

# Writing Strategies among Nigerian Student-Writers

Mohammed Bello<sup>1</sup> and Minah Harun<sup>2</sup>

[bellom825@gmail.com](mailto:bellom825@gmail.com) & [minn@uum.edu.my](mailto:minn@uum.edu.my)

Department of Language Studies, School of Languages, Civilization & Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia

**Abstract.** This article discusses Nigerian secondary school students' strategies on writing narrative essays. More specifically, it examines written texts of fifteen second language learners of English in a public secondary school in Adamawa state, Nigeria. Based on a purposive sampling strategy, the participants comprise male and female students between the age of fifteen and eighteen years old who can read and write in English language. Data collected were the narrative essays of the participants' which were done in class. The written test took approximately forty-five minutes. The study reveals that the student-writers use three prominent strategies which include using cohesive elements in connecting ideas, using supporting details for clarity of information and discussing relevant points through the use of paragraph. The findings of this study direct attention to the importance of having knowledge of academic writing strategies among the school students' to enable them to excel in an academic realm and the work place. Finally, the paper recommends that future research seeks to investigate the strategies used by Nigerian undergraduate or postgraduate students in written communication particularly, academic papers and dissertations.

**Keywords:** writing strategies, academic writing, written communication, second language learner, Nigeria

## 1 Introduction

Most English foreign language (EFL) students, including Nigerians, who use English as a foreign language encounter many challenges in learning the four basic language skills particularly the writing skill (Abas & Abdaziz, 2016). This current paper intends to explore the 'writing strategies' used by Nigerian secondary school students' in their essays. In almost all levels of education in Nigeria ranging from primary to the tertiary education, writing is considered a core element in the English school curriculum and syllabus (Ezeokoli & Patience, 2016). Narrative essay is one of the four recommended types of essay featured in the school syllabus and to be taught at schools particularly senior secondary school classes in Nigeria. The three examination bodies that were saddled with the task of preparing and administering final year exams for secondary school students' such as West African Examination Council (WAEC) and National Examination Council (NECO) are all given emphasis on essay writing, in particular the narrative essay. Similarly, in Nigerian school context writing essay is a component of English language subject and a student is expected to pass the subject at least at credit level as a minimum requirement to enable the student to proceed to tertiary level of education in the country. It is against this background that writing in English was taught to students in order to fulfill the educational and government needs (Danladi, 2013).

Meanwhile, studies are limited when it comes to the area of exploring strategies on narrative writing specifically among Nigerian secondary school students. This prompted the researchers' to consider it appropriate to explore the strategies used by the secondary school students' in their ESL writing particularly in an academic environment where the skill is considered challenging. More specifically, the research question that directs the study is: How do the Nigerian secondary school students construct their essays to narrate the story about their junior high experience? That is, what strategies do they use to make sense of their writing?

## 2 ESL Writing Strategies

Writing strategies is important to native and non-native writers of English language (Silva, 1990). It is generally believed that writing is a most problematic skill out of the four basic language skills (Nwogu, 2006). A person cannot be a successful writer until he or she becomes competent in listening, reading and speaking (Barkaoui, 2007). Feliks e tal (2018) explored how proficient and non-proficient writers revise their friends' English as a foreign language EFL argumentative essays in an Indonesian university environment. The study used two master's students as participants and the data were analyzed descriptively. The findings showed that the texts that were produced by competent writers are far better than the other writers. The results revealed that errors were committed by EFL writers in their written texts. Kilic e tal (2016) examined the use of topical structure in argumentative essays written by Turkey's learners of EFL. Eighty one ELT students from three universities were used as participants. The results demonstrated that the participants used pronouns frequently for parallel progression. While for sequential progression they used noun groups. Meanwhile, Soltani and Kheirzadeh (2017) examined the use of writing strategies by EFL students' and their attitudes towards reading-to write and writing-only tasks. The study used thirty four EFL students from an institution

