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Title	Exploratory action research on errors in essay writing
Publisher	British Council
Publication date	2023
Download date	2026-04-13 14:58:36
Link to Item	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14069/712">https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14069/712</a>



# Exploratory action research on errors in essay writing

Oluwatimilehin Amos Akinade  
Country: Nigeria

**ERRORS ON ESSAY TYPE WRITING**

**Exploratory questions**

- What do I expect from my students' performance in essay type writing?
- What do my colleagues think about errors in essay type writing?
- What is my students' view about errors in essay writing?
- What are the errors being committed by my students in essay writing?

**Methods**

- Reflective journal
- Interviews
- Focus group interviews
- Students' reflective writing

**Solutions**

- Develop an essay outline that will provide guidelines on principles of good essay writing.
- Practice demonstration (teacher modelling), writing frames and templates that provide great source for scaffolding instruction and building students confidence in essay writing.
- Encourage peer feedback among learners to facilitate friendly feedback among peers as they organize their ideas.
- Expose learners to grade level readings such as story books, magazines, journals and newspapers.

**Identified Problems**

- My learners were making a lot of errors in their essay writing due to lack of skills on essay writing and poor reading habits (the errors being committed by my learners were majorly out of context points, grammatical errors and improper punctuations)
- Learners felt anxious when asked to write an essay because they did not have the idea of what to put down.
- A few with ideas on what to write had problems organizing the ideas into a coherent essay as they lacked skills on how to structure and organize the essay.
- The learners lacked confidence in their essay writing, writing the way they talk which disregarded grammatical rules.

**ACTION**

The essay guidelines and practices towards good essay writing Practice demonstration (teacher modeling), writing frames and templates Grade level readings such as storybook, magazines, journals and newspapers

**RESULTS**

Good structuring of ideas into three main parts: introduction, body and conclusion Making essays without committing out of context and grammatical errors with wrong punctuations Development of confidence and boldness in creating self essays in a well structured manner. Organizing of ideas into a coherent essay

**Students' Reflective Writing on Errors in Essay Type Writing**  
Country of Research: Nigeria

**Instructions:** All students are required to answer the following questions

- What errors do I make in my essay writing?
- My most common errors are
- My errors would have reduced if I had
- I struggle to write with little or no idea in my essay writing
- I can be assisted to avoid errors in essay writing

**High School of Basic Design Alimosho**

**A GROUP OF LEARNERS PARTICIPATING IN THE RESEARCH**



## **Oluwatimilehin Amos Akinade**

is a teacher of English, literature and Christian religious studies. He holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English Education, and a Nigeria Certificate in Education in CRS/English. Oluwatimilehin, an inducted teacher in Nigeria, has six years of experience in primary and secondary education in different educational systems (private and public): Christmark Academy, B'olafeko Group of Schools and Ijebu Igbo Girls' Grammar School

**Nigeria**

## Background

I work with the Old Students Association of Ijebu Igbo Girls' Grammar School, a high school located in Ijebu North Local Government Area of Ogun State in Nigeria. There, I teach the Junior Secondary School (JSS1–3) Christian religious studies; however, as a graduate and teacher of English education, I voluntarily teach the English course to the JSS3 learners, who are within the age range of 12–14 years old, in the afternoon. These students take three hours of English weekly. Most of these learners have a low socio-economic status, so they do not have the opportunity to attend private schools. The only contact they have with formal English instruction has been in public education. The institution itself depends on the state resources, which are limited, so the technology available to help the teaching process is limited, and the materials used are mostly provided by the teachers.

I chose to explore the errors being made in the students' essay writing. This is because I noticed that my learners were making a lot of mistakes in their essay writing, which I attributed to a lack of skills in essay writing and poor reading habits. The main errors being made by my learners were mostly out-of-context points, grammatical errors and improper punctuation. I also noticed that students felt anxious when asked to write an essay. I assumed that they did not have any idea of what to put down, while the few with ideas on what to write had problems organising the ideas into a coherent essay as they lacked skills on how to structure and organise the essay. Finally, I felt that the learners lacked confidence in their essay writing. As such, they write in the same way they talk, which disregards grammatical rules. However, these were anecdotal, and I needed to depend on empirical evidence to ascertain the cause of the errors to enable me to come up with a remedy.

## Exploratory research questions

This research topic is of utmost importance to post-primary school learners as they need to have a good structure in one of the basic language skills of the learners (writing skills). The topic is a viable means towards developing good and effective writing skills through which the learners could have flawless write-ups. I needed to put into perspective the issues identified.

To this end, I designed four exploratory questions. They were:

- 1. What do I expect from my learners' performance in essay-type writing?**
- 2. What do my colleagues think about errors in essay-type writing?**
- 3. What do my learners think about errors in essay writing?**
- 4. What are the errors being committed by my learners in essay writing?**

In a bid to provide answers to the four questions, after three classroom observations, I decided to carry out a focus group interview and also collect data through my own and learners' reflective writing. There were two sets of focus group interviews. One was carried out with five colleagues, and another with 18 randomly selected learners constituting three groups (six learners in each group).

