

DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY: AN ASSESSMENT OF PERFORMANCE BY
UNDERGRADUATES OF AKWA IBOM STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This research set out to discover how undergraduates from Nigerian universities apply the techniques of description in their descriptive essays. The theories of descriptive linguistics and applied linguistics formed the theoretical basis. Using the technique of stratified random sampling, 147 essays were stratified into 9; 3 each from the departments of economics, political science, and public administration of Akwa Ibom State University. The test title was "Describe the frontage of your residence." The essays were scored on the variables of naming, detailing, and comparing, among others. The test required an essay length of 300 words to be written in 40 minutes and was administered under strict examination conditions. It was found out that our subjects coded A to I do not have problems with naming and detailing. The only problems are in the areas of comparing and using sensory descriptions as well as grammatical and lexical infelicities. It is recommended that the use of English courses for freshers in Nigerian universities be extended from one session to two.

KEYWORDS: Descriptive Essay, Performance, Detailing, Comparing, Sense, Special Issues, Grammatical and Lexical Issues, Undergraduates and Akwa Ibom State University

INTRODUCTION

A descriptive essay is one of the four genres of essay. The others are narrative, argumentative, and expository. Descriptive genre appears to be the most difficult among the four types because it requires a higher degree of aptitude in aesthetics as Okono (2020) observes:

...writing an essay as a composition is arguably an arduous task because of its inherent nature, consisting of competence in the medium of writing, composition, rhetoric, aesthetics, philosophy, and logic (Okono 2020, p. 82).

According to Axelrod and Cooper (2008: 639), descriptive essays are attempts to sketch or copy something in writing. According to them, vivid descriptions help readers imagine what is being described. The source goes further to say that a vivid description creates an intense, distinctive image, one that seems to bring the words on the page to life. A good description can also be evocative, calling up memories or suggesting feelings associated with the subject being described. The source further elucidates:

Writers can use description for many purposes: to give readers an impression of a person or place, to illustrate abstract ideas, to make information memorable, or to support an argument (Axelrod and Cooper 2008: 639)

The three techniques of descriptive writing enunciated by Axelrod and Cooper are: naming, detailing, and comparing. According to the source, naming calls readers' attention to observable features of the subject being described. Naming answers the questions "what is it?" or "what are the parts or features?" Detailing makes the features more specific or particularized. It answers the questions: "what is it?" "how many are there?", "what is it made up of?", "where is it located?", "what is its condition?", "how is it used?", "where does it come from?", "what is its effect?" and "what is its value?" The source advises that to add details to names, modifiers – adjectives and adverbs, phrases, and clauses should be added.

The source also observes that for detailing sounds, writers sometimes use the technique called synaesthesia: applying words commonly used to describe one sense to another, such as describing sounds as sharp and soft; they sometimes also use simile or metaphor to compare one sound to another. The goal of this research is to see how undergraduates of the university studied, apply the three descriptive techniques and the five senses to achieve vivid description in their descriptive essays.

Comparing is another technique of descriptive writing. Using Anne Dillard's essay, Axelrod and Cooper identify similes and metaphors as language elements that can enhance the vividness of a description by giving readers additional information to help them picture the subject.

Next, Axelrod and Cooper (2008:642) examine the use of sensory description to describe animals, people, and scenes. These senses are those of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. The source observes that writers often rely on the sense of sight more than the other senses, as even our vocabulary for describing what we see is larger and more varied than our vocabulary for reporting other impressions.

METHODOLOGY

The research method used in gathering data for this work was the direct method of data elicitation. The particular strand used was the clinical elicitation method. Corder (1973) distinguishes two kinds of elicitation. Clinical and experimental. According to him, clinical elicitation involves getting the informant to produce data of any sort, for example, by means of a general interview or writing a composition.

A descriptive essay topic, "Describe the Frontage of Your Residence," was given to first-year undergraduates in the two departments of the faculty of social sciences: Economics and Political Science, and one department in the faculty of management sciences, public administration of the Akwa Ibom State University. The length of the essay was 300 words, and the duration of the test was 40 minutes. The test was administered under strict examination conditions.

