Full Length Research Paper

Effectiveness of indirect and direct metalinguistic error correction techniques on the essays of senior secondary school students in South Western Nigeria

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The study assessed error-correction techniques used in correcting students' essays in English language and also determined the effects of these strategies and other related variables on students' performance in essay writing with a view to improving students' writing skill in English language in South Western Nigeria. A quasi-experimental design was adopted for the study. The sample comprised of 180 SSII students who were randomly selected. The students were assigned to experimental groups: Indirect techniques (68), direct metalinguistic (63) and the control group (65). The results showed that the indirect approach was the most effective (x=11.88) compared to the direct metalinguistic technique (x=11.53) and the conventional method (x=10.4), F (2,177)=7.12, p<0.05. In conclusion, the implications of the findings are discussed.

Key words: Error correction, indirect technique, direct metalinguistic, technique, academic ability, gender.

INTRODUCTION

The role of English Language in Nigeria is prominent. It could be rightly described as the pivot on which the international and integrational lives of the people of Nigeria revolve. Unlike the indigenous languages, English Language does not engender any ethnic hostility; rather, it ensures peaceful co-existence in Nigeria's diversity (Bamgbose, 2001; Farinde, 2002; Olayemi, 2007; Akinbode, 2006). From the foregoing, English Language has since assumed an uncompromising position in Nigeria's administration and government as the official language. To further stress the importance, the National Policy on Education (NPE) (1977, revised 1981, 1998 and 2004 section 5, 21(a)) states that English should be as a school subject for the first three years of primary education and as the language of instruction from the fourth year in primary school. Also, according to the policy, every child should be made to study English and any two Nigerian languages other than those being spoken in the environment of the junior and secondary schools.

In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, instructional practices in the Senior Secondary English Language classroom focus on fundamental areas, such as; Oral English and Grammar-However, students' writing over the years has taken a downward trend which has continuously reflected in their performance both in internal and external examinations. For instance, an external examination which is mostly used for admission into tertiary institution like the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) Chief Examiners'

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reports (2005 to 2009) describe a consistent decline in the way students write as exemplified in the various errors they commit in their written work or essays. The five reports state that candidates' expressions are generally poor and their range of vocabulary is limited. As expressed in the WASSCE Chief Examiners' report (2009), given a paper that conforms to standards, many candidates' answers to the questions show that quite a number of them are not adequately exposed to the skill of writing. Therefore, students' poor writing skill has been identified as a major factor in students' poor performance in English Language examinations. The focus of this study is on examination because it is a major form of assessment used within and outside the classroom after exposure to relevant knowledge.

Babalola and Akande (2002) point to the fact that students' writing (especially those who are second learners of English Language (L2) e.g. Nigerian students) should be properly corrected. It is a general consensus among language experts that making/committing errors is a necessary and natural process in language learning (Edge, 1989; Hendrickson, 1978). Apart from this, several studies point to the fact that the teachers' pedagogical strategies are often in contrast with the learners' expectation (Cathcart and Olsen, 1976; Oladejo, 1993; Peacock, 2001; Hawkey, 2006; McCargar, 1993; Schulz, 1996, 2001). This is where the language teacher is an important variable in ensuring that the strategy he/she adopts enhances students' writing skill (Green and Oxford, 1995; Nunan, 1995; Bang, 1997; Scheen, 2007).

Yingliang (2008) observes that for over 10 years the debate on error correction has continued. The debate has to do with the issue of using error correction to improve students' writing accuracy. Truscott (1996, 1999, 2004, 2007) views error correction as not only useless but also harmful to the accuracy in students' writing. However, a number of studies on error correction in L2 essays have revealed that students receiving error correction from teachers improve in accuracy overtime (Sommers, 1982; Raimes, 1983; Ziv, 1984; Chandler, 2003; Hyland, 2003). Error correction is a crucial aspect in the writing process. Through the corrections students receive from the language teachers, learners come to distinguish for themselves whether they are performing well or not. Indirect error correction technique occurs when the teacher indicates that an error has been made but leaves it to the students to solve the problem, and correct the errors (Ferris, 2002; Hartshorn, 2008). Indirect error technique takes the form of underlining and coding (or description) of errors by the teacher.

