigerian context, the same scenario of poor English writing command exists among students. English has been in Nigeria since before amalgamation of the country in 1914 by the British. And ever since, English has existed as the official language of education, and as language of administration. The country has three major ethnic groups; Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo. Their languages were recognised "as tools for the production side by side with English" (Balogun, 2013, p. 70) by the Nigerian Federal decree of 1979. Yet, the majority of Nigerians are still deficient in English writing. Similarly, the poor command in English writing makes Nigerian undergraduates to secure low academic grade. Also, this led to the undergraduates to be found wanting in their administrative task after they graduate.

However, this study found that limited studies were conducted to reveal the rationale or the backbone of poor English writing command among Nigerian undergraduate students (Akabogu and Mbah, 2013; Sani and Bature, 2014). Arguably, the scarcity of information regarding students' English writing proficiency, spine this study to investigate on the variation of English writing among Nigerian undergraduates. Also, the study investigates on the students' English writing based on their ethnic groups' variation and based on their variation in gender is in order to fill this gap.

#### **Research Objectives:**

**The following are the research objectives of the present article:**

1. To ascertain the English writing variation found in the overall mean scores within the students' descriptive essay according to gender.
2. To ascertain the English writing variation found in the overall mean scores within the students' descriptive essay according to ethnic groups.

#### **Research Questions:**

**Based on the objectives developed, the questions of the study were as follows:**

1. What is the English writing variation found in the overall mean scores within the students' descriptive essay according to gender?
2. What is the English writing variation found in the overall mean scores within the descriptive essay according to ethnic groups?

#### **Literature Review:**

Due to the complex demand of writing in English and the global integration of English language, numerous studies were conducted on writing skills for ESL and EFL context. More specifically, analysis of variation in writing has a special focal point in relating language use with society. Thus, its major concerns is to address linguistic variation across social groups, across ethnic groups, across gender and across the range of communicative situations in which women and men describe or share their ideas and or opinions within discursive contexts differently (Biber and Ferdinand, 1994).

Fundamentally, analysis of variance in English writing simply means the study of language in use (Finnegan, 1994, p. v). Various studies have shown that student's with whom English stand as an ESL or an EFL face difficulties in learning English writing which could be associated with social and cognitive factors relating to language learning (Chase, 2011; Veloo, Krishnasamy, and Harun; 2015). These two factors make English writing more complex, more conscious, which requires more effort and much more practice in order to create, organise, generalise, and analyse ideas particularly in academic context. Most recently, Odey *et al.* (2014) highlighted on the effect of SMS texting on the writing skills of university students in Nigeria. They found that students consciously or unconsciously transfer the SMS writing pattern into their essays. Likewise, Veloo, *et al.* (2015) argues that gender issues have become more prominent while relating their study to academic performance among undergraduate students in Malaysia. They were investigating on gender differences in English writing among undergraduate students of Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). The findings of the study indicated that female undergraduate students secured higher mean in English writing proficiency compared to the males. In addition, Chase (2011) analysis of variance among college student's English writing further affirms that students' writing based on gender varied. She employed 112 samples of argumentative essays for analysis among students with African, Asian, Hispanic, Caucasian, and American ethnicities as sample population and the findings show that female students write longer essays than their male counterpart from both ethnic groups.

Moreover, Javadi-Safa, *et al.*, (2013) investigate on the relationship between English writing skill and sub-skills of Persian native language. In trying to identify the variation of English writing skill among Persians, the researchers chooses undergraduates studying English from two universities; Guilan University and Payame Noor University in Iran. In total, the researchers employed 87 university students; 33 males and 54 females majoring English from the two universities as participants for analysis. The findings of the researchers found influence of

native in the students' essays. Because the mean scores for the Persian writing skills are greater in comparison to their parallel English writing. Also, a study by Hammad (2013) indicated that Palestinian EFL university learners writing skills requirement needs crucial attention. He pointed that in order to facilitate English language needs; the Palestinian Ministry of Education mandated each student must have to secure a total of 132 credits as major requirements for graduation.

In an earlier research conducted among secondary school students in Malaysia, Darus and Subramaniam (2009) examine types of language errors found in descriptive essays written by 72 participants. The participants consist of 37 male and 35 female with a non-English background and hardly communicate in English outside the school. The findings of the study showed the participants commit common language errors; including singular/plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement, and word order. Therefore, it clear that various researchers have focused on investigating linguistic attribute or linguistic competence of English writing proficiency from various perspectives and also from different nationalities. Whereas, this study contributes in understanding the variation of English writing among Nigerian undergraduates that originates from the three major Nigerian ethnic groups and based on their variation in gender.

