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Influence of Comprehension of Directive Words in Essay Questions in English Language Examinations on Students' Academic Achievement

UDOUMOH Anieti Enobong
Department of English Language Education, College of Education
Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University (formerly University of Agriculture), Makurdi, Nigeria
peaceudoumoh@gmail.com

ADAJE Ambrose Ochigbo
Department of English Language Education, College of Education
Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University (formerly University of Agriculture), Makurdi, Nigeria
ochigboaadaje@gmail.com

&

VANDE-GUMA Clara D.S.
Department of English Language Education, College of Education
Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University (formerly University of Agriculture), Makurdi, Nigeria
claravandeguma@gmail.com

Abstract

This research assessed the impact of comprehension of directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations on the academic achievement of sandwich English Language Education students in Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Makurdi. The research designs were survey and ex post facto. From a population of 131, a sample of 79 students were selected from 2023-2024 academic session using a Two-stage sampling technique. Anchored on Bloom's Taxonomy, students' Cumulative Grade Point Average and a researcher-developed cognitive test were used for data collection. The cognitive test was validated by five experts and when pilot-tested to ensure reliability, a coefficient of 0.808

was obtained. The test was administered and the scripts were marked and scored. Analysis was done using students achievement means and the Analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique. Results revealed that the sandwich students were unable to identify single, double and phrasal directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations. They were also unable to understand the meanings of directive words irrespective of level of study. Furthermore, lack of comprehension of directive words in essay examinations had a positive significant relationship on academic achievement in English Language. It was concluded that sandwich English Language Education students understudied were unable to understand the demands of directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations. It was recommended that it is better for them to be trained and encouraged to undergo self-improvement through personal studies on types of directive words, their expected demands in essay questions and the application of this knowledge in responding to essay questions in examinations.
Keywords: Directive words, Essay questions, Bloom's Taxonomy**,** Sandwich students, Comprehension

Introduction

In all nations of the world, questions play pivotal roles in examinations. Assessment of students' achievement is still being carried out through the use of questions in tests and examinations. Different types of questions are often employed in examinations ranging from objective questions to essay questions. Essay questions are questions which demand the composition of responses by examinees which are written in sentences and few paragraphs with focus on particular themes and later submitted for expert judgement and scoring (Boye, 2019; Nilson, 2017). Essay questions are set in such a way that the examinees have no options to choose from, blanks to fill or answers given in one sentence each. When all the questions presented in a particular examination are essay questions, the examination is popularly referred to as "essay examination".

A typical essay question comprises key words which are words that form part of the question through which the question can be unpacked and answered. In essay questions, the key words unravel the examiner's intention and describes how the question is to be answered. Prominent among these are task or directive words (Alexander & Rennie, 2020). Embedded in the directive words are the demands of how to respond to the question. Thus, a candidate first point of interest ought to be the key words because according to Field as cited in Ayar and Kiziltan (2020), understanding these key words equals understanding the demands of the essay question.

The sandwich students of English Language from Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Makurdi (JOSTUM) have been taught how to effectively answer essay questions from the first Contact upwards. However, the scores of these students in essay examinations as evidenced in their results are low. This necessitated an enquiry into the probable cause(s) of low achievement in English Language essay examinations. The researcher observed that among the various causes proffered by research on this phenomenon comprehension of directive words is not among them. This kindled the drive for the current research which focused on the influence of comprehension of directive words in English Language examinations on sandwich students' academic achievement.

Directive words

Directive words can be defined as verbs that aptly highlight the skill, ability or learning outcome that the examiner intends to evaluate in the examinee. Directive words bring into prominence the thought processes or needful actions students are expected to display as proofs of learning. In other words, directive words are task words in a question which carry the needed information on the requirements of the tasks students are required to execute. Directive words are often the instructional verbs in questions which dictate the direction, nature, scope, skill, ability, approach and/or contents of an intended response expected from a candidate

by the examiner. These words help in determining the right approach, appropriate information, facts or figures that should either be included or excluded from the composed response. Examples include verbs such as analyse, explain, describe, outline, contrast, justify and compare, report, list, among others (Cole as cited in Shea & Ceprano, 2017; Akinboboye & Ayanwale, 2021; California Polytechnic State University [Calpoly], 2023).