Direct metalinguistic technique according to Schmidt (1994) and Scheen (2007) involves the careful and systematic location of an error by the language teacher, providing the correct form in clear terms, and providing metalinguistic comments that explain the correct form/ usage. Though most learners want and expect their

essays to be corrected by their teachers, there is evidence to suggest that they tend to prefer the direct metalinguistic technique over the indirect technique (Ferris and Roberts, 2001; Komura, 1999; Rennie, 2000). However, there appears to be some evidence that suggest that indirect error correction technique may result in accuracy levels of the students' essays (Ferris and
Helt, 2000; Frantzen, 1995; Lee, 1997).

The technique being adopted by a majority of English Language teachers in public senior secondary schools in Nigeria for correcting students' writing errors is the conventional method. Conventional method is the technique of teaching that sees the teacher as the ultimate disseminator of knowledge with the students as spectators, with no active participation in the classroom. In other terms, it is regarded as the traditional method of teaching. This technique may not have been yielding the needed results as regards improving students essay writing skill. In order to assist secondary school students to write properly and meaningfully, it is important to find out which technique is more effective in correcting students writing. The present study is therefore geared towards comparing the effects of indirect and direct metalinguistic error correction techniques on senior secondary school students' essays.

Statement of the problem

Students' essay writing skill continually falls below expectations (Zeng, 2005; Graham and Perin, 2007; Akande, 2003). This may be due, among others, to the type of error correction techniques used by language teachers for correcting errors in English Language writing. There are various types of error correction techniques; however, this study focuses on two-direct metalinguistic and indirect techniques. It has been observed that in Nigeria, majority of the English Language teachers use the conventional method which have been proving unproductive in enhancing students' writing. There is therefore a need to find out which of the two major techniques for this study will more meaningfully contribute to better essay writing skill in students, taking gender and students' academic ability, considered as intervening variables, into consideration.

Purpose of the study

The main purpose of this study is to find the relative effectiveness of indirect and direct metalinguistic error correction techniques in order to improve teachers' effectiveness and students performance in English essay writing. Specifically, the objectives of the study are to:

a. assess the effect of the conventional error correction

techniques used by language teachers on SSSII students' performance in English essay writing,

b. determine the effect of indirect and direct meta-linguistic techniques on students' performance when exposed to both techniques,

c. determine the differential effect of the two techniques on the academic performance of low and high ability students in English achievement test and

d. determine the effect of gender on the academic performance of students on the effectiveness of the two teaching techniques.

Research hypotheses

The following were formulated to guide the study:

1. There is no significant difference in the pre-test scores on the performance of students exposed to the conventional error correction technique.
2. There is no significant difference in the essay writing performance of students exposed to the indirect error correction technique and those exposed to the direct metalinguistic technique.
3. There is no significant difference in the academic performance of low and high ability students when exposed to the indirect, direct metalinguistic and conventional teaching techniques.
4. There is no significant effect of sex on students' academic performance when exposed to the indirect, direct metalinguistic and conventional teaching techniques.

Theoretical framework

This study draws on the theory of Error Analysis and the cognitive, social constructivist theory of Vygotsky (1978). Error Analysis (EA) is a type of linguistic analysis that focuses on the error learners make in the Target Language (TL). The investigation of errors can be at the same time diagnostic and prognostic. It is diagnostic because it can tell the learner's state of the language

(Corder, 1967) at a given point during the learning process and prognostic because it can tell course organisers to reorient language learning materials on the basis of the learner's current problem. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of

Proximal Development (ZPD) is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help. According to Philips (1995), the theory emphasizes the learners' active participation and the heightened recognition given to the social nature of learning. This is particularly relevant to this study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an experimental design using a pre-test – post-test control group with a 3×2×2 factorial matrix which allows the concurrent manipulation of two or more independent variables (Keppel, 1973). Thus, there were two experimental groups and a control group. The independent variables for this study are:

a. Teaching approaches (comprising three levels: indirect correction approach, direct metalinguistic approach and the conventional method),
b. Academic ability (comprising two levels: high and low academic ability groups),
c. Gender (with two levels: Male and female).

