

# Psycho-Social Variables as Predictors of Students' Achievement in Expository Essay Writing

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## Abstract

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*This study investigated psycho-social variables (peer influence and writing anxiety) affecting students' performance in expository essay writing in Oyo State. The study adopted the descriptive design of correlational type. Simple random sampling technique was used to select six (6) senior secondary schools, in all 270; senior secondary two (2) students participated in the study. The instruments used were Expository Essay Achievement Test ( $r=0.73$ ), Writing Anxiety Scale ( $r=0.71$ ), Peer Influence Scale ( $r=0.72$ ). Data were analysed using Pearson moment correlation. Findings revealed that there were positive relationships between peer influence ( $r=0.03$ ), anxiety ( $r=0.03$ ) and students' achievement in expository essay.*

**Keywords:** Expository essay, Psycho-social variables, Peer influence, Writing anxiety.

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## Introduction

Writing is one of the most useful tools of communicating. Without it we cannot express thoughts effectively and ideas coherently. This is because one of the objectives of studying English as second language is to acquire the ability to write clear and precise English. Writing skill is often viewed as the most difficult of the four basic language and communication skills and the last of the skills to be acquired due to the fact that it does not just involve presentations of words graphically, but development and presentation of ideas in an organised way. In the words of (Fakeye and Ohia, 2016), writing skill occupies a more prominent position among other skills within the school system, writing skill is very important in academic advancement. This is because examinations are conducted through the medium of writing and students must be able to respond clearly to examination questions through writing for them to proceed to another academic stage. One way of testing students' competence in writing is through essay writing. However, writing skill is not limited only to essay writing; it is needed in other aspects of English language examination such as comprehension and summary writing. If students cannot write effectively, they would not be able to put answers across effectively in comprehension, they would not be able to write correct sentences in summary writing and they would not even be able to take down lecture notes in class.

As one of the major aspects of the English language, writing skill is tested at examinations such as West Africa Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and National Examination

Council (NECO) in the form of essay writing and letter writing. An essay is a composition. It is a piece of writing which is composed of related ideas and made up of paragraphs. The idea in an essay is arranged and expressed in an orderly manner. According to Oruche, (2014), to write an essay or composition means to compose a piece of writing by carefully putting together some ideas or points which are part of a given topic. A good essay has three necessary parts according to (Oruche, 2014): an introductory paragraph, which introduces the essay and states the main points in a thesis statement, the body which supports (shows, explain or proves) main point and support paragraphs. The concluding paragraph summarises the whole ideas of the essay.

Essay writing is a skill that needs to be learnt by all literate persons. As a skill that requires conscious learning, a child learns to write at a very early age till maturity. Students' ability to acquire basic skills needed for understanding and expressing their ideas in their own words is facilitated by essay writing Fakeye and Ohia, (2016). Essay writing involves such processes as choosing the topic to write on, identifying the audience or the reader of the essay, gathering material for the essay, outlining the material, these involve organising the materials into logical order (paragraph) using appropriate expression in terms of appropriate vocabulary and sentence construction and mechanics; punctuation, capitalisation, spelling and grammar (Igbor, 2015).

All these skills require the student to rely completely on his/her store of knowledge, imagination and creativity in order to navigate successfully through the chaos of existence. Essay

writing, which constitutes problem for Many English as second Language pupils' worldwide, is a major challenge for many students in Nigeria. Most of the examinations require students to show all they have learnt in the English language through writing which plays a pivotal role in the evaluation and assessment of students essay writing skills.

Essay writing skill is very essential to secondary school students in Nigeria because apart from its general usefulness to students, the test of the skill is a compulsory part of their English language examinations. Candidates writing English language examination in paper 1 of the WAEC and NECO examinations, this test usually attracts 50% of the total marks for the English paper, implying that a failure in this aspect may contribute largely to failure in the whole paper and a failure in English language paper is not usually a palatable experience for students. It always spells doom for them because it will rob them of the opportunity to progress in their academics since a pass at credit level in it is usually required for them to gain admission for further studies. A credit pass in English language is also required for students to even have some gainful employment according to (Ayoola, 2007).