of higher learning in Istahan, Iran for data collection. The findings indicated that no significant differences in writing strategies employed by Iranian EFL students in reading-to write and writing-only groups. Also, the data that were analyzed through the use of qualitative approach demonstrated that students had a positive attitude with regards to reading-to write class. Kotamjani and Hussin (2017) shared the opinions of a group of Iranian postgraduate students undergoing their doctoral degrees at Universiti Putra Malaysia on the challenges of writing their doctoral thesis in English as a second language. Fifty two Iranian postgraduate students participated in the study as respondents. Questionnaire was used as an instrument for data collection. The results revealed that the respondents admit that writing for academic purpose is more difficult than writing for other purposes. Bakery and Alsamadani (2015) examined the impact of self-regulation development strategies on writing persuasive texts for students of Arabic as a foreign language. Twenty four students from Al-qura University were used as participants. It showed that self regulation development was used as a strategy on writing persuasive texts for Arabic for foreign language students. Berkenkotter (1981) investigates how competence writers who have the needed skills in writing involve their readers through the medium of their text more than in-experience writers. The study revealed that most of the participants confirmed that the readers understand message convey by competence writers than in-experience writers because of the knowledge of the writing skill. Mastan and Maarof (2014) explored ESL learners writing self-efficacy beliefs. A mixed method approach was used for the data analysis. Also, the study used questionnaires, observation and semi-structured interviews for the collection of data among sixty students. The study indicated that the used of self-efficacy beliefs and strategy is effective in expository writing by the students. Panahandeh and Asl (2014) investigated the effects of planning and monitoring skills as meta-cognitive strategies on Iranian intermediate EFL learners argumentative writing. Sixty university students were selected randomly as participants. All of them are at the level of intermediate English proficiency. The study demonstrated that there was a positive effect in the experimental groups' writings performance. Ulya (2017) explores the categories of lexical cohesions used in the students' narrative essays. The study used qualitative approach in analyzing its data. Similarly, it used Halliday and Hassan model of cohesion. The findings revealed that the author used all the types of lexical cohesions in the process of writing the text. Al-shekaili (2011) examined the use of cohesive features in persuasive English written essays. The study used Halliday and Hassan's model of cohesion (1976) in analyzing the data. Twenty participants were used for the data collection. The study indicated that the writers made used of references more than the other types of grammatical cohesive elements. The study reveals that ESL students need more exposure on the use of cohesive ties in writing. Huy (2015) investigated the problems associated with learning writing skills of grade 11 at Thong Linh high school. The study found that students-writer commits a lot of mistakes in second language writing particularly in area of grammar. Darus and Subramaniam (2009) examined errors committed by Malaysian secondary school students in their written essays. Seventy two participants which consist of thirty-seven males and thirty-five female students were selected as participants. The students' samples essays and marker soft ware were also used as instrument for data collection. The study revealed six different kinds of errors committed by the students in course of their writing. The errors include: singular-plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement and word order.

In African context, similar studies were conducted on the ESL writing strategies. Nyangau (2017) explored how language learning strategies were used by students in English language writing. The study used descriptive survey research design. Fifteen English teachers and one hundred and twenty students from fifteen secondary schools in Kenya participated in the semi-structured interviews and questionnaire survey. The results revealed that meta-cognitive strategies were used by most of the student-writers. The study states that the teachers are expected to provide adequate training to the students-writers on how to use appropriate language learning strategies and encourage them to use the strategies. Ahmed (2011) investigated the difficulties of writing essays by Egyptian student-teachers of English. The study used a mixed method approach in analyzing the data. One hundred and sixty five questionnaires were distributed to student-teachers of English. Seven teachers were used as participants. Semi-structured in-depth interviews and observations were also used as instruments for the study. Data were analyzed using SPSS descriptive statistics and exploratory content analysis. The findings revealed that student-teachers of English normally encounter difficulties with regards to planning and organizing how to teach ESL learners writing skill. Ezeokoli and Patience (2016) explored how instructional teaching strategies contribute towards improving secondary school students' English essay writing particularly to ESL learners in Nigerian context. Three public secondary schools in Benin City, Nigeria were randomly selected based on purposive sampling technique. The results indicated that there was no significant effect of treatment on how instructional teaching strategy influence students' English writings in schools.

