



Developing Writing Skills through Discourse Competence in Learners of English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Competence in a target language is, no doubt, the focus of any meaningful language study. The ability of the learners of a language to effectively and appropriately put together pieces of thoughts, ideas and opinions in a clear manner and unified whole is an indicative of literacy in education. The development of this competence in the learners of English as a second language becomes imperative. This paper examines developing writing skills through discourse competence in students of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria. One hundred students across the four colleges were purposively selected for the study. A pretest was conducted to ascertain the level of the students competence in writing skills. A total number of sixty students whose performance were very poor in the pretest were selected as experimental group for the study. Having exposed the students to different cohesive devices that enhance good writing skills in academic activities, a post-test was conducted to also ascertain the level of their improvement and achievement after four months academic activities. The outcome shows significant improvement in the performance of the experimental group. The empirical study, therefore, reveals that discourse competence enhances the mastery of good writing skills which the second learners of English needed in the target language to perform effectively and efficiently in any area of their study. It also emphasizes the significance of discourse competence in enhancing the students the knowledge to manipulate language in order to meet written communication goals as the needs for it arise.

Keywords

Writing skills, Cohesive devices, Discourse competence

INTRODUCTION

Writing skill is an essential form of language communication that enables students to effectively convey their thoughts, ideas, and opinions in written form. It is an aspect of language skills that helps learner to appropriately and succinctly put together pieces of connected speech or utterances that are larger than the conventional sentence to form a coherent unified whole. This skill is very important in academic settings irrespective of the course of study where students must often express simple and complex ideas through written assignments, note jottings and essay writing. Having the ability of good writing skills helps learners to think critically and express themselves in a structured manner. This can make a huge difference in the success of a student's academic career. The writing skill being described as the productive aspect of other language skills is referred to as the heart of education. It is an essential tool for composing essays, writing assignments, and research papers that demonstrate a student's understanding of a subject in any field of study. A well writing paper therefore, not only garners higher grades but also reflects a student's depth of knowledge and critical thinking abilities. Thus, writing skills boost student's confidence as well as increase their communication skills. To score good marks in any type of examination as students, the ability to put together meaningful sentences becomes imperative. For every student, therefore, writing skills play an important role in their academic career as it enhances the overall creative skills and prepare them for future challenges such as entrance examinations and career choices. Learning all the grammar rules for effective communication is greatly insufficient for language use but ability to put loose sentences together to make meaningful communication is equally very germane. Writing skills start from jotting down of essential points in classroom during lectures which may be developed to a full note later. Lately, it has been observed that students' ability to communicate their ideas, thoughts and opinion in a clear manner is reducing by the day. It is disheartening to

note that most students failed examinations not because they lacked the ideas but of inability to express their thoughts and ideas clearly. The need to address this problem and impart in students the writing skills competence in any field of study becomes very important. This research, therefore, examines the use of discourse competence to enhance good writing skills in selected students of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aims at using discourse competence to enhance the mastery of good writing skills which the learners of English as a second language needed to perform effectively and efficiently in any area of their study. The specific objectives are:

- i. to ascertain the competence of the selected students in writing skills in Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology;
- ii. to examine the effectiveness of discourse competence in enhancing students' good writing skills in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse competence is conveyed as ability to understand, create and develop forms of the language that are longer than sentences with appropriate cohesion, coherence and rhetorical organization to combine ideas, Fernando and Jose (). This explains the competence of the learner to comprehend any read text, interpret or explain and summarise or arrange in sentences in order to produce coherent stretches of language. Llobera (1996:374) describes discourse competence as a dynamic procedural competence which is constantly in action during the teaching and learning processes. This definition sees discourse competence as gradual ability of the learners to put words, phrases, clauses and sentences together to form a unified whole. The procedural activities to achieve discourse competence according to Madrid and McLaren (1995:197) include, completing text with missing words, building a text by choosing the most appropriate option in a multiple choice format, finding mistakes and differences, analyzing and interpreting discourse elements. Other activities are punctuating texts, narrating events and expressing sequence with visual support, transforming colloquial discourse into narrative discourse and arranging sentences to form texts that describe processes. Discourse competence in academic writing as observed by Marta and Muresan (2016:152) signals the appropriate use of linguistic resources and strategies that allow effective communication in specific contexts according to both the purpose of the text and the expectations of the target audience. Discourse competence as one of the components of communicative competence supposes the learner's ability to understand and produce text in all aspects. The aspects include the four language skills. Discourse competence therefore contributes to the construction as well as interpretation of any text. Tatiana (2023) corroborating the earlier researchers highlights the components of discourse competence as the to order the sentence according to the topic focus or sentence, temporal sequencing, cause and effects. It also involves ability to structure and build discourses regarding thematic organization, logical ordering, style and register. The most important aspects are cohesion and coherence which form the core of discourse competence. This emphasizes that inability of the learner to use lexical cohesive devices correctly in any type of academic writing may hinder the understanding of the message or written texts.

