

Full Length Research Paper

The writing performance of undergraduates in the University of Technology Mara, Terengganu, Malaysia

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Writing well and effectively helps our students achieve three important objectives. Firstly, it reinforces 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 undergraduates' 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, 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, it is recommended that 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. It can be concluded that 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.

Key words: Writing, English language, performance, undergraduates, effective communication.

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 ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy in choosing the right words so that there is no ambiguity of meaning and also the right use of complex grammatical devices to focus and emphasize ideas. Besides, writing demands the writer to have careful choice of vocabulary and understand grammatical patterns and to be able to write sentence structures that is appropriate to the subject matter.

Therefore, besides having knowledge in skills and conventions of writing, ESL students have to practise a lot of writing. However, there are other factors that may affect their writing performances. Currently in Malaysia, few researches have been carried out pertaining to writing performance of students. It is evidently true when Freedman, Pringle and Yalden (1996) agreed that;

“...writing, and until recent years has been the neglected child in the family of the ‘four skills’: listening, speaking, reading and writing...”

Therefore, with this in view, this study is conducted to examine some of the factors affecting students writing performance as writing in ESL poses great difficulties to them. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to determine the writing performance of degree students with matriculation and diploma qualification and examine the problematic areas in writing that is content, organisation vocabulary, language use and mechanics that can help lecturers focus more during writing lessons and to examine the factors, which influence the writing performance of the two groups of students in Universiti Teknologi MARA, Trengganu (UiTM Terengganu).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research methodology for this study is descriptive research, using frequency and mean, and correlation analysis and mean difference. The methodology research is described in terms of setting, the subjects, the design of the study, research instruments and research procedure and statistical treatment. The research was conducted at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Terengganu Branch (UiTM Terengganu) that is a public university, and has made English courses as one of the core subjects for all the students. They ranged from proficiency courses to job-related skills courses. English is also used as the medium of instruction for all the programmes offered in the university.

The subjects of this study were forty students pursuing their degree in Bachelor in Business Administration (Finance) and Bachelor in Office Management in this particular university. This first semester students had acquired different levels of English Language proficiency because they had their matriculation and diploma qualification before they enrolled for the degree courses. Out of the total 40 students they were 33 female students and only seven male students.

The theoretical framework for this study focuses on the writing performance of first semester degree students in Bachelor in Business Administration (Finance) and Bachelor in Office Management in UiTM Terengganu. For the purpose of the study, two major clusters of variables are taken into consideration. The independent variables selected are categorized as: (1) demographic factors among the degree students that include gender and qualification and (2) writing components that compose of content, organization, vocabulary, language use and mechanics. The dependent variable is the writing performance of first-degree students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic factors

The first part discusses the demographic factors that consist of two sub-topics, which are gender and qualifications. Both respondents were 40 students from Bachelor in Business Administration (Finance) and Bachelor in Office Management. The respondents were given BEL 411 final examination question paper in Section B (Appendix 2) to write descriptive essays. Then, two raters marked the essays based on ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al (1981: 90). The Profile contains five criteria (components), which are Content (30 marks), Organization (20 marks), Vocabulary (20 marks), Language Use (25 marks) and Mechanics (5 marks).

Generally both the female and male respondents scored highest in Mechanics based on the ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981: 90). The female respondents scored 70% while the male respondents scored 67.1% in Mechanics. The next highest score is Organization whereby the female respondents scored 65.7% and the male respondents scored 62.9%. This is then followed by Content, where the female respondents scored 63.4% and the male respondents scored 61.4%. The female respondents scored 62.8% in Vocabulary and the male respondents scored 59.6%. There was a drastic drop in Language Use

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where the female respondents scored 54.8% and the male respondents scored at 50.0%. Overall, it shows that the female respondents scored higher than male respondents for all the five criteria.

The highest score for both the female and male respondents is in mechanics while the lowest score for both of them is in Language use. Overall, the female respondents scored higher than the male respondents for four criteria like mechanics, organization, content and vocabulary. However, both the female and male students had almost the same score for Content. Generally, the female respondents scored higher than the male respondents for all the criteria. On the other hand, 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 a grade range of 5C - 6C (credits) in SPM English scored 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 or average marks for their SPM English Language paper, scored lowest in Language Use.

