



COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE AND NON- LITERATURE STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN ESSAY WRITING IN MAKURDI LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA, BENUE STATE

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Abstract

*This study investigated differences in essay writing performance between Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students in senior secondary schools in Makurdi Local Government Area, Benue State, Nigeria. Two research questions and two hypotheses guided the research. A cross-sectional design was adopted. The population comprised 9,758 Senior Secondary Two (SS II) students (4,132 males and 5,626 females) in 135 public schools during the 2024/2025 academic session. A sample of 150 SS II students (75 Literature-in-English and 75 Non-Literature-in-English) was selected from six schools using purposive sampling. Data were collected using Students' Expository Essay Writing Test (SEEWTE), adapted from WAEC past questions and validated by three experts. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while independent samples *t*-test and two-way ANOVA tested the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. Findings revealed a statistically significant difference in essay writing performance, with Literature-in-English students outperforming Non-Literature-in-English students ($t(148) = 5.12, p < 0.05, d = 0.77$). Gender, however, did not significantly influence essay writing performance across groups ($f(1,46) = 2.07, P > 0.05$). The study concluded that exposure to Literature-in-English positively impacts students' essay writing skills and recommended, among other things, the integration of literature-based strategies into English language instruction for all students.*

Key words: Essay writing, academic performance, Literature-in-English, gender

Introduction

Essay writing is one of the core skills in English language learning and assessment at the secondary school level in Nigeria. The West African Examinations Council (WAEC) English language paper places considerable emphasis on essay writing, requiring students to demonstrate competence in narrative, descriptive, and expository essay types (WAEC, 2023). Mastery of essay writing is not only vital for passing school examinations but also for success in higher education and workplace communication. Despite its importance, consistent reports indicate that Nigerian students perform poorly in essay writing due to challenges such as limited vocabulary, grammatical errors, incoherent organisation, and weak content development (WAEC Chief Examiners' Report, 2022). These weaknesses suggest the need for effective pedagogical interventions to improve essay writing skills.

One area believed to influence essay writing performance is exposure to Literature-in-English. Literature-in-English involves the study of prose, poetry, and drama, encouraging critical thinking, creativity, and appreciation of language aesthetics. The major provisions of the Literature-in-English syllabus for Nigerian secondary schools (especially at the Senior Secondary level: SS1–SS3) are structured to guide both teaching and assessment. These provisions cut across aims, content areas, skills development, and examination structure.

The general objectives of the syllabus is designed to enable students to develop awareness and appreciation of literature as an art form, acquire knowledge of literary terms, techniques, and conventions, cultivate critical and analytical skills in reading and interpreting texts, understand how literature mirrors, critiques, and shapes society, enhance language proficiency, creative imagination, and self-expression and prepare for higher education and external examinations such as WAEC, NECO, JAMB, NABTEB.

The content coverage of the syllabus is built around the three main genres, prose, drama and poetry. Prose covers elements, such as plot,

theme, setting, characterisation, point of view, style and its types include novel, short story, novella, fable and allegory. The recommended text cut across African and non-African prose as well as unseen prose passages meant for appreciation. Drama on the other hand covers elements like action, character, conflict, dialogue and stage directions and its types are tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, satire, melodrama and one-act play. African and non-African dramatic texts are also recommended for the students. Poetry also covers elements such as theme, tone, mood, persona, imagery, rhythm and rhyme and its types include lyric, epic, sonnet, ode, ballad, narrative poem and dramatic monologue. It also has African and non-African poetry as well as unseen poems meant for appreciation.

The Literary Appreciation part of the syllabus is designed to test the students' ability to read, interpret, and evaluate both prescribed and unseen texts. It also aims at recognising literary devices (metaphor, irony, satire and symbolism) and creating an awareness of cultural, moral, political, and social contexts of literature.

