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EFFECTIVENESS OF FORMAL INSTRUTIONS ON EFL UNIVERSITY WRITING: THE CASE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM*

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Abstract

This study sought to find out how effective instructions are in promoting language proficiency of EFL Tanzania university students. 350 students from the University of Dar es Salaam participated in the study, guided by four questions focussing on a) students' overall proficiency after the instruction, b) their proficiency levels across various academic disciplines, and c) across instructional groups, and d) the gender comparison of the observed proficiency. After the pre-test, followed by three weeks of instructions, a post test was administered and the findings suggested marginal increase in students' written English proficiency with variations between the instructional groups, academic disciplines and gender.

1. Introduction

Among many functions of language is what Yule (2004) calls transactional function by which he means humans using their linguistic abilities to communicate knowledge, skills and information. Rubagumya (2000) adds that without language, there can hardly be any education. He further asserts that in order for leaning and teaching process to be successful, both learners and teachers have to have a relatively good command of the language of instruction. If learners prove to non proficient in the language of instruction, they will not understand their teachers and reading materials written in that language. In the same tenet, if teachers lack the required levels of proficiency they will not be able to carry out the teaching

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task effectively. Furthermore, Obston (1980), Anderson (1975) and Mvungi (1987) observe that proficiency in the language of instruction is an important factor in education performance. Ishumi (1994) argues that mastery of language is a key in the efficiency and eventual effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. Cleghorn, et al., (1989:36), as quoted by Rubagumya (1997) summarize the importance of language in education by stating,

> When teachers and learners cannot use language to make logical connections, to integrate and explain the relations between isolated pieces of information, what is taught cannot be understood….and important concepts cannot be mastered.

However, when the language of instruction is a foreign language to learners, (as English is the case for Tanzania), learners have the burden of learning the language while at the same time using it to process the cognitive load of learning at a post primary level. In such situations, there are programmes being offered to assist learners gain the proficiency level required for them to pursue their studies in the target language successfully.

Such programmes need to be evaluated to find empirical grounds for their continuance, improvement or, when found unrewarding, abandoned and another one put in its place. One way to evaluate language instructional programme is via the measurement of the learners' competence, in terms of their ability to perform linguistically, i.e. by judging how fluently they speak, and eventually how well they read and write. In judging effectiveness of language education, two issues are of interest (Lilja, 1980): The first is, how effective is the learner's language usage upon entering the class and when leaving it? And, the second, has language study improved communication abilities, and if so, how? The first present study focussed on the first issue. Saville-Troike (1989) adds that, because language is the primary medium through which all education takes place, and because the development of productive skills depends on prior receptive competence, it is even more important for teachers to know how well children understand the language of instruction. It is generally assumed that learners who speak fluently, who learn how to learn and write well and who master the content areas of instruction are also competent in the skills and processes involved in understanding language.

Being correct for the users of English means conforming to the rules and conventions of Standard English. The learner of ESL must first master the rules, thereafter he/she must also cope with the conventions (or norms) which are the basis of English Instruction at school for first language user. Guides on how to be correct, or how not to be incorrect, abound, as do morality-type injunctions on the need to maintain correctness. It ranges from prescriptivist alarms of letter writing to the newspaper about stereotyped points of grammar to the pedagogic approaches of textbook writers. They also range from the manuals on clear thinking and rhetoric to the sociolinguistic interest in linguistic class markers and feminist observations on the need for an inclusive language which encourages its users to be non-discriminatory (Davies, 1999). In the context of this study, being correct would be adhering to the norms, standard and conventions of English for general writing.

The contribution of writing skills in higher education is indisputable. Lilis (2001) stresses the importance of student writing in higher education. Student writing is at the centre of teaching and learning in Higher Education in the UK, being seen as the way in which students consolidate their understanding of subject areas, as well as the means by which tutors come to learn about the extent and nature of individual students' understanding. One of the interventions at university level has been that of initiating students into university (Ndoloi, 1997). Students are initiated to the university to fit into communicative proficiency required for academic tasks in the university and initiate them into membership of *academic discourse community*[1]. Ndoloi (1997) cites a number of case studies regarding initiating student's in university: Ballard (1984) in Australia, Irvine and Elsasser (1988) in the Caribbean, and Ogbu (1991) in Nigeria, to mention a few.

