

Why Writing in ESL Is Difficult For Undergraduates In A Public University in Malaysia

Yah Awg Nik (*Author*)
Centre for Language Studies and Generic Development
Universiti Malaysia Kelantan
Kelantan, Malaysia
Email: yah@umk.edu.my

Azizah Hamzah (*Author*)
Department of Media Studies
University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: azizah@um.edu.my

Hasif Rafidee bin Hasbollah (*Author*)
University of Salford Manchester
United Kingdom

Email: H.R.BinHasbollah@edu.salford.ac.uk;

Abstract - Writing well and effectively helps our students achieve three important objectives. Firstly, it reinforces the grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary. Secondly, writing provides opportunities for our students to be more adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have learnt and to take risks with the effects of writing. And, finally, the importance of writing lies in the ability to develop language skills in terms of fluency, accuracy and appropriateness, in the communication of meanings and messages. This paper attempts to investigate a comparative study on the first-degree students' writing performance and the problems that hinder students' perception of good writing skills. As English Language is used in all the subjects taught in their degree performance, these students should acquire and also achieve some kind of satisfactory level of writing proficiency. Lecturers expect them to use and write daily tasks, assignments and answer examination questions using English proficiently and effectively.

In this study, we found that the students from the Diploma Programme acquired better writing skills than the Matriculation students. The Diploma students performed better in all the five writing components like content, vocabulary, organization, language use and mechanics. This was because the Diploma students had more exposure in English as all the subjects were taught in English Language. Therefore, the Matriculation students were slightly less proficient in their writing performance compared with the Diploma students. Nevertheless, the component like mechanics in writing did not contribute greatly to their writing proficiency and both groups of students scored almost the same percentage. The most significant component in writing that hindered their writing proficiency was language use. Both the Diploma and Matriculation students scored very low percentage in this component. Firstly, because ESL students faced more problems than the first language students as they have to acquire or consciously learn the grammar, syntactic structure, vocabulary, rhetorical structure and idioms of a new language. Secondly, composing and writing is already a difficult task for them and the acquisition of grammar and other language structures make it even more difficult. Finally, students who do not read and

write well in their first language need to work harder on the new creative activity of forming ideas and thoughts in English for the readers to understand. Therefore, we recommend writing lecturers to provide our students ample time and opportunities for them to write and form ideas clearly. Next, choosing topics for students to write with care can also nurture the development of composing abilities. As a conclusion, lecturers should focus on helping students to become aware of how and why they write, and on encouraging them to write freely, fluently and well.

Keywords: Writing, English language, performance, undergraduates,

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most difficult skills for students to acquire. Writing is unlike spoken language, as it requires the readers or the audience to understand and interpret what has been written. Langan (1987) and Gunning (1998) agreed that writing is difficult when they stated that writing is both more complex and more abstract than talk. Moreover, Parker (1993) supported this view when he stated that writing could be a torment to students. In addition, Pearsall and Cunningham (1988) and Emmons (2003) advocated that writing is definitely "hard work". Therefore, it is evidently true that writing poses a number of problems to the students, as it is a skill that is difficult to master. It is believed that writing demands a great deal of skills and conventions such as writing readiness and grammatical rules for the students to become proficient and effective writers. Besides that, teachers too face great challenge to teach these skills and conventions as students may at times find them confusing and difficult to understand and write affective writing in English. Writing therefore is not just putting pen to paper or writing down ideas but it is how these ideas are presented or expressed effectively. This highly demanding process of writing requires a number of skills and conventions like organization in the development of

IV. QUALIFICATION

Generally, the respondents who had 1A – 2A (distinction/excellent marks) in SPM English grade scored highest (62.5%) in Organization but lowest in Language Use (46.0%). Meanwhile respondents who had 3B – 4B (good) in SPM English grade scored highest (70%) in Mechanics and lowest in Language use (54.9%). However, respondents who had 5C – 6C (credits) in SPM English grade highest in Organization (64.2%) and lowest in Language Use (52.3%). Next, those who passed with 7 – 8 (pass) in SPM English grade scored highest in Mechanics (70%) and lowest in Language use (scored 48%).

Meanwhile, all the respondents with the qualification of 1A – 2A, 3B – 4B, 5C – 6C and 7 – 8 in the SPM English Language Paper scored almost the same score for Organization. As a result, all respondents who had either good marks and average marks for their SPM English Language paper, scored lowest in Language Use.