Presentations and Demands of Directive Words in Essay Questions

There are varying nomenclatures used by scholars and institutions for the term "directive words" such as cues, task words, prompts, scaffolds, directive verbs, command words, among others (Calpoly, 2023; Proofed, 2022). These words are presented in different forms in essay questions. Various examples would be cited from essay examinations in English Language administered on sandwich students from Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University Markurdi (JOSTUM). First, directive words can be presented as single instructional verbs or words. For examples: (1) *Elaborate* on the basic concepts of linguistics. (2) Applied linguistics is an interdisciplinary field. *Discuss*. (3) *Explain* how linguistics helps English Language teaching. (ENG 426: Applied Linguistics, 2020/2021). The italicised words above are the words in which the action/skill needed in tackling the questions are embedded. The word *elaborate* in number one question above demands that the subject matter be expansively and carefully presented with complex details and explanations that are exact and devoid of criticisms (Lukman, 2021). Using number one example above, if a candidate argues or debates instead of elaborating on the theme of the question, it affects the marks he will be given on that question and ultimately his achievement.

Second, directive words may be doubly presented in a single question as italicised below: *Define* and *explain* the concept of style (ENG 535: Stylistics, 2020/2021 Session). *List* and *discuss* **five** purposes of constructing tests in English Language and

Literature in English (ENG 320: English Language and Literature Testing, 2019/2020 Session, Sandwich examinations, JOSTUM). In example 4, the candidate is expected to carry out two tasks: give both a definition and an explanation of the concept of style. In example 5, the demands are to first list out five purposes of constructing tests in English Language and Literature in English before attempting to discuss. In essay question, the word *discuss* means to make a detailed presentation of facts on the theme of the question. If a candidate carries out only one of the tasks, or gives a scanty or brief response, he loses some marks allotted to that question.

Third, directive words may be presented as phrasal verbs in essay questions. Phrasal verbs are presented as verbs combined with other elements such as a preposition as in *take on*, adverb as in *break down* or both as in *look down on* (Strong & Booers, 2019). Though they have tenses like any lexical verb, they have their own distinguishing features instead restrictions governing their combinations. Mansour (2020) notes that phrasal verbs have become a matter of concern to English Language teachers globally. The author adds that English as a Foreign Language learners particularly find them difficult because their meanings cannot be deduced by merely understanding the meanings of the verb and the particle independently. Handini et al. (2021) further expatiate that in the academia, phrasal verbs are regulated to the background in formal academic discourses. Students are therefore scored low when they employ phrasal verbs in formal registers and are advised to replace these verbs with single words.

Phrasal verbs can be used in questions as stated by Mansour (2020). Examples of phrasal verbs in essay questions include: *Give an account* of the following major characters in *The Concubine*: (a) Gbonka (b) Alaka (c) Adewale (d) Adetusa (ENG 429: Creative Writing, 2020/2021 Session, JOSTUM). *Give an account* is a phrasal verb which demands that the candidate should vividly describe these characters, give a description of their experiences or

their appearances and narrate series of experiences of events that occurred to them in the novel.

Some phrasal directives may demand double tasks in the examinee's response. Such as: *Briefly explain* the gains of ENG 320 to you as a prospective teacher of English Language and Literature-in-English (ENG 320: English Language and Literature Testing, 2019/2020 Session, JOSTUM). *Briefly explain* is a phrasal verb demanding that the candidate presents more revealing facts on the subject matter by delving clearly into all its components. An explanation demands a detailed presentation of facts but *briefly explain* needs the skill of doing this in a very brief manner. It is different from when *give a detailed explanation* or *explain in details* is used in an essay question. Still, some phrasal directives may demand just a single task from the testee such as: *Write out* the rhyme scheme of the Shakespearean sonnet 130 below: … (ENG 317: English Poetry, 2020/2021 Session, JOSTUM). *Write out* demands that the examinee only pens down the rhyme scheme of the poem on his answer paper. Other examples of phrasal verbs in essay questions include: *give a demonstration of*; *briefly discuss*; *critically analyse*, *write short notes*, *analyse with an outline*, *draw up a plan*, among others.