The different types of essay given to students to write on include; Narrative essay, Descriptive essay, Argumentative essay and Expository essay. Narrative writing could be categorised into the fictional narrative or imaginary, the non-fictional narrative, or combination of both. According to (Fakeye, 2016), a fictional narrative writing presents an imaginary account of a story that happened in an imaginary world. It includes fairy tales, folktales, stories, myths and science fictions. On the other hand, a non-fictional narrative presents a real-life person's account of a real-life story. It includes historical narratives, ballads and personal experience. For (Alutu, 2007), a narrative essay, whether real or imagined must possess the quality of feasibility. That is, it must be a story that is capable of happening. The story written should be such that when the reader or the examiner has gone through it, he will agree that such a thing happens even if the one written did not take place actually. Simply put, every narrative should be credible. Examples of narrative topics are: a wedding ceremony I attended, a day in the life of a university student, how I spent my last vacation, an annual cultural festival in my village, all that glitters is not gold etc.

Descriptive essay, according to (Amaechi, 2005), is a type of essay in which the writer describe a situation or a phenomenon that takes place. Writing a

descriptive essay, involves the use of words to paint a picture of something. The writer, talk about the shape, the size and the colour of what is being described. (Onuigbo, 2006) also states that description is writing that creates a clear and vivid impression of the topic. It translates ones experience of a person, place or thing into words, often by appealing to the physical sense of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. A good description creates a main impression, that is, an overall effect, feeling or image about the topic. It uses concrete specific details to support the main impression. (Anker, 2001) says that being able to describe something or someone accurately and in detail is important not only in school but also in other settings. Example of descriptive essay topics are: A house I admire, our school compound, beautiful scenery, a dance show I watched etc.

Argumentative essay is a writing that takes a position on an issue and offers reasons and supporting evidence to persuade someone else to accept, or at least consider the position. Argument is also used to convince someone to take an action. Here, the writer gives reasons for the statements, opinions or preferences. To argue means to reason or to prove that an idea or statement is true or false or that it is correct or incorrect. An argumentative essay may also be one in which we give reasons for saying that one thing is better or worse than another thing (Alutu, 2007). Good argument takes a strong and definite position on an issue or advises a particular action, gives good reasons and supporting evidence to defend the position or recommend action, considers opposing views and has enthusiasm and energy from start to finish (Sanaa, 2009). Knowing how to put together a good argument is one of the most useful skills one can develop. Some examples of argumentative essay topics are: life in the township is better than life in the village, science is more useful to man than religion etc.

Expository essay, this type of essay normally explains or reveals how to do something. (Anker, 2001), states that it is a type of writing that explains the meaning and uses of something or an idea, and the functions of a person. It may also explain the similarities or dissimilarities between two actions or objects. Some examples of expository essay topics are: How to make garri, how to get to my school from the town, democracy, the functions of a class prefect, the advantages and disadvantages of boarding system in schools, the similarities and dissimilarities between boys' secondary school and girls' secondary school. Thus, scholars have identified poor writing skills as a major cause of mass failure of Nigerian candidates in English language examinations.

This discovery further confirms the report of the WAEC Chief Examiner's report (2014), that students' problem with writing include inadequate preparation manifesting itself in many forms like poor spelling, poor punctuation, inadequate exposure to idiomatic forms of English, lack of familiarity with the required formats, indiscriminate copying of passages in summary section, poor grammatical expressions, misinterpretation of questions, failure to adhere to rubrics among others, considering the problems that students have with essay writing as highlighted, examiners and scholars have therefore advocated that the problems be given more attention so as to improve performance in the language skill and consequently the performance in English language examinations realising the crucial place of English language in the educational and career advancement of the secondary school students.

From WAEC past questions on essay writing, One would observed that most of the questions centered on narrative and expository essay writing. However, a critical look at the chief examiner' report shows that out of the two aspects of essay writing, students record poor performance in expository essay, (WAEC 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013). Expository essay is a general term given to non-fiction prose. It is not story telling because it depend on facts, opinions supported by facts and fully developed ideas that must be made clear through the use of example. What this entails is that, the writer of the expository essay must be able to convey information through being able to define, explain and analyse knowledge, ideas, fact, problems and situations. It involves the ability to explain how a thing is done or how a thing is made or how a phenomena act in a particular way. Expository essay writing is a little but more advanced than the descriptive essay. This is because it requires the writer to explain in detail what a thing is (Oyeleye, 2005).