### 3 Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed to examine the writing strategies of Nigerian secondary school students in their narrative essays. The essays were written as a classroom test on the topic titled “My experiences as a junior secondary school student”. The participants were all non-native speakers of English language. Steps were taken to protect the participants’ confidentiality (Creswell, 2012; 2014). The table below presents the writers profile:

**Table 1.** Participants’ Profile

SN	Participants	Gender	Age	Tribe	Religion
1	S 1	Male	18	Fulani	Islam
2	S 2	Female	17	Yoruba	Christian
3	S 3	Male	18	Fulani	Islam
4	S 4	Male	16	Bachama	Christian
5	S 5	Male	17	Vere	Islam
6	S 6	Female	17	Fulani	Islam
7	S 7	Male	17	Vere	Christian
8	S 8	Male	16	Hausa	Islam
9	S 9	Male	16	Fulani	Islam
10	S 10	Female	17	Bachama	Christian
11	S 11	Male	16	Igbo	Christian
12	S 12	Female	16	Fulani	Islam
13	S 13	Female	18	Hausa	Islam
14	S 14	Male	17	Luguda	Christian
15	S 15	Male	18	Igbo	Christian

Key:

S= Student

Source: Students registration files.

The samples of the essays were written in English language because it is the language of instructions in Nigerian educational institution of learning. The length of the essays was not more than three hundred and fifty words. The time given to the students during the written test exercise was approximately forty-five minutes which is the normal time allocated to each subject on the lecture time table. The students were asked to write about their junior secondary school days experiences. The essays were analyzed manually and coded based on particular thematic categories (Kvale, 1999; Creswell, 2014). The analysis of the content witnesses several themes emerging from the students’ writing (see Table: 2).

### 4 Findings

The data leads to three themes emerging from the students’ written texts:

**Table 2.** Themes of (student-writers) writing strategies

Themes	Categories of themes
Theme 1	Using cohesive elements in connecting ideas as a writing strategy
Theme 2	Using supporting details for clarity of information as a strategy in writing
Theme 3	Discussing relevant points through the use of related paragraph as a strategy of writing

**Theme 1: Using cohesive elements in connecting ideas as a writing strategy**

Most of the Nigerian student-writers use cohesive ties throughout their writing task more specifically in an academic environment. The study found that six participants from the fifteen that participated in the study revealed that they used cohesive elements as a writing strategy. The student-writers that used this type of writing strategy during their writing are (S3, 6, 8, 10, 5, and 9). However, the study demonstrated that the dominant cohesive elements used by most of the participants are the grammatical cohesion precisely reference types of cohesive ties as shown in the student sample essays:

... I have a friend called *Christopher* a very good and nice person. *He* used to give me a useful advice on how to go with the school life... (S 3)

... With this efforts and concern of my *parents*, I must thank and pray for *them*.... (S 6)

... I want to share with you my *experiences* both the good and the bad *ones*... (S 8)

... I have a lot of *friends* who are *Muslims*, even my *boyfriend* is a *Muslim* and he loves and cares for me... (S 10)

... Also my *form mistress* like *me* because of my intelligent, *she* also appointed me as a monitor of the class... (S 5)

... I have a terrible experience with one of my *female class mate*. In fact, I don't have anything before me apart from thinking about *her* which affects my academic performance... (S 9)

**Note:** S= stands for student (student participant)

All the words (in italics) in each of the above samples demonstrate how the student-writers used cohesive elements in connecting information in the process of writing about their experiences. But, the most dominant cohesive tie used in almost all the sample essays was the grammatical cohesion, namely, the reference type of cohesion. For instance, S3 writer used personal pronoun *He* refer back to Christopher; here the writer uses an anaphoric reference as a way to avoid unnecessary repetition of words during the course of writing. Meanwhile, S6 uses the pronoun "them" to refer back to the word "parents". Similarly, the word 'ones' used by S8 demonstrates the use of nominal substitution which is pointing back to the abstract noun 'experiences'. Interestingly, S10 uses lexical substitution, for instance, when she substitutes the word 'Muslim' with 'friends' and in the other part of the sentence the word 'Muslim' was used instead of 'boyfriend'. Also, personal pronoun 'she' was used by S5 to point back to "form mistress" as an anaphoric reference. Similarly, S9 uses singular personal pronoun 'her' to refer back to 'female class mate'. In that way, the writer avoids making the text boring to the target reader by unnecessary repetition of words, phrases or clauses. As seen, the use of cohesive elements by the writers share their stories help towards achieving richness of the information within the written communication.

