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ANALYSIS OF SPOKEN ENGLISH IN STUDENTS' WRITING: A CASE STUDY OF A GHANAIAN SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL (SHS)

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Abstract: Writing in English as a Second Language appears to be a challenge to most students in Ghanaian schools especially those in Senior High School (SHS). This study was carried out to investigate the spoken features in students' essays. The purpose of the study was to find out the spoken features in students' written productions. The participants who took part in the study were from one students. The tools used in the study were students' essays and an interview with teachers. Data collected were analysed and spoken features were sorted out. The study revealed that students were not proficient in essay writing because they blend both written and spoken genres in their write-ups. The study concludes that suitable solutions should be employed by teachers to arouse students' interest in language use, particularly in essay writing.

Keywords: English as a second language, spoken features, essay, written production

ANALYSE DE L'ANGLAIS PARLÉ DANS LES ÉCRITS DES ÉLÈVES : UNE ÉTUDE DE CAS DANS UN LYCÉE GHANÉEN (SHS)

Résumé : L'écriture en anglais langue seconde semble être un défi pour la plupart des élèves des écoles ghanéennes, en particulier ceux du Senior High School (SHS). Cette étude a été réalisée pour examiner les caractéristiques orales des rédactions des élèves. L'objectif de l'étude était de découvrir les caractéristiques orales dans les productions écrites des élèves. Les participants à l'étude étaient des élèves de première année. Les outils utilisés dans l'étude étaient les rédactions des élèves et un entretien avec les enseignants. Les données collectées ont été analysées et les caractéristiques orales ont été triées. L'étude a révélé que les élèves ne maîtrisaient pas la rédaction d'essais parce qu'ils mélangeaient les genres écrits et oraux dans

leurs rédactions. L'étude conclut que des solutions appropriées devraient être employées par les enseignants pour éveiller l'intérêt des étudiants pour l'utilisation de la langue, en particulier dans la rédaction de dissertations.

Mots-clés: Anglais langue seconde, expression orale, essai, production écrite

Introduction

English, one of the most important languages in the world is studied either as a second language or as a foreign language. It is also used as a national language or business language. Furthermore, English is used as a lingua franca in countries that have varieties of indigenous languages. This implies that learning the English language is indispensable since it enables one to use the language in school and in society as a whole. Language can be used to communicate orally and in writing. Communicating through writing is considered to be very important since it develops a person's critical thinking skills that enable him or her to make logical and persuasive arguments. Writing gives people the chance to later reflect on their ideas and re-evaluate them. It helps to express one's personality, foster communication and prepares, most especially, students for school and employment (Chappell, 2011). That is why writing is regarded as one of the most crucial language skill in a student's academic life (Sawalmeh, 2013). It enables students to complete their assignments, write essays, stories, written responses, reports, theses, articles, and other types of written works.

This implies that writing equips students to express their thoughts, ideas, views and opinions through essays. For students to write intelligibly, and accurately, they must be exposed to the features and norms of the written genre of a language. The curriculum should include writing skills and methods, strategies and techniques to teach writing. This means that the curriculum should place a strong emphasis on writing ability. Urbanova and Oakland (2002, p. 31) claim that the written language serves a vital social and educational purpose and has great social prestige. They posit that the written language has a unique form and this form has its own unique structure. Therefore, students must use this specific norm and structure in written production in order to succeed both in school and beyond. It is instructive to note that academic success depends on students' ability to effectively and clearly communicate their ideas through writing when answering examination questions, writing thesis, dissertations, long essays etc. The findings from David (2001), Cai (2001), and Dovey (2010) indicate that writing is an essential tool in school and the workplace, so it's critical that it is not contaminated. Much is also expected from these students after school to express themselves strongly in writing proposals, reports memos, applications, etc. This implies that teaching and learning of writing in a second or foreign language classroom is crucial to guard learners against the occurrences

of errors in second or foreign language writing. One of these errors is the spoken feature in the students' essays. Students may write good essays presenting brilliant content. However, this brilliant content may include spoken features. These spoken-like features can prevent or inhibit comprehension of students' written productions leading to communication failure. That is why it is important to equip students with the necessary tools through teaching and learning of written genre of the language.