## Findings

After analysis of the findings, I was able to deduce the reasons why my learners were committing errors in their essay-type writing. First, my learners lacked skills in essay writing, and poor reading habits made learners make a lot of errors, starting from out-of-context points, grammatical errors and improper use of punctuation marks. I also found out that some learners did not have an idea of what to put down, while the few with ideas on what to write had problems in structuring and organising the ideas into a coherent essay. Lastly, I was able to understand that my learners lacked confidence in writing. Therefore, they write in the same way they talk, which negates the grammatical rules.

Learners' reflective writing indicated that 25 of the learners, constituting 62.5 per cent, were anxious whenever they had to work on essay-type writing because they did not know what and how to write. Because of their anxiety, they tend to put down whatever comes to their brain. Responses from my colleagues identified the same issues in writing: poor structure, wrong spellings and jumbled-up write-ups. A key issue that came out of the focus group interview with colleagues was the inability to mark all the time due to large classes. They said it was 'difficult to provide timely and constant feedback on students' writing'. They also identified key errors in students' writing as relating to grammar, punctuation, context and direct translation from the first language to English.

## Intervention

In order to proffer solutions to the problems identified through the exploratory questions, an action plan of six lessons was adopted. The actions included:

- **the development of an essay outline that provided learners with guidelines on the principles of good essay writing**
- **practice demonstrations (teacher modelling), writing frames and templates that provide a great source for scaffolding instruction and building students' confidence in essay writing**
- **encouraging peer feedback among learners to facilitate friendly feedback among peers as they organise their ideas, which would reduce pressure on marking by the teacher**
- **exposing learners to grade-level readings, such as storybooks, magazines, journals and newspapers.**

These actions were then implemented over four weeks. Peer observation and focus group interviews were adopted in a bid to evaluate the effects of the strategies included in the action plan. Two peer observations were carried out using an observation instrument for the observer, a colleague, during and after the intervention. Again, the observer who has been following up on the class since the exploratory stage initially wanted to know the end result of the exploratory challenges identified. He was instructed to focus his attention on the observable behaviour of the learners during and after the action plan.

For the focus group interview, the learners were asked about their insights regarding the action plan strategies. Nine learners, constituting 50 per cent of learners selected for focus group interviews during the exploratory stage, participated in the focus group session of evaluation. To get their opinion of the actions carried out, five questions were designed for the interview, and the questions focused on each of the actions implemented.

## **Results of the intervention**

After the actions were carried out, I established that the essay guidelines and practices towards good essay writing helped the learners in structuring their ideas into three main parts – introduction, body and conclusion – which made a difference from how they used to write without paying attention to the three major parts. The observations revealed that aside from being able to identify the main parts of an essay, the learners wrote essays without committing out-of-context errors because they had been introduced to how to develop and build up ideas in essay-type writing.

The observations and the focus groups suggested that with the practice demonstration (teacher modelling), writing frames and templates, learners were able to develop self-confidence in creating their own essays in a guided and controlled manner. Also, learners were able to explore the writing frames and templates to develop the courage to present the ideas of what would be written in an oral format before their colleagues. A learner said: 'The demonstration helped me understand what is expected of me during the writing exercise, making it easy for me to organise the ideas in my essay.'

Through grade-level readings such as storybooks, magazines, journals and newspapers, learners were able to build up their ideas in a well-organised manner. Although learners still have issues with their vocabulary, it is still much better when compared with the previous experiences before the actions were taken. As such, focus groups and observations made it clear that the few learners with ideas on what to write, but who faced problems with organising the ideas into a coherent essay, and those without ideas all presented their ideas in a simple but well-structured and organised manner after the action was taken. Meanwhile, grammatical errors and incorrect punctuation are reduced to a minimal level.

When the learners were asked about their perspective of the action plan carried out, they responded that reading newspapers, storybooks and writing essays with other class activities within a short period of time appeared to be challenging at first, but they eventually enjoyed the process because of how it made their learning of good essay writing so simple to understand.

The learners added that the initial problem of getting scared whenever they had to write an essay became a thing of the past, as they already have in them the principles needed in making a meaningful essay. Moreover, a few of the learners said they had already developed the urge to put each of their ideas into writing.

## **Final reflections**

The plan carried out made me realise that the poor performance of many learners in essay-type writing is not what constant essay activities could solve. It involves the identification and application of strategies that are helpful in bringing out the desired changes in the learners' essay performance.

To buttress the above, many teachers (of which I was formerly one) are of the opinion that the more the learners are given constant essays, the more they write well, with their errors being reduced. However, through the actions carried out, constant essay activities without problem identification and proper guidelines would only make the learners keep repeating the same errors the teacher hopes to eradicate.

Hence, constant essays can only improve learners' errors and skills when problems or factors affecting their essay well-being are first identified and leveraged by the teachers towards providing the needed solutions in aiding the learners' performance.

Based on the experience gained in this research, I personally discovered that it is expedient for me to stay updated as a teacher, without limiting my teaching activities to passing across information to learners within the four walls of the classroom alone, as that makes teachers static and not dynamic, without having their knowledge broadened. This research has therefore helped me to see the need for personal development. It has equally opened my eyes to teaching by solving educational challenges, as a result of which I would teach as a teacher-researcher and use research as a tool to enhance effective teaching.