
**EFFECTS OF RESPONSE TO TEXT INSTRUCTIONAL METHOD ON
WRITING ACHIEVEMENT OF FRESH TERTIARY STUDENTS**

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Abstract

Fresh university students are often at a loss when faced with writing tasks in their new academic environment. This study therefore investigated the effects of the response to text instructional method on the writing achievement of newly admitted university students. Two hundred and forty-eight freshly admitted undergraduates of a university in Owerri, south east Nigeria, participated in the study. The study employed the pre test, post test, control group, quasi-experimental design. One experimental and one control group (consisting of a total of 94 females and 154 males) were used for the study. Students' scores in their pre and post test writing were used as data which were analysed with the use of t-tests, means and standard deviations. The results show that the response to text instructional method had a higher effect on the writing achievement of the students than the conventional method which is the regular mode of instruction. It was recommended that language teachers at the tertiary and other levels of education should adopt the response to text method to enhance the writing proficiency of their students.

Keywords: Text Instructional Method, Writing Achievement. Fresh Tertiary Students, undergraduates, language teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in writing the English language is essential if university students are to succeed in their academic life. This is because writing enables them to gain knowledge of the subjects which they encounter in school, to dissolve doubts, and to communicate this knowledge back to their instructors and other audiences. Through writing, the learners deliberate on the subject matter of interest, and as a result obtain new insights about it (Nathan and Abernathy 2012). Writing enables the students to succeed in their

academic work and in other areas of endeavour and results in the development and progress of the individual (Gallaher, 2017). For these reasons, reading and writing proficiency among students cannot be treated lightly.

Deficient performance and weak grades in English Language and content area courses (in which the students have to demonstrate their knowledge through writing in English language) have become a feature of some students' performance in both informal tests and semester examinations (Otagburuagu and Nnamani, 2014). The universities themselves try to address these challenges by designing and requiring fresh students to take some compulsory courses in the English Language. But the level of competence exhibited by the students at the conclusion of the courses still leaves much to be desired. Consequently, many graduates leave the university without acquiring the requisite literacy expertise that would help them excel in their endeavours (Adebiyi, 2012). This has constituted a basis for anxiety to parents, teachers, education authorities, the government, as well as employers of labour.

Amongst different reasons enumerated as causing the lack of proficiency of students in reading and writing, the methods of teaching adopted by instructors stand out as the most crucial. The conventional system of teaching in which a teacher is a repository of all knowledge and in which model texts are to be emulated by the learners is the most favoured in the Nigerian school system (Achuonye, 2015; Ogwu, 2019). Emphasis is laid on students reading and writing accurately, with memorization being the key instrument of learning. Udosen (2012) notes that the conventional method of instruction, in which all knowledge and information is in the custody of the teacher who gives it out to the learners while they sit and listen without any contribution on their own part, is the style most favoured in English language classrooms in Nigeria, from the kindergarten to the tertiary level. But unfortunately, writing cannot be learned through commitment to memory, regurgitation or simulation of model texts since it requires the combination of different skills during the writing process (Muodumogu and Unwaha, 2013). This presupposes that a learner would, apriori, have acquired the knowledge of different

language skills in order to be able to handle the new academic responsibilities of a tertiary environment.

Research Problem

Instructional methods are fundamental to the discharge of the duty of imparting knowledge to the new student by the teacher (Ogwu, 2019). In Nigeria, there is no significant direct instruction given in reading and writing except perhaps where students are studying English and/or literary studies as their core courses (Enighe and Afangideh, 2018). Where writing is taught at all, emphasis is laid on the product of writing. This type of instruction focuses on the mechanics of spelling, punctuation, and correctness of the learner's writing rather than on the personal thoughts, experiences and techniques which will enable the learner to produce quality writing. This type is the conventional form of instruction used in the secondary schools (Muodumogu and Unwaha, 2013) which has affected the proficiency of the students as they enter the university. Consequently, the majority of new entrants to the universities are admitted with inadequate competency which thus makes them ill-prepared for the advanced reading and writing requirements of tertiary academic work (Springer, Wilson and Dole, 2014; Komba, Kafambo, Njabili and Kira, 2012, Ayodele, Akinkurolere, Ariyo, Mahmud and Abuya, 2017). Therefore, it seems that in order to address the poor level of erudition by fresh students in the tertiary institutions, scrupulous consideration must be directed towards the problem of methods and strategies of instruction of these literacy skills, especially that of writing. The response to text strategy was therefore employed in this study as a means to address the above challenges.

