

© Society of Education, India

<http://www.soeagra.com>

ISSN 0976-4089



A Comparative Study on the Factors Affecting the Writing Performance among Bachelor Students

Yah Awg Nik¹, Azizah Hamzah² and Hasif Rafidee³

¹Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, ²University of Malaya and

³University of Bradford, U.K.

Email: yah@umk.edu.my, azizah@um.edu.my, cingai2006@yahoo.com.my

ABSTRACT

This comparative study investigates the writing performance of undergraduates and the problems that hinder students' perception of good writing skills. There are many factors affecting undergraduates writing performance in ESL, like content, vocabulary, organization, language use and mechanics in writing. The most significant component in writing that hinders their writing proficiency is language use as they have to learn the grammar, syntactic structure, vocabulary, rhetorical structure and idioms of a new language (ESL). Writing is a difficult task for them and the acquisition of grammar and other language structures makes it more difficult and complicated. We believe that 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. We recommend that writing lecturers provide ample time and opportunities for them to write and form ideas clearly. Finally, lecturers should focus on helping students to become aware of how and why they write, and encourage them to write freely, fluently and well.

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 effective 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 (1996:186) 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 i.e. content, organization 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, Terengganu (UiTM Terengganu).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Writing is one of the ways in which we explore our understanding of the world and discover the meaning of our experience. The Ministry of Education of New Zealand (1994) stated that writing is the act of using the language to discover meaning in experience and communicate it. Similarly, Hall (1982) advocated that a good writer uses words to discover and to bring that discovery to other people. Basically these similar views on writing relate to experience and discovery of meaning. However, teachers and learners should know some of the criteria to write good essays and become more proficient writers. Therefore, the citations and findings below provide some of the criteria for good writing performance. Firstly, Hall (1982) states that a good essay should be in the first place interesting to read. Furthermore, the reading can be informative, descriptive and reflective which can make the reader understand clearly. If, for instance an explanation of an idea is provided, the writing should proceed logically as it moves from one point to the next. The writing or essay should form a cohesive whole. Whenever a terminology is used, definitions or explanations should be given. Appropriate examples or illustrations enhance the reading of a good essay. Furthermore, Hall (1982) states that a good essay are exhibited through its content: an understanding of events theories, actions, findings and views. For example strong persuasive writing is achieved by the writer's ability to organize and articulate ideas or events very vividly. Besides, that he explains that the other very important criterion of a good essay is structure. This means that a good essay is clearly structured, with a beginning, middle and an end, or normally termed as introduction, body and conclusion. Other than that, he states that the next criterion, for a good essay is presentation, which means that the essay is clearly laid out, articulately and grammatically written with original ideas. Most importantly, a good essay also brings 'discovery' to the reader. A good writer writes to provide pleasure that carries knowledge with it. The pleasure-carrying knowledge comes from self-understanding, and creates understanding in the minds of reader(s). This definitely makes it a good essay. Then, some may agree that a good essay is also a piece of prose or writing that can make contact with the reader (audience). This means that a good essay avoids clichés. Clichés are little cinder blocks of crushed and reprocessed experienced which when writers use them in writing, they violate the agreement to construct sentences in order to reach someone (Hall, 1982:3). Therefore clichés prevent true contact by making false contact in its place. In other words, a good essay is able to make contact with the reader or audience without using clichés. According to Langan (1987), a good piece of writing must also has a strong central idea (thesis) that is related to the topic discussed. In other words, the essay has a clear, logical organization with well-developed major points that are supported with concrete and specific evidence. Besides that, there are effective transitions between ideas. Moreover, the use of appropriate words in the essay exhibits an admirable style with sentences that are sophisticated. Meanwhile, Jacobs Zinkgraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel and Hughey (1981:92) suggested a few criteria for excellent writing, which are represented on the ESL Composition profile at the "Excellent to Very Good" mastery level. The first criterion is "content" which has the descriptors as knowledgeable, substantive, thorough development of thesis and relevant to the assigned topic. The descriptor "knowledgeable" includes understanding of the subject and the facts or information used by the writer. While "substantive" means that several points are discussed and there are sufficient details. There is also originality with the concrete details to illustrate, define, compare and contrast factual information supporting the thesis. "Thorough development of thesis" is described as the thesis is expanded sufficiently to convey a sense of completeness and there is a specific method of development like comparison and contrast, illustration, definition, description, example and fact. The writer is also aware of different points of view. The last descriptor "relevant to assigned topic" is described as all information is clearly pertinent to the topic discussed. Furthermore, Jacobs et al. (1981:97) emphasized that, the general procedures for determining good criteria in writing performance are firstly, take two or three minutes to evaluate and read the essay twice. Then, form an overall impression of whether the writer has delivered a clear and complete message. This means that the writer's ideas are readily apparent, appropriately sequenced to fulfill our expectations and adequately developed to convey a complete message. Later, we are able to identify the descriptors in the "content and organization" components or criteria, which most accurately describe the writer's overall effect and assign a score. Then, the next step is to reread the essay to verify the first impression and see whether the communicative effort of the writer is effective or not and the mastery of vocabulary, grammar and mechanics help or impede our comprehension of the message in the essay. Meanwhile, Hedge (1990) stated that effective writing requires a number of things: a high degree of organization in the development of ideas and information; a high degree of accuracy so that there is no ambiguity of meaning; the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis and a careful choice of vocabulary. She further advocated that grammatical patterns and sentence structures to create a style, which is appropriate to the topic, are also important for effective writing. Therefore, Jacobs et al. (1981) and Hedge (1990) agreed with almost the same criteria for good effective writing that includes organization and development of ideas