Research has shown that EFL undergraduates among whom are the sandwich students experience various difficulties with phrasal verbs in questions. For instance, in a study by Mansour (2020), majority of the students lacked the skill necessary to recognise the meanings of phrasal verbs. Another majority were unable to interchange forms of phrasal verbs based on contextual usage in questions given. Handini et al. (2020) in a separate study enjoined that 80% of the undergraduates were confused over the meanings of phrasal verbs, 70% never specifically learnt them and 30% found it difficult to master them. In fact, 79% of them never read books on phrasal verbs while another 77% did not even know the characteristics of phrasal verbs. This means that if these students

encounter these verbs as directive verbs in examinations, they would fail to recognise or understand their meanings.

Fourth, an essay question may be presented with multiple directive words. For instance: *List*, *explain* and *exemplify* seven speech acts (ENG 321: Introduction to English Semantics, 2017/2018, JOSTUM). The candidate who attempts the above question is expected to display 3 skills here: listing, explaining and giving of examples of seven speech acts he had been taught. If he only lists and explains, his answer is incomplete. If he only explains with examples without listing first, he has partially implemented the demand of the directive words in the question.

Fifth, essay questions can be presented with both directive and phrasal verbs. For example: *Identify* and *briefly explain* at least four types of English Concord (ENG 427: The Structure of Modern English, 2019/2020 Session, JOSTUM). The word *identify* is a directive verb while *briefly explain* is a phrasal verb. The candidate is expected in his response to not only pinpoint clearly four types of English concord but to also shed more light on them by giving brief, but detailed facts on the *why*, *what* and *how* aspects of the subject matter.

Consequently, for good and accurate responses to be provided to essay questions, according to Calpoly (2023), a correct understanding of directive words and their meanings is crucial. The author further reiterates that although it is crucial to possess a background knowledge of a topic or subject matter, merely exhibiting this knowledge is inadequate. For instance, if asked to make a comparison between a university and secondary school education, very little marks will be awarded by just a mere description of the two levels of education without any comparisons. Or if a task word demands a critical analysis, for example, of the removal of fuel subsidy in Nigeria and its impact on her citizens, the question remains unanswered if just a

description of a fuel subsidy is given without *critically assessing* its impact on the citizens of Nigeria. On this note, expected answers must be exact without irrelevant details and no candidate should ever attempt a question without fully understanding its demands.

When employed in question setting, the cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy offers directive verbs that measure both lower and higher cognitive skills that can be employed in essay questions. Each of the six levels of the cognitive domain of the taxonomy has directive or action verbs that are measurable and best elicit the required responses to expected learning outcomes (Berger, 2018). These verbs are employed to create learning objectives and assessment questions and categorically state the tasks students are expected to accomplish to demonstrate that learning has occurred. Based on the six levels of cognitive learning, for instance, Akinboboye and Ayanwale (2021) illustrate that to test a student's knowledge on a unit of instruction, that is, on a particular topic taught, such directive verbs as recite, name, list, underline, tell, among others, are used. To test a student's understanding (comprehension), the task words needed are: interpret, match, classify, explain, arrange, restate, and others. The essay questions mostly employ directive words that measure higher cognitive skills such as argue, prove, justify synthesise or evaluate.

If a student fails to know the meaning of a directive word or understand the task(s) required by the directive word, he will likely misinterpret the examination question thereby leading to a wrong response. This is confirmed by Hogg and Reid as cited in Edwards et al., (2017), that erroneously interpreting directive words leads to a misunderstanding. As such, the student may fail to exhibit the expected learning outcome or behave in a manner contrary to the examiner's expectations as a result of failing to understand the demands of the question. Failure to understand the demands of a

directive word in an examination question creates a disparity between the examiner's intentions and the examinee's response. Such disparities may either be of little or no consequences or have serious adverse effects (Edwards et al., 2017) on the overall achievement of the student. In view of this, a student's answer may have coherence, relevant details and logical organisation but written completely outside the scope of the expected question demands thereby attracting little or no marks from examiners especially at sandwich programmes.