However, there have been contenting claims made regarding the differing contributions of formal classroom versus naturalistic settings to second language acquisition. Some scholars have been focusing on grammatical aspects, some having results showing gained proficiency after instructions on Grammar (Burt and Dulay, 1977). Others, like Felix and Simmet (1981) studied acquisition of English pronouns by German high school students over an eleven-month period

[1] The term is defined by Swales (1990), as cited by Ndoloi (1997), as :a) having a broadly agreed set of common public goals; 2) having mechanisms of intercommunication among its members; c)using its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback; c) utilizing and hence processing one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims in addition to owning genres; e)having acquired some specific lexis, and f) having a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise.

noted that the acquisition strategies observed paralleled those noted in naturalistic acquirers. This led the researchers to conclude:

> The students' instruction independent learning strategies demonstrate …that the learning process can only be manipulated within narrow limits and that the principles and regularities of natural language acquisition must also be considered in foreign language instruction (p.26).

A study by Pica's (2006) comparative study was more comprehensive as it sought to test claims regarding the differing contributions of formal classroom versus naturalistic settings to second language acquisition by investigating the production of English grammatical morphology by 18 adult native speakers of Spanish under three different conditions of exposure to English L2: (a) instruction only, (b) naturalistic, and (c) mixed (a combination of 1 and 2). She noted there were differences in production errors, with statistically high correlations being found among the three groups of subjects with regard to rank order accuracy for grammatical morphology. Results of the study suggest that different conditions of exposure to ESL do not significantly alter the accuracy order in which grammatical morphemes are produced. However, as reflected in production errors, different conditions appear to affect learners' hypotheses about the target morphology and their strategies for using it. However, some scholars (Lightbown, et al, 1980; Long 1988; Pienemann, 1984) have shown that instructions cannot alter the students' mental acquisition schedule as manifested in their first language acquisition.

Amongst such contending views and conflicting findings, this study found its position as adding to the contribution to the debate of effectiveness on instructed second/foreign language, using writing skills as a case.

2. Statement of the Problem

Tanzania, is like many other African countries, linguistically heterogeneous. However, unlike many other African nations, she is blessed with a unifying neutral language – Kiswahili – that is spoken by more than 90% of the population. In 1961, soon after independence, Kiswahili was given a new status of a national

language and in 1967 it became the official language and the Medium of Instruction (from now on to be referred to as MOI) at the primary education level. Today Kiswahili is also the MOI for pre-primary schools and Grade 'A' teacher training colleges.

English, however, has remained the *de jure* MOI at secondary and tertiary levels of education albeit the various call from researchers, educators and other concerned Tanzanians to change the situation. This status quo continues in spite of the recent policy- *Sera ya Utamaduni* (Cultural Policy) of 1997 from the cultural arm of the Ministry of Education and Vocational Tradition which talks of a special programme through which Kiswahili can be used as a MOI while the teaching of English is strengthened. This persistence to use English as MOI is illustrated by the following resolution quotation from the *Education and Training Policy* (URT, 1995):

> Currently English is a medium of instruction at secondary school level and most instructional media and pedagogical materials available at this level are also written in English. This situation is likely to remain so for a long time in the foreseeable future (URT, 1995:44).

However, over the years there have been mounting concerns and bitter complaints about, arguments relating and vehement debates on the falling standards of English and the associated fall in educational attainment in Tanzania (University of Dar es Salaam, included) (Anderson, 1975; Cripper and Doddy, 1984; Mlama and Materu, 1977; Mvungi, 1982; Obston, 1980). There is a belief that those poor standards of education in Tanzania are attributable to poor English Language standard (Osaki, 2000).