The examination structure gives the general patterns of the entire Literature-in-English examination. WAEC, NECO and NABTEB examinations are often divided into Paper 1 (Objective/Multiple Choice, literary terms, figures of speech, unseen passages (prose & poetry), context questions), Paper 2 (Essay on Prose - African and non-African novels/short stories) and

Paper 3 (Essay on Drama & Poetry African & non-African plays and poems).

The skills development structure of the syllabus emphasises that students should demonstrate critical reading, analysis, and comparative judgment, relate literature to real-life experiences and societal issues, improve vocabulary, communication, and creative writing skills and develop aesthetic and moral sensitivity.

There is a strong relationship between Literature-in-English Syllabus Provisions and essay writing. The Literature-in-English syllabus for Nigerian senior secondary schools emphasises prose, drama, poetry, literary appreciation, and

examination techniques. These provisions are not isolated; they directly foster the development of essay writing competence, which is a core skill expected of senior secondary students.

The prose component of the syllabus trains students to analyse plot, setting, characterisation, point of view, and style. These elements parallel the requirements of narrative and descriptive essays, where coherence, logical sequencing, and vivid description are central. By studying novels and short stories, students see how ideas are organised into paragraphs and how narratives are sustained. This exposure enhances their ability to construct their own essays with unity, progression, and style (Ogunyemi & Adepoju, 2020). Drama requires students to understand dialogue, conflict, and resolution. These provisions sharpen students' ability to present different sides of an issue, just as in argumentative essays, where points and counterpoints must be logically presented. According to Abraham and Oladejo (2023), analysing dramatic dialogue improves students' persuasive strategies, logical reasoning, and clarity of expression, which are essential in expository and argumentative writing. Poetry in the syllabus also emphasises imagery, symbolism, tone, and diction. This provision nurtures students' appreciation of how language can be used effectively and economically. Exposure to poetry improves students' figurative expression, creativity, and emotional appeal in essay writing. Eze and Mama (2021) argue that poetry equips students with a heightened sensitivity to word choice, rhythm, and imagery, which enriches reflective and creative essays.

The requirement to analyse unseen texts develops critical reading and interpretation. This provision is directly related to analytical and critical essays, where students must dissect issues, evaluate perspectives, and present informed arguments. As noted by Ibrahim (2022), literary appreciation fosters higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, which are the backbone of strong essay writing.

The examination provision (objective, essay-type questions, and unseen texts) trains students in essay planning, organisation, and time-bound

writing. Essay-based sections of WAEC and NECO require students to compose coherent arguments on literature texts, a task that strengthens their general composition skills (Adebayo & Chukwu, 2019). Thus, the examination structure itself reinforces essay-writing competence by demanding clarity, organisation, and evidence-based reasoning.

Across prose, drama, and poetry, the syllabus provisions implicitly emphasise language mastery, which underpins all forms of essay writing. Through exposure to diverse styles and registers, students expand their vocabulary and refine their grammar. This aligns with Ashaolu (2021), who found that consistent engagement with literature texts improves students' essay fluency, cohesion, and accuracy.

It must be emphasised here that one of the syllabus aims is to help students relate literature to societal issues. This provision enriches students' essay content by providing themes, ideas, and moral reflections that can be applied in expository, argumentative, and reflective essays. As Okeke (2023) observes, literature supplies students with cultural capital and topical examples that enhance the depth of their essay writing. The provisions of the Literature-in-English syllabus are integrally connected to essay writing skills. Prose studies strengthen narrative and descriptive essays; drama sharpens argumentative skills; poetry enriches creativity and diction; literary appreciation enhances analytical writing; and the examination structure consolidates organisational and time management skills. In effect, the syllabus not only prepares students for external examinations but also equips them with lifelong writing abilities that are crucial for academic success and societal participation.

