Second Language Learners' Family Background and Their English Writing Competence: The Case of a Private Tertiary Institution in Ghana

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Abstract

This work assesses the effects of family background of second language learners on their academic writing competence in English. A cursory study of some examination scripts of first-year students reveals some poor writing skills of students in areas such as concord, spelling, capitalization, and fragmentation errors.30 participants were selected from a class of 121 students from the Ghana Baptist University College, a private institution in Kumasi, Ghana. Initially, the class of 121 was sorted out into three groups—those who said they used only English at home, those who said they used only Ghanaian language(s) at home, and those who said they used both English and Ghanaian language(s) at home. Each group was further divided along gender lines and 5 students from each of the 6 sub-groups were picked randomly. The participants were then made to write a sit-in assessment on a topic and were graded by an independent assessor. The findings of the study reveal that the performance of the bilingual English and Ghanaian language learners outweighed those of their contemporaries. The study also revealed a positive correlation between attitudes of parents about English and learners' academic writing skills. These have pedagogical and theoretical implications for the teaching and learning of English as a second language in Ghana. Language proficiency involves the development of skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. All these four aspects of language development are equally vital in the language learning process, but the current paper focuses on the development of writing skills by second language learners of English in Ghana.

Keywords

monolingualism, bilingualism, first language, second language, academic writing

1. Introduction

Language is very important to our existence. Without it, communication becomes difficult. It is therefore the very core of our humanity. If one wants to socialize and function effectively and efficiently in life, it depends on one's command of language skills. There are four types of

communicative skills: reading, listening, speaking and writing. Even though these four skills are equally important, the one that stands out in terms of end-of-semester and other forms of written examinations is writing. Therefore, the academic success of the learner of English as a second language learner studying at the tertiary level depends to a large extent on his level of competence in English grammar and writing. Grammar is the system which organizes and controls meaningful elements which combine with each other in a structural pattern (Biber et al., 2002, p. 13). Learning the grammar of a language might be essential if it could help in preventing "errors" in writing (Gleason, 1965, p. 13). The elements in the L2 learner's culture—norms, beliefs, values, practices and attitudes—could influence their learning of the English language. Thus, within their cultural setting, L2 learners' linguistic background is likely to affect their proficiency in academic writing. This effect could be positive or negative. Academic writing is the kind of prose-format write-up that seeks to develop the students' ability to think creatively. Good writers reason extensively before they put their thoughts together to develop various ideas in the paragraphs of a write-up. Writing is therefore a complex activity, especially if it is done in a second or a foreign language context. So, Celce-Murcia (1991) as cited in Erkan and Saban (2011, p. 166) argues that expressing one's idea in a written form in a second or foreign language, and doing so with reasonable accuracy and coherence, is a major achievement. It is a major achievement because it is not every learner who has the capability to execute this with ease. At the tertiary level of education in Ghana, the writing-based topics in the fields of English language and communication skills that expose students to academic writing are comprehension, summary, essays, letters, memoranda, reports, minutes writing, critical review exercises, thesis/dissertation writing and proposal writing. For students who do not have the flair for writing, the complexity intensifies. Thus, Erkan and Saban (2011, p. 166) agree that most students, low and high achievers alike, find writing difficult and view it as something they just have to persevere through in order to pass their examinations. Over the past few decades, there has been widespread research (Daly, 1978; Daly & Miller, 1975a, 1975b; Daly & Wilson, 1983; Faigley et al., 1981; McCarthy et al., 1985; Onwuegbuzie, 1999; Pajares & Johnson, 1993; Phinney, 1991; Shell et al., 1989, 1995) on writing-composition processes that student writers undertake (Erkan & Saban, 2011, p. 166). Most of the findings of these studies have attributed the participants' writing challenges to issues such as the quality of the school the learner attended, the learner's attitude towards writing, and the competence level of the teacher or the instructor who handled the learner at the basic level. These variables emanate from either intrinsic or extrinsic factors. Relatively current studies on writing have also come up with some variables that have effect on writing. For example, while Erkan and Saban (2011) have mentioned lack of self-efficacy in writing, Ushida (2005) has mentioned attitudes and motivation. However, one vital external factor that has not received much attention is the family background of the second language learner. This variable has the proclivity of affecting the academic writing of the second language learner at the tertiary level in several ways. Some sub-factors of the family background are: the attitudes of parents, the educational background of parents, the culture of the family, and the language(s) spoken at home. The

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family is a powerful tool that could exert influence on the social, economic, cultural, and educational lives of the second language learner. This paper in part attempts to establish a correlation between the family background of English as a second language learners and their academic writing proficiency at the tertiary level in Ghana.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

There is a body of research (for example, Jin-feng, 2007; Oluwole, 2008; Xian-nian, 2007; Abdulkareem, 2013) that shows a correlation between culture and second language competence. Oluwole (2008) has reported of language transfer and faulty application of rules as some of the possible correlation between culture and second language teaching and learning. Abdulkareem (2013) has also cited interfering of learners' native language (Arabic language) and lack of ability to organize the functions of writing as some of the problems faced by Arab postgraduate students at Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. In Ghana, the situation is not different. A cursory study of students' end-of-semester examination scripts support this view. For example, sentences like: *the driver stopped for us to crossed the road* "the driver stopped for us to cross the road" and *I am going to town to come* "I am going to town, I will be back soon" were seen in students' scripts. When a language lecturer was interviewed, he attributed the poor writing skills of some of the students to factors such as the learners' own innate intelligence, the quality of language foundation the learner has had and the quality of the Senior High School (SHS) the learner attended. Sadly, the family background of the learners was not mentioned. The general impression that one gets is that most people do not recognize the family background of the second language learner as a key factor in learners' attainment in writing, but it is. Therefore, this study seeks to investigate this relationship.