The population of the students who wrote the test was 147, comprising 50 from the Department of Economics, 46 from the Department of Political Science, and 51 from the Department of Public Administration.

Using stratified random sampling, the population of 147 was stratified into 27, 9 from each department. From the 27 subjects, 9 were randomly sampled, resulting in 3 subjects per department. The essays were scored on the variables of naming, detailing, and comparing, being the major techniques of descriptive essay as enunciation by Axelrod and Cooper (2008). The other varieties are sensory description methods of sight, hearing smell, touch and taste. Errors in the students' essays are analysed and discussed under issues. Simple percentages are used to calculate the scores for the descriptive techniques. The maximum usage of each of naming and detailing is calculated at 40 corresponding to 100% while any other technique is calculated at 5. Issues that are clearly errors are calculated on 10 according to the marking rules of West African Certificate Examination governing mechanical accuracy. Ten errors always cancel the total score which is 5.

THEORETICAL FRAME WORK

The major theory adopted for this research is descriptive linguistics. Dineen F. P. (1966: 1 – 17) states that a course in descriptive linguistics usually includes training in phonetics as well as in phonological and grammatical analysis. Another theory that is useful for this study is applied linguistics. Catford (1965: 19) sees applied linguistics as a term used to cover all those applications of the theory and categories of general linguistics which go

beyond (i) the elucidation of how language works and (ii) the description of a particular language or languages for its / their own sake. For Lyons (1981:34) applied linguistics is a subfield of general linguistics which has as its concerns the application of the concerns and findings of linguistics to a variety of practical tasks.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data gleaned from this study show that subject C achieved 26 instances of naming in his essay closely followed by H with 25 instances while subjects A and C recorded the highest i.e. 31 instances of detailing in their essays. Only subject B showed 2 instances of comparing in his writing. Subjects F and I exhibited 1 instance each. In the use of senses in description, subject I employed this technique 7 times representing 140%. This was followed by Subjects C, E and F who employed this technique in the ratio of 3:2:1. Both subjects A and C recorded percentage failure of 80 in grammatical and lexical issues. Three other subjects D, G and I recorded 60% failure in the same issues. Subjects B and subject H recorded 40% apiece while subjects E and F exhibited a low failure rate of 20% each. The data are presented in tables 1 and 2 below.

TABLE 1: SHOWING PERFORMANCE OF STUDENTS IN DESCRIPTIVE TECHNIQUES

SUBJECTS	NAMING		DETAILING		COMPARING		SENSES	
	FRE	%	FRE	%	FRE	%	FRE	%
A	21	52.5	31	77.5	0	0	0	0
B	21	52.5	28	70	2	40	0	0
C	26	65	31	77.5	0	0	3	60
D	23	57.5	27	67.5	0	0	0	0
E	13	32.5	14	35	0	0	1	20
F	20	50	30	75	1	20	2	40
G	20	50	17	42.5	0	0	0	0
H	25	62.5	24	60	0	0	0	0
I	15	37.5	24	60	1	20	7	140

Key: FRE = Represents Frequency

% = Represents Percentage

**TABLE 2: SHOWING STUDENTS PERFORMANCE ON GRAMMATICAL /
LEXICAL ISSUES**

SUBJECTS	VARIABLE	FREQUENCY	% FAILURE
A	Grammatical Issues	4	80%
B	Lexical Issues	2	40%
C	Grammatical Issues	4	80%
D	Lexical Issues	3	60%
E	Grammatical Issue	1	20%
F	Lexical Issue	1	20%
G	Grammatical/Lexical Issues	3	60%
H	Grammatical/Lexical Issues	2	40%
I	Lexical Issues	3	60%

DISCUSSION

Naming is the same as nomenclature or what may be called appellation. Naming in the literature refers to the observable features of the subject being described. In this writing test the outstanding subject is the frontage of the writer's residence. This includes the gate, the front fence, the open court, the gate, the veranda, the front walls, doors, windows, the frontal view of the roof, orchards and lawns. Some appurtenances such as small buildings for electricity generating plant, security post, overhead water tank, shops (provision) store, chemist, hair dressing salon among others have been named by the students. Objects such as vehicles, heap of gravel and door and windows blinds have been named. Electricity wire bulbs and even gutters leading to the residence are part of house characteristics. Of particular mention is the type of paint which the house wears as well as flowers and trees.