Statement of the problem

A vital tool for studying a discipline is writing. As a holistic skill that supports vocabulary, grammar, thinking, planning, editing, revising, and other components, writing has been widely recognized as a crucially important skill in the teaching and learning of English as a Second Language (ESL). This is because speaking, listening, and reading are all interconnected with writing. Writing aids in the development of all these other skills (Saed & Al-Omari in Yunus, & Chien 2016, p. 1). Myles (2002) contends further that writing entails composition, which denotes the capacity to either transmit or retell material in the form of narratives or descriptions or to create new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. This means that students need skills to communicate effectively through writing good essays. To excel both in life and in academics, every student needs to communicate effectively. Since students' failure can result from lack of communicating ideas, views, and opinions, especially in writing through essays, writing has been adequately incorporated into the school curriculum as a way to significantly improve the communication skills of students. Writing an essay needs deliberate work as well as a lot of practice in concept generation, development, and analysis. It is one of the necessary skills for achieving success at all levels of education. and after tertiary education. It also gives students the opportunity to excel in their career endeavours. According to Walsh (2010), writing is significant since it is employed frequently both in higher education and at workplace. Students might not be able to interact effectively with their professors, employers, peers, or even anyone else if they lack the ability to express themselves in writing. Walsh says that a lot of business communication is done in writing. That is, a college student or graduate's everyday routine includes writing proposals, memos, reports, applications, preliminary interviews, e-mails, and more. Therefore, regardless of the profession, having a resilient writing ability is necessary in the employment sector. Beyond learning grammar rules and building a large repertoire of vocabulary, English language learners have various difficulties when learning to write in a second language. In terms of the common vocabulary, expressions, and sentence patterns, learners must learn to discriminate between academic and conversational English (Biber & Conrad, 2009; Chapelle, 1998; Gardner, 2012). Additionally, students must be

taught the specifications for writing in a number of genres, including what details to include and in what order (Swales, 1990). The use of spoken lexicalised words that are more common in conversation than in writing and which give the essay an oral tone is one element that proves to be difficult for many students. Additionally, students pursuing higher education are constantly required to compose academic works like essays or papers (Biber 2006, & Swales 1990). Given that written language must differ from spoken language, this can be a difficult task. The spoken and written forms of English, specifically, can be very difficult for non-native speakers learning the language as claimed by Xiufeng Tian (2013). According to Hammond (1990), young children, whether they come from an English-speaking family or not, have difficulties telling the difference between spoken and written language. There is no clear difference between spoken and written language, which makes learning of these forms more challenging (Carter, 2004). Students encounter difficulties when writing in English, according to a study conducted by Al-Fadda (2012). Al-Fadda discovered that distinguishing between written and spoken forms, selecting the appropriate tense, and connecting sentences to build cohesive paragraphs are the main difficulties students face. Hinkle's study shows that the features used by learners are more similar to the spoken register than the academic register, and their use gives writing a sense of lack of quality and simplification (Russell, 2014 p. 17). According to Banda (2003), the capacity to produce error-free text is not a skill that comes naturally; rather, it is formally learned or culturally transmitted as a benefit of practices in formal educational environments. Writing skill can only be taught to students in a classroom setting. As a result, becoming comfortable with academic (written) and spoken English is a crucial component of learning to write for both academic and professional objectives (Russell, 2014). Again, few research studies have been carried out on spoken features in students' essays, especially in Presbyterian Senior High School, Legon. This study, therefore sought to identify and examine the spoken features in students' essays and to suggest possible ways to remedy the situation. To achieve the research objectives, the following questions need to be answered. What are the spoken features found in students writing? And what could be done to remedy the spoken-like features in students' written production? The finding of this study will be used to assess how well the students understood spoken features and how they applied them in their essays. The study of the features will also reveal mistakes that learners make while using spoken-like features. Language teachers will also benefit from this study since they will be able to choose the best teaching strategies to help students overcome their challenges and the areas they will focus on while teaching and learning how to write essays. Additionally, the study will add to the body of knowledge on the initiatives taken by academics to encourage second-language learners' fluency in the English language.