The students' English Essay Writing Test (EEWT) is the only dependent variable in this study.

Population, sampling procedure and sample

The population for the research comprised all the SSS II students in public schools in South Western Nigeria of Ondo, Oyo and Lagos. From these secondary schools, three schools were randomly selected. From the three schools, six SS II classes were selected. They were further sorted into the following seven groups;

1. Indirect error correction (Male)
2. Direct matalinquistic error correction (Male)
3. Control (Male)
4. Indirect error correction (Female)
5. Direct metalinquistic error correction (Female)
6. Control (Female)
7. High and low academic ability groups.

The sample size was 196 but only 180 students turned up for the test. The sample was made up of 99 females and 81 males; 98 were ranked as students with low performance and 82 as students with high performance using their performance in the pre-test. The total period of administration of treatment was six weeks and it was the first term of the academic session.

Research instrument

The instrument used for data collection was an essay writing test titled 'The English Essay Writing Test (EEWT). This test is made up of one narrative essay which was used to assess students' writing skill.

Instructional and assessment tools

Instructional tool

Three broad topics-writing and its types, components of a good essay and examples of written errors and error correction techniques, were used for this study because they are the major components of the writing skill.

Assessment tool

A package titled 'English Essay Writing Error Correction Guide' (EEWECG) consisting of instructions to be used in correcting essays written in both groups was developed by the researcher. That is, the tool developed as an alternative to the conventional method.

Table 1. Analysis of Variance of pre-test scores for all students

Source of variance	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	P
Between Groups	0.211	2	0.106	0.033	0.967
Within Groups	562.433	177			
Total	562.644	179	3.178		

* Significant (p<0.05)

Validation of the Instrument

To ensure content validity, the essay test was critically examined by two experienced senior secondary school teachers of English Language and an expert in curriculum studies.

Reliability of research instruments

The reliability of the instrument was calculated using a sample of thirty participants and the test-retest method. The research followed Crocber's (1965) suggestion that samples for test-retest should be small because large samples tend to produce high reliability coefficient. Test re-test method was used to establish the reliability of the instrument (EEWT). The trial test was done using two secondary schools namely; Ajue Grammar School, Odigbo and Asewele Grammar School, Odigbo, both of which were not part of the study. The results from the retest were subjected to item analysis and a coefficient of 0.6 was got as difficulty index while the discriminating index was 0.5.

Students' error counts were analysed and the scores were correlated using Pearson Product Movement Correlation. A coefficient of 0.85 was obtained. This shows that the essay test was reliable to perform the purpose for which it was designed.

Procedure for data collection

For the three schools selected for the study the researcher at different times administered the pre-test on the first day of meeting. The students' scripts were graded and the mean scores from the three schools were calculated.

Data analysis

The scores of the 180 sample (female=99, male=81) who eventually completed the six-weeks exercise were used for the analysis. The data generated were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The scripts of students in the two experimental and control groups were marked based on the assessment tool developed by the researcher (EEWECG). The results of this study are presented according to the sequence of the hypotheses generated. In testing the hypotheses for the study, two types of data were involved. They were data collected during the pre-test and post-test administration of research instrument on subjects in both the experimental and control groups.

RESULTS

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant difference in the pre-test scores on the performance of students exposed to the conventional error correction technique.