Generally, the female respondents scored higher in all the criteria of the ESL Composition Profile (Content, Organization, Vocabulary, Language Use and Mechanics). The highest component scored by the female respondents was in Mechanics whereby they scored 70%. However, the lowest component that the female respondents scored was for Language Use. Similarly, the male respondents scored highest for Mechanics (67.1%) while the lowest was for Language Use. Nevertheless, both the male and female respondents scored almost the same score for Content that was 63.4% and 61.4% respectively. Therefore, we believe that female respondents performed better in writing descriptive essays on the ESL Composition Profile developed by Jacobs et al (1981: 90). The female respondents' handwriting is not only neater than the male respondents but also they follow the conventions and rules of writing. Therefore, their essays are easier to read as they are tidier and do not impede communication.

Next, the female respondents scored higher in all the five criteria of the ESL Composition Profile but there were very little differences between their scores. For instance, in Content, the difference of score between the female respondents and male respondents was only 2%. For both their highest scores in Mechanics, the difference of score was only 2.9%. Both male and female respondents

scored highest in Mechanics and not in other criteria because, Mechanics is easier to master and acquire. In Malaysia, students start learning to write simple letters and words during pre-school until they reach upper secondary school level. Firstly, during pre-school education, children learn simple writing conventions like capitalization of alphabets and copying simple words. Then, when they are in the primary school, they learn to write simple sentences following the rules and conventions in writing. Later, when they are in the secondary school, they have already acquired and mastered the Mechanics or conventions in writing. Therefore, we can conclude that, Mechanics is one of the easiest criteria that students can acquire in the writing skill and this provides the answer for the highest score.

The next criterion was the qualification of both the female and male respondents in their SPM English Language paper. When the Diploma and Matriculation students first enrolled for their programmes, they had obtained different grades for their SPM English Language paper. Their grades or qualification in SPM English Language paper ranged from 1A - 2B (distinctions) to lowest grade 7 - 8 (a pass). In between, they had grades likes 3B - 4B and 5C - 6C (credits) which indicated that they were good in English Language. Nevertheless, respondents who scored 1A - 2B (distinctions) grade scored highest in Organization and lowest in Language Use. Respondents with 3B - 4B grades (good) scored highest in Mechanics and lowest in Language Use. Respondents who scored 5C - 6C (credits) in SPM English got highest in Organization (64.2%) and lowest in Language Use (52.3%). However, respondents with a pass or lowest grade (7 - 8) scored highest in Mechanics and lowest in Language Use. Therefore, we believe that the respondents who had good grades and lowest grade were not very good in their Language Use. This indicates that Language Use that includes mastery of sentence construction, agreement, tenses, word order, articles, pronouns, nouns and prepositions are very difficult for students to acquire and master.

Even though, their qualification in English 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.

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 the 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.

The finding in this 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.

Inter-rater correlation

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. It was found out that the ratings for both raters (1 and 2) were reliable.

The results showed that the Writing Performance is highly correlated with Content ($r = 0.924$), Organization ($r = 0.859$), Vocabulary ($r = 0.884$), and Language Use ($r = 0.880$). There is no correlation between Writing Performance and Mechanics ($r = 0.305$). The correlations are significant at 0.01 levels. As a conclusion, Writing Performance depended on Content, Organization, Vocabulary, and Language Use only. The results also revealed that there were significant differences in Score for Content, Vocabulary and Language Use for the Diploma and Matriculation Entry. The mean differences score for the Diploma Entry, for Content with Mean = 19.0217, Vocabulary with Mean = 12.5652 and Language Use with Mean = 13.6957 and for the Diploma Entry the mean differences score for Content with Mean = 17.5882, Vocabulary with Mean = 11.6471 and Language Use with Mean = 12.2353. There were no significant differences between both Diploma and Matriculation respondents for the two criteria, which included Organization and

Mechanics. As a conclusion, the Diploma respondents scored significantly higher than Matriculation respondents for the three criteria, Content, Vocabulary, and Language Use.