There have been measures taken as a response to this language of instruction crisis. The intervention measures have taken several forms. At secondary school level, there have been attempts to introduce language across the curriculum programmes, especially in the first year of junior secondary education . Isaacs (1968) notes that in 1960s *Learning Through Language* materials were introduced in form one as a transitional support measure to help students move smoothly from

Kiswahili to English MOI. A few years later, notes Rubagumya (1997) Baseline Materials were produced by ELTSP[2] for the same purpose.

Even after six years of secondary education, the problem of students' low level of English Proficiency has persistent.

The University of Dar es Salaam has taken up some intervention measures to address the issue of low proficiency of its students. These have included programmes known as UTLIP (for Lecturers), Communication Skills (CL) (for students) and NORAD-funded English Language Teaching Programme (ELTP). The improvement has, however, not been encouraging, probably because of lack of a critical evaluative study about the programmes.

The most recent initiative by the university has been the carrying out of English Writing Skill Intensive Course. The focus has been helping students to boost their level of Written English proficiency, which was found to be highly wanting. This initiative was based on the fact that, as they join the university academic community, the beginning students have been, to use Ndoloi's (1994) terms 'under-prepared' if not 'unprepared'. This study was thus guided by the motive to find out how effective short term intensive language instructions are in promoting language proficiency of EFL Tanzania university students. It used the University of Dar es Salaam first year students as a case study.

3. The Aim and Objectives of Study

The current study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of language instructions in promoting learners' language proficiency in the foreign language environment.

The study was guided by four research questions:

i) What is the overall proficiency of students after their participation in three weeks of intensive English writing course?
ii) What is the written English proficiency of students from various academic disciplines after the instructions?
iii) To what extent does the division of students into groups produce differing levels of written English proficiency after the instruction?

[2] ELTSP stands for English Language Teaching Support Project that was organised and funded by the British Council.

iv) To what extent is the gender variable manifest in the measured proficiency after the instructions?

4. Scope of the Study

The study was confined to undergraduate students in the Main Campus of the university of Dar s salaam who were in their first year of study and who volunteered to take part in the study. In terms of language skill, the focus was on the English language writing skills.

5. Theoretical Framework

This study is an evaluative in approach and was guided by Stufflbeam's (2001) CIPP evaluation model. The CIPP Evaluation Model is a comprehensive framework for guiding evaluations of programs, projects, personnel, products, institutions, and systems. This checklist, patterned after the CIPP Model, is focused on program evaluations, particularly those aimed at effecting long-term, sustainable improvements (Stufflebeam, 2001)

Corresponding to the letters in the acronym CIPP, this model's core parts are context, input, process, and product evaluation. In general, these four parts of an evaluation respectively ask:

a) Context: The fundamental question here is: What needs to be done? In this aspect, the fundamental issue would be revisiting the documents regarding the vision, mission and objectives of the teaching of writing. This, however, is outside the scope of this report.

b) Input: A guiding questing is: How should it be done? The primary focus in this aspect was in making analysis of diagnostic test (pre-test) to assess the level of proficiency of the course participants (students) to see how far their proficiency to establish the learner's baseline proficiency at the onset of the programme.

c) Process: this is guided by a question: Is it being done? During the process, the researcher was a participant observer of the teaching-learning process, playing part in the actual teaching and weekly evaluations of students' progress.

d) *Product:* 'Did it succeed?' is the key question in this aspect. In this regard, an analysis was made on students' post-test scripts to assess the extent to which an approximation to native-like proficiency has been brought close.

This model has also been used by other scholar in language instructional programme evaluations. Nichololson (1989) used it in evaluating reading instructions, arguing that classroom practitioners need to carry out classroom-based evaluations "..if they are to explain the reasoning behind their reading instruction programmes and the effects of the instruction (p.312). CIPP model was also used by Dalton (2003) to evaluate New Hampshire, a Chinese Language school in the town of Derry. The most recent one is by Xiong and Yang (2010) who also used the model to evaluate bilingual education in the aspects of teaching objectives, teaching resources, teaching scheme and teaching results.