Furthermore, it is envisaged that the conclusions drawn from the research would act as a helpful manual for policymakers.

Literature Review

The spoken and written languages differ in a number of ways (Mewburn et al 2019). For instance, spoken language is frequently spontaneous, and so, it can be described as being highly informal, colloquial, and probably unstructured. Additionally, spoken language typically takes the form of a conversation with another speaker where paralinguistic elements such as gestures, mimics and so on are used. On the other hand, written language is typically more ordered, formal, impersonal, and wordy. Further, it usually takes the form of a monologue rather than a dialogue. Townend & Walker (2006) state that both spoken and written language are closely interdependent. Cook (2004) states that although there are some similarities between the systems of speech and writing, there are many differences. Written language can easily show various words by varying the spelling. "Many of the devices of written language have no spoken equivalent" (p. 12). This presupposes that in written language, spoken-like features such as, *to my mind, in my own view, to my point of view* and many others are absent.

Spoken language

In spoken language, the locutors usually do not pay much attention to lexical content and meaning, which are strictly used in written language. There are many different definitions of spoken and written language. Horowitz & Samuels (1987) define spoken language or oral language as typically associated by linguists with a conversation that is produced, processed, and then evaluated in the context of face-to-face exchange and grounded in interpersonal relationships that are often clearly established. Additionally, in spoken language, people often use elliptical and abbreviated forms. Horowitz and Samuels (1987) show that in writing people use complete sentences, but in speaking we usually use incomplete sentences. Spoken language is a conversation that embraces the use of syntactic reduction which is more specific to speeches. According to Leech (1998), conversation, which is the most common type of spoken language, takes place in real-time, so it often expresses personal politeness, emotion, and attitude. Specifically, conversation usually uses syntactic reduction such as *You better..., What you doing? We gonna...* Moreover, people also use familiarizing vocatives like *honey, mum, guys, dude, mate...* The speech-like or spoken-like features exhibited by students in their written production for that matter their written essay do not conform to the norms of writing.

Written language

Šimčikaite's (2012) opines that written language is associated with the language of books and explanatory prose such as is found in schools. Written language is formal, academic, and planned; it hinges on the past and is reconstructed in such a way that in the future, it can be processed by varied readerships (p. 21). Writing involves composing, conducting research, developing ideas, analyzing ideas, writing the first draft, editing and writing the final draft (Omaggio, 1993). It involves formulating new ideas and this can be difficult because it involves reworking information. This means that writing is a difficult task and it could be a difficult skill to be learned or taught due to the fact that it is not a simple cognitive activity; rather it is believed to be a complex mental production that requires careful thought, discipline and concentration (Grami, 2010, p. 9). In writing, the author presents his or her ideas to the public, so the style must be academic and formal. Widdowson (1978) defines writing as "an act of producing correct sentences and transmitting them into words on paper." This definition implies that the skill of writing is seen as a way of recording one's ideas and feelings, using a correct grammar in a concrete manner. Troyka and Nudelman (1994) as cited in Abderraouf (2016, p.1) hint at the difficulty of the process of writing by asserting that "writing is more than just taking a pen in hand and expecting words to flow perfectly on paper". Ransdell and Levy (1996: 93) define writing as "a process that requires extensive self-regulation and attentional control...writers must change ideas into text, repair organization and mechanics, and monitor their success - all while trying to formulate a coherent message". For Byrne (1996: 190), writing "involves encoding of a message written through a sequence of sentences ordered together in certain ways, and it requires some conscious mental effort including making notes, drafting, and revising." Bell and Burnaby (1984) as cited in Belkhir & Benyelles (2017, p. 81) view writing as a cognitive skill whose mastery necessitates an appropriate selection of vocabulary items, careful attention to spelling and punctuation as well as sentence structure. From the above, it is important that students are aware of these spelling and punctuation as well as sentence structure in order to excel in academic writing. Without this knowledge, students will face many difficulties in their writing. Al Fadda (2012) found out that the main challenges ESL students encounter are differentiating between written and spoken words and phrases, reviewing grammar including subject-verb agreement and joining sentences together to make a coherent paragraph. And this will inhibit students' acquisition of written language.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adapted a conceptual framework from Gilquin & Paquot (2007) called a three-fold process. This framework involves identification, explanation and solution. The identification stage is where the spoken-like features are identified in learners' or students' essays. The explanation stage deals with the possible explanation of the presence of the spoken-like features in learners' essays. The last stage which is the solution deals with how the challenges of spoken-like features in students' essays can be resolved. In this paper, the spoken-like feature of learners' essays are investigated through this three-fold process.

