

EXPLORING AFFECT IN ESL WRITING BEHAVIOUR

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ABSTRACT

Affect in writing is linked to knowledge bases, attitudes, apprehension, strategy use, and self-efficacy which together shape a writer's behaviour. These elements of affect have been recognized as essential ingredients in the development of effective writing. Hence, understanding the workings of affect within a writing discourse model contributes to the comprehensiveness of ESL writing theory that can be translated into practice. Opinions, preferences and evaluations are manifestations of affect. The discussion in this paper focuses on important aspects of affect that impinge on ESL writing behaviour and these aspects, which are multi-faceted, and encompass linguistic, socio-cultural and cognitive features.

Introduction

ESL writing research has postulated that applied linguistics has been the academic discipline that gives most attention to students' writing needs and problems (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). The research effort into the needs and problems of ESL writers, however, is still considered to be in its infancy. In fact, research on writing in a second language context in countries other than the USA, Australia, Canada and the UK is minimal. Further, most academic articles which appeared prior to 1980 centred on techniques for teaching writing rather than explaining the nature of writing ability, of which writing behaviour is a constituent element.

When looking at translating writing theory into practice, it is difficult to identify a single 'overarching' linguistic perspective that can be applied. In fact, applications must be drawn from a multitude of disciplines such as psychology, applied linguistics, communication and rhetoric. In this respect, Flower (1994) argues that it is impossible to isolate a social process from the minds that carry out the act of writing. On a broader basis, Witte (1992) suggests that a comprehensive theory of language could incorporate both psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic constructs. The 1996 Hayes writing model (refer to Figure 1 below) describes writing as having two major parts: 1) the task environment and, 2) the individual. The task is further subdivided into two aspects, which are the social and the physical.

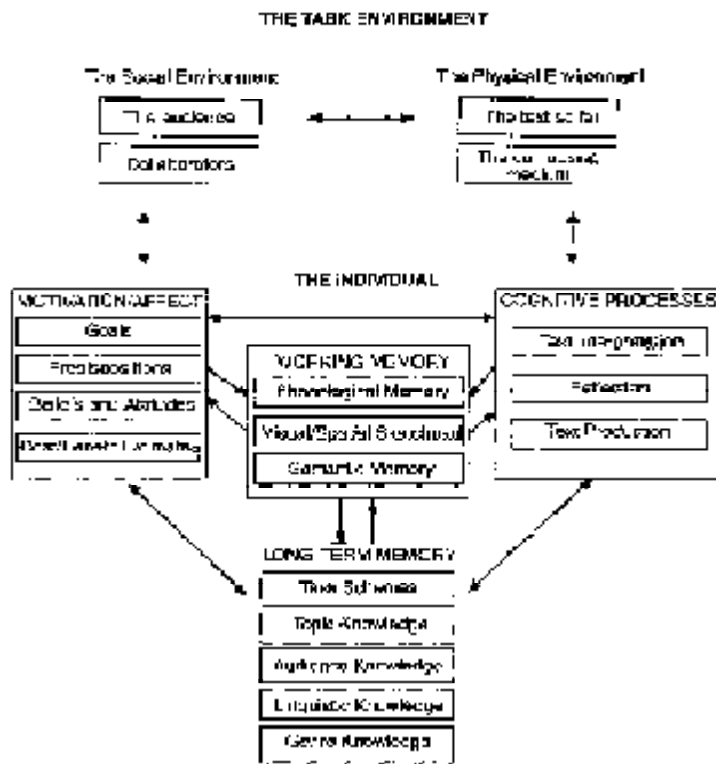


Figure 1: The Hayes (1996) Model (in Weigle, 2002:26)

According to Hayes (1996), the central focus in writing is on the individual rather than on the task environment. Influencing the individual are motivation and affect which include knowledge bases, attitudes, beliefs, strategy use and apprehension in writing. This is further influenced by long term memory with its accompanying constituent composites.

The Hayes model is significant in providing a comprehensive description of factors that influence writing. Each aspectual feature of the Hayes model naturally deserves attention in its own right. Other writing models have also exerted their

influence on writing such as those by Flower and Hayes (1980), Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and Grabe and Kaplan (1996). The fundamentals in these models were derived, in the main, from language models proposed by Hymes (1972), Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990). They share a commonality of dividing language knowledge into linguistic knowledge, discourse knowledge and socio-linguistic knowledge.