1.2 The Purpose of the Study

The broad objective of the study is to determine a correlation between the family background of second language learners and their academic writing proficiency at the tertiary institution level in Ghana. Specifically, the study seeks to:

(a) Assess whether parents have different attitudes towards their children's target L2; and to establish whether or not such attitudes have the propensity of affecting the teaching and learning of their ward's academic writing.

(b) Establish a correlation between the educational background of parents and their wards' performance in academic writing.

(c) Assess whether the participants' home language(s) has/have an influence on their academic writing competence at school.

1.3 Importance of the Study

In the past, extensive research works on Discourse Analysis and Academic Writing have been done by a range of Ghanaian researchers. Some of these studies include: Adika (1999), Arhin (2000), Anyidoho (2002), Amable (2004), Agordjor (2004). Even though these works have looked at various issues in discourse analysis and academic writing, none of them has considered the family background of the

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second language learner as a major variable. This, however, does not mean that similar works have not been done elsewhere on the variable mentioned. Abdulkareem (2013), for example, has made mention of *perceptions of students towards academic writing* in his work; and Rafieyan et al. (2013) on the other hand have talked about *attitude toward cultural instruction* in their work. However, it looks as if variables such as: family attitude of a target language, the parents' educational background and home language as against academic writing competence have not been exhaustively researched. This research is thus one of the few works to have studied the variables mentioned. It is therefore anticipated that it will enable stakeholders in the field of Second Language Teaching and Learning—learners, parents, teachers, government, authorities, and the general public—find pragmatic measures in dealing with the revelations that the work has brought up.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The literature of this paper is centred on academic writing; attitudes and aptitude of parents as against second language teaching and learning; intelligence of monolingual and bilingual students; the role of first language in educating multilingual students; and parents' educational background.

2.2 Academic Writing

To Nordquist (2013), academic writing is the forms of exposition and argumentative prose used by university students and researchers to convey a body of information about a particular subject. Linton, Madigan and Johnson (1994, p. 66) have identified three features of academic writing. These are conventions of argument, conventions of citing references, and conventions of language use. The conventions of argument have to do with the writing style. Conventions of citing are the referencing style that the writer has employed (for example, Harvard, APA, or MLA). The third one is the language and how it has been used by the writer. Abdulkareem (2013) argues that academic writing can be characterized as the construction and development of techniques taught in institutions such as organizing and generating students' ideas and critical thinking, and developing vocabulary and grammatical syntax. Thus, the main idea behind academic writing is creation of ideas through significant reasoning. Therefore, one obvious characteristic of academic writing is the use of vocabulary and grammar.

Earlier research conducted by Ur (1988, p. 5) shows that grammar furnishes the basis for a set of classroom activities. Thus, Ur (1988, p. 5) sees grammar as the core of all activities that go on in the language classroom. This claim is reasonable; because all teachings of other subjects excluding French and Ghanaian languages, studied at the tertiary level in Ghana, are wholly done through the medium of English. The teachers and the learners of the English language should therefore endeavour to teach and learn grammatical rules well; and that seems to be the reason why Ur (1988, p. 5) again asserts that both implicit and explicit knowledge of grammatical rules are essential for mastery of language. Some unpardonable errors in academic writing could be averted if grammatical rules are imbibed well enough.

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However, grammar should not only be the focal point in the L2 learner's success in academic writing; other aspects of the language (for example, semantics and morphology) play vital roles. Thus, Davies and Pearse (2000, p. 58) reason that, in communication, vocabulary is often more important than grammar. To them, while grammar seems to be finite, vocabulary is virtually infinite. So, as academic writing is characteristic of grammar usage, so is it related to vocabulary usage. Accordingly, in teaching and learning of academic writing, emphasis should also be placed on the teaching and learning of grammar and vocabulary. The learners could be encouraged to constantly add new words to their stock of vocabulary of the L2.

2.3 Intelligence: Monolingual and Bilingual Learners in Focus

A monolingual person is a person who uses or speaks only one language. For example, in America most of the indigenes are monolingual speakers. Therefore, English (American variety) is the language mostly spoken. Bloomfield (1933) as cited in Edwards (2006, p. 8) observed that "bilingualism resulted from the addition of a perfectly learned foreign language to one's own undiminished native tongue…" Grosjean (1989) insists that "the bilingual is not two monolinguals in one person" (Meisel, 2006, p. 93). Weinreich (1953) therefore defined bilingualism "as the alternate use of two languages…" Baker and Prys Jones (1998, p. 2) as cited in Wei (2000, p. 5) have suggested that in defining a bilingual person, some of the issues or questions that should be considered are: fluency in two languages, equal competence in two languages, language proficiency, self-perception and self-categorisation, and degrees of bilingualism. So, to Wei (2000, p. 7):

"The word 'bilingual' primarily describes someone with the possession of two languages. It can, however, also be taken to include the many people in the world who have varying degrees of proficiency in and interchangeably use three, four or even more languages".