Writing expository essay goes beyond mere description of a place, object, person or thing into the nature or feature of the particular object, person or thing. It requires a good knowledge of the subject of discussion. When looking into the reasons for the students' weakness in expository essay writing, the WAEC chief examiner noted that the attention given to teaching of writing skills in general has been inadequate. According to the reports, candidate' answers show that they are not adequately exposed to the skill and that though the candidates' weaknesses are listed every year, there is no evidence that those concerned are taking steps to help students

overcome the weaknesses which have made the students to find it difficult to write expository essays.

Expository essay writing is not only limited to secondary school students, higher institutions students would always be required to write expository essay in form of term papers, seminar papers, project work, theses and so on. Also, most of the writings engaged in by adults such as taking notes, jotting phone messages, composing business letters, and others are expository in nature. Despite its centrality to everyday writing tasks, expository essay writing is often neglected in favour of narrative essay in the early school years. This lack of exposure to expository essay writing may place students at a disadvantage in their later years of schooling when they are required to produce expository writings.

Students at the secondary and college level often have difficulties with writing expository essay (Igbor, 2016). As a way of addressing the problems, experts in essay writing have carried out varieties of studies on effectiveness strategies for teaching essay these include: Controlled composition strategy, Process writing approach (Okedare and Oden, 2002), Paragraph pattern strategy, and Product approach (Sanna, 2009) two modes of expository advance organiser (Ayanniyi, 2015). A close look at these studies revealed that they focused on performance in essay in general and teachers related factors, and, none examined performance in expository essay writing as the present study does. Thus, this study is set to fill the gap. Although most of these studies came up with good contribution to the teaching and learning of essay writing, they have not been significant enough to translate to improve performance in public examinations. This according to Fakeye and Ohia (2016) means that there are more to the problems of teaching and learning essay writing than just improving teaching strategies. It is perhaps in confirmation to this that (Obemeata, 2003) opined that improving teaching methods and strategies alone cannot solve the problem of poor performance in school.

Thus, scholars have called for a shift in research focus from what happens in the classroom such as teachers' teaching methods and strategies to student-related factors. The implication of this is that, some other variables that are yet to be considered could be responsible for the student's poor performance in expository essay. This is perhaps plausible in view of the fact that in the teaching learning process, it is not only the teacher that is responsible. In the process, the teacher, the learner and even learning environment have been discovered to be accountable for effective

teaching and learning experience. This means that if the teacher and the learning environment are good and learners have certain problems, the desired results will not be achievable. Studies have reviewed some students' psycho-social variables that have strong linked to academic success. They are: peer influence, gender, attitude, interest, intelligence quotient, anxiety, and self-concept among others.

Psycho-social variables documented in literature which are relevant to this study are: Peer influence and anxiety. Studies have linked Peer Influence and writing anxiety with academic achievement in Literature in English (Omobowale 2016), English Grammar (Amore 2016) and in other subjects. The relationship between peer influence, writing anxiety and achievement has not been considered in a study of this nature especially in Ibadan. The research at this juncture is set to fill the gap. Peers play a large role in the social and emotional development of adolescent (Allen, 2005). Their influences begins at any early age and increase through the teenage years. It is natural, healthy and important for learners to have and rely on friends as they grow and mature. A peer could be any one a student look up to in behavior or someone who a learner thinks is equal to his/her age or ability (Hardcastle, 2002). On the other hand, the term 'pressure' implies the process that influence people to do something they might not otherwise choose to do. According to (Hartney, 2011) peer pressure refers to the influences that peers can have on each other. Peer pressure is emotional or mental forces from people belongings to the same social group such as age, grade or status to act or behave in a manner similar to them. Studies have shown that influences from peer group could be something stronger than that of the parents, when there is a need to make decisions (Arnett, 2010). There is a strong possibility that a group of student who move together will have either a positive or negative influences on one another's academic performance. Thus, they can encourage each other to skip, classes, steal, cheat or become involve in other risky behaviour. On the other hand, Peer pressure can help to challenge or motivate one another to perform better in school subject (Okorie, 2015). There is therefore need to consider the influence of peer pressure on the academic performance of student in Expository essay writing.