The concept of evaluation underlying the CIPP Model is that evaluations should assess and report an entity's merit, worth, and significance and also present lessons learned. Moreover, the model's main theme is that evaluation's most important purpose is not to prove, but to improve and this the context of this study, to improve the teaching of short term *sheltered instructions*[3] within which the programme under the present study falls.

6. Materials and Methods

a) The participants

A total of 350 students participated in the programme, 216 males (61.7%) and 134 females (38.3%). Students came from five out of seven schools/colleges making up the University of Dar es Salaam Main Campus. These are CASS, UDBS, CONAS, SJMC and UDSL and the number of students for each is as detailed in Figure 1. UDSE and COET did not have any students in this batch.

[3] Sheltered English is the term that refers to an instructional approach used to make academic instruction in English understandable to Limited English Proficient (LEP) students (*National Clearinghouse on Bilingual Education, 1987*).

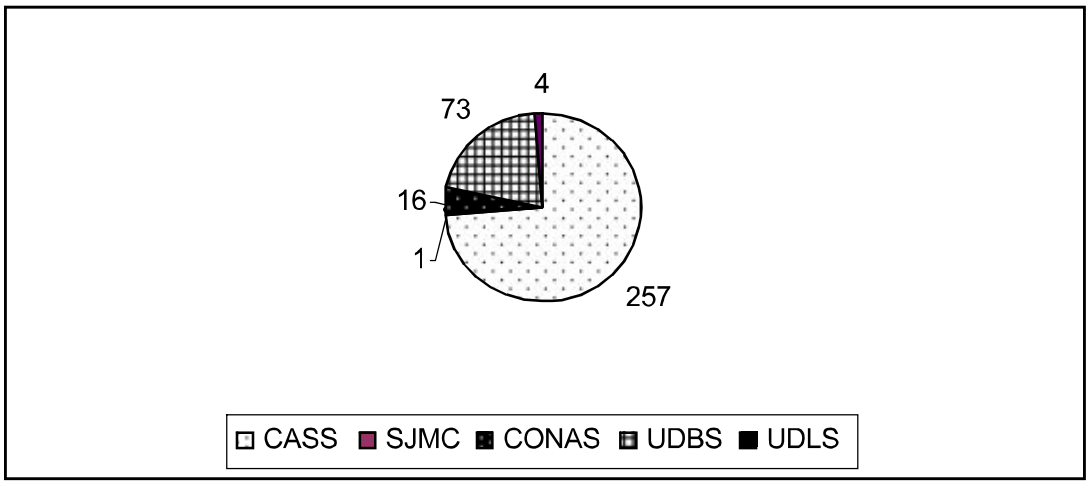


Figure 1: Participants from different Colleges/Schools

As can be seen from Figure 1, the grand majority, 257, (73%, nearly three quarters) of the students were from CASS followed by UDBS with 73 (which are 20.9%) of the total enrolment for this batch. The school with the smallest number of participants was SJMC which had only one student (03%) while UDSL had 4 (1.1%).

b) Research Procedure

To get the students interested in the programme, announcements were posted to as many notice-boards as possible as well as online. The students who registered for the course were so many that they had to be divided into batches. The first batch was taught in the first three weeks following the end of semester one. The second batch was to be taught in the last three weeks of the long vacation. The current study was concerned with the students in the first batch. Having been selected, the students were divided into fourteen groups of about 35 each for pedagogical efficiencies. Before the three weeks of teaching by members of the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics, to which the programme was housed, a pre-test was administered to establish the students' baseline proficiency. After the instructions the same test was administered as a post-test to measure the extent to which the students' written English proficiency had increased and thus provide empirical basis for evaluating the programme's effectiveness.