Related studies

Dockrell et al. (2007) examine the longitudinal effects of oral language on writing. This study examined the writing skills of a cohort of children from ages 8 to 11 who had been identified with a specific language problem earlier in their development. Writing performance was examined in relation to both earlier and concurrent oral language skills and literacy levels. As a cohort, these children experienced significant problems in producing written text throughout the study period. Both concurrent and predictor measures of receptive vocabulary and reading showed similar patterns of strong relationships with the outcome written language measure. Granger and Rayson (1998) demonstrate that learners overuse many lexical and grammatical features typical of speech ... or short Germanic adverbs such as *also, only, so, very, etc.* in their essays. They further state that these learners also underuse many of the characteristics of formal writing, such as a high density of nouns and prepositions. The spoken features in students' write up led other researchers to focus on more specific items, for example, *I think* (Granger 1998, Aijmer 2002, Neff *et al.* 2007), *of course* (Granger & Tyson 1996, Altenberg & Tapper 1998, Narita & Sugiura 2006), *because* (Lorenz 1999) or *so* (Lorenz 1999, Anping 2002). It has been revealed through their studies that these features are overused and it gives learners' writing a distinctly oral tone. *I think* in argumentative writing is analysed by Aijmer (2001). She reports that *I think* is typical in conversations to signal uncertainty. She collected the data from the London- Lund Corpus, where *I think* occurs 51 times per 10,000 words (Aijmer 1997). This signaled that *I think*, a spoken-like feature occurs in students' essays. Simon-Vandenberg (2000) reports even higher frequencies in political interviews and television debates. Interviews and debates are carried out in spoken form and Simon-Vandenberg's work interestingly points out that *I think* in the political interview and the television debate indicate various functions. For example, in political discourse, it has a function of making a point or adopting a stance that expresses the speaker's authority in his or her speech. This analysis further stresses the point that *I think* is usually used in spoken discourse than written one. In 1984, a study was carried out by Horowitz &

Newman (1964). This study examined undergraduates talking and writing and it was found that spoken language was more rampant in students' essays. They argue that students used spoken-like features, repeat them and also used them for elaboration in their work.

Methodology

Research Approach

According to Croker (2009), the characteristic of qualitative method is exploratory with the goal to uncover new ideas and insights and interpretatively analyse them to figure out pattern of behaviour. Silverman (2010, p.118), posits that "... qualitative methodology provides insights into the 'how' aspect of the research." The aim of this study is to identification and analyses of spoken features in students' essays, and advance some pragmatic ways to remedy the problem. This research adopts the qualitative method because the study will be based on data from the students' essays.

Research Design

Gall (2003, p. 436), posits that a case study is described as "the in-depth study of instances of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon". In an attempt to define the term "case study", Duff (2008) in Awute (2020) expressed that a case study is designed to explore and describe a phenomenon; building theory, illustrating and explaining theoretical insights. Duff concludes that case study is conducted to investigate a variety of issues in applied linguistics because it provides "a high degree of completeness, depth of analysis, and readability" (Duff, 2008, p. 43). This study used a case study as a design in which the researchers develop an in-depth analysis of students' essays.

Population

According to Burns and Grove (1993, p. 779), a population is defined as all elements (individuals, objects and events) that meet the sample criteria for inclusion in a study. The study population consists of form one students in a public Senior High School (SHS) in Ghana. This is due to the fact that the first year at the Senior High School is the form where all strategies are adopted to identify and solve students' problems in their academic endeavours. Form two or the second year is a stage where teachers build on what learners started in the previous year. Further, third-year students are normally engaged in their revision and preparation for their final exams. Hence first-year students are deemed to be appropriate for this study.