The sandwich programme is a part-time, in-service programme run by institutions of higher learning for teachers on the job for an upgrade of skills or acquisition of higher degrees (Imakpokponwan & Adeyemi, 2016). This programme normally operates during vacations. It is mounted by Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University (JOSTUM), Makurdi, Nigeria where students are enrolled for English Language in the College of Education to obtain a Bachelor's degree. Most of these sandwich students are already in the field teaching English Language and other related subjects. It is required of these students to pass all their examinations including essay examinations in all their English Language courses before graduation.

Studies indicate a chronic poor achievement in English Language among Nigerian students especially in essay examinations (Bamidele, 2017; Ebiumene & Tamuno, 2023). Various reasons have been proffered for this phenomenon to include examiner's instructions (Bulqiyah et al, 2021), poor contents (Abdullahi & Salisu, 2019), teaching methods (Nyanga'au, 2016), writing either below or above word limits (Rhubido et al., 2021), misinterpretation of questions (Fakeye & Ohia, 2016), among other factors. Although scholars have verified that students do misunderstand essay examination questions, the specific aspect being misunderstood has not been identified and assessed.

It appears research has neglected understanding the component parts of the essay question itself as a cause of low achievement in examinations. Merely saying "misinterpreting" or "misunderstanding" the essay question is too broad. The questions that arise, therefore, are: first, *what* unit of the essay question is misunderstood by English language sandwich students? Is it the *subject* of the question (i.e. what the question is all about or subject matter)? Or *how* the examiner wants the question answered (for example, justify, interpret, explain, illustrate)? Or the *scope* (limits in time, location, aspect, among others)? Second, can students identify these directive words in essay questions? Third, do sandwich students know the meanings of these words in the *context* of the question? Fourth, does failure to understand directive words in essay questions in examination impact on students' academic achievement? Consequently, the present study was set to assess the impact of comprehension of directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations on the achievement of English Language Education students in Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Makurdi.

Objectives of the Study

This research assessed the impact of comprehension of directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations on the academic achievement of sandwich English Language Education students in Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Makurdi. The specific objectives were to:

1. determine sandwich students' ability to identify single, double and phrasal directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations.
2. determine sandwich students' ability to understand the meanings of directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.
3. test if there exist any difference among sandwich students across Contacts in understanding the meaning of directive

words in essay questions in English Language examination based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.
4. establish the relationship between understanding directive words in essay questions by sandwich students and their achievement in English language examinations.

Research Questions

1. What are the mean achievement scores of sandwich students in identifying single, double and phrasal directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations?
2. What are the mean achievement scores of sandwich students in understanding the meanings of directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy?
3. What is the difference in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students across Contacts in understanding the meanings of directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy?
4. What is the relationship between understanding directive words in essay questions by sandwich students and their achievement in English language examinations?

Hypotheses

Three null hypotheses, tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance guided this study as follows:

1. There is no significant difference across Contacts in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students' identification of single, double and phrasal directive words.
2. There is no significant difference among sandwich students across Contacts in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students' understanding of directive words based on the cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy.

3. There is no significant relationship between sandwich students' understanding of directive words and academic achievement.

Methodology

The research design adopted for this study was a combination of the survey and ex post facto designs. The survey design is a research method in which data is primarily obtained from a methodically sampled respondents on a particular topic and the findings generalised on the larger understudied population (Pandey, 2024). The ex post facto research design is a non-experimental design which observes a dependent variable after the independent variable has already occurred and the researcher cannot manipulate theses variables (Emaikwu, 2021). It was employed in this study because it was believed that sandwich students from Contact three upwards were already exposed to essay questions and taught how to answer essay questions in relevant English Courses for at least two contacts. The Cognitive Test was administered on them to measure their level of comprehension of directive words in essay examination questions.

The study was carried out in Joseph Sarwuan Tarka University, Markurdi (JOSTUM), Nigeria. The population comprised 178 Bachelors of English Language Education (B.Ed.) sandwich students: 18 in Contact 1; 29 in Contact 2; 54 in Contact 3, 48 in Contact 4 and 29 in Contact 5 of 2023/2024 academic session. The choice of these sandwich students is contingent on the cases of low achievement in their examinations as evidenced in their examination results. A Two-stage sampling technique was employed in this study. At Stage 1, three (3) out of the five (5) Contacts of English Language Education sandwich students were purposively selected, namely: Contacts 3, 4 and 5. They were 131 in number. At Stage 2, out of the 131 sandwich students in the selected Contacts, only 79 [Contacts 3(28), 4(22) and 5(29)] were purposively selected to make up the sample for the study. They were purposively selected for three reasons: they have spent at

least three Contacts in the university, participated in the essay examinations in the courses selected for this research and also in the cognitive test.