V. WRITING COMPONENTS

The distribution data of ESL Composition Profile for Rater 1 based on Diploma and Matriculation Entry qualifications showed that the respondents from Diploma (Entry qualification) scored higher than Matriculation (Entry qualification) for all the five criteria. For instance, the highest score of the respondents from the Diploma in Mechanics (60%), and it is followed by Organization (59.1%), then Content (56.5%). The next score was in Vocabulary (56.3 %) and the lowest was in Language Use (47%).

Similarly, the score for respondents from the Matriculation was almost the same, whereby they scored highest in Mechanics (56.5%) and lowest in Language Use (43.5%). Therefore, both respondents from the Diploma and Matriculation (Entry qualification) scored highest in Mechanics and lowest in Language Use.

In general the distribution data of ESL Composition Profile for Rater 2 showed that both respondents from Diploma and Matriculation (Entry qualification) scored highest in Mechanics but lowest in Language Use. For instance, the respondents from Diploma (Entry qualification) scored highest in Mechanics (80 %) and lowest in Language Use (62.6%). Similarly, the respondents from the Matriculation (Entry qualification) scored highest in Mechanics (77.6%) and lowest in Language Use (54.4%).

Meanwhile, the respondents from the Diploma (Entry qualification) scored higher than respondents from the Matriculation (Entry qualification) for all the five criteria such as Content, Organization, Language Use, Vocabulary and Mechanics. They scored highest in Mechanics (80%), then the second highest score was in Organization (72.2%) and this was followed by Content (70.3%). The lowest score for them was in Language Use (62.6%). However, the respondents from the

Matriculation (Entry qualification) scored lower than the respondents from the Diploma (Entry qualification) for all the five criteria. They scored 77.6% for Mechanics, which was the highest score, and second highest was for Organization (65.6%). This was followed by the next highest, that was for Content (63.5%) and then followed closely by Vocabulary (62.6 %). The lowest score was similar with the respondents from the Diploma (Entry qualification), which was in Language Use (54.4%). In conclusion, the respondents from the Diploma (Entry qualification) scored higher than respondents from Matriculation (Entry qualification) for all the five criteria.

In general, the average distribution data of ESL Composition Profile of Rater 1 and Rater 2 showed that respondents from the Diploma (Entry qualification) scored higher than respondents from Matriculation (Entry qualification) for all the five criteria, in the ESL Composition Profile, like Content, Organization, Language Use, Vocabulary and Mechanics. The highest score for both respondents from the Diploma and Matriculation (Entry qualification) was for Mechanics, whereby they scored 70% and 67.1% respectively.

Meanwhile, both respondents from the Diploma and Matriculation (Entry qualification) scored lowest in Language Use, 54.8% and 48.9% respectively. The second highest score for the respondents was Organization, whereby the Diploma respondents scored 65.7% and the Matriculation respondents scored 61.5%. This was then followed by Content where Diploma respondents scored 63.4% and the Matriculation respondents scored 58.6%. For Vocabulary, the Diploma students scored 62.8% while Matriculation respondents scored 58.2%. In conclusion, both the Diploma and Matriculation students scored highest in Mechanics and lowest in Language Use in the ESL Composition Profile for Average Rater 1 and Rater 2

VI. INTER-RATER CORRELATION (REALIBILITY)

The results of the correlation analysis revealed that there was a positive correlation between Rater 1 and Rater 2 for the ESL Composition Profile for Content ($r = 0.586$), Organization ($r = 0.335$), Vocabulary ($r = 0.440$), Language Use ($r = 0.636$), Mechanics ($r = 0.409$) and Writing Performance ($r = 0.707$). All correlations were significant at 0.01 levels except Organization for both Raters at 0.05 levels. In conclusion, the ratings for both raters (1 and 2) were reliable.

Language paper is good, they are incapable of using Language appropriately and effectively in their writing performance. We can assume that mastering a language is not an easy task especially English Language that is a second language (L2) to the students. Moreover, the skills in writing, particularly writing in L2 is difficult because Raimes (1996) suggests that non-native students needed more than just creativity to form ideas in English. These students needed teachers' great concerns of grammar and syntax. This means that students have to acquire the basic rules of grammar and know the correct syntactic structures to compose and write their essays proficiently. Therefore, we can conclude that, good grades or qualification in their SPM English Language Paper did not contribute and help both the Diploma and Matriculation respondents perform well in their writing.