Meriyan and Hamzah (2020) carried out a research on the effectiveness of discourse competence in presenting final project by Higher Intermediate students. The study aims at describing the discourse competence as part of communicative competence used by higher intermediate students in delivering final projects. Qualitative descriptive method was used to conduct the research. The subjects were eleven students of higher Intermediate class of English in Buk Higgin city. Their presentations were recorded and translated to get the written data. The data were analysed based on Zirkovic model of academic oral presentation. The results showed that the students were not fully aware of discourse competence. Even though, the students used some expressions and phrases for moving from one idea to another, they were sometimes found using non-authentic expressions or phrases.

Hun Pan (2021) investigated enhancing students' discourse competence in reading. The research aims to explore relationship between cohesion and coherence and how to develop students' discourse competence in reading. It was revealed that students with strong discourse competence can comprehend spoken and written texts more effectively than those who did not. Also, it enables student to create more coherent discourse to advance their speaking and writing skills.

Ali, Hussan and Ali (2020) examined the use of poems as teaching material to develop discourse competence in learners of English as a second language. It was a quasi-experimental study consisting a control group (CG) and experimental group (EG) from the faculty of social sciences, University of Markland, Pakistan. The students of both groups were subjected to a speaking type pre-test and post-test. Their scores were compared using independent samples t-tests. The outcomes indicated that learners in the treatment group scored significantly higher than the learners in the comparison group. It was also observed further that the students of the treatment group were actively involved in the language learning process associating the text of poetry with their socio-cultural, and personal lives. Hence, the study suggests that poems should be utilized as teaching materials in ESL classrooms.

Tiatana (2023) studied the development of the discourse competence through literary texts. The aim of the study is to present a study of the literary texts from a discourse perspective focusing on the development of discourse competence in the English language. The study describes discourse competence as new approach in EFL methodology which highlights the relation between holistic understanding of the communication, social phenomena and the study of language structures in their use. The results show that the text interpretation through a discursive approach constitutes an effective tool for examining the language correlation with the intent and socio-cultural context.

Matiso and Tyantsi (2023) also conducted a study on discourse competence as an essential variable in developing Grade II English first additional language learners' writing skills. Halliday and Hassan's Model of Evaluation framework which advocates that the primary means of linking texts in discourse is through lexical cohesion. The data for the study were gathered from 40 purposely selected Grade II learners through qualitative approach and a case study. Findings indicated that restricted knowledge of lexicon, inadequate knowledge of reiteration and allocation as well as insufficient knowledge about appropriate use of cohesion and coherent devices were among the established reasons for learners writing deficiencies. Hence, the study recommends that good essay writing skills can best be achieved through the implementation of the proposed recent language teaching method such as the text-based approach. The present study, therefore, intends to examine the effectiveness of discourse competence in enhancing good writing skills in students of higher Institutions in Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study adopted Halliday and Hassan's (1976) cohesion as theoretical framework for the study. Cohesion explains a process which involves one item pointing to another. The significant property of the cohesive relation as observed by Halliday and Hassan (1976) is the fact that one item provides the source for the interpretation of another in a text. Cohesion is purely an anaphoric relation with a presupposing item pointing to something that has gone before it whose referent clearly either precedes or follows. Cohesion, is therefore, describes as part of a text forming component in the linguistic system. It is the means whereby elements that are structurally unrelated to one another are linked together through the dependence of one or the other for its interpretation. Halliday and Hassan's (2004) interpretation of cohesion is further elaborated by approaching the notion of cohesive tie. The concept of a tie makes it possible to analyse any text in terms of its cohesive characteristics and gives a systemic account of its patterns of texture. Cohesive ties are created through lexical and grammatical cohesion. Lexical cohesion explains the cohesive effect achieved by selection of vocabulary. The two main categories linked with lexical cohesion are collocation and reiteration. Halliday and Hassan (2004:533) explain that cohesion is created in English by conjunction, reference, ellipsis, substitution and lexical cohesion. Conjunction is used cohesively to mark a relationship between one clause and another. It implies the use of words or phrase to link sentences, clauses, and showing logical relationship between them. Reference on other hand creates cohesion by creating links between elements of meaning, this is achieved through exophoric and anaphoric references thereby forming referential chains. It explains relationship between things and facts. Substitution involves replacing of one element of a sentence with another to avoid repetition and maintain textual cohesion. It entails nominal, verbal and clausal substitutions. All these mechanisms work together to create cohesion in a text, ensuring that it is understood as a unified whole. Lexical cohesion operates within the lexis or the choice of lexical items., and it involves the use of vocabulary to create links within a text. Cohesion, therefore, expresses the continuity that exists between one part of the text and another. This continuity in most general terms in expressing at each stage in the discourse the point of context with what has gone before. It is the continuity provided by cohesion that enables reader and listener to supply all the missing components of the picture which are not present in the text but are necessary to its interpretation. This framework is adequate for the study for it provides a detailed and systematic approach to analyzing, interpretation and understanding the ways in which texts achieve cohesion.