Sample and sampling technique

Mouton (1996, p. 132) defines a sample as elements selected with the intention of finding out something about the total population from which they are taken. A convenient sample consists of subjects included in the study because they happen to be in the right place at the right time (Polit and Hungler 1993, p. 176). A sample of three classes of form one students consisting of 169 students and 16 teachers have been selected for this study. These students have been selected because they will be able to write an essay that will help the researcher (researchers) to answer the research questions. Again, it is believed that the population sample will be representative and the result of the investigation could, to some great extent, be extrapolated since the phenomenon under study happens in almost all second-language classrooms in Ghana.

Research instrument

An essay test was given to the students in order to bring out their actual proficiency or competence with regard to their application of spoken features and written English concord rules. Teachers were also interviewed on how spoken features could be solved.

Data analysis

According to Singh (2006), analysis of data means studying the tabulated material in order to determine inherent facts or meanings. To analyze the data, the researchers employ the three-fold processes by Gilquin & Paquot (2007). Students used spoken features in their essays. The spoken features identified in the essays of the students were: *was like*, *to my mind*, *is like*, *to my point of view*, and *thanks to*. Gilquin & Paquot (2007) opine that items such as *thanks to*, *look like*, *maybe* and *by the way* are all overused by a majority of the learners in their essays.

Findings

The research question aims to identify and examine the spoken like features in form one students written production. With regard to research question 1, spoken features were found in the students' essays and the spoken features were indicated under each heading. Thus, *was like*, *to my mind*, *to my point of view*, *look like*, *thanks to*, among others. The content analysis performed on the essays of the students highlights the following:

Is like

Example

*On my way to the house, I got a chance to see so many places such as the University of Ghana, Legon, Accra Mall etc. Finally, we arrived in the school. I was filled with so much joy **is like** I didn't even know what to do. I got down from the car, the school registered me and I assigned to my house. The name of the school is PRESEC, legon. To my mind, it is the best school. The school is known as the best science school in the country.*

In the above write-up, one sees the use of **is like** which is clearly a spoken feature (colloquial language). The student should have used a much more formal language such as the conjunction **that** instead of **is like** to connect the two sentences.

Was like

Example 1

*I wake up four thirty am, I took a bath and dressed up for school. My mother made sure I wouldn't leave any important item in the house. I left the house with my mother and father. We took off at 6: 45 am so that we will not get into traffic. The distance from my house to the school **was like** 15 kilometers.*

Example 2

*I went into the dorms I layed my bed arranged my things and I met one of my friends I completed JHS with. He was in the same house as I was. I **was like** so excited when I saw him because I was not alone.*

In these particular instances (example 1 and 2), the students should have simply written *The distance from my house to the school was 15 kilometers* and not *The distance from my house to the school was like 15 kilometers*. And *I **was** so excited when I saw him...* and not *I **was like** so excited when I saw him...* The use or the addition of the word *like* to the verb *was* in the two sentences above gives an oral tone rather than a written one to the write-ups.

to my mind

Example 1

*On my way to the house, I got a chance to see so many places such as university of Ghana, Legon, Accra Mall etc. Finally, we arrived in the school. I was filled with so much joy **is like** I didn't even know what to do. I got down from the car, the school registered me and I assigned to my house. The name of the school is PRESEC, Legon. **To my mind**, it is the best school. The school is known as the best science school in the country.*

Example 2

*In my life, I have celebrated lot of birthdays. Thanks to my parents. Lot of them were celebrated in my house. But there is one which is my favourite birthday party I've ever celebrated. This took place at the hotel called golden Gateway. **To my mind**, this is the best hotel I ever know.*

Similarly, in the paragraphs above (example 1 and 2), the students in question were supposed to write “*To the best of my knowledge*” instead of the colloquial expression “*To my mind*”. The use of “*To my mind*” renders the written text non formal by given them an oral tone.

thanks to

Example

*In my life, I have celebrated lot of birthdays. **Thanks to** my parents. Lot of them were celebrated in my house. But there is one which is my favourite birthday party I've ever celebrated. This took place at the hotel called golden Gateway. To my mind, this is the best hotel I ever know.*

