

Writing Difficulties Faced by Politeknik Kuching Sarawak Commerce Diploma Students in Doing their Assignments

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Abstract: Writing is one of the four main skills in learning and it is important especially in the academic context where students have to write all sorts of texts such as assignments, essays and reports. Often, second language students find that it is difficult to express their thoughts in writing, especially when they have to write in English. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the writing difficulties faced by the Politeknik Kuching Sarawak Diploma students when writing their assignments. The respondents of this study comprised 132 students who had enrolled in the A4004 English for Commercial Purposes course. Questionnaires were used to collect data from the respondents. The information gathered from the questionnaires was then analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency count and percentage). The findings showed that the students faced major difficulties in completing writing tasks that required creativity and/or critical thinking. They also faced problems in proofreading and in writing grammatical sentences. It was also found that students often thought in their first language and translated their thoughts into English when writing assignments. Other difficulties encountered by the students included not being able to decide on the correct tenses, and differentiating between British English and American English. Some also encountered difficulties in finding suitable words to say what they meant.

Keywords: writing difficulties, Commerce Diploma students, writing tasks, second language, academic context

INTRODUCTION

Written assignments are normally a requirement in any academic pursuit. However, writing has long been claimed to be a very difficult skill to acquire regardless of whether one is writing in the first language or second language. Not many people are able to master writing skills (Richards, 1990). This is probably due to a lack of proficiency in the target language such as the lack of vocabulary, grammar and generic structure. The statement is further supported by Steinman (2009) who claimed that it is a challenge for non-native speakers to write in English for academic purposes as “not only must they deal with the obvious linguistic and technical issues such as syntax, vocabulary, and format, but they must also become familiar with Western notions of academic rhetoric”(p. 80). Besides that, a lack of exposure to academic writing also causes the students to face difficulty in writing. Barker (2000) conducted a study on students’ perception of specific difficulties with writing tasks, and reported that “the students are not adequately prepared for the writing demands required at university” (p. 8).

At Politeknik Kuching Sarawak (PKS), students are involved in many types or genres of writing such as information reports, explanations, letters, description and others related to academic writing. Such assignments are a compulsory component in most academic evaluations in the English courses, namely English for Commercial Purposes and English for Technical Purposes.

The researcher’s own experience in teaching the students, indicates that a majority of Diploma students in PKS today encounter difficulties in writing. Students often feel stressed, resistant and demotivated whenever they are assigned a written piece of work. Considering the fact that the English language is not their mother tongue, students tend to use spoken English rather than written English in writing.

A poor command of grammar is also said to be one of the difficulties that students face in writing. This has resulted in students having difficulties in deciding the tenses to be used in their writing. Apart from that, students usually think in their mother tongue and find it difficult to express their thoughts in English as they lack English proficiency. According to Myles (2002), students may translate from their first language when they are writing. Besides that, students may also sometimes use their first language when generating ideas and attending to details (Friedlander, 1990, as cited in Myles, 2002). All these problems cause their assignments to be lacking in academic quality and in return have caused them to obtain poor grades in the evaluations. Therefore, it is important for lecturers to identify students' writing difficulties in order to be effective in their roles to help students to produce a good piece of writing.

Stapa and Izahar (2010) examined the errors in subject-verb agreement made by postgraduate teacher trainees of a college in Malaysia. The focus of the analyses was on five types of error in subject-verb agreement: (a) person, (b) number, (c) coordinated subject, (d) indefinite expression of amount and (e) notional agreement and proximity. The results showed that the majority of the students committed errors in subject-verb agreement, especially in subject-verb agreement of numbers followed by subject-verb agreement of the person.

Qian and Krugly-Smolska (2008) in their study, found that Chinese graduate students are not able to use appropriate vocabulary in expressing their ideas clearly. Similar challenges are faced by the polytechnic students probably because they lack background knowledge in the target language as they do not use much of the language in their daily activities: it is not common for them to read English texts, listen to English songs or watch English movies without subtitles. The study conducted by Diaz-Gilbert (2005) showed that students whose first language was not English simply avoided a word they did not understand and skipped over it, did not use the dictionary, or guessed at the meaning of the word, most often incorrectly.

Another difficulty faced by the students when writing texts in English is that they tend to translate from their native languages, or they may try out what they assume is a legitimate structure of the target language, although hindered by insufficient knowledge of the correct usage. Thinking in the first language and direct translation of their thoughts into the target language may lead to awkward and disorganized sentence structures in the target language. Besides, for students who are “less familiar and less confident with structural elements of a new language, rhetorical and cultural conventions and even new uses of writing, writing in an L2 can have errors and be less effective than writing in L1” (Kern, 2000, in Myles, 2002).