Thus, a bilingual person has some degrees of proficiency in two or more languages. This is quite predominant in Africa. Almost all the peoples in the countries of Africa have both a first language(s) and one or two or more second language(s). Consequently, most of the peoples of Africa are bilinguals. According to Edwards (2006, pp. 15-16) early studies conducted in America tended to associate bilingualism with lowered intelligence…; and later research tended to show essentially no relationship between intelligence and bilingualism. However, the turning-point came in the early 1960s, when findings of some works showed a positive relationship between intelligence and bilingualism. For example, in a research conducted between 1962 and 1972 by Montreal, Peal and Lambert, which involved an examination of ten-year-old bilingual and monolingual children, the bilinguals were found to outperform their monolingual counterparts on both verbal and non-verbal intelligence tests (Edwards, 2006, p. 16). Accordingly, it was concluded that the bilingual child had "mental flexibility, a superiority in concept formation, and a more diversified set of mental abilities" (Edwards, 2006, p. 16). In relation to Edwards' (2006) assertion, a recent (Wednesday, 2014) BBC news item reported that: "learning a second language can have a positive effect on the brain" (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/behindtheheadlines/news/2014-06-04-lea). This finding

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came about after a Scottish study saw that respondents who spoke two or more languages performed better in intelligence tests than people who only spoke English. So, encouraging the use of different languages in a multilingual classroom setting could "slow brain ageing" of the learners. Bilingualism, thus, has some advantages. Wei (2000, p. 23) has pointed out some communicative advantages of bilingualism as: *relationship with parents, extended family relationship, community relationships, transnational communication* and *language sensitivity*. On language sensitivity, Wei has argued that: … being able to move between two languages may lead to more sensitivity in communication. Because bilinguals are constantly monitoring which language to use in different situations, they may be more attuned to the communicative needs of those with whom they talk (2000, p. 23).

Thus, all things being equal, the bilingual student is likely to be more sensitive in communication than a monolingual student does. This claim has been corroborated by Meisel (2006, p. 93) who has maintained that "by choosing between their languages and by switching between them, bilinguals have available additional communicative means which monolinguals speakers lack. By inference, one could therefore reason that a bilingual learner would perform better in academic writing than a monolingual learner would do.

2.4 The Role of First Language in Educating Multilingual Students

In a typical multilingual setting, obviously, the language that a learner acquires first becomes his or her first language (L1). This language therefore plays a significant role in the learners' acquisition of a second or third language. Anyidoho (2009) has pointed out a few affirmative influence of L1 in educating children in multilingual Ghana: … children can see the school as an extension of the home rather than as a completely different place. The use of the L1 may reduce the emotional and psychological disruption that many children experience when they enroll in school…

In a typical Ghanaian setting, the young learner is likely to go through cognitive dissonance should he or she encounter a new phenomenon in his new environment—the school. Anyidoho (2009), thus, argues that communicating and teaching new things in an unknown language can only destabilize children and reinforce their negative feelings. Therefore, the use of his or her first language at the initial stages promotes smooth transition from home to school. Those who subscribe to this theory believe that the L1 promotes the acquisition of the L2 and can even facilitate language proficiency from the primary level to the tertiary level. If we are to stick to this theory, then it stands to reason that L1 can facilitate academic writing proficiency at the tertiary level. Hence, Anyidoho (2009) argues that: … the high level of competence in the L1 that children bring to school is therefore important if they are required to express their feelings and views. The English-only medium can inhibit pupils' self-expression for as long as it takes for them to become proficient in it…

2.5 Attitudes and Aptitudes of Parents toward a Second Language

Earlier studies done by Wilkins (1974, p. 34) cogently states that:

Particularly important in the case of language learning are certain attitudes which are characteristic of the society to which the learner belongs. Some cultures expect a reasonably high degree of bilingualism

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to be a normal quality of the educated man or women … if social attitude are negative, the overall achievement can be relatively poor … If social attitude are positive, learning may proceed even where teaching is not particularly efficient (1974, p. 34).

Thus, the attitude of the second language learner's parents could either ruin or lead to an increase of the competence level of the learner's academic writing. If attitudes of parents concerning the L2 are negative, the learner will not have an extrinsic motivation that will urge him or her to strive for excellence in the language (L2). This could have negative ramification on the learner's academic writing. However, there are times where attitudes of parents may be negative yet the learner's seriousness about the language (especially when he or she is away from the home) can lead to a greater degree of excellence in academic writing. Wilkins (1974), unfortunately, did not recognize this. Ellis (2002, p. 51) states that learners who have language aptitude possess some qualities:

(a) Phonemic coding ability that is the ability to identify the sounds of a foreign language so that they can be remembered later. This ability is also seen as related to the ability to handle sound-symbol relationships.

(b) Grammatical sensitivity that is the ability to recognize the grammatical functions of words in sentences.

(c) Inductive language learning ability that is the ability to identify patterns of correspondence and relations between form and meaning.

(d) Rote learning ability that is the ability to form and remember associations between stimuli. This is believed to be important in vocabulary learning.

