

Developing Effective Paragraphs For Higher Performance In Essay Writing Of Senior Secondary School Students In Bwari Area Council Of The Federal Capital Territory

Helen Tope Olorunfemi and Christiana K. Bitrus

Veritas University, Abuja

Abstract

Writing remains the most important mode of knowing students' academic ability in learning institutions globally. The study investigated development of effective paragraphs for higher achievement in essay writing of senior secondary school students in Bwari Area Council in Nigeria's Federal Capital Territory. A quasi-experimental design was adopted for the study. Five research questions were raised to guide the study. The population was 5,804 students from twelve senior secondary schools. A sample of two hundred and five respondents was selected for the study using random sampling technique. A Paragraph Development Test (PDT) was used to collect the data. A test re-test reliability which yielded 0.75 correlation co-efficient was considered enough to determine the reliability of the instrument. In analyzing the data, simple mean statistics was used to answer the research questions. The results indicated that paragraph developers and pre-writing activities had effects on students' achievement in essay writing. Based on the results of the findings, it was recommended among others suggestions, teachers and students should practice the use of paragraph developers and pre-writing activities while writing essays to enhance performance in writing and for higher academic achievement among Nigerian students.

Keywords: Effective paragraphs, paragraph development, higher performance, essay writing

Introduction

Language is a means of expressing human thoughts and feelings which can either be through spoken words or written texts. While speech is spontaneous, writing requires more time to reflect and is a deliberate, planned, and more organised way of communication. Writing is the graphic manifestation of the spoken word. Although writing and speech share some affinities, the written word is what is used to determine standard of expression and it is the medium mostly used to determine the performance of students in all school subjects especially for English proficiency.

The importance of writing in the English language assessment is such that even the test of orals conducted by both the West African Examinations Council (WAEC) and the National Examinations Council (NECO) still use the written medium to test the oral performance of students in English. In fact, when public outcry is raised in the performance of students in English, what is often voiced is the poor writing ability of students. The outcry is such that students are often accused of inability to string a couple of sentences together to form a paragraph in addition to the glaring weaknesses observed in handling the grammar and mechanics of writing in English.

Researchers, teachers, parents, caregivers, school authorities, examination bodies as well as the government are unanimous in the concerns expressed about students' poor writing abilities. Specifically, the difficulties students experience in writing mostly start with difficulty in developing a coherent and effective paragraph which then leads to writing a full-fledged essay. Such difficulties may include their inability to generate viable ideas, lack of skills to write sentences logically and coherently, and inability to generate topic sentences and develop such topic sentences into paragraphs.

This explains why Nordquist 2019, defines a paragraph as a group of closely related sentences that develops a central idea, conventionally beginning on a new line. Thus when writing, a writer transits into a new paragraph when a new idea is generated. Wirantaka (2016) describes a paragraph as constituting the basic unit of organisation in writing group-related sentences which consist of two kinds of sentences namely, the topic sentence and supportive statements adding that the paragraph is important in helping the reader to comprehend the information of the writing.

To develop effective paragraphs, Meyers (2005) identifies three important parts of paragraphs which include: an introduction, a body and a conclusion. The introduction contains the main idea of a paragraph; the supporting sentences which develop the main idea by giving details, and explanations while the conclusion is the last part of the paragraph.

One of the important skills a writer must learn is the development and organisation of ideas into paragraphs which many students do

not have. The researchers have observed that students lack the skills of creating an outline of generated ideas which helps writers to stay organised. Students lack chronological arrangement of ideas that are already generated. They also lack proper use of punctuation marks and in-correct sentences characterized by fragments, run-on as well as scanty and improper expressions. These are responsible for poor achievement of paragraph development in essay writing.

Bearing the aforementioned in mind, this study set out to investigate whether or not students' practice of paragraph developers would help them achieve better essay writing since it has been observed that students in secondary schools have continued to perform poorly in essay writing; thereby, graduating into careers where they equally perform below expectation. Experience has shown that teachers of English in Bwari Area Council, in the Federal Capital Territory which forms the study setting have been observed to teach the writing component of the syllabus without paying specific attention to paragraph development which has been proved to enhance better essay writing. They only assign essay topics to students who write and turn in their essays for grading. No explicit instruction is given by the teachers to help students develop their paragraphs.

