

THE EFFECTS OF CONTENT ON ESL STUDENTS' TERTIARY LEVEL WRITING

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Abstract

Learning and developing writing skills are considered a difficult task which makes the ability to write well even harder to be mastered. Previous researches done on students' writing focused more on theories, attitudes, feedbacks and errors (Myles, 2002; Noriah et. al., 2008). Studies on a factor that influence students' writing (the effects of content) is still relatively scarce in research writing. Thus, the case study investigated on ways this factor affected students' performance in writing English as a second language. Two types of instruments: narrative responses and semi-structured interview were used in the study. The findings indicated that content affected students' poor performance in writing. The data analysis from student respondents' showed that these students faced problems in writing but unable to identify the variables that affected them. The results from the lecturers' interview confirmed of the existence of that effect of content on students' writing. From the previous findings, the researcher then managed to identify how content influenced students' writing in determination to guide instructors with better teaching in helping students become excellent writers. In conclusion, students still cannot escape from being influenced by their content problems when composing thus leading to poor performance in their writing.

Keyword: content, ESL students' writing, writing skills, effects

1. Introduction

In the domain of second language (L2) learning, writing is considered to be a complex process due to its difficulty in learning and developing the writing skills. In this so-called tedious process, it has been found that students encounter plenty of effects that can influence their writing (Midget et. al., 2007; Noriah et. al., 2008; Schlig, 2009).

It is known that environments and experience play their parts in writing and these happen when students learn and practice their writing skills (Myles, 2002). There are definitely differences in the maturity of writing abilities when compared with students who are in the correct writing environments and those who are not, also the same goes with students who have experience in writing and those who do not. However, environment and experience are only a small disturbance in students' writing because Myles (2002) stresses that when it comes to academic writing, student writers should have a strong awareness when dealing with

the process of writing (composing, developing and analyzing ideas). This means that students should know more of the specific effects that may influence their writing which is content. This is especially applied to L2 students who have to acquire proficiency using the English language along with the writing processes, skills and techniques when comparing to students who are writing in their first language (L1). For example, going back to the environment scenario where students are asked to write in English and they are in their L1 setting. No doubt that when content is concerned, students with a lot of experience would be able to provide sufficient amount of ideas in their writing, especially for those who like to read, watch movies or involve themselves in any sort of way with the English language. Compared to those who do not possess much experience dealing with the language, figuring out ideas for writing is a setback to them making content a factor that could influence their writing. Since English is not these students' L1, the skills do not come naturally to them and therefore would affect them when writing, but with much practice, it would not be a problem for the students to be able to provide a well written composition.

Thus, in order to understand more of the intricate factors concerning students' writing proficiency, the present study centers on the effects of content on university students' writing, aims to investigate qualitatively how the factor affects or influences their writing, and to find out whether lecturers are able to identify this same situation which is considered one of the crucial stages in student's education.

2. Content and Writing

In English, the ability to make use of the comprehensible input is known as a very crucial factor in the teaching and learning of English as a second language and this has been specified by the current research in second language (L2) writing (Krashen & Biber, 1988). By teaching content in English is a good way to present students the comprehensible input. Furthermore, there are strategies and methods used by the L2 learners to better understand the learning of the content. It has been confirmed by a research done by Krashen & Biber (1988) that if such techniques and strategies are used by students during class time, it requires a lot of English knowledge and content learning as well. Also, it has been identified that an efficient learning of writing in the English language can be achieved when writing is not treated as the object, instead as the medium of instruction (Lambert & Tucker, 1972; Campbell et. al., 1985).

Since before, the entire education of a child is every teacher's equal responsibility and this is the basic beliefs of written language and the integration of content (Short, 1991). The combination between content and written language includes the integration of the material about content into the writing classes in addition to the variation of materials and written language with result to offer the comprehensible input to L2 students in their classes where the learning of content is involved. The first one is usually known as "language-sensitive content instruction" (Krashen & Biber, 1988). Then, there is an approach called integrated approach where it link the gap between languages and content which often been separated in

writing classes. By utilizing an integrated approach, L2 students can approach academic writing easier.

With the approach, it raises L2 students' understanding of the subject matter which later brings them to success in their academic (Short, 1991). Simultaneously, the English language proficiency levels of L2 students are increased.

Furthermore, the existing writing curricula are designed to teach writing as a separate subject typically focusing on fixing sentence level grammar problems (Noriah et. al., 2008). They neglect to link writing instruction with authentic content area writing assignments that L2 students encounter in their real studies. Such neglect ignores calls for integrated teaching of language, subject matter content, and higher order thinking skills by the National Research Council (NRC) (1999a), leaving L2 students incapable of accomplishing writing tasks required by their respective disciplines, even after taking several writing courses in the universities or colleges that they attend to. Such phenomena not only cause frustrations and despair among L2 students, and their teachers/lecturers, but also jeopardize the educational agenda. Therefore, students should have classes where writing involves the teaching of content and language to socialize L2 students in context (Ochs, 1989). That is, the curriculum teaches all language skills including writing and subject-matter content simultaneously in an authentic context.