Thus, some learners, by nature, have a natural ability. This natural ability or skill can give them an advantage over those who do have a low (or no) language aptitude. Nonetheless, Ellis (2002, p. 51), on this occasion fails to recognize the fact that some learners are slow learners who at the initial stages of language acquisition may face challenges which could affect their academic writing competence though they eventually could become competent in academic writing. So, one could infer that time matters when it comes to being competent in academic writing. For example, all things being equal Level 400 students of a tertiary institution are likely to excel in academic writing than Level 100 students would do. This, of course, is not always the case.

2.6 Parents' Educational Background and Students' Academic Writing Competence

All things being equal, most educated parents in Ghana tend to have a positive attitude towards their children's education. Astoneand Mclanahan (1991) observe some correlation between high educational attainment of parents and high educational attainment of their children and attribute this correlation to the parents having a burning desire to transmit their aspirations to their children and supervising and counseling them in their studies. Wilkins (1974) observes that exposure plays a vital role in language acquisition. According to him, the child at a tender age—between the ages of about twelve months and five years—may be in contact with languages for most of his waking hours. This contact will take different forms—language directed at the child by parents; language that the child is exposed to, in the

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sense that is produced in his presence by other people; and finally language that the child himself produces. When the child is adequately exposed to language he or she will produce language himself. Wilkins (1974) further observes that, parents sometimes repeat in a fully grammatical form a less than grammatical utterance produced by a child. For instance, to the child's utterance like:

"*Mummy go shop*",

The mother might respond

"*Yes, that's right. Mummy's going to the shops*".

In this way the child's reduced utterance and the parent's fully grammatical utterance are brought into immediate juxtaposition. Therefore if parents have adequate English language proficiency, then the child's acquisition is relatively guided. It therefore stands to reason that such a student from such a background is likely to produce less ungrammatical structures in his or her academic writing courses at the university level than a student who didn't have this opportunity.

2.7 Theoretical Frameworks

The work is based on two theoretical frameworks: Labovian sociolinguistics—quantitative study of speech—and Gardner's (2000) model on role of aptitude and motivation in L2 learning. Quantitative study of speech is an aspect of sociolinguistics which provides new data which need to be reconciled with existing linguistic assumptions. According to Hudson (2005) quantitative studies of speech seem particularly relevant to theoretical linguistics because they involve precisely those aspects of language—sounds, word-forms and constructions—which theoretical linguists consider central. According to this theory of linguistics, we cannot understand how languages change unless we have an exact opinion of what language systems are like. Therefore, most of his (William Labov) works have been centred on the study of living languages, and especially on the study of ordinary colloquial English. In comparing two languages, the question of method will come in: what kind of data should we use as evidence, and what kind of patterns should we pay attention to? According to Labov (1975, p. 31), we can trust native speakers' judgments; but in cases where native speakers' judgment cannot be trusted, then as many different methods as possible should be used before a case is made out of the issue (Labov, 1972a). For example, before making a conclusion that most Akans, have problems producing *r* and *l* sounds accurately, as many data as possible should be used. According to Hudson (2005) in sociolinguistics text study, methodology is both important and problematic. The stages in such a study are: (1) Selecting speakers, circumstances and linguistic variables, (2) Collecting the texts, (3) Identifying the linguistic variables and their variants in the texts, (4) Processing the figures, and (5) Interpreting the results. Hence, the above-mentioned stages have been employed in this study.

The work is also based on Gardner's (2000) model on role of aptitude and motivation in L2 learning. This theory is a modified version of Gardner's (1985) Socio-educational Model. It is illustrated below (Figure 1):
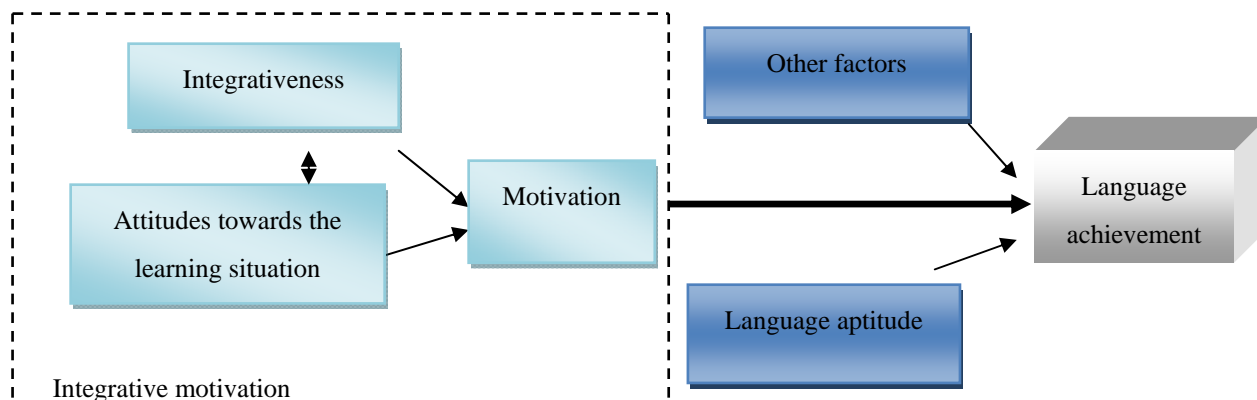
Figure 1. A Model on the Role of Aptitude and Motivation in L2 Learning

Source: Gardner, 2000.