**Theme 2: Using supporting details for clarity of information as a strategy in writing**

Most of the Nigerian secondary school student-writers use supporting details which comprise reasons, examples, illustrations and itemizations. They do this to provide more clarity of the points they intend to convey to their target readers as part of writing strategy as seen in the following excerpts:

... I have the experience of interacting with people from different faith (Christians) and tribes such as *Igbos, Yorubas, Kilba and Margi*... (S 12)

... We are now senior secondary school students with different subjects and different names such as *biology, chemistry, physics, government and agriculture*... (S 14)

...I also engage myself in some menial jobs like *laundry and motor mechanic* during weekends... (S 1)

... As part of our daily duties as students include *sweeping the school compound, classrooms and offices* before the assembly time.... (S 15)

...these groups' activities create fair in the minds of other innocent students in the school. The activities of the group include *raping, stealing and even taking hard drugs*... (S 11)

... I used to participate in sports activities such as *hand ball, volley ball and table tennis* in order to exercise myself so that to provide healthy muscles and bones... (S 13)

Most of the supporting details are used by the student-writers in deductive method of paragraph development. They expand their stories by strategically drawing attention to the content words in the sentences. For instance, S12 writing shows tribes are further narrated to refer to Igbos, Yorubas and so on. The 'menial jobs' as written by S1 are explained to provide a glimpse of what the tasks are all about. The word 'activities' in S11 writing is made clear by

detailing the actual activities done by those groups. In that way, the narration is more understood as the reader can make sense of what the writer is attempting to convey.

### Theme 3: **Discussing relevant points through the use of related paragraph as a strategy of writing**

The samples of the students' essays demonstrate how the student-writers present important issues that are related to the main subject matter of the written text. The study revealed that the students' used simple sentences in most of the texts in order to communicate their intended message effectively to the target readers as a written communication strategy. Also, the findings indicate that the dominant type of paragraph development used by the Nigerian secondary school student-writers is the deductive method of paragraph development. This means that four of the participants start their paragraph with a topic sentence and followed by supporting details including illustrations, reasons, and itemizations.

First and foremost, as a female student I have a lot of experiences with regards to cooking and other duties in the house... (S 2)

Assalamu alaikum my beloved brothers and sisters, I want to share with you my experiences as a student.... (S 7)

One of the wonderful experiences I got during my junior secondary school days is having the opportunity to learn the three major Nigerian languages... (S 4)

Another experience has to do with the role I played in the activities of Muslim students' society of Nigerian... (S 6)

The students' narratives demonstrate how the use of paragraphs contributes in the course of presenting important issues that are related to the subject matter as a writing strategy by the student-writers. As evident from the extracts above, the study reveals that most of the samples essays are constructed based on deductive methods of paragraph development as seen here. Most of the paragraphs start with topic sentences and followed by supporting ideas. Similarly, the study shows that mostly the writers use simple sentences as a writing strategy in order to convey their messages easily to the target readers. As a result of using this particular strategy by the participants, it is evident that it helps in achieving certain degree of coherency in their written work.

## 5 Discussion

This findings display three prominent themes emerging from the students' writings. The themes include: using cohesive elements in connecting ideas as a writing strategy, using supporting details for clarity of information as a strategy in writing, and discussing relevant points through the use of related paragraph as a strategy of writing.