Research Questions

The following research questions were used to investigate the problem

1. What effect did the Response to text instructional method have on the writing achievement of students?
2. What level of difference exists between the writing achievement of the experimental and control students?

Review of Concepts

Writing and reading

The capacity to read and write with competence constitutes a major key to success in academics, the workplace and life in general. For example, Koster, Tribushinina, de Jong, Van den Bergh (2015) see proficiency in writing as mandatory and a necessity for students because it is a basic requirement for achieving educational goals as well as social and economic positioning in life. This is because reading and writing are the vital tools by which students connect with, get hold of and demonstrate the knowledge they have come to acquire in the academic setting. Graham and Hebert (2011) explain that for students to be successful educationally, occupationally and socially, reading and writing are two key skills they must master. Students need to read and extract information from books and other materials which they encounter in their studies, and then reproduce the knowledge they gain from reading through writing; as such, those who are handicapped in reading and writing will be at a disadvantage even before they have begun their studies.

Response to text

Response to text is a technique that is grounded in the transactional perspective of the constructivist theory of learning (Rosenblatt, 1978), which sees meaning as a product of what learners have within them as non verbal or mental resources (prior knowledge, experience, personality) prior to when they read what the writer has put down in the text. As Spiegel (1998) posits, it consists of two critical elements, which are: reading and responding. The response to text method is therefore a practice in which the reader uses his/her unique personality and experience to construct his/her own meaning from a text and responds, or reacts, to the text in his or her own way through writing. Alberta (2003) points out that response to text is a means through which readers talk to and with themselves in order to react to issues relating to a text; and involves the construction of meaning, interpretation of text, interrelationship of the person who reads with the written

material that is to be read, and the environment or situation in which the reading takes place. This enables the reader to handle the text and make evident his/her understanding of it.

Glenn, (2007) posits that response to text exposes the personal reactions, thoughts, feelings and questions a reader has about the events or characters in a text and also enables the learner to think analytically about what s/he is reading. Response to text may take the form of writing an explanation, a poem, satire, or extension of the contents of a text (McMahan, Day and Funk, 1999), or keeping a journal and sometimes, oral discussion (Spiegel, 1998). Students may respond efferently to a text, in which case they will look out for aspects of the text which the teacher will require from them. That is, they will read for facts which may be required of them in tests or examinations. But responding aesthetically to the same text means they will write based on the feelings which the text generates in them without reference to what might be required by the teacher. This method, therefore, is useful for both reading comprehension and writing.

In this study, students were required to respond efferently in writing to set texts. The students were encouraged to explore a given text, react to that text, clarify the reasons for their particular reactions and justify their position on the text.

Writing achievement

Steinmayr, Meifbner, Weidinger, and Wirthwein (2015) define scholastic attainment to be the accomplishment of students shown through performing the tasks set before them, which demonstrates their attainment of particular academic goals in a particular subject or course which they have been taught, and evidences the understanding or knowledge which students have acquired in particular intellectual disciplines like literacy or mathematics. Many indicators such as students' knowledge of processes (skills) or their exhibition of knowledge (facts) show achievement. Algarabel and Dasi (2001) separate achievement into three components: the declarative (knowledge of facts of a specific domain of knowledge), procedural (knowledge of processes or procedures) and strategic (knowledge of strategies or methods). Academic achievement is gauged through tasks

given to students in tests or examinations. Differences in personality, understanding, knowledge or proficiency affect the scholastic attainment of learners in such areas as reading and writing. Therefore the outcome of students' achievement plays a role in the adoption of particular methods of instruction by teachers. In this study, the difference between the pre and post test scores of students was used as a measure of their achievement.