METHODOLOGY

A total number of one hundred students of part one of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti, Nigeria were selected for the study. Twenty five students from each college of the University were randomly selected from General studies course class. A pre-test was conducted to ascertain the selected students' level of competence in writing skill. The outcomes of the written essay test helped the researcher to select the poorest 60 candidates as experimental group while the remaining 40 students formed the control group. The experimental group was exposed to different discourse cohesive devices for four months. The activities include selection of two novels to be read and summarised by the selected students for the study, identification of cohesive and coherent devices in the novels by both the teacher and the participants, integrating coherence and cohesion exercises in writing instructions. Others are use of discourse markers and transitional devices, group and individual presentation, and classroom practices. After four months, post-test was conducted for both the control and experimental groups. The scores were collated and statically analysed using mean, standard deviation, and t-test statistic.

Data Analysis

This section presents the result of data analysis and the interpretation of the result. The results are presented by employing descriptive analysis and test of hypotheses using mean, standard deviation, and t-test statistic. While mean, standard deviation proffer answers to the research questions, the t-test statistic was used to test the hypotheses formulated at the 0.05 level of significance.

Respondents' Demographic Characteristics

The performance of students to the aptitude test was analyzed descriptively. The variable of consideration is the students' performance in both pre-test and post-test writing skill tests and student's group.

Table 1 Frequency and Percentage of Student's Group

Group	Frequency	Percentage
Control	40	40.0
Experimental	60	60.0
Total	100	100.0

Table 1 above shows the frequency and percentage of student's group in Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti selected for study. The table indicates that 40 (40.0%) students in the control group and 60 (60.0%) students in the experimental group participated in the study.

Research question 1: What is the level of competence of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology students in writing skills?

Table 2 Level of competence of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology (BOUESTI) students in writing skills

Group	N	Mean	SD	RMK
Control	40	11.53	1.38	Competent
Experimental	60	7.55	1.61	Not competent

Table 2 above shows the mean performance of students in the first writing skill test (pre-test) conducted for BOUESTI students. Students who obtained above 50% of the total score were considered competent and were categorized in the control group while students who scored less than 50% of the total score were considered not competent and placed in the experimental group. The result indicated that the mean score for students in the control group was 11.53 while that of the experimental group was 7.55 with a mean difference of 3.98.

Research question 2: Is there any difference in the performance of students taught with discourse competence and those that were not taught?

Table 3 Performance of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti students in the post-test writing skills

Group	N	Mean	SD
Control	40	12.23	2.01
Experimental	60	17.47	1.38

Table 3 above shows the mean performance of students in the second writing skill test (post-test) conducted for Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti students after the exposure of those in the experimental group to cohesive devices that enhance good writing skills. The result indicated that the mean score for students in the control group was 12.23 while that of the experimental group was 17.47 with a mean difference of 5.24.

TEST OF HYPOTHESES

Hypothesis 1: There is no significant difference in the performance of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti students in pre-test writing skills?

Table 4 t-test analysis of students' performance in the pre-test

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t _{cal}	t _{tab}	Decision
Control	40	11.53	1.38	98	12.80	1.96	Significant
Experimental	60	7.55	1.61				

The result in Table 4 shows the difference in mean score of students taught using discourse competence approach and those without any teaching intervention in the pre-test. The t-test analysis revealed that mean score for control group students (11.53) was greater than the mean score for students in the experimental group (7.55) with mean difference of 3.98. The t-test analysis also showed that t_{cal} (12.80) is greater than t_{tab} (1.96) at p < 0.05 level of significant. This implies that there is a significant difference between the performance of control group and those with discourse competence intervention in the pre-test.

Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in the performance of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti students in post-test writing skills?