The first theme "using cohesive elements in connecting ideas as a writing strategy", reveals insights into the writings of Nigerian secondary school writers who avoid unnecessary repetitions in narrating their experiences which also contributes in not making the whole text boring to the reader. Also, the use of cohesive ties by the writers as a strategy helps in achieving economic use of words during writing. Similarly, the writing reveals that the dominant cohesive type used in most of the student essays include: reference cohesion, nominal substitution and lexical substitution. The results of this study shares the findings of numerous studies on how cohesive elements are used as a writing strategy in an academic discourse (Carrell, 1982; Al-shekaili, 2011; Malah, 2015; Ulyah, 2017).

The second theme "using supporting details for clarity of information as a strategy in writing" demonstrates the use of varieties of examples, illustrations, itemizations and reasons in making writing more readable and interesting to follow. This is an attempt to convince and motivates the target reader to have more interest and continue reading the text. The findings from the samples essays revealed that the student-writers make use of supporting details in the content of their writings as a strategy of justifying the experience shared based on the given topic and for the purpose of clarity of the message to the reader. Given that the essay is a class test, more efforts are shown to attract the reader, who in this case, is the researcher. The results of this study coincides with the opinions of numerous scholars on how the use of supporting details such as adequate examples and illustrations contributes as a writing strategy towards providing clarity of information to the readers of the written academic discourses (Abas & Abdaziz, 2016; Ezeokoli & Patience, 2016; Nwogu, 2006; Nyangau, 2017; Soltani & Kheirzadeh, 2017).

The third theme "discussing relevant points through the use of paragraph as a strategy of writing", indicates that the participants use simple sentences in the course of presenting important issues related to the topic to ensure that their narration is understood by their reader. Similarly, the study found that deductive method of paragraph development was also used by most of the student-writers as a writing strategy during their writings which demonstrate that each of the paragraphs constructed by the participants starts with a topic sentence and followed by supporting

sentences with the aim of providing more clarifications to the reader. Also, the strategy contributes a lot in achieving certain levels of coherency by the student-writers through the medium of written communication. These findings confirmed with several scholars such as (Fakuade, 2007; Nwogu, 2006; Umunnakwe, 2017) positions on the use of topic sentence and simple sentence as a strategy in constructing simple paragraph that can be easily understood by the reader.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper explored the strategies used by Nigerian secondary school students' in writing about their junior secondary school days experiences as the topic for their essay. The strategies used include: employing cohesive elements in connecting ideas, using supporting details for clarity of information and discussing relevant points through the use of relevant and well-connected paragraphs. Similarly, the dominant cohesive elements used by the student-writers were reference cohesion, nominal substitution and lexical substitution. Also, the type of paragraph development adopted by most of the writers is the deductive method of paragraph development. Simple sentence structure is also used frequently by most of the participants' in the written texts due to their level of education and experience in written communication. These are students who have somewhat acquired certain level of mastery in the construction of phrases, clauses, sentences, and letter writing.

Special efforts should be given by all the relevant agencies and educationist towards providing the needed training and re-training of English teachers' on how to improve the students' writing in English language, particularly in writing narrative essays. Also, we suggest that a comparative study should be conducted towards understanding the writing skills of public and private secondary school students' in Nigeria to enable both parties to excel in their future work situations that might require communicating with non-Nigerians or people that are from different tribes. The educators can learn from such research as they can help facilitate students under their tutelage.