(Omobowale, 2016) avers that Peer group provides a forum where teenagers construct and reconstruct their identity; this identity may be towards achieving academic excellence and being the best or otherwise. Most students worry about their

peers' reaction to certain steps or actions they take. There is therefore every possibility that these same students could be influenced towards their performance in expository essay. This is supported by (Aribiyi, 2006) who says that peer group often relies on their peers for support, approval and behaviour models. These could be such as being studious or having unserious attitude towards academic. Researchers have observed that when a student associates with friends who have a positive attitude towards education, such a student will also develop satisfaction towards school. Whereas, associating with friends who have negative attitude to schooling will reduce such student's interest as well. It should therefore be made clear that not all peer influence is bad, (Howard, 2004) says that peer group is a source of affection, sympathy, understanding and a place for experimentation.

What should always be understood is that a student is always very free to relate well, while in the midst of peers. Peer influence is a strong factor that could determine the behaviour, attitude and even the extent of what a learner can achieve in school subjects. A student can learn by discussing with peers and possibly be affected by their personality and attitude towards learning (Zaki, Thabet and Hassan, 2014). There are of course a number of students who have excelled through peer influence. Scholars, are of the opinion that peer tutoring often result in academic, emotional and social gains for the students involved. Therefore, the kind of peer group learners of English Language associate with has the tendency of predicting positive or negative achievement in expository essay writing. The interactions among peers are normal and are an essential part of the learning process that influences the lifelong learning habit of students (Zaki et al, 2014). Students learn better and faster with the help of other brilliant students around. That is, an averagely brilliant student who moves with very brilliant and achievement oriented friends could possibly be influenced positively by them and thereby result into better performance academically. Whereas, if a student moves with negative academic oriented students, such a student performance would be poor. The impacts of peer group on students achievement is very significant depending on the magnitude of the influences (Majeed, 2010). Studies have shown that peer influence is strongly related to students' achievement in Economics, Mathematics, Computer Science, French, History, Chinese, English Language, Yoruba and Literature (Khodadady and Zabetipour, 2013); (Boucher, Bramoulle, Djebbari

and Fortin, 2012), Aktita and Aziz, (2011), (Alabi, 2013 and Adeoye, 2014).

Writing as a communicative activity imposes great difficulties on English as second Language learners. Scholars believe that learning to write in a foreign language involves as much anxiety as learning the other skills. This is because most of the writing exercises are required to be written in English language. Writing anxiety is also known as writing apprehension or blockage Fakeye and Ohia, (2016). Writing anxiety is a negative and apprehensive feeling a learner has whenever such a learner is given a writing task. The term, writing apprehension, was originally defined as the measure of anxiety about writing that outweighs the projected gain from the situation. Ibrahim and Noor, (2011) defined writing apprehension as a subjective complex of attitudinal, emotional, and behavioural interaction which reinforces each other.

According to (Cheng, 1999), (Daly, 2010) and (Aziz, 2011), Apprehensive students are likely to suffer from the concern about the possibility of failure, flawed performance, fear of evaluation, negative attitudes towards writing task and writing situation. Their writing performance are mostly lifeless, mechanical, full of grammatical errors, repeated concepts and unsupported organisation. Many studies have been carried out on the effect of writing apprehension in the first language (Atkinson, 2011, Boeing, Anderson and Miller, 2002; Clark 2004, Varnon, 2009, Rankin, 2006), and none examined effects of peer influence and writing anxiety on expository essay writing as the present study does.

Some scholars have identified the causes of writing anxiety to include expectations for oneself, expectations of one's teachers or peers, fear of committing errors, unfamiliarity with the craft of writing and a lack of voice. Students who are anxious about writing, have been discovered to likely turn in papers late, not turn in papers at all, fail to complete tasks, turn in paper that are not well thought out nor properly edited, turn in paper with vague, dull and general writings. Quite a number of studies have been carried out and findings have been made concerning writing anxiety. However, some of the findings are contradictory; thus, there is need for more research to be done.

### **Statement of Problem**

Expository essay writing skill is very essential to secondary school students in Nigeria because apart from its general usefulness to students,

the test of the skill is a compulsory part of their English language examinations. Despite this, previous studies have shown that students have poor expository essay writing skill and this account for their poor performance in English Language examinations. Efforts were then geared towards various interventions on pedagogical approaches and instructional strategies, among which are direct and indirect explicit learning strategies, Process writing approach, Paragraph pattern strategy, and Product approach, two modes of expository advance organiser. Studies also focused on teachers' characteristics variables such as; teachers' assessment pattern, teachers' qualification and subject mastery, teacher's attitude and teachers' teaching styles but despite these interventions, studies still show the alarming rate of poor learning outcome in expository essay writing.