#### **Methodology:**

This study is a purely quantitative in nature. The sample of the study consists of 30 descriptive essays written by undergraduates studying in a public university in Nigeria. The undergraduates originate from the three major Nigerian ethnic groups; i.e., Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba. Precisely, the sample of the study has 15 males and 15 females as gender representatives, with 10 students representing each ethnic group. They were grouped in one class and were give the duration of 1 hr, 30 minutes to write the essay. Moreover, the study uses convenience sampling technique (Creswell, 2014; Gay, Mills, and Airasian, 2006; Sekaran and Bougie, 2013) on the fact that students participated voluntarily. They were asked to describe their university in at least 300 to 350 words. Therefore, for the instrument employed is descriptive essay question (DEQ).

For marking the essays, a rubric was adapted from Avants (2007), Glencoe (2001), Rogers (2011), and Stevens and Levi (2005). The total score for grading the essay was over (40) marks. 4 marks were awarded to each matrix or section of the rubric. The matrix from the adapted rubric entails language use features including, introduction, cohesion and coherence, descriptive words-use, figurative language, grammatical function, lexis-vocabulary, mechanics structure, sentence structure, parts-of-speech, and then conclusion. Primarily, the rubric put

by the present study was designed to have an analytical rating in scoring. The overall scores are presented as:

- High: Mean scores of 31 to 40
- Average: Mean scores of 21 to 30
- Low: Mean scores 11 to 20
- Very low: Mean scores 1 to 10

Notably, in order to sustain the reliability of the research instrument, as well as the clarity of the research questions. The essay questions and the adapted rubric were sent to two qualified English language lecturers for validation. The two English language lectures selected were PhD holders and have more than ten years experience of English language teaching in the university. Subsequently, the essays written by the students were marked by those two English lecturers according to the adapted rubric. After that, using the Pearson's correlation in SPSS the researchers found a high degree of reliability in the scale of the overall scores given by the two markers. Thus, the correlation of the markers was significant at the level of 0.01,  $r=.901$  which was considered highly reliable and can be used for the study positively (Creswell, 2014; Gay, *et al.*, 2006; Sekaran and Bougie, 2013).

#### **Findings and Discussions:**

For writing is a complex cognitive act which requires a high rate of memory use in search of vocabulary and other features of language use, this study applies the Anderson's (1985) language production model relating to writing stages. The model has three stages; including construction, transformation, and execution. That is, the present study allows the participants to brainstorm and plan their ideas to describe in the essay using mind-map or outline. This is the idea behind allocating 1hr 30 minutes for the essay writing. This was done in order to facilitate the participants to set their goals in describing the information asked and to actively derive connotation they wish to express in writing. Thus, essay writing in is cognitively complex; it has everything to do with idea organisation which proves its difficulty. But more importantly, it serves as a medium of developing student's academic writing (Atkinson and Ramanathan, 1995).

Therefore, the present article analyses the features of language use found in the students descriptive essay in order to identify the variation in English writing as designed in the adapted rubric. For this purpose, the present article will answer the following questions:

**1.** What is the English writing variation found in the overall mean scores within the students' descriptive essays according to gender?

The results from table 1<sup>a</sup> of the overall mean score shows that there is variation of English writing in the students descriptive essay according to gender (Mean difference= 0.86). The present study shows that female students achieve (Mean=24.73, SD=3.75)

whereas the male students were able to secure (Mean=23.87, SD=3.09). This clearly indicates that the female participants' achieve higher mean score, and the male participants' secure a lower mean. Therefore, the findings of the study are in line with the result of Veloo *et al.*, (2015) that when it comes to writing proficiency, female undergraduate students secured higher mean compared to the males. This was further supported by Chase (2011) that female

students achieve higher scores because they write more comprehensive long essays than their male counterpart. Also, the finding of the present study goes along with the affirmation of Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) which have demonstrated that when all other social factors remain constant, language use features pertaining to gender remains varied either in writing or in speaking structure.

**Table 1<sup>a</sup>:** Comparing the overall mean scores of English writing skills within the students' descriptive essay according to gender.

Gender	N	Mean	SD	Mean Difference
Female	15	24.73	3.75	0.86
Male	15	23.87	3.09	

**Table 1<sup>b</sup>:** Language use feature indicating where female participants' scores an improved average mean over the male counterpart.