Affect is defined by Brand (quoted in Loudermilk, 1998:7) as the “why” of writing, “writers’ emotional processes and motivation,” as opposed to the “what” of writing, the product and the “how” of writing. It is further linked to self efficacy which Bandura (1993: 120) explains to encompass “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required in managing prospective situations” (including writing). In addressing affect, Bandura (1986) considers self-reflection as a form of evaluation that could effectively change learning behaviour. This belief system will influence performance. According to him, learners with low efficacy or confidence may feel that the tasks they encounter are more difficult than they really are, while those with more confidence may feel secure in reaching their goals. These confidence indicators could be regarded as strong determinants or predictors of ESL learners’ level of educational attainment. Bandura reiterates that “beliefs of personal efficacy constitute the key factor of human agency.” Self-efficacy or confidence level is influential in explaining why people’s ability may differ even when they have similar knowledge and skills.

The significance of affect in writing is evidenced in the work by Dweck (1986) and Palmquist and Young (1992). They found that students who believe writing is an innate ability give up more easily on improving or developing their writing compared to students who believe that success is due to effort. Similarly, this discussion is concerned with affect that impinges on writing behaviour.

This chapter holds the perspective that internal resources of the writer must be activated in order to produce the desired writing outcomes. The practice of writing demands the engagement of internal resources with the writing task. This engagement goes beyond these resources to enter into the act of writing as a heuristic process for the discovery of new meaning. Thus, in attempting to understand writing as a social act, it is believed that the act of writing is embedded in an array of wider social and cognitive processes.

A language learner brings to the classroom a complex array of experience and knowledge as he learns a new language (Reid, 1993). This includes differing abilities, skills, and self-belief systems acquired through the first language. In the ESL classroom, learners encounter a new language system in which they have to learn a whole new set of beliefs and practices. The learning may be accompanied by the

frustration of having to meet new and unfamiliar demands. In a study by Leki (1992), students learning an ESL skill expressed their disappointment in having to focus on finding the correct word forms and word order in English. They were also plagued by limited vocabulary, difficulties in understanding word connotation and depth of meaning. There appeared to be a mismatch between sense of writing in their first language and that of the second. They also expressed difficulties in meeting deadlines for their writing assignments as well as reaching a satisfactory level in the quality of the final written product. All this generates special problems and trouble spots. It could be concluded that another difficulty that students face is anxiety, which could exert extraordinary pressure as they learn a new language skill. Resulting from anxiety may be a host of other writing problems such as the tendency to avoid writing tasks, low productivity, dislike or fear towards writing (Daly and Miller, 1975; Scott and Rockwell, 1997). Researching students' anxiety on writing, Marney (1990) identified several 'panic' points. Among them were expectation of failure, limited information-gathering skills, limited organisational skills, limited development skills, fear of errors and fear of evaluation. Other researchers such as Scovel (1991), Horwitz, *et al.* (1991), and Krashen (1984) have also made a similar link between affect (in the form of anxiety) and its influence on language performance.

McDonald (2000) argues for the integration of teaching writing as an art, and also as a process that needs to be nurtured. Teaching writing as an art will provide writers with practical knowledge and strategy use to guide their writing. On the other hand, nurturing the natural processes would entail engendering confidence and independence, factors that are also essential ingredients in the development of effective writing behaviour. The natural processes also highlight the importance of having a relevant attitude and cognitive style. The learning world, in fact, comprises skills at the legeric level that entail mastery of the rhetorical system, which includes knowledge of the discourse and its pragmatics. These skills are, however, said to be little understood by researchers and teachers though they ultimately reflect the true ability of what can be acquired in the learning process (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). Students who are equipped with the appropriate legeric skills can be expected to be more successful. Thus, in understanding writing success or the lack of it, there would be a need to address not only the intellectual needs of the ESL learners but also their affect, which is often neglected.

Linking Affect to Writing Behaviour

What is meant by writing behaviour? The reasons for writing are so varied that there is no single answer to the question. Writing has close connections to academic and professional success. As ESL students advance from school to university, it becomes clear that greater demands are made on writing effectively. In the university, students

are increasingly immersed in reflection and cognitive processing, and writing becomes an indicator of the rigours of critical thinking. However, in an ESL situation, the ESL learners come with a myriad of backgrounds, experiences and needs. In Malaysia, the types of ESL writing students are engaged in are spelt out in the school curriculum. They range from reproducing information, arranging or reorganising information, and producing writing, which deals with invention and creation of new ideas. This invention and creation of new ideas is considered the most demanding of the range of skills in writing.