The model has six variables. These are: integrativeness, attitudes towards the learning situation, motivation, other factors, language aptitude and language achievement. The model showcases integrative motivation—integrativeness, motivation, and attitudes towards the learning situation—as dependent variables; other factors and language aptitude as mediating variables; and language achievement as an independent variable. *Integrativeness* refers to the individual's willingness and interest in having social interaction with members of the L2 group (Gardner et al., 1997). When the L2 learner communes with other members in the L2 group, he or she, subconsciously learns some structures which can be useful to his or her competence in academic writing. *Attitudes towards the learning situation* reflects the student's evaluation of formal instruction and can be assessed by two measures: (a) attitudes toward the teacher, and (b) attitudes towards the course (Gardner et al., 1997). If the L2 learner's attitude towards the teacher and the course (especially academic writing) is positive, the overall effect could be positive when all other things remain equal. *Motivation* refers to the individual's attitudes, desires, and effort to learn the L2 (Gardner et al., 1997). This also has consequences on the language achievement of the learner. *Language aptitude* has to do with the language (writing) skills or talents that the learner is born with. If the learner has superior talents about writing, he or she is likely of gain competence in that field. But, if he or she is not naturally gifted about writing, achieving writing competence could be a great challenge. The *other factors* have to do with all issues that have influence on language achievement. This includes the family background of the learner. This is an external factor. So, variables such as: parents' attitudes, culture, home language, and educational background of parents are all other factors that have influence on the academic writing of the L2 learner. For example, if the parents continually feed the child with information on how insignificant academic writing is, it can have a negative effect on the learner's writing.

3. Research Method

Data are crucial in sociolinguistic quantitative research. Therefore, this section clearly showcases information on the research design; data and data collection procedure; instruments of data collection; participants; and sample and sampling techniques.

3.1 Research Design

Quantitative and descriptive research tools are the two tools used in designing the research. These two tools were employed for specific purposes. Descriptive technique was used to analyze the written text the participants wrote. On grading of the texts of the participants, the independent assessor was given the opportunity to develop his own analytical framework (marking scheme). Quantitative research technique was also used since a large number of cases had to be collected before sampling for the sample size of 30 cases (texts) needed for the study.

3.2 Data Collection Instruments

Three instruments—questionnaire, interview, and essay-based test—were used in collecting primary data for the study. The design of the close-ended questionnaire was mainly based on these three sociolinguistic variables: monolingual Ghanaian language, monolingual English and bilingual English and Ghanaian language students. Apart from these three main variables, close-ended auxiliary questions on age range, gender, and background information of students, were included in the questionnaire. Interviews were also used to solicit information on some variables—culture, parents' attitudes on academic writing, and educational background of parents. The essay-based text which constituted the main instrument was used in collecting data which sought to establish a possible correlation between family background (home language) and academic writing.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

The participants were given 25 minutes out of their 3-hour lecture to fill and submit the questionnaire. After the collection of the questionnaire, the 30 students whose scripts were sampled were informed of the rationale behind the exercise. Most of the questionnaire items were not analyzed per se, since the questionnaire was only used as a prelude in determining the gender status and the home language of the participants. The following week, the participants were given one hour to respond to an academic writing question in a sit-in open-book test. After the test, they were interviewed. While tables and descriptive research were used in analyzing the graded scripts, descriptive analysis only was used in analyzing the interviews the participants granted us.

3.4 Participants, Sample and Sampling Techniques

The participants who provided the primary data were drawn from 2013/2014 batch of first year (level 100) students of the Ghana Baptist University College (GBUC) since the English-language related courses, Communication Skills I and II, are offered only in the first year. GBUC has 121 level 100 degree students as of the second semester of the 2013/2014 academic year. Out of these 121 students, 30 were sampled as the sample size needed for the study. The sample size of 30 was not selected in a haphazard manner; techniques were employed. At first, all the 121 first year students who constituted

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the sampling frame, filled the initial questionnaire which was intended to establish the kind of family background the student was coming from; that is whether the student comes from a home that uses only the Ghanaian language(s), English, or both Ghanaian language(s) and English as the means of communication. After this, the questionnaires were sorted into three major strata: monolingual-Ghanaian language students, monolingual-English students, and bilingual-English-Ghanaian language students. From this stage, each of the three major strata was further sorted into male and female. This kind of gender sorting was done so as to ensure that 50% (male and 50% female participants were eventually sampled for the study. This, we thought would make our research gender unbiased. When this gender sorting of each of the three strata was done, a simple random sampling technique was used in selecting 5 male and 5 female participants from each of the three strata. After the random sampling stage, the 30 participants were motivated to take a sit-in test in the following week. After the test, an independent examiner was asked to grade the scripts of the participants. The results of the assessment have been projected in section four of the paper.

4. Analysis of Data

In this section, we have analyzed and discussed the scripts we collected from the field. The script of each respondent has been given a code. The codes were generated from the gender status of the respondent, the language(s) spoken at home and the script number in that category. For example, the symbols in code F/E&L1/1 mean female (F), English and L1 (E&L1), and script number one; those in M/E/6, mean male (M), English (E), and script number six; while those in F/L1/4 mean female (F), language one (L1), and script number four. The results of the marked scripts are presented in tables 1, 2 and 3. The section, again, discusses the interviews conducted with some of the students. Also, some of the errors which were found in some of the scripts have been projected.