An examination of Table 1 shows that the differences between the means of the groups are significant. The F-ratio of 0.033 at p=0.967 level showed that there is no significant difference in the mean scores of all groups at the pre-test level. This implies that the groups were equivalent before the treatment. Based on this result, hypothesis is accepted.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant difference in the essay writing performance of students exposed to the indirect error correction technique and those exposed to the direct metalinguistic technique.

From Table 2, for the three teaching techniques, the experimental F-ratio of 7.121 is significant at 0.05 level. This indicates that the three teaching strategies are significantly different. This means that the mean scores for the groups are not statistically equal and that one or two strategies are superior to the others.

The need to locate the degree of effectiveness and to state which method is superior to the others informs the Scheffe's Post hoc Analysis (Table 3).

This indicates that the mean performances of students taught using indirect and direct metalinguistic techniques are statistically superior to those taught using the traditional/conventional method. That is, there is improvement in the score of the students exposed to direct and indirect metalinguistic technique.

Hypothesis 3

There is no significant difference in the academic performance of low and high ability students when exposed to indirect, direct metalinguistic and the conventional teaching techniques.

From Table 5, the F-value of 47.045 is significant at 0.05 level indicating that the result is significant. This is also evidence in the mean scores for the low and high ability groups as shown in Table 4. The total mean score for the low ability group (10.600) is significantly different from the total mean score for the high ability group (13.018). On the contrary, the interaction effect of the

Table 2. Summary of ANOVA of post-test scores of subjects in the experimental and control groups.

Source of variance	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	P
Between groups	65.344	2	32.67	7.121*	0.001
Within groups	812.05	177			
Total	877.39	179	4.59		

*Significant (p<0.05)

Table 3. Scheffe's Post-hoc analysis of post-test scores of experimental and control groups.

Research group (i)	Research group (ii)	N	X	Sd	Mean difference (1 – 11)	Std. error	P
Indirect technique	Direct metalinguistic	60	11.53	2.05	.33500	.3911	.671
	Conventional (control) Group	60	10.47	1.89	1.4167*	.3911	.002
Direct technique	Indirect technique	60	11.88	2.45	-.3500	.3911	.671
	Conventional (control) Group	60	10.47	1.89	1.0667*	.3911	.026
Conventional (control) Group	Indirect technique	60	11.88	2.45	-1.4167*	.3911	.002
	Direct metalinguistic	60	11.53	2.05	-1.0667*	.3911	.026

*The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Table 4. Mean and standard deviation of post-test scores of subjects of low and high ability groups.

Level of performance	Group(s)	N	X	SD
Low	Indirect technique (experimental group)	40	10.719	1.689
	Direct metalinguistic (experimental group)	40	10.485	1.228
	Conventional method (control group)	40	9.727	1.989
	Total	120	10.600	1.467
High	Indirect technique (experimental group)	27	13.214	2.529
	Direct metalinguistic (experimental group)	27	12.815	2.130
	Conventional method (control group)	26	11.370	1.305
	Total	60	13.018	2.329
Total	Indirect technique (experimental group)	60	11.883	2.450
	Direct metalinguistic (experimental group)	60	11.883	2.450
	Conventional method (experimental group)	60	10.467	1.891
	Total	180	11.294	2.214

performance level is not significant at 0.05 level as shown in Table 5. The result therefore indicated that the effectiveness of the teaching strategies did not depend on the performance level of the low and high ability students.

Hypothesis 4

There is no significant effect of sex on students'

academic performance when exposed to the indirect, direct metalinguistic and the conventional teaching techniques.

The result from Table 6, shows that there is a significant difference in the performance of male and female students in the indirect group with the female counterpart having the upper hand. Furthermore, there is a significant difference between the male and female counterparts exposed to the direct metalinguistic technique. The male

Table 5. Effectiveness of teaching techniques and level of performance on post-test scores of subjects of low and high ability groups.