Some of the subjects are colourful in their style of description. For example, subject B wrote: "A strip of grass runs down the length on one side forming a boundary between the drive-way and my neighbour's house". Subject G is less fanciful but realistic: "... at the centre of the frontage we have a circular display of flower such as izora, planted to add beauty to the residence".

DETAILING

Detailing as the name implies means making the features of the subject more specific or particularized. It does appear that the relationship between naming and detailing is like the relationship between topic and comment; theme and rheme; and subject and explanation. For instance, Subject H wrote. "...the frontage of my residence is greenish in colour due to plants, and even the field that decorates the compound". From the students' write-up when an object is named then its explanation is given. The explanation which could be an adjectival phrase or clause becomes detailing.

COMPARING

Comparing in descriptive essay has two elements: simile and metaphor. These elements enhance the vividness of a description (cf Axhood and Cooper 2008). Only three subjects incorporated these elements into their description. Subject B particularly wrote: "... millions of small rocks scattered throughout the drive-way; each rock varying in size from a grain of sand, to a small stone, the size of a ping pong ball" – metaphor. Earlier in his essay the subject wrote: The drive-way to my house is a narrow drive-way about as wide as one and a half car widths". Subject I in his essay wrote: "At the backyard of my residence you will see something that looks like palm tree and plantain plantation". These descriptive devices make the essays more real and vivid.

SENSE

The sensory descriptions are those of sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste of these five senses, the sense of sight is the most frequently used by writers. In this work subject C applied two instances of sense of sight. Subject I wrote his essay entirely on the sense of sight. In his description he always called the reader to see; for instance, in one of his sentences he wrote: "On getting down from the slope you will see a building that is not complete". Subject C made use of the sense of smell in his essay. "The front of my compound is a beautiful place; there is also a fresh air with pleasant smell". This sensory description guarantees vividness.

GRAMMATICAL AND LEXICAL ISSUES

The subjects who featured in the writing test are not free from committing grammatical and lexical infelicities. Subject A wrote: "car's, room's and flower's" instead of cars, rooms and flowers. For subject D his problem is with the system of numbers where he would write "...the walls of the house is". Subject E wrote: "The Street leading to my residence is tarred with

gutters at the both sides of the road". The underlined definite article is intrusive. Subject H wrote: "Flowers are been lined by the both sides of the entrance". "been" is a wrong word and it is a variant of "being" but none is needed in the structure. Subject I exhibited incipient knowledge of English lexis. He wrote: "has" for as, "they" for there and "kilometal" for kilometres. These errors appear to be phonologically conditioned.

SPECIAL ISSUES (SEMANTICS)

An instance of synaesthesia was exhibited by subject C when he wrote: "Fresh air with pleasant smell". This is applying the sense of living things to air – a non-living thing. Subject B wrote: "eatable leaves". The adjective is a normal English word but the variant *edible* is common. Subject C wrote: "I personally do cut off those weeds". The phrasal verb "cut off" does not collocate well with weeds. The single verbs: *trim*, *mow*, *cut* could have been used. Another item of semantic significance is the use of the phrase: "gravel dump" by subject F. Dump and heap denote careless and disorderly piling of things. They are synonyms

CONCLUSION

Our informants, the students, who participated in the writing test, have done above average; there is room for improvement. The students appear to have little problem with naming and detailing as none was found wanting in these areas. The application of sensory description is not well employed by the students as only four out of nine used it at all. Similarly, comparing as a descriptive technique is not well cultivated by the students as only three out of nine students used it. Applause goes to subject B who wrote the essay in a technical but flowery style. His write-up shows some traces of an architect or someone in the building industry. Subject F also wrote in a mature and beautiful style. The poorest performance in the exercise is subject H who produced insipid essay. The techniques of naming, detailing and comparing among others have enhanced the vividness of the essays.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research it is recommended that use of English course for freshmen and women in Nigerian Universities be made a four semester course. Secondly, writing should be given greater attention in the use of English curriculum in Nigerian universities than has hitherto been the case.

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