A study conducted by Khuwaileh and Shoumali (2000) showed that the lack of cohesion and coherence in students’ written texts is caused by the lack of logical connectors of sequence, consequence, contrast, addition and illustration. Another problem identified in the texts written by the students is a lack of appropriate logical linking of ideas. This showed that the students had problems in organizing ideas in their writing. The organization of ideas into paragraphs was not clear in their writing. Several main ideas were found in one paragraph written by some of the students.

Gambell (1991) conducted a study on university education students’ self-perceptions of writing at the University of Saskatchewan. The sample consisted of forty eight elementary education preservice teachers in their second (mostly) or third year who were writing in English as their first language. The results of the study provides information on common problems encountered by students, such as the inability to narrow down the topic, inability to organize the structure of their writing and difficulty in deciding relevant information to be used in their writing.

METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the writing problems faced by students in Politeknik Kuching Sarawak, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed to the students. It took about 10 minutes for

the students to complete the questionnaire. The data collected from the questionnaires were then analyzed descriptively using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Subjects

The questionnaires were administered to 132 students who had enrolled in the A4004 English for Commercial Purposes course.

Instrument

The researcher used questionnaires to find out the difficulties faced by the students while writing their assignments, especially when they had to write in English. By using questionnaires, the researcher was able to obtain information from a large number of participants which helped him to identify the variety of writing difficulties faced by the students. The questionnaire was adapted from Kho (2007).

The questionnaire covered various areas of writing difficulty such as comprehension, mechanics, composition, language accuracy and vocabulary. Under each area, there were some given statements. The students were required to tick on the statements that reflected the writing difficulties faced by them. There was also a structured question that inquired whether the students had other writing difficulties besides those stated in the questionnaire. The students had the opportunity to write in additional comments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The writing difficulties listed in the questionnaire were categorized into six areas: Comprehension and Conception of idea, Mechanics, Composition, Language accuracy, Language appropriacy and Vocabulary. Respondents were allowed to choose more than one option for each category of writing difficulty. This means that the total percentage would be more than 100%.

Comprehension and Conception of Idea

Table 1
Comprehension and conception of idea

	Number of Students	Percentage
Creativity and/or critical thinking	108	78.8%
Getting Started	71	51.8%
Overall Ideas	69	50.4%
Understanding	12	8.8%

78.8% of students who had difficulty with writing tasks that required their creativity and/or critical thinking. According to Scriven and Paul (1987), critical thinking is “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action”.

Students often find that it is hard to think critically when writing their assignments. A possible explanation is the students might not understand what their lecturers are looking for in their written assignments, thus they have difficulty getting started. Students are also not able to link their ideas to the problems or purpose required by the instruction. Students often find it difficult to write when the tasks require them to compare, solve problems, look for cause and effect, evaluate and reason.

Mechanics

Table 2
Mechanics

	Number of Students	Percentage
Proofreading	71	51.8%
Commas	64	46.7%
Spelling	43	31.4%
Colons and semicolons	42	30.7%
Capitalization	38	27.7%

51.8% of students had difficulty in proofreading their written assignments. Proofreading is important in order to ensure the written text is free of grammatical errors, spelling errors, typos, and inconsistencies (Barker, 2000).

The possible areas of proofreading difficulties encountered by the students are the use of the passive voice, the proper use of tense, the proper use of punctuation, the appropriate choice of words, and the use of various noun forms. Besides, students have not cultivated the habit of proofreading their written assignments once they have drafted them.

Composition

Table 3
Composition

	Number of Students	Percentage
Think in first language & translate into the second language	97	70.8%
Writing grammatical sentences	97	70.8%
Developing ideas/supporting details	82	59.9%
Organizing ideas	80	58.4%
Proofreading to make sense	67	48.9%
Understandable & coherent paragraph	58	42.3%
Topic sentence	47	34.3%
Introduction & conclusion	33	24.1%
Paragraphs	12	8.8%

70.8% of students thought in their first language and translated their thoughts into English when writing assignments. According to Myles (2002), one of the factors that leads to difficulties when students write texts in a second language is they may translate from their native languages, or they may try out what they assume is a legitimate structure of the target language, although hindered by insufficient knowledge of the correct usage. The students often think in

their first language such as Mandarin, Malay, Foochow or Iban and directly translate their thoughts into English when writing. This may lead to disorganized sentence structure and word order in the second language, e.g. Sos Tomato (Malay) and Tomato Sauce (English). Lecturers may not be able to understand what the students have written and this may lead to lower grades. Students who are “less familiar and less confident with structural elements of a new language, rhetorical and cultural conventions and even new uses of writing, writing in L2 can have errors and be less effective than writing in L1” (Kern, 2000, in Myles, 2002).