Accordingly, this study set out to investigate how instruction in developing effective paragraphs in essay writing of senior secondary school students in Bwari Area Council can yield higher academic achievement through instruction in paragraph developers and pre-writing activities. Specifically, the study was aimed at determining the mean scores of essay writing achievement of the experimental and

the control groups in both the pre-test and posttest results in terms of the use of topic sentences and supportive sentences in paragraph development.

Conceptual Clarification and Literature Review

Paragraph

Paragraph is defined by Hussen (2015) as an extended way of helping a reader by a writer to follow a piece of writing while for Oshima and Hogue (2016), a paragraph is a basic unit of organisation in writing a group of related sentences; with topic sentence and supportive sentences. To Edward (2019) the purpose of every paragraph is to give an indication about a swing in thinking, and also give readers a rest. Thus, a paragraph is created to signal an introduction of a new line of thinking in a discourse or an essay writing. For Bamgbose (2020) a paragraph is a group of sentences that elaborate a single idea noting that the attributes of a paragraph include: helping the writer communicate his or her message clearly and emphasizing the central idea through the discussion of it. Bamgbose outlined the following as the essential qualities of a good paragraph: (i) it must reflect unity, which means that the paragraph should only deal with one idea or topic. This dedication of a paragraph to a single idea makes it easy for the reader to follow the writer's thought in meaningful bits. (ii) It must be complete in itself; it must show evidence of reasonable development of a central point. He added that if a writer focuses on an idea that cannot be fully developed, the paragraph will be incomprehensible for the reader. (iii) There is a topic sentence where the central idea is summed up. It is also important to know that the function of the other sentences is to

emphasize the point disclosed by the topic sentence pointing out that the topic sentence serves as a sign post to the meaning of the whole paragraph. (iv) Presence of transitional markers sometimes called linkers or discourse markers which help to link sentences together within a paragraph and also help to achieve cohesion within the paragraph.

Arnaudet and Ellen (2012) assert that the decision about what to put into paragraphs by the writer begins with brainstorming which lays the foundation of developing a set of paragraphs. With brainstorming, the writer is able to ensure the unity of the paragraph, achieve cohesion such that sentences are arranged logically and follow a definite plan for development. They point out that every idea discussed in the paragraph should be adequately explained and supported through evidence and details that work together to explain the paragraph's controlling idea to make the essay understandable to the readers.

Odell, Vacca, Hobbs & Warrier (2007) identify pre-writing activities necessary as strategies for teaching and learning of effective essay writing. According to them, pre-writing activities can be used to find a subject to write about and to gather information about a subject. They pointed out that although the pre-writing strategies are presented separately, a writer can use more than one at a time. Odell et al identified journalist "five questions : who? what? when? where? why? and how?" as a good brainstorming pre-writing strategy. Bitrus (2015) on the other hand, proposed listing as one of the pre-writing activities for students. According to the author, this is needed for the generation of information and content for essay writing in the classroom. Listing helps students and teachers to discover their level of knowledge on a topic as well as activate the

prior knowledge to teach the students an enriching lesson on that topic.

Wali and Maani (2020) described the supporting sentences as the sentences that build up the body of the paragraph. They added that the supporting sentences are used to support the topic sentence of the paragraph. They explain that the supporting sentences help to provide logic and evidence through which the writer can convince the readers or to convey the message of the paragraph. Supporting sentences are in two categories, major and minor. While the major supporting sentences directly support the topic sentence in a paragraph, the minor supporting sentences directly support the major supporting sentence and indirectly support the topic sentence.

For the concluding sentence of the paragraph, Bascunan (2019) identified it as the last part of a paragraph that brings the paragraph to a logical conclusion. The concluding sentence according to Bascunan (2019), depending on the choice of the writer's interest, helps to: (i) to restate the main idea that has been mentioned in the topic sentence in another way of paraphrasing the main idea; (ii) to give an opinion as a writer of your text with some verbs like, *think, consider, believe* and so on; (iii) to make a prediction based on your supporting sentences to finish the paragraph and; (iv) to offer a suggestion based on what a writer has written with some words like *suggest, recommend, propose, advise* and so on.