Exposure to literary texts is thought to enhance reading comprehension, expand vocabulary, and improve students' ability to generate and organise ideas in writing (Ugwu, 2022). Students who offer Literature-in-English may therefore have an advantage in essay writing compared to those who do not. However, empirical evidence supporting this assumption

remains limited, particularly in Benue State, where no major study has directly compared the essay writing performance of Literature and Non-Literature students.

Another variable of interest is gender. Research findings on gender differences in essay writing performance are inconsistent. Some studies report that female students tend to outperform males in essay writing tasks due to better language development and greater attention to detail (Chigbu, Emelogu, Nwakoby & Anyanwu, 2023), while others find no significant gender-based differences (Eze & Nwaneri, 2022). In the Nigerian context, sociocultural expectations, learning environments, and access to reading materials may influence how male and female students engage with both Literature-in-English and essay writing tasks. Understanding whether gender moderates the relationship between Literature exposure and essay writing performance is therefore essential for curriculum planning and teaching strategies.

Given these gaps, there is the need for an empirical study to examine whether students offering Literature-in-English perform better in essay writing than those who do not and whether gender plays a significant role in this difference. This study addresses these gaps using a comparative analysis of Literature and Non-Literature students' essay writing performance in Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Essay writing remains one of the most challenging aspects of English language learning in Nigerian secondary schools, as reflected in persistent reports of poor performance in public examinations (WAEC Chief Examiners' Report, 2022). While students offering Literature-in-English are believed to have an advantage due to their exposure to a wide range of literary texts and creative writing exercises, there is insufficient empirical evidence to substantiate this claim, particularly in Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State.

Furthermore, existing studies have not

adequately addressed how gender differences may influence essay writing performance among Literature and Non-Literature students. Without clear evidence, schools, parents, and policymakers lack reliable data to guide curriculum planning, instructional strategies, and targeted interventions that can improve essay writing skills for all learners regardless of their subject combination or gender. This study therefore seeks to fill this gap by providing a comparative analysis of Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students' essay writing performance, with gender as a moderating variable.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to conduct a comparative analysis of Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students' performance in essay writing in Makurdi Local Government Area of Benue State. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Determine whether there is a significant difference in essay writing performance between Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students.
2. Examine the extent to which gender influences the essay writing performance of Literature and Non-Literature students.

Research Questions

1. What is the difference between the essay writing performance of Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students?
2. To what extent does gender influence the essay writing performance of Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students?

Research Hypotheses

H0 : There is no significant difference in essay writing performance between Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students.

H0 : Gender does not significantly influence the essay writing performance of Literature and Non-Literature students.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory (1978), which explains how exposure to literary texts influences essay writing performance. Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the role of social interaction and cultural tools in learning. Literature-in-English classes often involve discussions, interpretations, and collaborative learning, which create a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where students refine language and writing skills through teacher and peer scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). The theory is relevant to this study in that Literature-in-English classes promote interaction and critical thinking, which help students develop advanced writing strategies. Non-Literature students may lack such collaborative literary experiences, limiting opportunities to expand essay writing proficiency.

Literature Review

Essay writing is a key component of English language assessment and pedagogy at the secondary school level in Nigeria. It requires the ability to generate, organise, and present ideas coherently while observing linguistic and mechanical accuracy (WAEC, 2022). Essay writing competence involves cognitive processes such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing (Hyland, 2019). According to Nwana and Agbo (2023), effective essay writing depends on vocabulary knowledge, grammatical accuracy, and familiarity with different essay types such as narrative, descriptive, expository, and argumentative.

Despite its importance, essay writing remains a persistent challenge. WAEC Chief Examiners' Reports consistently highlight poor content development, weak paragraphing, limited vocabulary, and inappropriate register as common weaknesses (WAEC, 2022). Factors responsible include inadequate teaching methodologies, lack of practice opportunities, insufficient reading culture, and the influence of mother tongue interference (Ugwu, 2022).