Hence, scholars have suggested shifting focus from teaching strategies and other pedagogical issues to students' affective and social factors. Some of these factors include self-efficacy, self-concept, attitude, writing anxiety parental involvement and peer influence. Various studies on these factors revealed that they are strongly linked to students' academic success in Mathematics, Economics, literature in English and in some aspects of English language such as reading comprehension, summary writing, essay writing, but have not been significantly linked to the teaching and learning of expository essay writing, especially in Ibadan North Local Government of Oyo State, Nigeria.

### **Scope of the Study**

The study investigated the influence of students' psycho-social variables on achievement in expository essay writing. This study focused on the relationship between peer influence, writing anxiety and students' performance in expository essay writing. It covered senior secondary students in six selected senior schools in Ibadan North Local Government, Oyo State.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is significant in that it revealed the extent to which psycho-social variables (peer influence, writing anxiety) would predict students' achievement in expository essay writing thereby identifying some important variables that must be addressed and reduced for improved achievement in expository essay writing. Also, the study would shed light on areas of professional development needs of English Language teachers who are in constant

search of improved performance in essay writing in general and expository essay writing in particular. Finally academics, researchers and students will find the study to be a significant contribution to existing research on ways of improving students' performance in English Language.

### Methodology

The descriptive design of correlational type was adopted for the study. This was because there was no manipulation of variables as their manifestations have already existed. The population of the study comprised all students in senior secondary schools in Ibadan North Local Government area. Two sampling

techniques; multistage random sampling technique and purposive sampling procedure were used in this study. In the first stage, in the first stage, six senior secondary schools were randomly selected from the schools in Ibadan North Local Government area. In the second stage, simple random sampling technique was used to select intact Class of Senior Secondary 2 students from each of the schools. For the third stage, proportionate sampling technique was used to select (15) students from each of Arts, Commercial and Science classes to ensure that all the students were involved in the study making a total of 45 Students in each of the schools and a total of 270 students in all the six schools participated in this study.

### Results

**Research question 1:** what is the relationship between peer influence, writing anxiety and students' expository essay achievement?

**Table: 4.3 Correlation matrixes showing the relationship between peer influence, writing anxiety and students' expository essay achievement**

Variables	Achievement	Peer influence	Anxiety
Achievement	1		
Peer influence	0.030 0.648	1	
Anxiety	0.034 0.596	0.107 0.096	1
Mean	15.69	53.31	45.25
STD.D	6.089	8.566	12.888

Table: 4 .3 showed that there were positive relationships between peer influence ( $r = 0.03$ ), anxiety ( $r = 0.03$ ) and students' expository essay achievement.

### Discussion of Findings

The result revealed that there is no significant correlation between peer influence, writing anxiety and achievement in expository essay writing. This means that as writing anxiety becomes low, achievement in expository essay writing reduces. This means students' expository essay writing anxiety is low. This might implies that most of the students are not interested in writing expository essay. This might be attributed to the fact that students view expository essay writing as being too wide and tasking in nature because it requires the writer to give detailed explanation and expose all the pieces of information on the given topic.

This is probably due to the fact that learning outcome in expository essay writing could be

predicted by other psycho-social variables not included in this study. This result contradicts the reports of (Fakeye and Ohia, 2016) *who investigated the extent to which* vocabulary knowledge and writing anxiety would predict students' achievement in essay writing in *Ibadan Metropolis*, the study revealed that writing anxiety has a negative influence on the students' achievement in essay writing. This result supports the reports of Okunade (2014) and Oloyede and Olatoye (2005) who reported that there was no significant relationship between peer influence and academic achievement.

### Conclusion

The study investigated psycho-social variables predicting students' achievement in expository essay. The study therefore concluded that the two variables were not good predictors of achievement in expository essay. It could be concluded from this study that these variables might be responsible for students' achievement in expository essay in Ibadan North Local Government.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

The home and the school should collaborate to ensure that the students only associate with peers who have positive disposition to education in general and the teaching and learning of expository essay writing in particular in order to be positive influence on the students. Trained counselors should be posted to all the secondary schools so as to help counsel few students with negative influence

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