The next findings revealed that respondents from the Diploma (Entry qualification) scored higher than respondents from Matriculation (Entry qualification) in all the five criteria in the ESL Composition Profile like Content, Organization, Language Use, Vocabulary and Mechanics. The highest score for both respondents from the Diploma and Matriculation was for Mechanics and the lowest score was for Language Use. However, the Diploma respondents (Entry qualification) scored higher than Matriculation respondents (Entry qualification) in their writing performance because they use English Language more frequently. The Diploma respondents used English Language in all their programmes or codes as a medium of instruction. Exposure to English Language enables the Diploma respondents to perform better in the writing performance than the Matriculation respondents. Furthermore, we believe that the Diploma respondents were given more time and opportunity to practise writing compared to the Matriculation respondents. Moreover, Rizal (2006), from the Matriculation Division, Ministry of Education of Malaysia reveals that not all the subjects or codes in Matriculation programme are taught in English Language. Some subjects use Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction. Therefore, this assumption is made because the Diploma respondents have better exposure in English Language and their proficiency level is better than the Matriculation respondents. Moreover, Hedge (1990) agrees that extensive reading and more exposure to the language can help improve students' writing performance. Furthermore, we agree with The Ministry of Education of New Zealand (1994) that a writer needs three things; experience, observation, and imagination. This evidently shows that students write best when they have the experience or knowledge about the topics they are familiar with. Moreover, the observation and exposure they have in the language enable them to compose and write proficiently and effectively.

Next, the finding in the study showed that Writing Performance depended on Content, Organization, Vocabulary and Language Use. There was no correlation between Writing Performance and Mechanics. Therefore, we believe that, good writing performance definitely has very important criteria like Content, which means the writer has an understanding of events, actions, findings, and views that are vividly presented. Besides Content, Vocabulary and Language Use play important roles too for students to write proficiently and effectively. Students who are good language users are capable of commanding attention from the readers. They can enlighten and captivate more readers with their good command of language. Organization or structure is also an important criterion for students to have in their writing. A good essay is clearly structured with a beginning, middle and an end. Therefore, we can assume that all the four criteria like Content, Organization, Vocabulary and Language Use are important in the writing performance. However, Mechanics do not make a great difference on writing performance because it only includes capitalization and writing conventions so that the writing will look the way formal writing is expected to look. In conclusion, we believe that writing is definitely a skill that needs to be taught and learnt, and students should be taught by lecturers to acquire and master the skills in writing so that they emerge as proficient and effective writers.

X. IMPLICATIONS TO ESL LEARNING AND TEACHING AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Language may be our most powerful tool. We use it to understand people through listening, reading, speaking and writing. However, the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skills, it can be learnt or transmitted as a set of practices. This is similar to what Reid (1993) and Langan (1987) advocate that writing is a craft and also a skill. It means that it can be taught and learnt. Therefore, writing skills must be practised and learned through experience. When a craft or skill is learnt, students can use it especially for many purposes. However, it takes time to become skilful and proficient writers. Writing teachers and lecturers should play vital roles in preparing students and providing them ample time and more opportunities to practise writing.

Firstly, writing is a thinking process. It is a skill that is difficult to master. It undergoes a long and tedious process of drafting, revising and editing. Students and lecturers should seriously collaborate and cooperate to achieve some kind of satisfactory level of writing proficiency. This is vital for our prospective graduates to be able to write proficiently and effectively in English

our students. We believe that lecturers should be aware of our students' different needs and wants. As a result, lecturers need to review and reflect on our approach in teaching writing. We may also decide to register or enroll ourselves in a 'refresher course' or a professional development course to keep abreast and meet with the special needs and demands of our students nowadays.

With that, we like to conclude with a special note from Harp and Brewer (1996) that there are only two kinds of teachers in the world: green and growing, or ripe and rotting. Therefore, we believe that lecturers have worked hard to stay green and growing so that our students emerge as aspiring graduates who are both proficient in their oral and written English Language and most importantly well qualified for the jobs waiting for them.

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