Theoretical background

The reader response perspective of the constructivist theory (which is based on the transactional perspective advanced by Louise Rosenblatt in 1978) is used for this study. The main assumption is that meaning is created through the transaction of the reader with the written passage before him. According to Karolides (2000), the reader and the text are given equal emphasis during the creation of meaning and the meaning of a text comes alive when the reader interacts with the written passage. He comes to read the passage with the totality of information at his disposal, his personality and know-how which bear on the text to produce the meaning. Dobie (2012) explains that the unique personality, feelings and experience that each reader brings to interact with the text produces as many meanings as there are readers. A rereading of a text by the same reader may even produce a different interpretation of the same text. Morrow and Gambrell (2003) argue that meaning is therefore personal and unique to the reader and therefore, different readers will get different meanings from one particular passage and a text will have as many interpretations as there are readers; and therefore no one interpretation of a text can be said to be the right or correct one. Karolides argues that a text can only be in existence and have meaning not because it has been written by the author but because there is a reader who transacts with the text. Dobie sees the interaction as what causes the reader to call up the cultural values and experiences which help him/her make connection with the text. It is this personal connection with the text that generates the meaning for the reader.

The transaction which a reader has with the written passage may be either efferent (i.e. he reads to get ideas) or aesthetic (the reader reads for feeling or pleasure) (Rosenblatt 1978; Spiegel, 1998), and a reader's stance while reading a particular text can move on a continuum from efferent to aesthetic or vice versa (Rosenblatt, 1978). In other words, while reading a particular text, the reader may focus on getting information from that text at one point and/or may focus on the feeling that the text generates in him/her at another point within the same reading event. Prather (2001) points out that efferent teaching makes the student focus on getting out information which s/he thinks the teacher is likely to require. Thus the student concentrates on passing a test or examination and ignores any other information which is not expected to add to this. But aesthetic teaching makes the students to experience the reading in their own peculiar and unique ways based on the knowledge and experience, and the emotional response which the text produces in them. Their interpretation is uniquely theirs and no two interpretations can be the same.

This perspective is relevant to this study and participants were not bound in their readings to find a correct interpretation of any given text but were free to use their individual experiences as a tool that would help them interpret the materials before them. They were expected to make connections between their experiences and the texts. Yet their interpretations were expected to be bound by focus on the strategies used to extract meaning from texts (Dobie 2012). The subjects' responses to texts would be uniquely theirs but would not be unconnected with the texts or the structure and elements of such texts. Their responses to the texts formed the subject of the writing tasks which were given to them.

Literature review

Reader response strategies have been found to be of benefit to learners of English and as such, different scholars have studied its effects on students. For example, Chung and Lee (2012) used assignment-dependent plus learner reaction-evoking strategies to consider the effect of teaching on the motivation of subjects in an ESL class. Fifty non-

literature major students of a university in Taiwan were the participants in the research. Texts for the treatment consisted of a novel, a picture book variation of the novel, and a film variation of the novel. Written reports (as opposed to oral), summarization, cloze test and work sheets were the instruments of the study. The researchers assigned a chapter each to the research groups. They were then asked to make a list of lexical items from their chapter, write a summary of the chapter, and then make an oral presentation in the class. They were thereafter asked to watch the movie and give a written feedback after which they held class discussions. They were also given essay questions which elicited responses from them; and finally filled out the content knowledge questionnaire and self access form (that elicits the students' knowledge of the facts of the stories they read) which provide the researchers with feedback on the content of the text. A qualitative data analysis showed that students generated multiple interpretations of the text and also enhanced their reasoning capabilities.

In another study, Khatib and Farahian (2013) sought to find out what effects reader response strategies would have on university students' comprehension of short stories, as well as their attitude and motivation. One hundred undergraduates in Iran were subjects of the study. Students' Grade Point Average (of which no benchmark was given by the authors) and performance in a standardized language test were the basis upon which 75 of them were selected for the study. These students constituted two treatment and one comparison group. After a pre-treatment test, the treatment groups were taught for three weeks. The first group read selected short stories at home. When they came to class, they were given a set of tasks (nine questions) meant to elicit their responses to the stories. The second experimental group was taught the use of reading logs in which the students recorded their questions, memories, guesses, reflections, comments, thoughts and feelings, as well as connections they made to the stories. The non-treatment group was taught with conventional instruction whereby instructors gave lectures to students who received information and interpretation of the stories from them. Findings revealed that the second set of students who received the log treatment outperformed the first

experimental unit as well as the control. However, the short treatment of three weeks could have been elongated.