In the example given above, the whole of the statement “*Thanks to my parents*” was not necessary for, it adds nothing to the essay. It is redundant and very loose thereby given the text a non-formal tone. Even if the student chooses to maintain that statement. It should read “*I am grateful to my parents*” because that is much formal compared to “*Thanks to my parents*”

to my point of view

Example

***To my point of view**, I hope that with the point stated above and many others which could not be expressed at length, I can help create awareness about the causes that have led to the drastic increase in the rate of teenage pregnancy and with the solutions also stated above, the society can put measures in place to help stop the rampant increase in the rise of teenage pregnancy in Ghana.*

Finally, in the example above, the student should have written, *in my opinion*, instead of “*to my point of view*”. The use of “*to my point of view*” reduces the language level from a written one to a spoken one.

Research question 2

Research question 2 aims at finding possible remedies to the challenges of spoken features in students’ essays. The solution aspect of the conceptual framework of Gilquin & Paquot (2007), a three-fold process, was used to answer research question 2. 14 teachers were interviewed. The responses were grouped into themes.

Consciousness-raising activities should be included in the curriculum

All teachers are of the view that lack of register awareness makes students write essays with features of spoken English. They said it is important to include

in the curriculum consciousness-raising activities, aimed at highlighting the differences that exist between written and spoken registers. For example, one of the teachers made a comment that *"Students continuously used lexical words that are mostly associated with spoken language. And it makes students' essays bleed. It will be of great help to include activities, aimed at underlining the differences that exist between written and spoken registers in the curriculum."* This finding is similar to the work of Gilquin & Paquot (2007).

Rewriting exercises could also be proposed to the students

It is also important to allow students to practice writing on their own. Teachers should help students raise their awareness of the spoken features in their own academic writing by leading students in identifying grammatical and ungrammatical uses of these features and providing practice in differentiating between uses that are standard to the register of essay writing and uses that are appropriate only in conversation. Twelve of the teachers argue that the importance of helping students to practise essay writing and making them realise the differences between spoken and written English cannot be over-emphasised. Two of the teachers said:

Teacher 1

As the saying goes, practice makes man perfect. So, students must practise what is taught them, especially essay writing. By so doing, students will become used to the format of the two genres

Teacher 2

Teachers can give exercises and homework to students to keep them busy with writing. This will make them become perfect.

Indeed, learning is hinged on practice so students should be made to practise both the oral and written genre of the English language. And their attention should be drawn to the nuances between the spoken and the written English.

The use of scaffolding

Scaffolding is a strategy that teachers can use to build upon students' strengths. It should be contextual, social, and temporary frameworks used to support successful learning with a specific academic domain such as writing (Vygotsky, 1987). Scaffolding is thought of as using steps in a process, modeling the steps, and then giving students the opportunity to try it themselves. A teacher said *"using theories in teaching help to accomplished pedagogical goals."* Baradaran, & Sarfarazi, (2011) did a study and found that students who had the opportunity to receive scaffolding principles outperformed the ones who did not experience

scaffolding, thus having a significant impact on the ESL students' academic writing.

Students must learn the requirements for writing in a variety of genres

Students must also learn the requirements for writing in a variety of genres, including the appropriate information to include and in which order to include it (Swales, 1990; Biber & Conrad 2009; Martin & Rose, 2008). That is, students must understand the differences between written and spoken forms. (Gilquin, 2007). All the teachers said students must know the requirement for each genre of language. One of them said, "*When students learn what each type of language demands, their writing will conform accordingly.*"

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is concluded that spoken features characterized students' essays. And this can be attributed to the fact that students are not aware of the differences between written and spoken words. In this study, an attempt was made to identify some spoken features in students' essays in English at the Senior High School (SHS) level in Ghana. The study among other things revealed that students make mistakes in writing. That is students' speech-like features in their essays. What the study has clearly shown is that the level of competence in written and spoken features of English at the SHS level is very low. Therefore, efforts should be made by all parties to help improve students' academic standards in English Language writing.

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