A paper written by Beckett & Gonzalez (2004) mentions that there is much needed information on writing curriculum which shared the designed from sound socio-cultural (Vygotsy, 1971) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1994) perspectives. This second language instructional approach has the objective of using a writing instruction following a language socialization model that incorporates learning plans and cognitive processes with the subject matter across the content areas. Being engaged in this active and problem-solving based approach, L2 learners can develop genuine communicative skills in English through the use of cognitive and emotional or affective strategies in a socioculturally suitable manner and learn rhetorically and lexico-pragmatically appropriate writing skills (Raimes, 1983). This integrative curriculum also encourages L2 students to expand their higher level critical thinking skills by becoming bilingual and bicognitive (i.e., thinking in both languages using both languages when learning). As such, the paper by Beckett & Gonzalez (2004) described of a national need for high quality curricula based on theory and research knowledge.

3. Methodology

Qualitative methods of two instruments were used in this study which was narrative responses and an interview. Two groups of subjects (a group of third semester Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Johor students and a group of its lecturers) were then selected for this study. There were two semi-structured questionnaires Set A (for narrative responses - students) and Set B (for interview - lecturers). After the narrative responses were gathered, they were labeled M1, M2 and M3 for the male students and F1, F2 and F3 for the female students. Then, lecturers' interviews were transcribed and labeled as L1 and L2. Next, the researcher analyzed the data based on these two research questions: i) How do content influence students' writing (students' point of view)? ii) How do content influence students' writing (lecturers' point of view)? Both responses were constantly compared, contrasted and categorized.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Effects of Content on Writing from Student Respondents

The respondents were first asked about the way they find ideas for the content of their writing. The findings of the study indicated that none of the answers reflected the teaching or learning from the teachers or instructors of the writing class. Five out of six student respondents mentioned that they found ideas for their writing through reading from books or articles relating to the topic asked. The followings described the way they found the ideas as stated by Student M1, Student M3, Student F3, Student F2, and Student F1:

By reading many books that lot of information regarding that I ask to write about. (Student M1)

I usually do some research on the Net and then try to find books or articles relating to the subject. (Student M3)

I usually find ideas through some article that I had read... (Student F3)

It comes from the fact or anything that I have read, watched or seen... (Student F2)

Beside that, I find it on what I have looking or reading something. (Student F1)

Interestingly enough, all three female student respondents mentioned "experience" as their source of ideas when writing. This showed that these student respondents were able to retrieve information according to the specific context and follow the writing instruction successfully (Beckett et. al., 2004). However, the male student respondents still lack of strategies in ways for them to obtain information for their writing. One of the student respondent (Student M2) even answered, "I think and understand the content given carefully" which showed that either the student was able to find ideas easily or he just misunderstood the question given. Even so, finding ways to find the ideas for the content of students' writing did not really confirm that it influenced poor performance in writing thus the best way to find out was by interpreting their answers for the next two questions found in the narrative responses. Before moving on to the next question, Table 1 provides the summary of the ways these student respondents attained their ideas when

writing.

Student Respondent	Source of ideas for content		
	Teachers/instructors	Reading	Experience
M1	-	●	-
M2	-	-	-
M3	-	●	-
F1	-	●	●
F2	-	●	●
F3	-	●	●

Table 1: Summary of Students' Reported Sources of Ideas for Content Writing

Second, the next two questions required the student respondents to reflect whether they encountered difficulty in finding ideas for their essay and if so what were the topics that they found hard to write about. The findings showed that most of the student respondents had trouble finding the ideas due to that certain topics that they did not have interest in. Student F3 claimed that she had problem finding ideas *"because in certain type of question in the essay, I don't really usual to it or I had never or less focus in that topic or issues"* and Student M2 said *"sometimes when I get stuck on my head, it is very difficult to find ideas when I could not understand the question or content well"* whilst Student M3 concurred *"depends on the topic I'm writing about. If it is a general topic then I won't have any difficulty"*. And the topics that these student respondents found trouble looking for ideas mostly on topics that were based on facts like *history, statistics, origins, society, someone's bibliography* and also *politics*.

Third, the findings on student narratives also indicated that four out of six students stated that not having enough content/ideas in writing would lead to lower marks. To them, content was part of writing skills that students had to acquire in order to gain good results in their compositions. Below are the opinions of Student M3, Student M1, Student F3, and Student F1 on how not having enough content affected the marks of their essays:

Yes. What I found out that when writers don't have sufficient ideas, they'll write more on the supporting details. But the details given mostly is not related to the ideas, so the ideas is not flashed out properly, leading to lower marks. (Student M3)

Yes, because the essay that lack of ideas make the reader become boring. So that, lower marks will be given. (Student M1)

Yes because it lead to weak elaboration and examples in the essay. (Student F3)

Yes. Because without content or ideas the essay is not complete. It is one of the way to have an effective essay. (Student F1)

Unfortunately, two of the six student respondents believed that content only did not make the essay bad because “*even the ideas or content is not enough, but the good supporting details with a good language and the uses of ‘bombastic’ word may be considered in giving marks*” (Student M2) and “*sometimes our grammar mistakes are less, but our ideas are great so, there will be no lower marks*” (Student F2). When trying to interpret the answers given by the two student respondents, it showed that these students understood that language and content goes hand in hand when it comes to giving marks for students’ composition. This was what Ochs (1989) tried to apply when it comes to learning how to write. However, content was considered a crucial part in any writing activity therefore it confirmed that content did influence students’ poor performance in writing particularly if they were not able to provide sufficient ideas to the topic mentioned. Students’ opinions on whether not having enough content would lead to lower marks are summarized in Table 2.