Gender		INTRO	CC	FL	GF	LV	MS	PS	DW	SS	CONC	OVERALL
Male	Mean	2.33	2.60	2.13	2.67	2.67	2.40	2.53	1.93	2.13	2.47	23.87
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	SD	.48	.83	.83	.72	.62	.73	.52	.70	.74	.52	3.09
Female	Mean	2.40	2.80	2.00	2.47	2.80	2.33	2.60	2.20	2.53	2.60	24.73
	N	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
	S D	.51	.56	.75	.52	.68	.81	.51	.68	.52	.63	3.75

**KEY:** INTRO: Introduction; CC: Cohesion and coherence; DW: Descriptive words-use; FL: Figurative language; GF: Grammatical function; LV: lexis-vocabulary; MS: Mechanics structure; SS: Sentence structure; PS: Parts-of-speech; CONC: Conclusion

Table 1<sup>b</sup> indicates the means in accordance with feature of language use found in the rubric where the female participants varied against the male participants in 7 out of 10 features. The variation in writing was in introduction (Mean= 2.40, SD= .51), cohesion and coherence (Mean= 2.80, SD= .56), lexis-vocabulary (Mean= 2.80, SD= .68), parts-of-speech (Mean= 2.60, SD= .51), descriptive word-use (Mean= 2.20, SD= .68), sentence structure (Mean= 2.53, SD= .52), and then conclusion (Mean= 2.60, SD= .63).

Also, findings in table 1<sup>b</sup> indicate that the male students writing varied from the female students as they score higher means in the area of figurative language (Mean= 2.13, SD= .83), grammatical function (Mean= 2.67, SD= .72), and mechanic structures (Mean= 2.40, SD= .73).

**2.** What is the English writing variation found in the overall mean scores in the descriptive essay according to the three major ethnic groups?

**Table 2<sup>a</sup>:** Comparing overall mean scores of variation in English within of the students' descriptive essay according to the three major ethnic groups.

Major Ethnic Groups	N	Mean	SD
Yoruba	10	25.80	2.78
Igbo	10	25.10	4.20
Hausa	10	22.00	1.69

**Table 2<sup>b</sup>:** Language use feature indicating where Yoruba ethnic group participants' scores an improved high and average mean over Igbo and Hausa.

Major Ethnic Groups		INTRO	CC	FL	GF	LV	MS	PS	DW	SS	CONC	OVERALL
Hausa	Mean	2.00	2.30	1.80	2.30	2.30	2.20	2.40	2.00	2.30	2.40	22.00
	N	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
	SD	.00	.67	.63	.48	.48	.63	.52	.67	.67	.69	1.69
Igbo	Mean	2.70	2.70	2.20	2.40	2.90	2.40	2.60	2.10	2.40	2.70	25.10
	N	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
	SD	.48	.67	.79	.52	.57	.84	.52	.87	.69	.48	4.20
Yoruba	Mean	2.40	3.10	2.20	3.00	3.00	2.50	2.70	2.10	2.30	2.50	25.80
	N	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
	SD	.52	.57	.92	.67	.67	.85	.48	.57	.67	.53	2.78

**KEY:** INTRO: Introduction; CC: Cohesion and coherence; DW: Descriptive words-use; FL: Figurative language; GF: Grammatical function; LV: lexis-vocabulary; MS: Mechanics structure; SS: Sentence structure; PS: Parts-of-speech; CONC: Conclusion

The results from table 2<sup>a</sup> show that there is variation in English writing from the overall mean score based on the three major ethnic groups. The findings of the present study shows that overall mean score was secured by the Yorubá group (Mean= 25.80, SD= 2.78), followed by the Igbo group that achieve (Mean= 25.10, SD= 4.20) whereas the lowest mean score was attain by the Hausa group (Mean= 22.00, SD= 1.69). Thus, the findings are in line with the affirmation of Ferguson (1994) that "one of the kinds of variation noticed in early human history in sociolinguistics' is the way people differs

in their writing which relatively depend on where they come from and where they belong to in their society" (p. 16). In addition, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) further propose that variation in writing occurs based on level of social practice. Moreover, these findings are also in line with the assertion of Coulmas (2003) that all writing system includes linguistic analysis, and all writing schemes are cognitive in nature.