Recent studies (Adebayo & Bello, 2023; Chigbu et al., 2023) have also shown that digital

distractions and limited exposure to reading materials reduce students' ability to generate ideas and construct coherent essays. Literature-in-English as a subject exposes students to prose, poetry, and drama, encouraging critical thinking, creativity, and appreciation of language aesthetics (Ali & Mohammed, 2023). The reading of diverse literary texts enriches vocabulary, improves comprehension, and enhances students' ability to construct coherent arguments in writing (Krashen, 1985).

In the words of Ugwu (2022), Literature students engage in intensive reading, analysis, and interpretation, which increase their exposure to different writing styles and rhetorical techniques. Such exposure is believed to enhance essay performance compared to non-Literature students, who may not have similar literary experiences.

Several empirical studies have linked Literature-in-English exposure to improved writing skills. Tarkighir (2020) conducted a comparative study in Katsina-Ala Local Government Area of Benue State, and found that Literature students outperformed their non-Literature peers in English writing tasks. Similarly, Chigbu et al. (2023) observed that integrating literary texts with digital graphic organizers significantly improved students' expository essay scores.

Conversely, Eze and Nwaneri (2022) reported no significant difference in essay performance when teaching methods were ineffective, suggesting that instructional strategies mediate the relationship between literature exposure and writing performance. While prior research has shown a relationship between literature exposure and writing competence, few studies have focused specifically on Makurdi Local Government Area. Additionally, limited research has explored how gender moderates this relationship, hence the need for this comparative study.

Research Method

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design to compare the essay writing performance

of Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students.

The population comprised 9,758 Senior Secondary Two (SS II) students (4,132 males and 5,626 females) in 135 public schools in Makurdi Local Government Area, Benue State during the 2024/2025 academic session. A sample of 150 students (75 Literature and 75 Non-Literature students) was drawn using purposive sampling to include six schools (three urban and three rural) while ensuring gender balance. The instrument for data collection was Students' Expository Essay Writing Test (SEEWTE) adapted from WAEC past questions. It required students to write a 450–500-word essay and was scored with

a WAEC marking scheme emphasising content, organisation, expression, and mechanical accuracy (maximum score = 60 marks). Face and content validity were ensured by three experts in English education, and a pilot test established reliability at $r = 0.90$. Data were collected in examination-like conditions, with students given 50 minutes to complete the essay task. Scripts were anonymised and scored by two trained English teachers to ensure consistency. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (independent samples t-test and two-way ANOVA) using SPSS version 26 at a 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Research Question 1:

What is the difference between essay writing performance of Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students?

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of Essay Writing Scores by Student Group

Group	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Literature-in-English	75	42.30	8.70
Non-Literature-in-English	75	35.10	9.40

Table 1 shows the mean and standard deviation of essay writing scores for Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students. The table shows that Literature-in-English students

($M=42.30$, $SD = 8.70$) scored higher in essay writing than their Non-Literature-in-English counterparts ($M = 35.10$, $SD = 9.40$).

Research Question 2:

To what extent does gender influence the essay writing performance of Literature and Non-Literature students?

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation of Essay Writing Scores by Gender

Group	Gender	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
Literature-in-English	Male	38	41.60	8.40
	Female	37	43.00	9.10
Non-literature in English	Male	40	34.90	9.20
	Female	35	35.30	9.70

Table 2 shows the mean essay scores by gender across both groups. From the table, female students scored slightly higher than male students

in literature in English ($M = 41.60$, $F = 43.00$) and Non-literature in English ($M = 34.90$, $F = 35.30$). This implies that gender is not a strong factor in

essay writing performance.

Hypothesis One:

There is no significant difference in essay writing performance between Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students.

Table 3: Independent Samples t-Test on Essay Writing Performance of Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English Students

Group comparison	t(148)	P-Value	Effect Size (d)	Decision
Literature Vs Non-Literature	5.12	0.00	0.77	Rejected

Table 3 shows the independent samples t-test result of students' performance in the two groups. The table reveals a statistically significant difference in students' performance, $t(148) = 5.12$, $P < 0.05$, with a moderately large effect size

(Cohen's $d = 0.77$). This means that literature in English students outperformed their Non-Literature-in-English counterparts in essay writing.