The instruments used for data collection were a researcher-developed cognitive test and students' Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). The Cognitive Test was developed by the researcher based on topics across courses in the English Language syllabus and arranged hierarchically based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy with five questions at each level. Each cognitive level was scored over one hundred making each question to attract 20 marks. It was used to elicit answers on students' understanding of directive words in essay questions. The 2-Part Cognitive Test was labelled *Directive Words in Essay Questions Test* (*DWIEQT*) with a total of 45 items. Validation of the Cognitive Test was done by five professionals of English Language Education, Measurement and Evaluation and Statistics from JOSTUM to ensure relevance, content validity and scope of coverage.

To ensure reliability of subsequent administrations, the cognitive test instrument was pilot tested on 21 Contact 4 sandwich students of English Language from Benue State University (BSU), Makurdi. The Cronbach's Alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the measurement scale based on the inter-item correlation and a reliability coefficient of 0.820 was obtained. 79 copies of the Cognitive Test were administered on the sandwich students under a typical examination setting and supervised by the researcher directly. They were collected immediately after the test, coded and marked. The marked answers were translated into scores and the scores matched with each student's CGPA to determine the impact of understanding on their achievement in examination.

Results

This section presents the results of data analysis and interpretation following the sequence of the research questions and hypotheses as earlier listed.

Research Question One

What are the mean achievement scores of sandwich students in identifying single, double and phrasal directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations?

Table 1

Mean Achievement Scores of Sandwich Students for Types of Directive Words

DIRECTIVE VERB	ACHIEVEMENT FOR CONTACT 3		ACHIVEMENT FOR CONTACT 4		ACHIEVEMENT FOR CONTACT 5		ACHIEVEMENT FOR OVERALL STUDENTS	
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
SINGLE	21.43	29.28	22.78	29.86	15.86	18.62	19. 60	25.65
DOUBLE	22.14	35.42	18.89	32. 51	23.10	30.60	21.73	32. 52
PHRASAL	7.14	21.23	14.44	25.48	5.52	15.94	8.26	20. 55

Table 1 presents the mean achievement scores on sandwich students' understanding of single, double and phrasal directive words. From the results, the mean achievement scores of Contacts 3, 4 and 5 sandwich students' identification of single directive words are 21.43, 22.78 and 15.86 respectively. The mean achievement scores of Contacts 3, 4 and 5 sandwich students' identification of double directive words are 22.14, 18.89 and 23.10 respectively. The mean achievement scores of Contacts 3, 4 and 5 sandwich students' identification of phrasal directive words are 7.14, 14.44 and 5.52 respectively. The poor mean achievement scores in Table 1 reveal the students' inability to effectively identify single, double, and phrasal directive words irrespective of contacts. Phrasal directive words are the least identified followed by the double and lastly the single directive words.

Research Question Two

What are the mean achievement scores of sandwich students in understanding the meanings of directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy?

Table 2

Mean Achievement Scores of Sandwich Students' Understanding Based on Bloom's Taxonomy

COGNITIVE LEVELS OF BLOOM'S TAXONOMY	ACHIEVEMENT FOR CONTACT 3		ACHIVEMENT FOR CONTACT 4		ACHIEVEMENT FOR CONTACT 5		ACHIEVEMENT FOR OVERALL STUDENTS	
	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD	MEAN	SD
Knowledge	50.71	26.93	43.64	28.71	45.52	25.01	46.84	26.58
Comprehension	45.71	27.14	40.91	25.80	46.90	25.79	44.81	26.06
Application	72.86	23.23	62.73	27.11	45.52	30.19	60.00	29.18
Analysis	37.14	25.94	33.64	29.85	40.00	32.51	37.22	29.31
Synthesis	46.43	27.78	41.82	23.83	40.69	24.77	43.04	25.44
Evaluation	44.29	18.34	36.36	29.37	37.24	23.74	39.49	23.75