Table 2b shows language use variation from the adapted rubric of this study, where Yorubá ethnic group scores high mean in the aspects of cohesion

and coherence (Mean= 3.10, SD= .57), grammatical function (Mean= 3.00, SD= .67), lexis-vocabulary (Mean= 3.00, SD= .67), mechanics structure (Mean= 2.50, SD= .85), and then parts-of-speech (Mean= 2.70, SD= .48).

Consequently, it was clear that Yorùbá ethnic perform better than both Igbo group that came second and Hausa group that came third. This goes with relation to the findings of Akinwale (2013) that Yoruba have developed their learning system through which an individual is shaped and directed towards achieving good grade beyond examination status but to the end product; i.e. to administrative achievement. He affirms that the Yorùbá ethnic adult members carefully guide learning development of infants and young children long before the coming of the Europeans in the country. Certainly, Akinwale (2013) affirms that Yorùbá ethnicity are more academically incline when compared to other ethnic groups, particularly the two other major ethnic groups in Nigeria; i.e., Igbo and Hausa.

And then, the Igbo group varied from the Yoruba and Hausa groups by securing high scores in the aspect of introduction (Mean= 2.70, SD= .48), sentence structure (Mean= 2.40, SD= .69), and then conclusion (Mean= 2.70, SD= .48). This can be supported with findings of Thecla-Obiora (2014) whom confirms that Igbo language is a tonal language to its mother tongue speakers which is characterised with ambiguous words. The findings show that ambiguity mostly influences second language learning. As such, the researcher affirms that Igbo natives' faces ambiguity in relation to English writing particularly in lexis-vocabulary, sentence structure, and grammatical function which arise from homonyms, homophones, homographs, anaphoric pronouns, dialectal among other things.

However, the Yorùbá and Igbo ethnic group scored equal average mean score in language use features including figurative language (Mean= 2.20) and descriptive word-use (Mean= 2.10). This finding can be related to that of Rahimi, Riazi, and Saif (2008) that argued that students are influence by factors that relates to their mode of language acquisition.

Furthermore, the Hausa ethnic group achieved very low mean scores compared to both Yoruba and Igbo ethnic counterparts. They scored a low mean in introduction (Mean= 2.00, SD= .00), cohesion and coherence (Mean= 2.30, SD= .67), Figurative language (Mean= 1.80, SD= .63), grammatical function (Mean= 2.30, SD= .48), Lexis-vocabulary (Mean= 2.30, SD= .48), mechanical structure (Mean= 2.20, SD= .63), parts-of-speech (Mean= 2.40, SD= .52), descriptive word-use (Mean= 2.00, SD= .67), and conclusion (Mean= 2.40, SD= .69). This low achievement can be supported by the call made by Akabogu and Mbah (2013) that an effective English language programme should be integrated among students originating from the three major

ethnic groups. They further argued approaches to English writing proficiency should integrated along with theory, practice and the experiences of other countries in order to ascertain the needs of the Nigerian people in line with the current global trends in language acquisition. To be precise, the results of the findings of this study indicate that Hausa students need more exposure, and require more effort in enhancing their English writing proficiency when compared to the other two major ethnic groups.

### **Conclusion:**

The findings from the present study indicate that there is variation among students English writing according gender and ethnic groups. In addition, the findings of this study indicated that female students scored higher mean than the male counterpart. The mean scores of the female students were higher than the male students in all the sub areas for writing except for figurative language, grammatical function and mechanics structure.

Moreover, in comparing the variation for English writing among the students' based on their ethnic groups. The results indicated that Yorùbá participants achieved a higher mean score followed by Igbo and Hausa. The results from the findings show that Nigerian undergraduate students secure only average score and there is crucial need for intervention.

It is hoped that the findings of the study provide education administrative personals such as Nigerian Education Research Development Council (NERDC), the international education planners such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), the National University Commission (NUC), and the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Education (FME) concerning ways of enhancing students' English writing.

This study has some limitations; first it could only employ descriptive analysis quantitatively. The study could only present the statistics of the students writing variation, more studies should be conducted using qualitative and quantitative paradigms to investigate the variation of English writing among students in Nigeria. In addition, this study could only make use of 30 students as sample representatives; as such, it is essential to further research employing a larger sample with different status (pre-university, undergraduates, postgraduates etc.) to determine the level of English writing variation using descriptive essay among Nigerian students. Moreover, the present study could only look at the English writing variation based on the three major Nigerian ethnic groups. As such, more studies should be conducted relating to other ethnic groups existing in Nigeria.

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