Language Accuracy

Table 4
Language accuracy

	Number of Students	Percentage
Deciding tenses	115	83.9%
Using spoken English/colloquial language	61	44.5%
Sentence structure & word order	60	43.8%
Logical connectors	9	6.6%

83.9% of students faced more difficulty in deciding on the tenses to be used in their writing. A common mistake made by the students was placing “-ed” after an irregular verb. For example, the word “teached” was extensively used. This mistake occurred due to overgeneralisation by the students (Sahirah Marzuki & Zaidah Zainal, 2007). According to Richard (1971) in Sahirah Marzuki and Zaidah Zainal (2007), overgeneralisation occurs when “a learner uses a deviant structure based on his knowledge of other instances or language structure within the same class” (p. 42). Besides that, students struggle with the tenses because of inadequate exposure to grammatical rules (Sahirah Marzuki & Zaidah Zainal, 2007). They only learn about the rules during grammar classes in secondary school. Besides

that, grammar is now learned in context. There is no more drilling on grammatical rules. Therefore, the students may forget grammar rules such as when to use present, past and future tenses.

Language Appropriacy

Table 5
Language appropriacy

	Number of Students	Percentage
Difficulty differentiating between British English and American English	101	73.7%
Difficulty differentiating between Spoken English and Written English	66	48.2%
Difficulty differentiating between academic and non-academic writing	46	33.6%

73.3% students faced difficulty in differentiating between British English and American English. The possible explanation is the students were not able to differentiate between British English spelling and American English spelling. For example, labor and color (American English) vs. labour and colour (British English). This confusion may result in a mixture of British English and American English spelling in students' written assignments.

Vocabulary

Table 6
Vocabulary

	Number of Students	Percentage
Difficulty in finding words	113	82.5%
Understanding difficult words when reading	85	62.0%

82.5 % students faced difficulty in finding the right words to say what they meant. This was because these students come from Malay medium schools or Chinese medium schools and did not use English often. In other words, these students lacked exposure to the target language. This means “that students are less interested in reading English materials that are found in abundance in Malaysia, lack of active listening activities, and very little involvement in producing the language” (Sahirah Marzuki & Zaidah Zainal, 2007, p. 43). Furthermore, they usually communicated in their mother tongue or in Mandarin with their friends instead of in English. Therefore, their English vocabulary was underdeveloped and they faced problems finding English words to express themselves. In addition, they usually relied on their teachers for the meaning of words during school days instead of looking for the meaning of particular words or vocabulary in the dictionary. Such dependency on the teacher may lead to a lack of motivation in taking charge of their own learning.

CONCLUSION

This study has identified the types of writing difficulties faced by the students in Politeknik Kuching Sarawak. The findings showed that the students faced major difficulties in completing writing tasks that required creativity and/or critical thinking. They also faced problems in proofreading and writing grammatical sentences. It was also found that students often thought in their first language and translated their thoughts into English when writing assignments. Other difficulties encountered by the students were not being able to decide on the correct tenses and differentiating between British English and American English. Some also encountered difficulty in finding suitable words to say what they meant.

RECOMMENDATION

Students' writing difficulties can be improved by encouraging students to think in English when writing their assignments in English. Extensive reading would help them do this. Lecturers could encourage the students to cultivate the reading habit by reading more non-fiction books or texts on familiar and interesting topics. By reading a lot, students would have the chance to encounter new words and new ways to formulate sentences, and obtain more ideas on how to use English in their writings. Lecturers could also encourage students to practice writing. Students could write in different styles: a blog, a humorous post, or keep a daily journal. This may improve their language proficiency and enhance their English vocabulary.

As this study only investigated writing difficulties, it is also recommended that future studies look at other difficulties involving listening, speaking and reading skills, such as difficulties in note-taking, in giving presentations and in reading for information. Identifying students' weaknesses in these skills could provide vital input in improving teaching methods in order to optimize learning.

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