4.1 Analyses of Marked Scripts

Table 1 illustrates marks of female and male respondents who communicate in both English and L1 at home with both their parents and their peers. In the female category, the participant who registered the highest marks is the one whose script has a code number of F/E&L1/2. She registered 17 out of a total of 25 marks (this represents 68%). Also, the participant whose script has a code number of F/E&L1/5 registered the lowest marks, 05 (20%), in the female category of this major grouping.

In the male category, the respondent with script number M/E&L1/8 had 17 marks, out of the possible 25 marks (this is the highest mark in the male category, and represents the same percentage of 68 as those in the female category). The participant with script number M/E&L1/9 had the lowest marks of 08 (32%) in the male category of students who use both English and an L1 as the medium of communication at home.

Table 1. Assessment Results of Bilingual-English-Ghanaian Language Students

S/N	RESPONDENTS (FEMALE)	MARKS REGISTERED (OUT OF 25 MARKS)	PERCENTAGE (%)
1	F/E&L1/1	10	40
2	F/E&L1/2	17	68
3	F/E&L1/3	13	52
4	F/E&L1/4	15	60
5	F/E&L1/5	05	20
	SUB-TOTAL	**60**	**48**

S/N	RESPONDENTS (MALE)	MARKS REGISTERED (OUT OF 25 MARKS)	PERCENTAGE (%)
6	M/E&L1/6	15	60
7	M/E&L1/7	11	44
8	M/E&L1/8	17	68
9	M/E&L1/9	8	32
10	M/E&L1/10	10	40
	SUB-TOTAL	**61**	**49**
	GRAND TOTAL	**121**	**48**

Table 1, again depicts that the cumulative marks for all the female participants stood at 60 (out of the possible cumulative marks of 125), and this represents 48%; and that of the male participants stood at 61 representing 49%. This figure reveals that the male participants in this particular grouping had a slight edge over their female counterparts.

Table 2 also portrays the results of students who communicate only in English at home. In the female grouping, the student with script number F/E/2 had the maximum marks of 16 (64%) while the one with number F/E/3 had the lowest marks of 05 (20%) in that same grouping. In the male category, the respondent with script number M/E/7 had the highest marks of 17 (68%) with the one whose script had number M/E/8 registering the lowest marks of 09 (36%).

Table 2. Assessment Results of Monolingual-English Students

S/N	RESPONDENTS (FEMALE)	MARKS REGISTERED (OUT OF 25 MARKS)	PERCENTAGE (%)
1	F/E/1	07	28
2	F/E/2	16	64
3	F/E/3	05	20
4	F/E/4	07	28
5	F/E/5	07	28
	SUB-TOTAL	**42**	**34**

S/N	RESPONDENTS (MALE)	MARKS REGISTERED (OUT OF 25 MARKS)	PERCENTAGE (%)
6	M/E/6	10	40
7	M/E/7	17	68
8	M/E/8	09	36
9	M/E/9	13	52
10	M/E/10	12	48
	SUB-TOTAL	**61**	**49**
	GRAND TOTAL	**103**	**41**

The results of Table 2 demonstrated the superiority of the male participants over their female counterparts in this category. While the male participants registered a total of 61 marks (out of a cumulative figure of 125 marks) and representing 49%, their female counterparts registered a total of 42 marks representing 34%.

Table 3 also showcases the results of students who communicate only in Ghanaian language(s) with their parents and peers at home. The student with script number F/L1/4 had the highest marks of 13 over 25 (representing 52%) while the one with number F/L1/5 registered 06 (24%). Of course, this is in the female category. In the male category, the person with script number M/L1/10 scored 11 marks (44%) with the one with M/L1/6 also scoring 6 (24%).

Table 3. Assessment Results of Monolingual-Mother Tongue Students

S/N	RESPONDENTS (FEMALE)	MARKS REGISTERED (OUT OF 25 MARKS)	PERCENTAGE (%)
1	F/L1/1	10	40
2	F/L1/2	11	44
3	F/L1/3	12	48
4	F/L1/4	13	52
5	F/L1/5	06	24
	SUB-TOTAL	**52**	**42**

S/N	RESPONDENTS (MALE)	MARKS REGISTERED (OUT OF 25 MARKS)	PERCENTAGE (%)
6	M/L1/6	06	24
7	M/L1/7	09	36
8	M/L1/8	09	36
9	M/L1/9	10	40
10	M/L1/10	11	44
	SUB-TOTAL	**45**	**36**
	GRAND TOTAL	**97**	**39**

Of the three tables, Table 3 is the only one where we see female participants dominating their male counterparts. Table 3 shows that while the total marks of the female participants was 52 over 125 marks (42%), that of the male participants was 45 (36%).