Student Respondent	Answer	
	Yes	No
M1	Lack of ideas – boring	
M2		Good supporting details with good language and the use of ‘bombastic’ word are also considered in giving marks
M3	Insufficient ideas – write more content supporting details	
F1	The essay is not complete	
F2		Grammar mistakes are less, but ideas are great – no lower marks
F3	Weak elaboration and examples	

Table 2: Summary of Students’ Opinions on Not Having Enough Content

Furthermore, the findings also revealed that all of the student respondents felt very at ease if the instructor gave them the freedom to choose their own topic when writing an essay because they knew that there was not a single problem for them to provide enough ideas for their writing. As what Student M2 claimed, “*Feels good because I can choose a topic that I can give out a lot of ideas and can elaborate it well*” and Student M1 professed, “*Feel like I am in heaven, because I free to choose any kind of topic and avoid me from getting hard topic to write about.*” Because the input that the students attained was clear enough for them to compose in their writing, it became trouble-free for them to accomplish the task given (Krashen &

Biber, 1988).

Also, to verified students' answers, findings from Section E was analyzed and the answers from three student respondents' on the factor that badly influenced them when dealing with writing proficiency was content. The followings revealed Student M3, Student M1, and Student F3's narratives on this question:

*Q1: It will be flashing out my **ideas** properly and choosing the correct words to use. (Student M3)*

*Q2: I'll go with **content**. I won't and can't write without good contents. (Student M3)*

*Q1: **Ideas** and grammar. (Student M1)*

*Q2: **Content**. (Student M1)*

*Q1: My primary concern is having good **ideas and supporting details** then comes the grammar. (Student F3)*

*Q2: Of course, **content**. (Student F3)*

4.2 Effects of Content on Writing from Lecturer Respondents

On the whole, content played a significant role in any writing and in this case it could affect students' performance in writing. Even so, it had been confirmed by the two lecturer respondents who were also involved in this study. They claimed that:

Their writing lacks maturity of thought where content is concerned. Although they are tertiary students, they sometimes forget to organize their ideas unless reminded. (Lecturer L1)

They perceive writing as difficult – both in language and content, thus other problems come in; ... contents or ideas development. (Lecturer L2)

Again, language and content were found to be inter-related in writing. When there was the mention of content, the word language would come into picture as well. However, it was unfortunate that the answers presented in lecturer respondents' interview towards the effect of content on students' writing were not elaborated much. Therefore, the findings only revealed that content did affect students' writing because it was one of the problems being identified by lecturers when assessing students' writing.

The variables involved with content mentioned by student respondents and lecturer respondents that affected students' performance in writing are summarized in Table 3.

Respondent	Variables
Students (M1, M2, M3, F1, F2, F3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● lack in source of ideas to begin writing ● topics that they found hard to write about – mostly those related with facts ● not having enough ideas/content in writing – led to lower marks in content
Lecturers (L1, L2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● lacks maturity of thought where content is

	concerned <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● not able to organize ideas well ● contents or ideas development
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Table 3: Summary of Variables Involved with Content

4. Conclusion

Poor writing performance is a growing concern of both educators and students as the notion of such ability may jeopardize students' future career opportunities. Many factors have been attributed as a cause of students' inability to perform well in their writing without them knowing it specifically. Indeed, one factor specifically is content that influenced students' capability to present a good piece of writing. Nevertheless, some good was found as claimed by the student writers themselves. Even though, the lecturers seemed to think otherwise, their opinions mattered in finding out how these factors influenced students' writing. Furthermore, students and lecturers agreed that content was a part of a big influence that led to bad results in essay writing activity and both parties should cohesively work together in rectifying the problems in order to gain better outcomes in students' composition. In fact, individual approaches should be entailed to curb the lack of confidence students had due to this effect. L2 students always welcome feedbacks either from lecturers or peers because they know that learning to write in English is not a matter of submitting a five-paragraph essay on time as taught by their lecturers. In addressing the influence of content issue in writing, focuses often concentrate on students. Therefore, lecturers' perspective on the issue should also be explored particularly on the assistance and support such as feedbacks, individual attention, and regular check on writing processes which they definitely require in dealing with negative influence on the writing of students.

Brief biography

Fazdilah Md Kassim is a language lecturer in MARA University of Technology (Johor) Malaysia for 7 years now. She has written several papers ranging from adult education to teaching English as a Second language (ESL). She has also presented in several international conferences and her last conference was at 2nd International Conference on Languages UPALS ICL 2013. Her areas of interests include ESL, TESL, linguistics and sociolinguistics.

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