Table 2 presents the mean achievement scores of sandwich students in understanding the meanings of directive words in essay questions based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. From the results, the mean achievement scores of Contacts 3, 4 and 5 sandwich students' understanding of directive words at Knowledge level are 50.71, 43.64 and 45.52 respectively; Comprehension level are 45.71, 40.91 and 46.90 respectively; Application level are 72.86, 62.73 and 42.52 respectively; Analysis level are 37.14, 33.14 and 40.00 respectively; Synthesis level are 46.43, 41.82 and 40.69 respectively; and Evaluation level are 44.29, 36.36 and 37.24 respectively. The mean achievement scores of the overall students' (Contacts 3, 4 and 5 combined) understanding of directive words at knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation levels are 46.84, 44.81, 60.00, 37.22, 43.04 and 39.49 respectively. This indicates

that sandwich students' understanding of directive words is generally poor but very good only at the Application Level pegged at 60.

Research Question Three

What is the difference in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students across Contacts in understanding the meaning of directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy?

Table 3

ANOVA for Equality of Mean Achievement Scores Across Contacts in Understanding of Directive Words based on Bloom's Taxonomy

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	*F*	*p*-value
Between Groups	175.594	2	87.797	.974	.400
Within Groups	1352.462	15	90.164		
Total	1528.056	17			

Results from Table 3 highlights the test of significant difference in mean achievements of sandwich students' understanding of directive words based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. The Analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique was used to ascertain if there exist any significant difference among Contacts 3, 4 and 5 in the mean achievement scores of their understanding the meanings of directive words based on the six levels of the Cognitive Domain of BT. With a p-value greater than 0.05 (p-value = 0.400), it means that there is no significant difference between Contacts 3, 4 and 5 in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students' understanding of directive words based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Research Question Four

What is the relationship between understanding directive words in essay questions by sandwich students and their achievement in English language examinations?

Table 4
Correlation Results on the Relationship between Students' Understanding of Directive Words and Academic Achievements.

Item	Description	Statistics	Decision
Directive Words	Pearson Correlation	0.589	Moderate positive correlation
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	Significant
	Sample size (N)	79	

From the results in Table 4, a correlation coefficient of 0.589 for directive words shows that there exists moderate positive relationship between sandwich students' understanding of directive words and academic achievement since the correlation coefficient (0.589) lie between 0.30 and 0.69.

Hypotheses One
There is no significant difference across Contacts in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students' identification of single, double and phrasal directive words.

Table 5
ANOVA on Equality of Mean Achievements Scores of Sandwich Students' Across Contacts on Identification of Directive Words

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	P-value
Between Groups	22.581	2	11.291	0.203	0.822
Within Groups	334.196	6	55.699		
Total	356.777	8			

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) technique was used to ascertain if there exist any significant difference among Contacts 3, 4 and 5 in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students' identification of single, double and phrasal directive words. Since the ANOVA result in Table 5 has a *p*-value greater than 0.05 (*p*-value = 0.822), it interprets that there is no significant difference across Contacts

3, 4, and 5 in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students' identification of single, double and phrasal directive words.

Hypothesis Two

There is no significant difference across Contacts 3, 4 and 5 in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students' understanding of directive words based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy.

Table 6

ANOVA for Equality of Mean Achievement Scores across Contacts in Understanding of Directive Words based on Bloom's Taxonomy

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	p-value
Between Groups	175.594	2	87.797	.974	.400
Within Groups	1352.462	15	90.164		
Total	1528.056	17			

Table 6 presents ANOVA results on the test of significant difference in mean achievements of sandwich students' understanding of directive words based the cognitive levels on Bloom's Taxonomy. Since the ANOVA result in Table 6 has a p-value greater than 0.05 (p-value = 0.400), the null hypothesis was accepted. This means that there is no significant difference among Contacts 3, 4 and 5 in the mean achievement scores of sandwich students' understanding of directive words based on the cognitive levels on Bloom's Taxonomy.