4.2 Comparative Analysis of the Results in the Three Categories

A comparative analysis of the results of participants in the three categories revealed that bilingual-English-Ghanaian language participants outperformed their counterparts. This is to say that while bilingual-English-Ghanaian participants had grand total marks of 121, those in the monolingual-English category placed second with 103 marks and the last-placed participants were those in the monolingual-Ghanaian language category who had grand total marks of 97. This revelation substantiates Edwards (2006, p. 16) stance that the bilingual child possesses superior mental abilities. Even those participants who speak only English at home could not outperform their colleagues. One would have thought that their situation—communicating in English at home with parents and siblings—would give them more exposure in writing, and, consequently, an added advantage over their counterparts. This was not the case. This revelation of the study thus corroborates the research works of Wei (2000, p. 23) and Meisel (2006, p. 93) whose works brought to light that bilingual persons have additional communicative prowess that monolingual persons do not have.

4.3 Errors Committed

A number of errors were seen in the scripts of the participants. The notable ones are punctuation, spelling, grammar (tense, sentence, concord), run-on, fragment, paragraph, capitalization, pronoun, dangling and misplaced modifier errors and mistakes. Though the main focus of this study was not to analyze students' errors per se, it was important for us to juxtapose a couple of them in a quest to know the category of participants who made the most and the least errors. Accordingly, two of these errors committed by some of the participants, have been listed in each of the categories. These errors were taken from only 12 of the 30 scripts. These 12 scripts are the male and female participants who registered the highest and the lowest marks in each of the category. For example, in the bilingual-English-Ghanaian category, scripts M/E&L1/8 (*the male respondent with the highest marks of 17*), M/E&L1/9 (*the male respondent with the lowest marks of 08*), F/E&L1/2 (*the female respondent with the highest marks of 17*), and F/E&L1/5 (*the female respondent with the lowest marks of 05*) were selected for inspection of errors. In the end, it came up that while the bilingual-English-Ghanaian language respondents made the least errors, those in the monolingual categories made the highest number of errors. These errors are displayed below:

4.3.1 Some Errors Committed by Monolingual-Ghanaian Language Participants

The following spelling and grammatical (tense/sentence/concord) errors/mistakes were found in some of the scripts of the monolingual-mother tongue respondents:

Spelling Errors:

scientifical "scientifically"; *panal* "panel"; *children* "children"; *behaviou* "behavior"; *supavision* "supervision"; *confortabl* "comfortably"; *somach* "so much"; *effictivelly* "effectively"; *scrab* "scrub";

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dinning-hall "dining-hall" *priviledge* "privilege"; *drunkiness* "drunkenness"; *buleying* "bullying".

Grammatical Errors:

(a) *Many parent don't …* "many parents don't …/a parent doesn't …" (*tense*).

(b) *… all this point being giving …* "… all these points given …" (*tense*).

(c) *adviced* "advised" (*spelling*).

(d) *I am so much concern …* "I am so much concerned …" (*Adjective*).

(e) *… they have close …* "… they have closed …" (*Aspect*).

4.3.2 Some Errors Committed by Monolingual-English Participants

These spelling and grammatical errors were recorded in the scripts of the monolingual-English respondents:

Spelling Errors:

Deciplain "discipline"; *studing* "studying"; *concious* "conscious"; *supavision* "supervision"; *compells* "compels"; *theirselves* "themselves"; *eisted* "listed"; *realy* "really"; *beening* "being"; *explainations* "explanations".

Grammatical Errors:

(a) *SHS schools* "SHS/SH Schools/Senior High Schools".

(b) *… shouldn't be turn into …* "…shouldn't be turned into…" (*past participle form*).

(c) *…with this motion am against …* "… with this motion I am against" (*missing subject*).

(d) *… to reduces lateness …* "… to reduce lateness…" ("*to*" *infinitive form of the verb*).

(e) *Secondary, boarding helps …* "Secondly, boarding helps …" (*Adverb*).

(f) *… it will taken …* "it will take …" (*modal auxiliary verb*).

(g) *Distinguish Ladies and Gentlemen* "Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen" (*Adjective*).

4.3.3 Some Errors Committed by Bilingual English-Ghanaian Language Participants

These spelling and grammatical errors were seen in some of the scripts of the bilingual English-Ghanaian-language respondents:

Spelling Errors:

Infront "in front"; *olding* "olden"; *intensionly* "intentionally"; *cafe* "café"; *librarus* "libraries"; *whiles* "while/whilst".

Grammatical Errors:

(a) *… some people shows …* "… some people show …" (*concord*).

(b) *I have being in a boarding house before …* "I have been in a boarding house before …" (*aspect*).

(c) *Teachers … who feels that …* "Teachers … who feel that …" (*concord*).

(d) *Here learning become …* "Here, learning becomes …" (*punctuation* and *concord*).

(e) *I am very delight to stand …* "I am very delighted to stand …" (*Adjective*).

4.4 Analysis of the Interviews Conducted

Six (a male and a female from each of the three categories) of the participants were interviewed. The interview session was mainly based on two of the research questions of this study. The results of the

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session as well as the analyses have been presented below:

4.4.1 Parents' Attitudes to English and to Their Wards' Writing Skills

The interview revealed a correlation between parents' attitude of English and their children's writing skills. Five of the participants answered affirmatively. Among some of the reasons they gave were: *their parents encourage them to strive for excellence in English; and their parents do their best by providing them with English language learning materials such as dictionaries, computers, story books, and writing books*. There was one respondent who said every two weeks, her father gave her a novel to read and to summarize. This attitude of her father, according to her, was a contributory factor to her performance in English at school. However, the student who answered in the negative said so, because he thought his parents didn't have formal education and they only inspired him to finish university early and join them in their family trading activities.