and information or content to convey a complete message. In conclusion, we believe that good performance in writing requires several skills such as getting the grammar right, having a wide range of vocabulary, demonstrating a mastery of conventions in mechanics of writing, and being able to construct effective and complex sentences. Last but not least, good and effective writing performance requires the writer to be knowledgeable about the topic assigned to him or her to write.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

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 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 (20marks), Language Use (25 marks) and Mechanics (5marks). 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 where the female respondents scored 54.8% and the male respondents scored 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 like 3B - 4B and 5C - 6C (credits) which indicated that they were good in English Language. Nevertheless, respondents who scored 1A - 2B (distinctions) grades 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 (1983) 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: 11) 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.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

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 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 practice 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 Language. Therefore, in this particular aspect Raimes (1983:258) 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 (2001:237) states 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 we (teachers) fail to cherish and challenge the human heart that is the source of good teaching”. In other words, we believe that she wants teachers to listen thoroughly and motivate our students and also share our views and ideas with them and later becoming more sensitive and tolerant with them. Furthermore, Chaffee, McMahon and Stout (2002:36) 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, we believe that 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, we believe that 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)”. Therefore, we believe that 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. Therefore, we believe, 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.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that extensive exposure to the English Language has enhanced the writing performance of the undergraduates from the Diploma program. These students had more years of exposure in literacy skills compared to those from the Matriculation program. 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 difficult and demanding but frequent exposure in reading and writing will help improve writing performance.

FUTURE WORK

Lecturers and teachers should focus on helping students become aware of how and why they write, and also encourage them to write freely, fluently and well. Next, 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). Therefore, 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. In conclusion, 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. Last but not least this paper can lead into future research and investigations on how to motivate university undergraduates to write proficiently and effectively in their academic fields and project work.

REFERENCES

- [1] Chaffee, J., C. McMahon, and B. Stout, *Critical Thinking Thoughtful Writing*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, 2002, pp. 36.
- [2] Emmons, R.H., *An Effective Writing Formula for Unsure Writers*. <http://www.airpower.au.af.Mil/airchronicles/aureview/1975/sept-oct/emmons.html>. Retrieved on 15th May 2005.
- [3] Freedman, A., I. Pringle, and J. Yalden, *Learning to Write: First Language/Second Language*, Longman, London, 1996, pp.186.
- [4] Gunning, T.G., *Assessing and Correcting Reading and Writing Difficulties*, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1998, pp. 3.
- [5] Hall, D., *Writing Well*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, 1982, pp. 2.
- [6] Hedge, T., *Writing*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990.
- [7] Jacobs, H.L., S.A. Zinkgraf, D.R. Wormuth, V.F. Hartfiel, and J.B. Hughey, *Testing ESL Composition: A Practical Approach*, Newbury House, Massachusetts, 1981, pp. 92-97.
- [8] Langan, J., *College Writing Skills*, McGraw Hill, New York, 1987.
- [9] Ministry of Education of New Zealand, *Dancing with the Pen – The Learner as a Writer*, Learning Media New Zealand, Wellington, 1994.
- [10] Parker, S., *The Craft of Writing*, Paul Chapman Publishing, London, 1993.
- [11] Pearsall, T.E., and D.H. Cunningham, *The Fundamentals of Good Writing*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1988.
- [12] Raimes, A., (1983) Anguish as a Second Language? Remedies for Composition Teachers, in Freedman, A., I. Pringle, and J. Yalden, (Eds.) *Learning to Write: First Language/Second Language*. Longman, London, 1983, pp. 258.
- [13] Reid, J., *Teaching ESL Writing*, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 1993.
- [14] Rizal Tahir. (2006) Matriculation Division, Ministry of Education of Malaysia (Telephone interview on 27th May 2006).
- [15] Spandel, V., *Creating Writers – Through 6 - Trait Writing Assessment and Instruction*, Longman, New York, 2001, pp. 237.