Hypothesis Three

There is no significant relationship between sandwich students' understanding of directive words in essay questions and academic achievement. Results from Table 4 shows a 2-tailed significant value of 0.000 which is less than the level of significance

$(\alpha) = 0.05$ making the correlation coefficient of 0.589 significant. This means that there exists significant relationship between sandwich students' understanding of directive words and academic achievement. Hence, the null hypothesis was rejected. The implication of this finding is that understanding directive words in essay questions has positive significant relationship with students' achievement.

Discussion of Findings

The first fifteen questions on the cognitive test tested students' abilities to identify single directive words (1-5), double directive words (6-10) and phrasal directive words (11-15) in essay questions (See Appendix 1). Findings reveal that sandwich students are unable to accurately identify directive words in essay questions after years of encountering them in essay examinations in English Language. Results show poor mean achievement scores among the sandwich students in the identification of single, double and phrasal directive words in essay questions. Phrasal directive words are the least identified followed by the double and lastly the single directive words. It was observed that most students underlined the words haphazardly include nouns, adjectives and even prepositions as a predictor to their confusion over the right words to be underlined.

Findings highlight that the mean achievement scores of phrasal directive words are relatively the least across Contacts. This aligns with Mansour (2020) who found out that students could not recognise phrasal verbs in questions and refutes the assertion by Nedjat-Haiem (2021) that students could identify and use phrases, words or key words in the questions to channel their thinking processes while others underlined specific concepts and key words of the questions to help their understanding. The inability to identify the directive words may be due to the fact that they may know these words as just English words that form part of the questions without attaching any importance to the roles these

words play in the questions. This is affirmed by Shea and Ceprano (2017) that an accurate repetition, fluent pronunciation and ability to understand spoken words do not automatically imply that a learner can recognise those words in print especially if they are used in novel contexts. In other words, a candidate may have known the meanings of the directive words in the questions but failed to contextually identify them (especially the phrasal verbs) as "examination instructions carriers". They might know directive words as lone English words but not as instruction words in examination questions.

Findings further depict a poor achievement of sandwich students in understanding the meanings of directive words based on the six cognitive levels of BT. Crisp and Macinska (2020) assert that the way questions are presented and the different elements of a question can influence achievement. For example, using a bold font to highlight a key word in a question can record a higher students' success rate in that question. On the cognitive test, therefore, the words that highlight the meanings of each directive word at all the six levels of BT were in bold, yet, the results still show a low achievement in understanding the meanings of the directive words in the essay questions. For example, five options of *re-order*, *outline*, *group*, *define* and *enumerate* were given at the Knowledge level on the Cognitive Test to answer questions 16-20.

Question 17 is presented as follows:
One by **one**, **clearly state** in details reasons for poor performance among sandwich
Students in essay writing. Answer: ……
To **clearly state** reasons for something **one** by **one** means to *enumerate* but majority of the students across Contacts such as C3S4, C4S2 and C5S6 chose *outline*, and others *group* (C4S21 and C3S16). This proves that the students do not understand the meanings of directive words irrespective of the cognitive level on BT nor accurately interpret the tasks demanded by these words in

essay questions. This is collaborated by Nchaberg (2020) who found out that interpreting the message (demands) of an essay question is a problem to students.

Findings again reveal that there is no significant difference in the extent of understanding the meaning of directive words in essay questions based on the six cognitive levels of Bloom's Taxonomy among Contacts 3, 4 and 5 sandwich students. This interprets that irrespective of contact level, or years of being exposed to the directive words in essay questions in English Language examinations, the understanding of sandwich students are the same. Meanwhile, the fact that questions from the cognitive levels of BT affect students' achievement is collaborated by Liman and Isma'il (2015). In other words, more years of exposure to a specific theme would have yielded higher achievement scores because questions based on Bloom's Taxonomy is hierarchical, that is, from the lowest to highest cognitive levels. However, findings reveal that the students' levels of understanding of directive words have neither increased per level on the Taxonomy nor per years of learning. This is collaborated by Wigati (2014) who discovered that basic students could not accurately interpret topics but upper intermediate could. This implies that the higher they climb that academic ladder, the more knowledgeable they were.