Methodology

This study adopted a quasi-experimental design involving the use of pre-test-treatment-post-test pattern, where the experimental group was exposed to instruction

on paragraph development using the paragraph developers while the control group taught without the strategy. The population of this study consisted of five thousand eight hundred and four (5,804) students in public senior secondary schools in Bwari Area Council with twelve (12) public senior secondary schools as at the time of this research as obtained from the Quality Assurance, Education Secretariat, Area II, Abuja, Zonal Education Office, Bwari.

A sample of two hundred and five SS 2 students was drawn from the population using purposive sampling procedure. Two schools were used. In each of the selected school, intact classes were used in order not to disturb the normal school arrangement. The researcher made use of SS II students because it was not a certificate class (external examination class). One school was assigned the experimental group while the other was regarded as the control group through a throw of a coin.

The instrument for data collection was an achievement test known as "Paragraph Development Test" (PDT) designed by the researchers. It consisted of test items to ascertain the ability of the students to create, generate ideas, create topic and supportive sentences. To help them develop this ability, the researchers created a treatment program which consisted of training in brainstorming, journalist five questions, listing, and the use of outlining for the already generated ideas.

Results

To answer the first research question to determine the difference in pre-test mean scores in essay writing achievements between the experimental and control groups, Table 1 below presents the findings.

Table 1: Mean analysis showing pre-test mean scores in essay writing achievements of the experimental and control groups.

Group	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean Difference
Experimental	105	30.60	13.136	0.000
Control	100	30.60	13.136	

Table 1 shows that both the experimental and control groups obtained a mean score of 30.60 and the control group had a mean score of 30.60 with a mean difference of 0.000. This implies that both the experimental and control groups' achievement were homogenous.

For research question two which sought to identify the difference in the mean scores of experimental and control groups' achievements in the stating of main ideas, Table 2 below presents the findings.

Table 2: Mean analysis showing the mean scores of experimental and control groups' achievements in the stating of main ideas.

Group	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean Difference
Experimental	105	69.60	6.167	13.420
Control	100	56.18	6.755	

Table 2 shows that the mean score of 69.60 for experimental group was greater than the mean score of 56.18 for the control group with a mean difference of 13.420 in favour of experimental group. This implies that the students in the experimental group performed

better than their counterparts in the control group.

For research question three which sought to determine the difference in the mean scores of essay writing achievements of the experimental and control groups in the use of topic sentence, the findings are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Mean analysis showing the mean scores of essay writing achievements of the experimental and control groups in the use of topic sentence

Group	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean Difference
Experimental	105	69.10	6.420	14.047
Control	100	56.18	6.755	

Table 3 shows that the mean score of 69.10 for experimental group was greater than the mean score of 56.18 for the control group with a mean difference of 14.047 in favour of experimental group. This implies that the students in the experimental group performed better than their counterparts in the control

group. And for research question four which investigated the difference in the mean scores of essay writing achievements of the experimental and control groups in the use of supportive sentences, Table 3 below present the findings.

Table 4: Mean analysis the mean scores of essay writing achievements of the experimental and control groups in the use of supportive sentences

Group	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean Difference
Experimental	105	68.94	6.279	12.893
Control	100	56.48	6.911	

Table 4 shows that the mean score of 68.94 for experimental group was greater than the mean score of 56.48 for the control group with a mean difference of 12.893 in favour of experimental group. This implies that the students in the experimental group performed

better than their counterparts in the control group. The fifth research question revealed the achievement of mean scores of the experimental group and the control group in the post-test results and the findings are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Mean analysis of the mean scores of the experimental group and the control group in the post-test results

Group	N	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean Difference
Experimental	105	68.93	6.308	13.152
Control	100	55.78	6.910	

Table 5 shows that the mean score of 68.93 for experimental group was greater than the mean score of 55.78 for the control group with a mean difference of 13.152 in favour of experimental group. This implies that the students in the experimental group performed better than their counterparts in the control group in the post-test.