The ESL writing purposes identified in Vahapassi's (1982) writing discourse model are writing for survival, enhancement, survival in the workplace, advanced subject matter such as obtaining a degree, and for educational and job enhancement. The writing needs are reported as having to satisfy the agenda in the cultivation of academic school writing skills, immediate literacy skills, and academic "educated" language skills (Bernhardt, 1991). It is clear that the ESL writer goes through a spectrum of writing experiences as dictated by various purposes and needs. The writing experiences build upon each other and as the writers enter university, they are expected to be ready to write and display academic "educated" language skills in relation to the learning of advanced subject matter.

To help define the demands made on ESL writing through an understanding of the link between writing processes and attitudes which could contribute to the comprehensiveness of writing theory for translation into practice, a questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 108 ESL student writers. They were enrolled in a writing course in the Bachelor of Arts (English) and Bachelor of Education (TESL) programmes at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

The questionnaire which was self-constructed and piloted, comprised five parts. Part I consisted of questions related to the respondents' background, such as age, race, mother tongue and the perception of the importance of writing as a language skill. This was followed by Part II, which assessed the students' knowledge bases inclusive of the nature of topic sentences and thesis statements. Part III assessed their attitudes toward the English language as a whole. Part IV investigated the cognitive readiness for the process of writing. Finally, Part V of the questionnaire focused on the strategies and skills of writing. Responses to this questionnaire provided insights into the link between affect and writing behaviour.

The sections below explicate ESL writers' behaviour, which is evidenced by insights from the questionnaire survey (henceforth, referred to as the UPM study). The questions in the survey were formed on the basis that the writers' behaviour had been moulded primarily from a set agenda in the form of the school curriculum. The behaviour is manifested through attitude towards the English language, knowledge bases, demands made on cognitive processes, and strategy use as a result of prior experience.

Attitude Towards English

Attitude towards the language may be linked to writing behaviour (Chan, *et al.*, 2003). Most ESL writers (88%) perceived English to be a beautiful language to learn and a worthwhile language to speak and write (92%). Being able to write in English was considered very important and almost at par with speaking. They considered English to be an important language to get ahead in the world, and saw English as a language that is important for expressing one's opinion (83%). Most (90%) also agreed that English is a progressive language and it need not be used only by those who were educated abroad. The writers realised the importance of empowering themselves with English language skills. English was not regarded as a colonial language. However, sentiments appeared to be strong with regard to the notion that English was very much a borrowed language, with many of the ESL writers (37%) expressing a sense of lack of ownership. The ESL writers' attitude toward English is positive though the sense of lack of ownership may hamper the development of language competence, which invariably includes writing ability.

Knowledge Bases: Prior Writing Practice and Experience

From the studies that have been conducted to investigate affect (Daly and Miller, 1975; Scott and Rockwell, 1997), it has been found that the amount of writing practice ESL writers had during their school days could be a determining factor of writing behaviour. From the UPM study, substantial writing practice was not evident (35%), suggesting that writing experience had been rather deficient as a prior experience. Drafting and redrafting were generally not well regarded with writers complaining when multiple drafting was made necessary. The ESL writers (68%) generally claimed that teachers had not paid too much attention to the importance of revising drafts indicating that serious drafting had not received much emphasis in school.

The ESL writers expressed that feedback was useful and meaningful, though they felt that they had received minimal feedback on their writing (55%). They claimed that their writing had not been regarded highly by their teachers, and their compositions were generally graded as low to average in quality (63%). The feeling of incompetence in writing ability is extended to the tertiary level. The writers were least secure in writing compared to the other language skills and writing was a skill that they liked least. The writers generally also had reservations about sharing their work with others.

Another aspect connected to knowledge bases is the perception of the ability to write coherent paragraphs. The ESL writers confirmed having learnt about paragraph writing in school. However, they reported that they had not learned it well (33%). As

such, the move towards acquiring academic “educated” language skills in the university would not begin on a firm footing. Having to write effectively was not emphasised in school (59%) and the ESL writers deemed writing as drudgery, failing to realise the long-term benefits of cultivating efficient writing skills.