Furthermore, findings reveal that students' abilities to identify directive words are the same irrespective of contact level. Lack of significant differences in identifying the three constructs understudied implies that academic level and years of encountering these words in examinations have no impact on their abilities to identify these words in essay questions. Ideally, it is expected that knowledge of a learning item should increase or be perfected over time but this result proves otherwise. The result is contrary to Wigati's (2014) findings that basic students could not identify nor elaborate on themes in essay questions, but upper intermediate students could. However, the research is similar to Sutra Riadi and

Tantra's (2020) finding that there was no significant differences in students' ability to understand phrasal/word meanings across classes. The result moreover buttresses the fact that misunderstanding directive words in essay questions is one of the problems encountered by ESL undergraduates among whom are sandwich students from JOSTUM. For instance, Japanese undergraduates could not figure out which of the directive words *draw* or *explain* was appropriate for a task in an essay question thus spending more time on the question than on the answer (Aizawa, 2024).

Lack of understanding directive words in essay questions may be due to the fact that students focus more on content words (subject words or themes) than on directive words when preparing for essay examinations. This is echoed by Rahman et al. (2016) who discovered that students perfunctorily prepare for essay examinations because their goal is to score grades enough to pass than to be proficient in providing correct responses to the questions. Another reason may be due to lack of exposure to directive words at all levels on the cognitive levels of BT or language barrier. For example, citing the Japanese confusion over *draw* and *explain*, draw is at a higher level (Application) than explain (Comprehension) on BT. The student was still confused over these directives despite years of encountering them in examination as a middle level undergraduate because these are English and not Japanese words.

Conclusion and Implication of Findings

Based on findings, it was concluded that English Language Education sandwich students find it difficult to identify and understand directive words in essay questions in their examinations irrespective of their academic levels. Such difficulties include inability to identify and understand the contextual meanings of directive words in essay questions especially phrasal directive words. This academic deficiency has a

significant negative impact on their academic achievement in English Language examinations. It was recommended that more studies on directive words should be embarked on by the undergraduates understudied. Also, English language teachers should employ BT both in preparing their lessons on effective response to essay questions and in setting the questions. Due to the short duration of lectures allotted to sandwich students at vacations only, the study could not be expanded to accommodate experimental research designs such as pre test post test design. It was further recommended that the study be replicated using other methods and samples of English Language students.

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Appendix 1: Cognitive Test

S/N	IDENTIFICATION OF DIRECTIVE WORDS
	Instruction: DO NOT underline any question you do not know the answer. Underline ONLY the DIRECTIVE WORDS/PHRASES (i.e. Words or phrases that tell you what to do or how to answer each question) in the following essay questions:
1	English language originated in Nigeria with the advent of the British. Trace and elaborate on the merits of learning the language by Nigerians.
2	Describe the rise of the English novel and highlight the contributions of the early English authors to its development.
3	There are certain factors that inspire the composition of poems. List five of these elements and explain them.
4	Examination malpractice is a menace in your school. Identify the causes and suggest ways of remedying the situation.
5	The removal of fuel subsidy by the Nigerian government was an unwise move in a period of inflation. Critique this statement and justify your view.
6	There are many types of figures of speech. Illustrate with any six.
7	Comment on the role of Daniel Defoe on the rise of the English novel.
8	Several authors contributed to the development of the African Novel. Elaborate on the works of any four of them.
9	Relate the importance of an extensive vocabulary to essay writing.
10	English language has evolved over the years. Review it in the light of the varieties spoken in Nigeria.
11	Critically assess the causative factors of poor performance in answering essay questions in English Language among English Education students.
12	Analyse with an outline, the different word classes in English Language.
13	There are various features of drama. Briefly discuss any five.
14	Critically evaluate the benefits of the Use of English course among first-year undergraduates.
15	Bearing the definitions of nouns and adjectives in mind, give a demonstration of their interrelationships in sentences.

ANSWERS

The answers to the questions above are as follows: 1. Trace, Elaborate; 2. Describe, highlight; 3. List, explain; 4. Identify, suggest; 5. Critique, justify; 6. Illustrate; 7. Comment; 8. Elaborate; 9. Relate; 10. Review; 11. Critically assess; 12. Analyse with an outline; 13. Briefly discuss; 14. Critically evaluate; and 15. Give a demonstration.