Discussion of Results

The study on developing effective paragraphs for higher achievement in essay writing of senior secondary school students in Bwari Area Council was based on the use of paragraph developers demonstrated through topic and supportive sentences. The findings revealed significant effect of paragraph development on students' achievement as shown in the results. The students in the experimental group presented more organised

and coherent paragraphs at post-test. This shows that the exposure of the experimental group to instruction using the pre-writing strategies such as journalist questions and as well as pre-writing activities such as brainstorming helped them to understand the underlying structure of a particular essay type. As Ezeokoli and Igubor (2016) pointed out, it is simply not enough to know what to write (content). Students must also know how to organise the content to meet specific writing task demands. In other words, the use of pre-writing strategies in paragraph development was demonstrated in better achievement in expository essay writing of students in the experimental group. The reason could be that the students in the experimental group were exposed to paragraph developers and pre-writing activities through systematic instruction which helped them to understand

the underlying structure of a particular essay type they were to write. This is contrary to what happens to students in the control group who were the conventional and traditional classroom where students were rarely helped on the generation of ideas and outlining before writing by the teachers. This position agrees with other studies on the benefits of explicit instruction on pre-writing strategies before engagement in essay writing (Hossain, 2015 & Salija, 2017). Salija's (2017) study on the effect of using outline of idea development on the quality of student essay writing for instance aligns with this study on the effect of paragraph development on essay writing achievement of senior secondary students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that students taught lessons on paragraph development in essay writing will perform better than those who are not taught

paragraph development systematically or explicitly. This shows that students learn and perform better when given explicit instruction on paragraph development as a basis for effective essay writing. We therefore recommend that:

- i. Students should use pre-writing activities in essay writing for effective paragraph development in classroom activities as well as in external examinations.
- ii. Teachers should use paragraph developers and pre-writing activities of idea generation and outlining in essay writing instruction.
- iii. Curriculum developers should include pre-writing activities in essay writing in the senior secondary school curriculum in Nigeria
- iv. Government should organise seminars, conferences and workshops for teachers to be abreast of new techniques for teaching paragraph development and essay writing.

References

- Akinwamide, T. K. (2012). The influence of process approach on English and second language students' performance in essay writing. *English Language Teaching*, 5 (3), 16 -23. <https://www.google.com/url...>
- Bamgbose, G.A. (2020). Paragraph. *Businessdaycolumnist/article*. <https://www.google.com/amp/s>
- Bascunan, D. (2019). The concluding sentence. <https://writebetter.io/e...>
- Bitrus, C.K. (2015) Effect of workshop method of teaching writing in the composing skills of senior secondary in Sabon Tasha Zone of Kaduna State, Nigeria. (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation) University of Ahmadu Bello Zaria.
- Edward, O. (2019). Are paragraph theories array of impressions? *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, (14), 15-68. <https://www.google.com/url>.
- Ezeokoli, F.O. & Igubor, P. (2016). Improving secondary school students' achievement in essay/ writing using two modes of essay structure-based instructional strategies. *International Journal for Innovation Educative Research*, 4 (6), 34-56. <https://www.google.com/url>
- Hossain, M.I. (2015). Teaching productive skills to the students: A secondary level scenario A Thesis from BRAC University (99). <https://www.google.com/ur/>

Hussen, M. (2015). Assessing students' paragraph writing problem. The case of Bodeno secondary school, grade 10 English class in focus.
<https://www.academic.edu.on>

Meyers, A. (2005). *Composing with confidence: Writing effective paragraph*. Pearson.
Edition: 7th. <https://www.abebooks>.

Norquist, R. (2019). *Best practices for the most effective use of paragraphs*.
<https://www.thoughtco>.

Odell, L., Vacca, R., Hobbs, & Warriner, J. (2007). *Elements of language. Third Course, Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics* California: Holt.

Oshima, A. & Hogue, A. (2016). *Introduction to academic writing*. 3rd Edition. Published by Pearson. <https://www.google.com/ur/...>

Salija, K. (2017). The effect of using outline on idea development quality of students' essay writings. University Negeri, Makassar, Indonesia. *International Journal of Language Education*, (1). 11-17.

Wirantaka, A. (2016). Paragraph writing of academic texts in an EFL. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, 1(2), 34-45.
<https://www.google.com/url>.

Wali, O. & Abdul, Q. (2020). The importance of paragraph writing: An introduction. *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences*. 03.44-50
<https://www.researchg>.

- **Helen Tope Olorunfemi** is a Master's student in the Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education, Veritas University, Abuja.
- **Christiana K. Bitrus** holds a Ph.D and she is in the Department of Arts and Social Sciences Education, Veritas University, Abuja.