4.4.2 Educational Background of Parents and How It Affects Their Children's Performance in Academic Writing

The study revealed that there is a strong relationship between parents' educational background and students' academic writing performance. Five of the participants responded that their parents were university graduates and they (the parents) always encouraged them to take their university education seriously. Some (four of the six interviewees) in addition said that their parents sometimes inspected the kind of lecture materials they were given at school. One participant revealed that his father had a strong desire for him (the participant) to follow his (the father's) chosen profession, law. Therefore, the father had been monitoring his (the participant's) English language performance since according to him (the father) there is a symbiotic relationship between the two academic subjects, law and English. However, the participant who answered in the negative said his parents had little formal education. Consequently, they (his parents) virtually kept mute on his English language performance and his entire educational matters as a whole.

5. Findings, Recommendations and Conclusion

This section discusses the findings, recommendations as well as the conclusion of the work.

5.1 Summary of Findings

The findings of the study are based on the research questions:

5.5.1 Do Parents Have Different Attitudes towards a Target Language Which Eventually Affect the Teaching and Learning of Their Wards' Writing Skills?

The work revealed a strong correlation between attitudes of parents towards the L2 and students' writing skills. Thus, out of the six respondents interviewed, five responded positively. This is in consonance with Wilkins's (1974, p. 34) observation that certain attitudes of some societies to which the L2 learner belong could contribute to language proficiency. According to him (Wilkins, 1974, p. 34) some societies expect a realistically high level of bilingualism to be a normal quality of the educated man or woman. This particular finding is also in consonance with the framework of Gardner et al.

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(1997) (see theoretical framework—Figure 1). This framework recognizes *attitudes towards the learning situation* and *language aptitude* as major variables which have the proclivity of affecting language achievement.

5.1.2 How Does Educational Background of Parents Affect Their Children's Performance in Academic Writing?

It was seen that educational background of parents has an influence on students' academic writing skills. This observation is based on the responses of the interviewees as five of them confirmed it. The revelation confirms Wilkins's (1974) work. He has argued that educated parents played major roles in their children's waking hours. Some of these roles included a repetition of a fully grammatical form to a less grammatical utterance produced by the child. This subconsciously enables the child to learn correct grammatical structures.

5.1.3 Does the Learner's Home Language Have an Effect on His/Her Academic Writing Competence at School?

The study revealed that there is a correlation between home language(s) and academic writing; and those learners who speak both their Ghanaian language(s) and English (bilingual English-Ghanaian language students) at home with their parents and siblings perform better than their counterparts. Thus, a comparative analysis of the results of the respondents in the three groupings brought to light that the bilingual English-Ghanaian language participants had grand total marks of 121 as compared to that of their colleagues—monolingual-English and monolingual-Ghanaian language—who had 103 marks and 97 marks correspondingly. Again, the errors found in the scripts of bilingual-English-Ghanaian language participants were nominal as compared to those found in the scripts of their contemporaries. This situation authenticates Edwards' (2006, p. 16) position that the bilingual learner has greater intellectual abilities. It also confirms a BBC news item that "learning second language 'slows brain ageing'".

5.2 Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made for all key players in the field of second language teaching and learning:

(a) We suggest that at home, the L2 learner should employ both the L1 and the L2 (if there is such an opportunity) in oral communication. This could enable him/her to excel in his/her academic writing lessons.

(b) We also recommend that parents, irrespective of their educational background should do their best by developing a positive attitude towards the child's education especially in the area of his/her academic writing skills. This, we believe, could motivate the learner to strive for excellence in academic writing.

(c) Again, parents should endeavour to acquire some reading materials such as novels, magazines, and folk tales books for their wards periodically. This, has the greatest inclination of inculcating positive attitudes about writing (and the L2 in general) in the mind of the L2 learner.

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5.3 Conclusion

The teaching and learning of academic writing at the tertiary level has been faced with some challenges. Most students find the course and other related language courses very taxing. Therefore, it is likely for any assessor to identify a couple of inexcusable mistakes in students' essays. One possible root cause of students' poor writing skills are the factors emanating from the family background of the learner. The work was therefore an attempt to juxtapose academic writing and students' family background.

A couple of revelations came up. One, learners who use both an L1 and the L2 at home outperformed their monolingual mates in the academic writing assessment. Two, the educational backgrounds of parents matter when it comes to students' performance in academic writing exercises as some of the participants confirmed that their success in academic writing at the tertiary level could be partly linked to the inputs of their parents at home. In conclusion, it must be pointed out that this work is not absolute since the data was collected from only the participants. Therefore, there is the need for further research to be conducted, where inputs of both teachers and parents could be considered.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

1. Hello:

2. Where do you come from?

3. What language or languages do you speak with your parents at home?

4. Would you say your culture has an influence on your writing skills?

5. Do your parents have certain attitudes towards English language that affect your academic writing skills?

6. How does your parents' educational background influence your English writing skills?

Appendix B

Analytical Framework (Marking Scheme)

The grading of the scripts was based on this marking scheme:

Content: 05;

Organization: 05;

Expression: 10;

Mechanical Accuracy: 05.