Language is the most powerful tool where it is used 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 practiced 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 UiTM Trengganu prospective graduates to be able to write proficiently and effectively in English Language. Therefore, in this particular aspect, Raimes (1996) suggests that writing lecturers should be concerned with process of writing rather than product. Furthermore, she states that when lecturers gave assignments to students, they should carefully choose these assignments to provide the chance for them to pay attention to the writing and revision process. This means giving them time to work on a paper, time to work with peers and also alone, time to deal with content, organization, and later the proof-reading stage. This is the thinking process that brings discovery to other people. In other words, we believe that students can master the writing skills if lecturers encourage them to write consistently. Moreover, Spandel (2001) stated that successful teachers write and share in their writing processes and products with their students. They personally experience what they require their students to do and as a result, they become more sensitive about the problems students face in their writing. Therefore, lecturers should themselves begin writing because writing is sharing and discovering new ideas and these are helpful and important for both parties. She further emphasizes "there are no set of standards that can 'transform education' if teachers fail to cherish and challenge the human heart that is the source of good teaching". In other words, she wants teachers to listen thoroughly and motivate students and also share views and ideas with students and later becoming more sensitive and tolerant with them.

Furthermore, Chaffee et al. (2002) advocate that students should be taught to think critically and creatively when they write. They state that a thoughtful writer thinks

critically while moving through the process of writing. They continue by saying that, “no collection of writing tips and strategies will ever enable you to write thoughtfully if you’re not thinking critically”. Therefore, lecturers should encourage and provide students opportunities to be adventurous with the language, to go beyond what they have learnt and to take risks with the effects of writing.

This in turn enables our students to be involved with new language; the effort to express new ideas and the constant use of their hands and brain is a unique “process” to reinforce learning. The close relationship between writing and thinking makes writing an invaluable part of any language course. Therefore, lecturers should learn not to take themselves too seriously in writing because occasionally you can tell your students “it’s not a sin to throw the whole page of writing away if it just isn’t working (not right)”. Thus, both lecturers and students will have deep satisfaction and understanding in sharing new ideas.

Next, there is a widely held belief that to be a good writer, a student needs to read a lot. This is generally true, because students are able to acquire proficiency through reading. The Ministry Education of New Zealand (1994) states that reading and writing, like talking and listening are inseparable processes. This evidently points out reading and writing are closely linked because readers use their knowledge and experience to construct meaning from the books they read and writers however, construct meaning in the texts they write. Both students and lecturers need to read extensively in order to create, construct ideas and organize thoughts to write proficiently and effectively. Furthermore, students who read a lot are able to use many kinds of language knowledge in constructing their ideas and thoughts and put them on paper. It is our greatest hope that lecturers should encourage students to read widely. Though it is not an easy task, nurturing and sustaining students’ interest in reading, lecturers should foremost play their roles as motivators efficiently. Using the newspapers, magazines and other reading materials as teaching aids for our lessons for instance can generate the reading habit among our students. As a result, students will become more proficient and effective writers if they read extensively. Moreover, lecturers should focus on helping students become aware of how and why they write, and also encourage them to write freely, fluently and well. Students should be made aware that writing is an important tool for learning and communicating. Writing is a vital tool in learning for students because when they write they go through or experience the ‘thinking process’ or ‘writing process’ that involves three stages, such as pre-writing (brainstorming), writing and rewriting (revising) and finally editing (proof reading). The importance of writing lies in the abilities of the students to develop language skills in terms of fluency, accuracy and appropriateness of meanings and messages since writing is an important tool for students not only in learning but

also in communication.

Consequently, writing is a major means of assessing learning throughout our education system. Most examinations and tests are assessed on the basis of written performance. Therefore, writing skill is very important for students to acquire and master because they are being assessed by the way they write.

Nevertheless, the most important reason for students to acquire good writing skills is to use writing in their creative ways to interact effectively with people and the world around us. Therefore, lecturers and students should seriously collaborate and cooperate to achieve some kind of satisfactory level of writing proficiency that is expected of 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.

Conclusion

This study concludes that extensive exposure to the English Language has enhanced the writing performance of the undergraduates from the Diploma programme. These students had more years of exposure in literacy skills compared to those from the Matriculation programme. Evidence shows that these undergraduates have mastered the writing skills and become proficient writers. This is in concord with Hedge’s (1990) argument that exposure and reading extensively are beneficial to acquiring effective writing skills. Writing maybe hard and demanding but frequent exposure in reading and writing will help improve writing performance.

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