## References

- Abas, I. H., & Abd aziz, N. H. (2016). Indonesian EFL students' perspective on writing process: A pilot study. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, 7(3), 21-27.
- Ahmed, A. M. A. (2011). *The EFL essay writing difficulties of Egyptian student-teachers of English: Implications for essay writing curriculum and instruction*. Unpublished PhD thesis submitted to the graduate school of education, university of Exerter.
- Alamaddine, M. M., & Mirza, H. S. (2016). Teaching academic writing for advanced level grade 10 English. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 232, 209-216.
- Al-Shekaili, D. A. (2011). *Cohesive features in persuasive (argumentative and non-argumentative) writing produced by Omani undergraduates*. Unpublished M.A dissertation submitted to language center, Durham University.
- Bakry, M. S., & Alsamadani, H. A. (2015). Improving the persuasive essay writing of students of Arabic as a foreign language(AFL): Effect of self-regulated strategy development. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 182, 89-97.
- Barkaoui, K. (2007). Teaching writing to second language learners: insights from theory and research. *TESL Reporter*, 40(1), 35-48.
- Berkenkotter, C. (1981). Understanding a writer's awareness of audience. *College Composition and Communication*, 32(4), 388-399.
- Carrell, P. L. (1982). Cohesion is not coherence: *TESOL Quarterly*, 16(4), 479-488.
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Boston: Pearson education limited.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.). Boston: Pearson education limited.
- Danladi, S. S. (2013). Language policy: Nigeria and the role of English language in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: *European Scientific Journal*, 9(17), 1857-7881.
- Darus, S., & Subramaniam, K. (2009). Error analysis of the written English essays of secondary school students in Malaysia: A case study. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(3), 483-495.
- Ezeokoli, F. O., & Patience, I. (2016). Improving secondary school Students' achievement in English essay writing using two modes of essay structure-based instructional strategies: *International Journal for Innovation Education and Research*, 4(6),2411- 3123.

- Fakuade, G. (2007). *Writing essays and business letters in English*. Yola : Paraclete publishers.
- Feliks, T., Liufeto, G., & Nalley, H. M. (2018). Analysis of peer revisions of an EFL argumentative essay. *International Journal of Translation Studies (IJELR)*, 5(1),99-111.
- Gray, D. E. (2004). *Doing research in the real world*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Huy, N. T. (2015). Problems affecting learning writing skill of grade 11 at Thong Linh High School. *Asian Journal of Educational Research*, 3(2),2311-6080.
- Kan-kan-dee, M., & Kaur, S. (2015). Teaching strategies used by Thai EFL learners to teach argumentative writing. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 208,143-156.
- Kilic, M., Genc, B., & Bada, E. (2016). Topical structure in argumentative essays of EFL learners and implications for writing classes. *Journal of Language and Linguistics Studies*, 12(2), 107-116.
- Kotamjani, S. S., & Hussin, H. (2017). Perceptions of challenges in writing academically: Iranian postgraduate students' perspectives. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 6(4), 1-4.
- Kvale, S. (1996) *Interviews : An introduction to qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Malah, Z. (2015). Lexical cohesion in academic discourse: Exploring applied linguistics research articles abstracts. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature (RJELAL)*, 3(4), 2395-2636.
- Mastan, M. E., & Maarof, N. (2014). ESL learners self-efficacy beliefs and strategy use in expository writing. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 116, 2360-2363.
- Nwogu, K. N. (2006). *Writing tasks: A course in essay, letter, summary and report writing*. Yola: Paraclete Publishers.
- Nyangau, B. N. (2017). Language learning strategies used by students in learning essay writing skills in English language in secondary schools in Manga sub country Kenya. *International Journal of English and Education*, 6(3), 205-212.
- Panahandah, E., & Esfandiari, S. (2014). The effect of planning and monitoring as meta- cognitive strategies on Iranian EFL learners' argumentative writing accuracy. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1409-1416.
- Silva, T. (1990). *Second language composition instruction: Developments, issues and directions in ESL*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Soltani, A., & Kheirzadeh, S. (2017). Exploring EFL students' use of writing strategies and their attitudes towards reading-to write and writing-only tasks. *Journal of Language and Linguistics Studies*, 13(2), 535-560.
- Ulya, N. (2017). *An analysis of lexical cohesion on John Cheever's The Five-Forty Eight*. Unpublished degree of strata one (S1) thesis submitted to the faculty of letters and humanities, University Islam Negeri, Jakarta-Indonesia.
- Umunnakwa, N., & Pitse, B. G. (2017). What is in the essay? An investigation of the introductory paragraph of students' academic essays. *International Journal of Scientific and Education Research*, 1(1), 31-44.
- Wu, H., & Zhang, L. J.(2017). Effects of different language environments on Chinese graduate students' perceptions of English writing and their writing performance. *Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 65, 164-173.
- Yule, G. (2010). *The study of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.