Source of variance	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	P
Corrected model	177.292[a]	3	59.097	16.036	.000
Intercept	16610.687	1	16610.987	4507.314	.000
Performance level	173.378	1	173.378	47.045	.000
Group	2.987	1	2.987	.810	.390
Perf. Level × Group	.204	1	.204	.055	.814
Error	427.500	116	3.685		
Total	17055.000	120			
Corrected total	604.792	119			

Dependent variable: Post-test score; R Squared = .293; Adjusted R Square = .275; Significant ($p<0.05$).

Table 6. Difference between the Post-test mean scores of male and female subjects for indirect technique, direct metalinguistic and conventional methods.

Groups	Subjects	N	X	SD	dF	t	P
Indirect technique	Male	25	10.85	2.26			
	Female	35	12.63	2.32	58	2.966*	0.04
Direct matalinguistic	Male	23	12.26	2.11			
	Female	37	11.08	1.87	58	2.245*	0.029
Conventional method	Male	33	10.64	2.24	58		
	Female	27	10.26	1.35		0.766	0.447

*Significant ($p<0.05$).

subjects performed significantly better than their female counterparts. However, the performances of both male and female subjects exposed to the conventional method are not statistically different.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis for hypothesis one revealed that there was no significant difference in the pre-test mean scores of the students before the treatment. This means as long as the conventional method is used to correct students essay, their performance will be low. The results from hypothesis two revealed that both techniques (indirect and direct metalinguistic) could be effective in enhancing students essay writing skill. This finding is opposed to Truscott's (1996, 1999, 2004, 2007) sub-mission that error correction in L2 writings is harmful to the accuracy in students' writing. However, this study substantiates the findings of Ferris and Roberts (2001), Hyland (2003), Chandler (2003) and Bitchener (2008) that students who receive error correction feedback from teachers ultimately improve in writing accuracy. Im-proving students' writing skill demands that the language

teacher has the onerous duty to providing accurate feedback which will enable the learner to constantly distinguish for himself/herself whether he/she is perfor-ming well or not. Besides, constructive learning as enunciated by Vygotsky (1978) and supported by Zeng (2005), suggests that learners' errors should be corrected by language teachers logically and systematically.

Findings are also in line with the submission of Schmidt and Frota (1986) that when an error is not corrected the erroneous form may serve as further input to the learner. If not corrected, the learner may incorrectly internalize the error. Hypothesis three revealed that there was a significant difference in the post-test mean scores of low and high ability students that were exposed to the indirect, direct metalinguistic and conventional techni-ques. However, the interaction effect of the three teaching methods on the performance of low and high ability students is not significant at 0.05 level.

The results of hypothesis four showed clearly that both sexes performed well when exposed to the indirect and direct metalinguistic techniques while their (male and female) performance was low when they were exposed to the conventional method. It could be inferred that the students saw the conventional method as not fascinating

because it has been in practice for long. This result is in line with the findings of other studies involving sex differrence in respect of educational attainment (Ukwangwu and Ezike, 2006; Iroegbo, 2006).

Implications of findings

This study has been able to provide useful information particularly to English language teachers on more effective ways of correcting students' errors in English language essay. More importantly is the fact that language teachers would be better positioned to apply the indirect and direct metalinguistic techniques properly even if the textbooks recommended do not conform to the principles behind the indirect and direct metalinguistic techniques. It is noteworthy to point out that teacher educators, professionals and textbooks writers have used viable techniques in correcting students' essays.

Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from this is that both the indirect and direct metalinguistic error correction techniques are effective at improving students' essay writing skill and should be incorporated by English language teachers in the teaching learning process especially as it relates to writing skill.

Recommendation

Following the findings of this study, it is recommended that:

1. Teacher training departments in universities and colleges of education should expand the scope of the in-service training given to students in order that they would be trained using the participatory techniques in error correction.

2. Writers of English language textbooks should be more current in order to produce textbook materials that would reflect developments and innovations in teaching essay writing.

3. People concerned with the organization of conferences, seminars and workshops are encouraged to hold regular programmes to facilitate English essay writing skill using the error correction techniques exposed in this study.

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