Iskhak (2015) conducted an Action Research with his prose class in a private university in Indonesia. The subjects were 36 third year student teachers in the English Department, purposively selected. Their teacher was the researcher. The qualitative study made use of video taping of activities in the classroom as well as participant observation. Written reflections, response journals, as well as questionnaire administered on the students were also used as sources of data. The resulting data were analysed through reduction and themes development (identifying features of participants' writings which the researcher sees as relevant to what is being investigated while discarding what is not relevant). The results showed that the reader response activities enabled the subjects to develop boldness, courage and self-confidence to participate in classroom activities as well as improve their competence in their reading and writing skills.

Corrigan, Chiad and Echendu (2015) investigated the use of reader response and discovery response by ESL students in three countries. The study used as subjects students from Nigeria, China, and Iraq. Subjects from these three countries read Hemingway's story, *A Day's Wait* and then wrote well organized, personal reader responses to the story. The students' responses were collected by the teacher/researchers from their students in each country and exchanged with the teacher/researchers in the other two countries. These were then given to the students in those countries to read and reflect on the similarities and differences between their own personal response and that of the foreign student whose response they read. They also wrote a "discovery" response on the similarities and differences in the two responses. The students were thereafter informed of which country(ies) the other students wrote from and then a class discussion was held on the questions raised by the students. The teacher/researchers then read both the reader responses and the discovery responses to identify the data that emerged. The results showed that the students got broader and deeper understanding and perspectives from reading students' responses from other countries. They were also able to create

multiple interpretations from the same story, and there was no wrong or right interpretation. The researchers report that the study also generated interest and curiosity of the students in their counterparts from the other countries (p.19). This study is relevant to this current study as it confirms the notion that use of texts and instructional methods which engage the interest of students contribute to developing their interest in reading and writing.

Methodology

Two hundred and forty-eight (248) freshly admitted undergraduates of a university of technology in the south east of Nigeria constituted the subjects of the research. This was made up of 154 males and 94 females. The study used the pre test post test control group quasi-experimental design. This was because the study made use of student groups that were already allotted by the university authorities. Two first year classes from two different faculties comprising the School of Health Technology (Public Health – 123 students) and School of Engineering (Polymer and Textile Engineering – 125 students), who registered for the Use of English course, participated in the study. The faculties were chosen as experimental and Control by random assignment while the classes were purposively selected. The experimental group was treated with the response to text method (RT) while the control group was taught with the regular conventional method. Both groups were administered the pre-test and post-test. The pre-test was used as a covariate to control for any selection threat to validity.

Both groups of students received the Use of English lectures one hour per lesson two times a week for six weeks. This study made use of four different texts/materials of approximately 400 words, drawn from various sources such as Science and Technology, humanities, and others. The texts were chosen so as to equally represent narrative and expository academic reading materials. These texts were selected from a collection of passages from International English Language Test Systems developed and administered by the British Council and Cambridge University, texts taken from past JAMB university entry qualifying examination questions as well as the recommended class text.

The choice of the passages was because they are targeted at higher education candidates. All the passages have content which are relevant to the language and experience of subjects. The cloze test was used to measure the readability of the passages which ranged from 70% to 76%.

The experimental and control groups were administered a pre test using the same texts. Thereafter, the experimental group was treated with the response to text method. At the end of the treatment, a post test was also administered on both groups.

The experimental students were taught their lessons with the response to text method, then given the texts to read. They were asked to respond to the different texts by extending the stories, writing letters or essays. They were made to ensure that they related the ideas in the texts to their lives, experiences and society. The control group was taught with the conventional method in which the teacher gave all the information and they were then asked to read and respond to the texts based on the prompts at the end of the passages.

The writing produced by the students were graded based on content (key ideas, details and examples which reflect students' understanding of the task required of them), organization (logical arrangement of ideas, the text having a beginning, middle and ending, the structural organization of the text followed, as well as effective use of transitional devices), expression (the clear and grammatical presentation of students' ideas in writing) and mechanical accuracy (the use of punctuations, correct spelling, use of capital letters, paragraph indentation, etc.)

The scores from the students' writing were used as data and were analysed with mean, standard deviation and t-test.