7. Results

The findings for the current study were presented in four themes in line with the course research questions. The first one in the overall performance of students, the second being comparison between different academic units to which the student respondents belonged, the third was on groups that were involved in the studies and the last one was on gender aspect of students.

a) Overall Average Performance

The first research question, as mentioned earlier, sought to measure the overall proficiency of students after their participation in three weeks of intensive English writing course. One can reinterpret the question to mean: What has been the effectiveness of the three weeks of intensive instruction in Writing in English? The Effectiveness of any instructional programme can be measured using a number of benchmarks one of which is to compute a difference between pre-test (which was administered before the commencement of the three weeks of instructions) and post-test (the same test administered after the three weeks of instructions). This difference serves as an indicator of the gained/acquired proficiency after the instructions (though not necessarily wholly caused by the received instructions). To arrive at the such a difference mean scores were computed by making a summation of all scores and the resulting statistic was then divided by the number of candidates (350 students), for each test. The same thing was done for the individual differences between pre-test and post-test. The results of such computations are summarized in Figure 2.

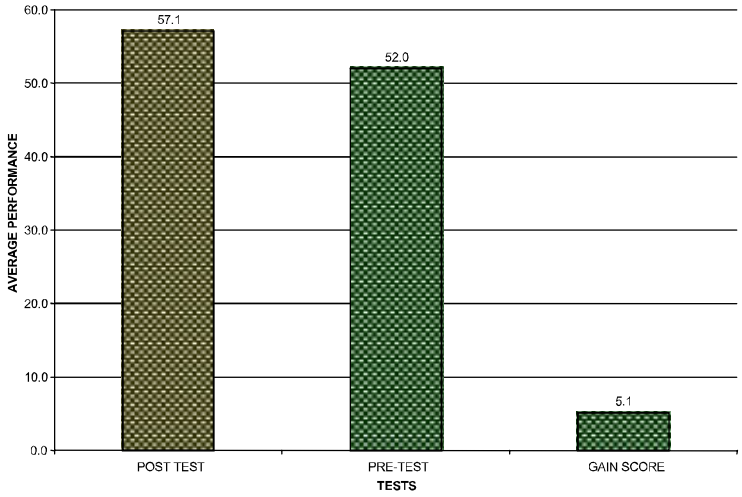


Figure 2: Average Overall Performance

What can be inferred from the data in Figure 2 is that the general performance was such that there was only a marginal increase in students proficiency by 5.1 scores (which is the deduction of average pre-test score (57.1) from the average post-test score, which stood at 52). The gain score is arguably marginal since the students overall competence at the time of course commencement was slightly above 50% (an aggregate of B in University of Dar es Salaam score ranking and the post test was still within the same percentile (a mere increase of 5.1 from the pre-test scores). However, one can argue that there was a gain difference, however small. Such marginal increase might be attributed to shortness of time but also to neglect of writing in secondary education in which, just as in Korean examples as observed by Ahn (1995) there has been little attention paid to teaching students "to write at a paragraph or discourse level"--again, because grammar and translation are considered "the most important components of language teaching" (p. 73). In other words, the traditional focus in teaching English writing in secondary education, as has been in some Korean universities, almost entirely on "grammar rules and the production of grammatically correct sentences," (Tyson, 1999, p. 1). The same was documented of Tanzanian perspective by Malekela (2000) on poor performance by secondary education students and by Malekela (3003) and Puja (2001) on EFL Tanzanian tertiary level students' problems with writing and speaking.

b) Performance by Schools/Colleges

We were also interested to observe the performance across various strata of our students, one being schools or campus colleges the students belonged to. The idea was to get some insights regarding differing competence among students from different academic biases both prior to and after the instructions. The findings of the computed mean scores for pre-test, post-test and gain scores are illustrated in Figure 3, the bottom of which has tabulated scores.

