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**Exploratory action  
research is an ideal form  
of practitioner research.**

Kikelomo Adeniyi (Nigeria)

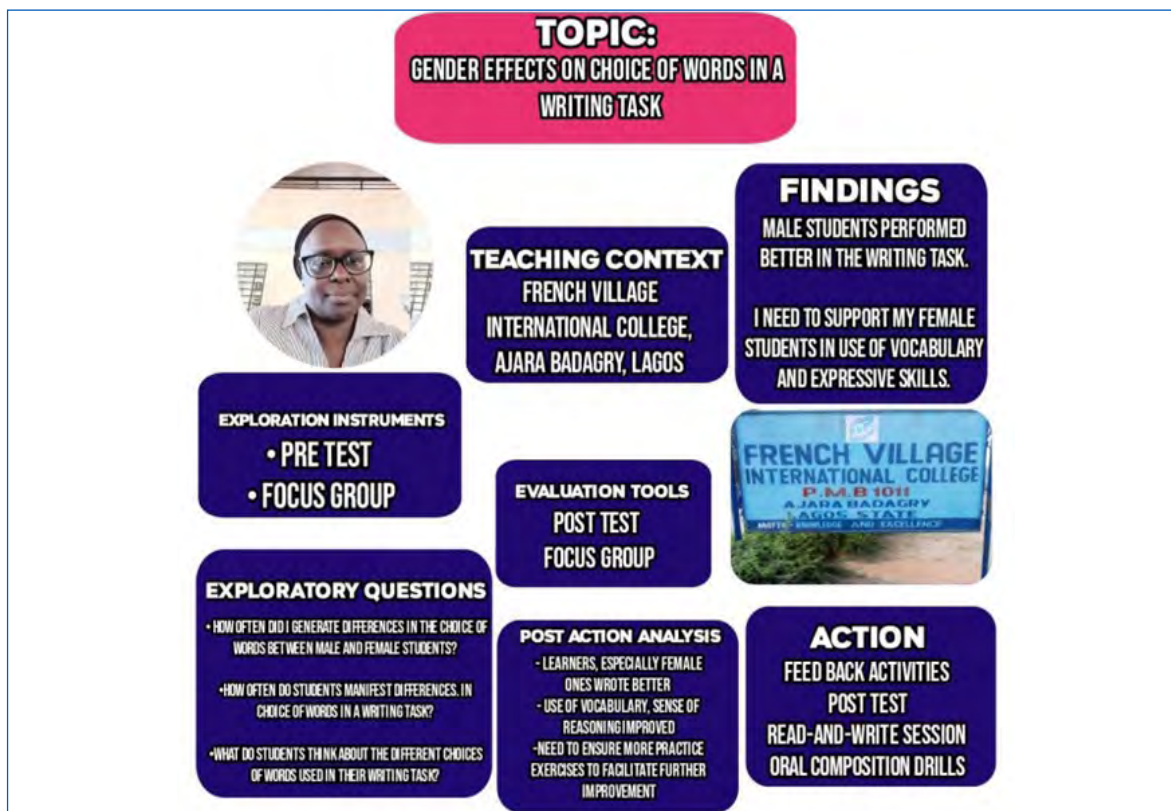




# Dr Kikelomo Adeniyi

Dr Kikelomo Adeniyi is a teacher and teacher-trainer at the Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos, Nigeria. She teaches courses in General Studies English and also core English courses to her undergraduate and Professional Diploma in Education students. She has a couple of publications to her credit, and she is a contributor to the British Council, Teaching English Africa platform.

# Gender effects on choice of words in a writing task



I am a teacher-trainer at the Lagos State University of Education, Oto/Ijanikin, Lagos, Nigeria. My research was carried out at the Nigeria French Language Village International Secondary School, Badagry in Lagos, Nigeria. It is a secondary school where learners are expected to spend six years – three years for Basic Education and another three for Senior Secondary Education. The participants of this research were of an average age of between 15 and 16 years. They were all in their final year of Senior Secondary Education. These students are drawn from different tribes of Lagos, the economic headquarters of Nigeria, which is a cosmopolitan state.



Photo of the French Village International College

I have been a teacher and teacher-trainer for more than three decades. Over the years, I have observed that more often than not there are differences in the written essays of my male and female students. I also observed that male students tend to write better than female ones. For example, they tend to use words more expressively. A discussion with a colleague made me realise that her thoughts on this were aligned with mine. This piqued my interest and hence the desire to explore the area of writing tagged 'Gender differences in the choice of words in a writing task'. This would enable me to get empirical evidence to support my students more in improving their writing.

To ensure I obtained the needed data for this exploratory research topic, I identified three exploratory research questions (ERQs) which guided my thoughts viz:

- A. How often do I generate differences in the choice of words between male and female students?
- B. How often do students manifest differences in the choice of words in a writing task?
- C. What do students think about the different choices of words used in their writing task?

I obtained data on these ERQs through a focus group discussion, a reflective journal and a pre-test. Such a test was based on essay questions to identify if indeed differences existed in the students' choice of words and their performance in the written task. This data predominantly formed the basis of this research. The reflective journal was specifically selected as it gave me the opportunity to think over the probable reasons for the differences in the choice of words between male and female students after analysing their written task. In addition, the focus group discussion – held with eight of the students – gave the room to further interact with the students to identify the probable factors responsible for the differences in the choice of words (as the content of some of these essays was revealed to them) and also assist in overcoming the identified challenges. Moreover, this informal discussion also gave me the chance to identify what these students think about the different choices of words used in their writing task. The task for the pre-test was to write an essay of between 200 and 250 words on the topic 'It is important that the Nigerian government gives free education to university students'. The students were asked to state if they agreed or disagreed with the statements and give reasons and some specific examples to support their opinion.