Results and discussion

In order to respond to this research question, data (students' scores) from pre-test and post test were compared to assess the effect of the response to text method.

Research Question 1: What effect did the response to text instructional method have on the writing achievement of students?

Table 1 gives the pre and post test results of both the experimental and control groups

Table 1: Pre-test and post test results of the effect of response to text instructional method on the writing achievement of students.

Groups	N	Pre-Test Mean	Std. Deviation	Post-Test Mean	Std. Deviation
RT	123	52.37	4.69	72.34	8.03
CG	125	51.40	6.99	59.54	13.23

At the pre test, the mean score of the experimental group (52.37, SD 4.69) was almost on an equal footing with that of the control group (51.40, SD 6.99). The standard deviations of the scores of the two groups indicate that the individual participants in these groups congregated around the mean of their group, showing that the scores were not too far apart from one another. At the post-test, the Experimental group (RT,) which had received the instruction-based response to text method, increased appreciably in their mean scores whereas the Control group which had received instruction in the traditional method increased only marginally. This is further noticed in Table 2 which disaggregated the scores into the four elements used in scoring the subjects' writing.

Table 2: Disaggregated Pre and Post-test results of writing achievement of subject groups based on four writing elements.

Treatment	Test	Content		Organization		Expression		Mechanical Accuracy	
		Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.	Mean	Std.
RT	Pre	17.93	3.38	13.68	2.54	10.68	1.71	9.63	1.92
	Post	22.55	3.42	22.51	2.56	13.65	2.54	13.38	2.79
CG	Pre	18.10	3.18	12.75	1.79	10.16	1.74	9.58	1.78
	Post	21.49	3.71	16.60	3.86	12.34	3.13	10.62	3.25

Table 2 indicates that in the pre-test, subjects in the two groups performed at similar levels in the different elements of writing. But in the post test, it was observed that the experimental group achieved better mean scores in the four elements than the control group. The students in both the experimental and control groups performed lower in Expression and Mechanical Accuracy than in the first two elements. This indicates that the teachers to would need to pay more attention to these elements in their teaching. Nevertheless, the treatments affected the achievement of the experimental subjects above what obtained in the control subjects.

Research Question 2: What level of difference exists between the writing achievement of the experimental and control subjects?

In order to answer this research question, a paired t-test analysis was carried out to examine the difference between the achievement of the experimental and the control groups.

Table 3: Paired t-test analysis of pre and posttest scores of the different groups.

Treatment	Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Mean Difference	T	df	p-value	Decision
Pair 1	RT	123	Pre	52.37	4.69	-19.97	-23.82	0.000*	p<0.05
			Post	72.34	8.03				
Pair 4	CG	125	Pre	51.40	6.99	-8.14	-6.08	0.000*	p<0.05
			Post	59.50	13.20				

Significance at 0.05 level of significance.

Result from Table 3 shows the mean differences between the pre- and post test scores of the experimental and the control groups. The Experimental Group which received the Response to text treatment had a higher mean difference in the pre- and posttest scores than the Control Group which received no treatment but was taught with the conventional method. Also there was a significant difference between the achievement in writing of the experimental group and that of the control group. This indicates that the response to text treatment had a higher effect on the students than the conventional method had on the control group. Thus the response to text treatment had a significant effect on the writing achievement of the experimental group above what was achieved by the control group.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This investigation examined the effect of the response to text instructional method on the writing achievement of first year university undergraduates in a university in south east of Nigeria. Pre and post tests were administered on the control and experimental groups. The writing scores of the students in both tests constituted the data which were analysed based on two research questions. The mean scores of the control and experimental groups were at the same level in the pre test. But in the post test, the

experimental group's scores were higher than that of the control group. The t-test analysis also showed that the experimental group had a higher mean difference in their pre and post test scores than the control group and the difference was significant. Thus it is concluded that the response to text instructional method had a greater effect on the writing achievement of the students than the conventional method.

In order to enhance the writing of freshly admitted university undergraduates, it is recommended that the response to text instructional method be adopted by language teachers at different strata of education in Nigeria, especially at the tertiary level. This will enable the students interact with text and respond to texts in writing based on their personality and experiences. Thus their interest and motivation to write will be fired up. They will then be able to increase their writing proficiency in the English language and cope with their new academic responsibilities.

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