Table 5 t-test analysis of students' performance in the post-test

Group	N	Mean	SD	df	t _{cal}	t _{tab}	Decision
Control	40	12.23	2.01	98	15.30	1.96	Significant
Experimental	60	17.47	1.38				

The result in Table 5 shows the difference in mean score of students taught using discourse competence approach and those without any teaching intervention in the post-test. The t-test analysis revealed that mean score for control group students (12.23) was less than the mean score for students in the experimental group (17.47) with mean difference of 5.24. The t-test analysis also showed that t_{cal} (15.30) is greater than t_{tab} (1.96) at $p < 0.05$ level of significant. This implies that there is a significant difference between the performance of control group and those with discourse competence intervention in the post-test.

Hypothesis 3: Discourse competence is not effective in enhancing the competence of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology students in writing skills.

Table 6 ANCOVA of performance students taught with different methods

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	662.137 ^a	2	331.069	125.614	.000	.721
Intercept	373.546	1	373.546	141.731	.000	.594
Pretest	15.256	1	15.256	5.788	.018	.056
Method	347.806	1	347.806	131.965	.000	.576
Error	255.653	97	2.636			
Total	24603.000	100				
Corrected Total	917.790	99				

a. R Squared = .721 (Adjusted R Squared = .716)

A one-way between subject analysis of variance (ANCOVA) was conducted to compare the impact of the discourse teaching strategies on the performance of students in the post-test scores as shown in Table 6. The independent variables were the teaching strategies (discourse competence method, and no intervention strategy), and the dependent variable consisted of post-test scores on the writing skill test. Students' scores on the pre-test administration were used as covariate in the analysis. After adjusting for pre-test scores, there was a significant difference between the two groups in the post-test scores on the writing test, $F(1, 97) = 131.965$, $p < 0.05$. This means that there is a significant difference in the post-test performance of students taught with discourse competence and those with no intervention. In fact, the value of partial $\eta^2 = 0.576$ indicates that the teaching strategy (discourse competence method) contributed about 57.6% to the improvement in the post-test scores of students in that group. Hence, discourse competence is effective in enhancing the competence of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti students in writing skills.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The performance of the respondents in the pre-test showed their deficiencies in writing skill generally. The areas of their deficiencies in essay writing include use of poor grammar, insufficient knowledge of cohesive devices and their use, inadequate use of subject and verb agreement as well as formation of incoherent essays. Even though, some of the sentences constructed are syntactically correct but lack grammatical and semantical coherence. Hence, the outcome of the pre-test showed that the students lacked the needed competence in the target language. This finding corroborates the finding of earlier studies on the competence of learners of English as a second language in Nigeria, Bodunde and Sotiloye, 2013; ELbashir, 2023 and Ogenyi et al. 2023 assert that students struggle with selection of appropriate dictions, correct punctuation marks, verb tenses and structure of sentences when they write and this explicates poor performance generally in writing skill. The poorest sixty among the selected students were chosen as an experimental group while the remaining forty who scored above fifty percent formed the control group. The experimental group was exposed to the use of different cohesive devices that enhance effective writing skills. This study also noted that the exposure of experimental group to the understanding and use of cohesive devices for months showed a significant improvement in their performance in post-test compared with the control group. The students were able to appropriately fill in the blank spaces with appropriate words in the given test which makes it obvious their understanding of the use of different types of conjunctions to link ideas together. Also, their understanding of cohesive devices helped them to create meaningful sentences and paragraphs coherently in the given test. The study carried out by Ali, Husain & Ali (2020) on developing second learners of English proficiency and performance through exposure to cohesive devices in poems indicated that the students in treatment group scored significantly higher than the learners in control group. Matiso and Tyantsi (2023) specifying discourse competence as a significant means to enhance effectiveness in receptive skill for outstanding performance in productive skills. This indicated the significance of discourse competence in enhancing good writing skills in English.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the study recommended the effectiveness of discourse competence in enhancing good writing skills, and this can be achieved through exposure of second learners of English at every level of education to reading of novels and plays that enhance communicative use of English.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study was carried out to examine the effectiveness of discourse competence in enhancing good writing skills in learners of English as a second language. Writing, which is the last of the four basic skills of language, is described as a productive and challenging skill which involves externalizing all the knowledge acquired in all other skills. Writing skills demonstrates a learner's competence in the target language. Hence, this study demonstrated how effective writing skills can be enhanced through exposure to meaningful understanding of the components of language use in effective communication and different written discourse types. A total number of hundred Part One students of Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology, Ikere-Ekiti participated in the study. While the pre-test ascertained the level of students' competence in writing skill which is not all that adequate for learners of English as a second language, the post-test demonstrated the efficiency of discourse competence in developing good writing skills in selected experimental group after being exposed to cohesive devices in English. This study, therefore, is of the opinion in support of the earlier works; Nilufar, 2020; Hui, 2022; and Matiso & Tyantsi, 2023, that discourse competence is relevant and effective in developing the receptive skills of learners of English as a second language for good productive skills.

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