Forty students, comprising 20 female and 20 male students, participated in writing the essay as class work. The analysis of this writing task was done to identify if differences existed in their writing tasks, thereby answering the ERQs. After the essays had been written and analysed, a focus group discussion was held with eight students that originally wrote the essay. Their responses in the focus group discussion, the reflective journal and the analysis of their essays formed the basis of my research finding.

There was a significant difference in the vocabulary used by male and female students, with males exhibiting a flair for advanced choice of words against the simple word choice of female students. Male students were also more articulate than female ones (this finding was taken from the analysis of the writing task). Precisely, it was discovered that most male students (15/20) used advanced words in their essays. Meanwhile, a few female students (7/20) used advanced words, while the majority of them used simple and elementary words in their essays.

From the focus group discussion, the students were able to distinguish advanced vocabulary items from simple ones when read out to them. However, they could not detect the gender of the writers from the examples from their written texts.

Specifically, most students in the focus group (6/8) could not identify if an essay was written by a male or female when read out to them except if the gender of the writer was explicitly stated. However, most of them knew the difference between simple and advanced words. Moreover, a little over half of them linked correct usage of advanced words to a high level of intelligence and better writing skills. In my reflective journal, I ruminated over what could be the reasons for these differences and felt it could be that the male students spent much time reading extensively and also watched educational videos, which might have contributed to their advanced word choice.

I therefore concluded that the male students performed better in the writing task than the female ones. The male students' vocabulary and expressions were more advanced. For example, I found the use of vocabulary items that are more advanced with the male students – such as 'intellectually capable', 'full potential', 'mass produce' and 'nonchalant' – than with the female students.

From the analysis, I realised that I needed to support the female students to improve their expressive skills, particularly in expanding their vocabulary through intensive and extensive reading and listening, oral composition drills and the use of a vocabulary book and dictionary.

To address these challenges in writing and improve female students' writing, I took the following actions:

- I introduced oral composition drills where I had a tutorial with the students on the nitty-gritty of essay writing, specifically structure, choice of words, use of data and evidence, and paragraphing among others.
- I introduced a read-and-write session where we went through the write-ups of some female journalists who wrote on a similar topic. This was to give them more exposure and to also teach the female students that they could also write as excellently as the models given them. Male and female students were paired for feedback activities so that they could learn from one another. We further went through the earlier written task to ensure they learned from their mistakes.
- A writing activity – a post-test – was given to the students to find out the impact of the intervention on their performance. In all, emphasis was laid on the female students.

To identify the impact of these actions, I evaluated the actions by analysing the post-test given. I also had a focus group discussion with 12 of the participants – 8 females and 4 males. The following questions were asked in the focus group discussion:

1. What do you think of the oral discussion on writing activities? Did it help you in writing better, and how?
2. What do you think of the lesson/session where we examined the write-ups of some selected female writers? What did you learn from these activities?
3. What do you think of the feedback activities that allowed you to do the analysis of the writing task of your male/female classmates?
4. Do you think you are a better writer now after these actions?
5. What do you think about the guidance provided by your teacher? What other type of support do you think you need to improve your writing skills?

The results of the post-test indicated that the actions attempted made learners – males and females – generally perform better in the writing task. In the post-test, 88 per cent of the male students showed a noticeable improvement by performing better than they did in the pre-test. A male respondent stated in the focus group that the oral activities assisted him in 'using better vocabulary (words), proper organisation of paragraphs and points' (focus group interview).

Of the female respondents, 89 per cent also showed a better performance in the post-test, with improvement in their manifestation of the ability to have more content to develop and better organisation of their write-ups. Indeed, one stated in the focus group that 'the actions made me write a lot better than the one I wrote previously' (focus group interview).

On the issue of the need to support my female students to improve their expressive skills, particularly to expand their vocabulary, data indicated that female students (100 per cent of them) admitted that the oral composition drills/discussion were impactful. Some stated that it made them develop their vocabulary/choice of words and sense of reasoning (focus group interview). All the students agreed that the examination of the write-ups of female writers was also of much assistance. One said, 'It is a brilliant idea, though the male gender was dominant, females are also making an impact in this aspect' (focus group interview).

Some also stated that seeing female writers' work made them aspire to also write (well) like them. Indeed, another said it 'made me realise that females are also good writers and made me believe in myself as a female' (focus group interview). Further, students stated that the feedback activities that allowed them to do the analysis of the writing task of male/female classmates were also worthwhile. One said she was able to learn from her male classmate as he pointed out some of her mistakes. Another said she learned about how to make a good choice of words and use of punctuation marks, among other things (focus group interview).

All the participants in the oral discussion agreed the teacher's guidance assisted them. One stated that it helped her in 'developing my vocabulary and spelling', and another declared that 'the guidance was satisfying and encouraging'. They all believe they still need to engage in more practice, to ensure consistent writing and guidance.

After the implementation of action plans, I realised that the learners, especially female ones, wrote better, their sense of reasoning improved and they had more content to write, but I needed to ensure more practice exercises to facilitate further improvement.

I realised that exploratory action research is an ideal form of practitioner research, one that may be used to identify and eradicate issues in the classroom. This exploratory research training has made me learn quite a lot about classroom research and using such to tackle existing classroom challenges.

I have learned that when such issues arise/exist, I need to delve into finding out why such is the case and how such challenges might be ameliorated. Indeed, the exposure has successfully empowered me to carry out more such exploratory research and also train others on it. I plan to get further engaged in such research and also teach my trainees and pre-service teachers to get involved in such.