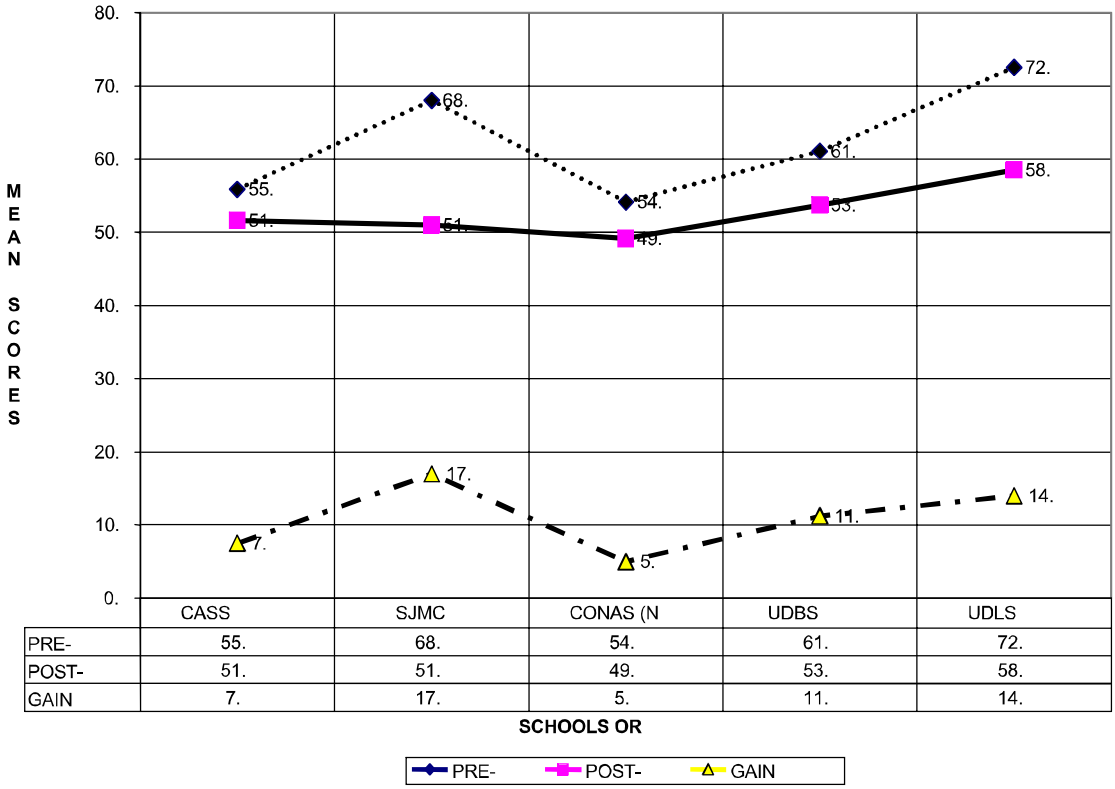


Figure 3: Performance of Students from Different Schools/Colleges

As the data in Figure 3 indicates, students from University of Dar es Salaam Law School (UDLS) were the highest achievers both in pre-test and post-test, followed by the one student from School of Journalism and Mass Communication (SJMC). The lowest achievers were those from school of Natural and Applied Sciences (CONAS) while those from College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) (who were the majority and the most diversified in the academic subspecialties, including those taking B.A. (Language Studies) ranked the last but one.

However, in terms of the mean gain scores, which, as noted earlier, was the indicator of effectiveness of the course, the SJMC student (the only one from therein) ranked the highest (mean gain score 17), followed by UDLS (14). Both CONAS (the last, with 5 mean gain score) and CASS (7.5 mean score) had their gain score below 10, which is very low.

c) Performance of Groups

It has been documented in various studies (e.g. Chickering and Gamson, 1991; Collier, 1980; Slavin, 1983; Whitman, 1988) that students learn best when they are actively involved in the process and when they work in groups they are both more successful and more satisfied with their classes. With that in mind, students were grouped and taught in fourteen different groups. These groups were the most diverse clusters since their members were randomly selected producing a rich texture of such variables as sex, age and academic units (colleges and schools). That justified the quest in this study to make a comparative analysis of the performance of the groups that were formed and taught separately for pedagogical and administrative efficiency. This group analysis was hoped to shed some light into the impact of instructors' teaching styles and methods as they were assigned specific skills to two specific groups. To attain this, means were computed of scores of members of each group for pre-test, post-test and gain score and the resulting statistics are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparative Group Performance