Hypothesis Two:

Gender does not significantly influence essay writing performance between Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students.

Table 4: Two-Way ANOVA on the Influence of Gender and Student Group on Essay Writing Performance

Source	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P-Value	Decision
Group	1,854.20	1	1,854.20	26.20	0.00	Significant
Gender	146.10	1	146.10	2.07	0.152	Not significant
Group x Gender Interaction	86.10	1	87.10	1.23	0.269	Not significant
Error	10,386.70	146	70.79			
Total	12,424.10	149				

Table 4 shows the relationship between gender and students performance. The table shows no significant difference in essay writing performance between male and female students ($F(1,146) = 2.07$, $P > 0.05$) implying that gender has no significant main effect on essay writing performance. It also shows that gender did not moderate the relationship between literature exposure and essay writing performance ($F(1,146) = 1.23$, $P > 0.05$) meaning that the effect of literature exposure was similar for both males and females.

Discussion of Findings

Findings of this study demonstrate that Literature-in-English students significantly outperform Non-Literature-in-English students

in essay writing tasks. This aligns with previous research (Tarkighir, 2020; Chigbu et al., 2023), which attributed such differences to the richer exposure Literature-in-English students have to diverse texts, creative writing tasks, and critical literary analysis. These activities likely enhance their vocabulary development, idea organisation, and creative expression, which are critical skills in essay writing (Ugwu, 2022).

Interestingly, gender did not significantly influence essay writing performance, suggesting that both male and female students benefit equally from Literature exposure and general essay writing instruction. This supports the findings of Eze and Nwaneri (2022), who also observed no significant gender-based differences in English essay performance when instructional quality was

consistent across groups. The absence of gender influence may reflect changing educational dynamics in Makurdi Local Government Area, where both male and female students have comparable access to reading materials and learning support. However, it contradicts some studies (Chigbu et al., 2023) that reported female students often outperform males in language-related tasks due to higher motivation and reading engagement. These inconsistencies suggest that gender effects on writing performance may be context-specific and mediated by factors such as teacher quality, school resources, and learner attitudes.

On a whole, the results highlight the potential benefits of incorporating literature-based strategies across all student groups. Even Non-Literature students may improve their essay writing skills if given opportunities to engage with creative texts and structured writing activities.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined differences in essay writing performance between Literature-in-English and Non-Literature-in-English students in Makurdi Local Government Area, with gender as a moderating variable. Findings revealed that Literature-in-English students significantly outperformed their Non-Literature counterparts in essay writing tasks, indicating that exposure to literary texts and related activities enhances students' writing competence. However, gender was not found to significantly influence essay writing performance among either group, suggesting that both male and female students benefit equally from effective essay writing instruction.

These findings underscore the importance of literature exposure in developing students' language skills and demonstrate that improving writing competence requires more than general English instruction—it benefits from integrating creative and analytical activities inherent in Literature-in-English.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. **Integration of Literature-Based Strategies:** Schools should incorporate literary texts and activities into the English language curriculum for all students, not just those offering Literature-in-English, to enhance essay writing skills.
2. **Essay Writing Workshops:** School administrators should organise regular essay writing workshops or clinics focusing on vocabulary development, content organisation, and creative expression.
3. **Teacher Capacity Building:** English and Literature teachers should receive periodic training on innovative writing instruction and literature-based pedagogy.
4. **Provision of Learning Resources:** Governments and school owners should supply relevant literature texts, writing guides, and reading materials to support sustained essay writing practice for all learners.
5. **Further Research:** Future studies should investigate other potential moderating variables such as socio-economic background and reading habits, using larger samples and longitudinal designs to establish long-term effects of literature exposure on writing performance.

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