GROUP	POST-TEST		PRE- TEST		GAIN SCORE	
	Score	*Rank*	*Score*	*Rank*	*Score*	*Rank*
1	54.7	12	48.7	12	6.0	10
2	62.5	2	50.2	9	12.3	2
3	57.7	7	48.8	11	8.9	6
4	56.8	10	49.3	10	7.5	8
5	51.1	13	54.9	6	5.8	12
6	56.3	11	56.0	3.5	5.9	11
7	57.1	9	50.6	8	11.6	3
8	57.2	8	56.1	2	7.0	9
9	57.9	5	48.3	13	9.6	5
10	49.9	14	45.7	14	5.5	13
11	57.8	6	54.4	7	4.5	14
12	61.8	3	56.0	3.5	8.6	7
13	60.5	4	55.0	5	11.0	4
14	98.1	1	91.0	1	18.8	1

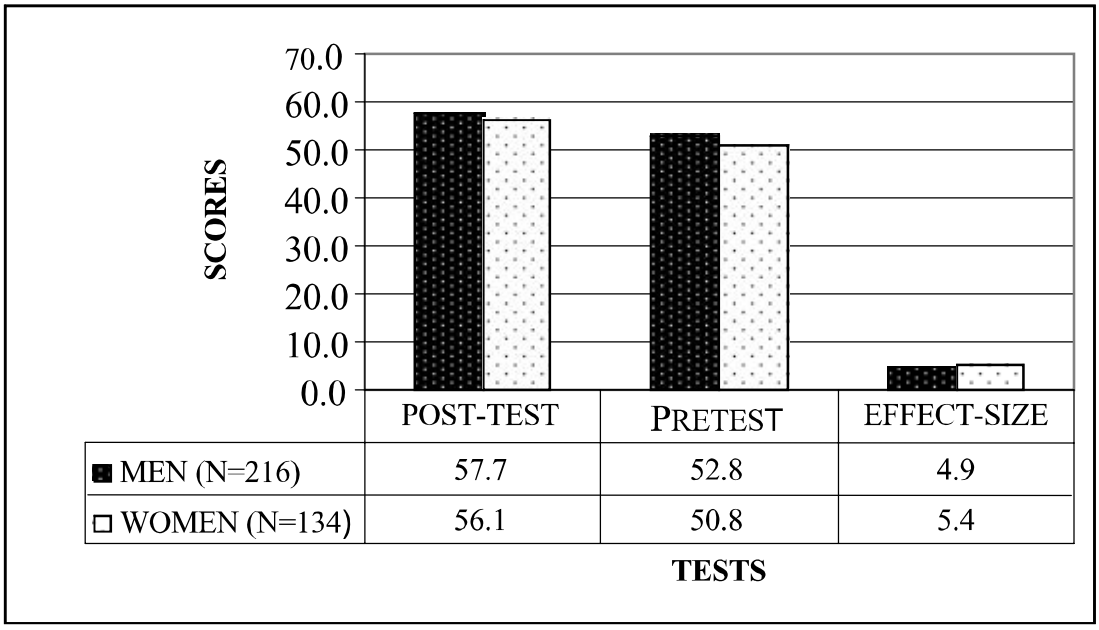
The data in Table 1 reveal the differing level of language competence between groups both prior to the beginning of the instruction and after it. Group 14 excelled well beyond all groups both in Pre- and Post-test as well as in gain score. This group's average scores for both pre-and post-test were in aggregate of A. This was followed by groups 2, 12 and 13 with an aggregate of B+, bearing mean pre-test scores of 62.5, 61.8 and 60.5, respectively. However, with exception of group 14, all other groups' scores for pre-test was below B+, with four of them (groups 3, 4, 9 and 10) scoring an aggregate of C. Group 10 was remarkably peculiar as it remained in aggregate C even after the instructions (as indicated in the post test scores (49.9). Generally, the gain score showed positive improvement in English language proficiency as all groups, except group 10, scored aggregates of B and above, differences among the groups, notwithstanding. Such improved learning is partly attributed to the notion of cooperative learning applied in this study in which, as Arends (undated) observes, students work together in small groups on a common learning task, coordinate their efforts to complete the task, and depend on each other for the outcome. Arends (Ibid.) summarizes what he considers advantages of group work in ESL/EFL classes:

> Language is best learned through the close collaboration and communication among students. This type of collaboration results in benefits for all or both learners. In fact, learners can help each other while working on different types of tasks such as writing dialogues, interviews, drawing pictures and making comments about them, play roles, etc… (p.3).

Besides, some students find it less stressful, if not much comfortable, to learn certain rules or usages of language from their pears and comrades than from their teacher. The teachers in this study whose groups excelled in this class must have taken such pedagogical insights into account while teaching, mainly using communicative language teaching approach, which requires a sense of community and an environment of trust and mutual confidence which "pair work" or "Group work" can provide. So, while we have not been able to find an empirical study in this area of group work and ESL/EFL teaching-learning success, the findings provide a basis for delving more and more in what works best for language pedagogy especially in university EFL settings where massification of higher education and meagre human and fiscal resources mitigate against such good ideals in Foreign language learning.

d) Performance by Gender

Gender is an important variable in issues related to language acquisition studies and its measurement of the speakers' proficiency. No wonder in many fields of language learning research, increasing attention has been given in recent years to sex differences as an important variable, although only a few studies have been conducted on literacy (Sunderland, 2000) discovered only a few studies. In the study, in the last set of research objectives, I sought to make a comparative analysis of the students' performance by gender, the results of which are as summarized in Figure 5.



	POST-TEST	PRETEST	EFFECT-SIZE
MEN (N=216)	57.7	52.8	4.9
WOMEN (N=134)	56.1	50.8	5.4

Figure 5: Gender Differences in EFL Writing

As for performance across gender, we note that the means scores for men was slightly higher than women for a 2.0 average point at the onset of the programme and 1.6 point after the instructions. However, in terms of the effect size of the programme, it is women who benefited more by having a difference of 5.5 score increase between pre-test and post-test. The women's performance after the instruction was thus at a better position (if taken in isolation) and are therefore said to have benefited from the instruction more than men although, admittedly, the effect size was only marginal for both groups. Studies elsewhere have also confirmed the superiority of women over men in ESL/EFL writings. Morris'

(1998) study examining men's and women's ESL writing and their handling of written assignments at the junior college level in Quebec showed that the women's essays showed much higher levels of adherence to guidelines and norms of writing than the men's. A recent comparative study by Waskita (2008) of examines men's and women's ESL academic writing in their written assignments at the University of Melbourne also showed significant differences between the men's and women's essays in which the structure of the women's texts tended to be more complex than the men's. The women also used more paraphrases to integrate cited information, and presented better organized arguments. This aspect of gender differences in ESL/EFL college writing has not been done in Tanzania yet. It is probably worth pursuing in the the recent future as it is insightful in the group dynamics and heterogeneity involving men and women in language instructions and measurement.

8. Conclusion

This paper has looked on effectiveness of the instructed SLA within the foreign language context in a university in Tanzania which is dominantly a Swahili speaking university, just as is the case to the rest of the country. Findings in the current study lead to these conclusions: Writing in the university, good and important that it is, requires more than a few weeks of intensive teaching (three weeks in the current study) if the have to go beyond the marginal success in students writing proficiency. Secondly, gender is such an important variable in a ESL/EFL language sheltered instructions to more empirically document the long held view (based on first language studies) that women are better at language than men. The last is that since language teaching is essentially a facilitative work than a transmission of knowledge in lecture way, the size of the students' audience matters. In the content of this study, the division of students into groups that were as richly diverse as possible was a notable variable in the increased written English proficiency marginal though it was.

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