The usual three divisions of composition writing are characterised by 1) the introduction, 2) the body, and 3) the conclusion. Teachers were said to have explained the writing of compositions according to these demarcations. However, the ESL writers believed that the conventions of how to write compositions in light of these demarcations had not been entrenched in their knowledge base (40%). They claimed to know what a topic sentence was before entering the university, and were able to elaborate on topic sentences with supporting details. However, the concept of a thesis statement was considered alien and the term did not seem to be frequently used in school (78%). Little attention, if any, was placed on the identification of this important element in ESL composition writing in the classroom.

The ESL writers felt that teachers did not help to generate a sense of commitment in writing, and neither did they create a sense of involvement and motivation to write well. They agreed that writing a composition might require several days of preparation; however, many (22%) resorted to writing a composition only one day before it was due. The immersion in the writing process, giving time for ideas to grow and be nurtured had yet to be entrenched as an operational parameter in writing behaviour.

Cognitive Readiness in the Process of Writing

Different aspects related to the ESL writer’s cognitive readiness were also explored. One aspect dealt with the state of nervousness. The ESL writers (55%) stated that they were nervous and worried when they had to write, agreeing on the whole (69%) to the statement in the questionnaire, “I know what I want to say, but I just can’t get it out on paper” which characterised this nervousness. However, it was encouraging to note that the students were positive in their desire to become better writers. They believed that writing well was usually not the result of an inherent talent. In other words, being able to write well was hardly regarded as a gift (72%). They said that putting ideas on paper could be embarrassing because of frequent grammatical and spelling mistakes. They appeared to be overly concerned about accuracy. As for sharing the writing with others, they expressed their lack of confidence to do so. Many (75%) confirmed that writing is a complex activity involving the experience of discovery but others (35%) did not see writing as a recursive process. About half of the ESL writers (43%) also did not relate to writing as a useful problem-solving activity.

Strategy Use in the Writing Process

In the process of writing, students are encouraged to go through the pre-writing stage, which entails idea generation and the cultivation of confidence for the writing task. In the UPM study, the ESL writers (54%) showed writing readiness indicating that they were rather confident when beginning a writing task. This is encouraging, as readiness to write dispels to some extent the inhibitions a writer may face. Therefore, the phenomenon of writer's block is not a dominant characteristic of ESL writers entering university. Spending time on pre-writing activities such as planning and brainstorming were seen to be important. ESL writers did not dismiss the relevance of the pre-writing process (96%).

In generating ideas, the ESL writers (66%) were in favour of using the *wh*-question technique. This involves using *wh*-questions in a journalistic approach to generate ideas. The clustering technique, in particular mind mapping, was favoured (62%). The most preferred strategy for generating ideas, however, was the use of a detailed outline as a guide (79%). This is claimed to be most often used and emphasized in the teaching of ESL writing in school. Other approaches such as free-writing took a back seat. However, at the tertiary level, students should be encouraged to use less structured methods to further encourage creativity in writing. Tertiary composition writing often emphasises independence in the generation of students' own ideas and topics prior to arriving at the final draft. This would free them from the dependence on instructor-guided writing that they have been used to in school. An exercise in 'creativity' in expository writing is seen as essential to the development of critical thinking and self-directed learning – both of which are very much emphasised in tertiary education.

Many of the ESL writers (32%) confirmed the concern for accuracy in writing, giving importance to the correction of errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation. They held the view that writing involved the use of two simultaneous strategies: strategies that would promote the germination of ideas and those that help to verify accuracy and correctness. Process writing advocates that accuracy should not be fore-fronted. However, the experience of the ESL writers in the UPM study showed that the traditional approach is still adopted by them. It appears to be difficult to change mind-sets toward the perspective that the concern for accuracy and correctness should be subservient to that of creativity. A large number of the ESL writers were found to be not too focused on the need to orient their work towards an audience. Focusing on the reader was considered unnecessary (46%). The ESL writers appeared to be inward looking; being writer-focused rather than reader-focused.

As a strategy in writing development, peer responses were welcomed (84%). Peer responses are considered to be valuable feedback in the process of writing. The ESL writers expressed reservation about sharing their work with others but were not totally adverse to this strategy, indicating the potential for collaborative and cooperative explorations in a writing environment. As for the editing and revising process in composition writing, the ESL writers (66%) believed that they were merely expected to correct their spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes. Obviously, they were not very clear about what editing and revision entail, that is, they did not realise that other details such as attention to organisation and development of ideas at the revising stage could contribute to the writing of a good composition.

Conclusion

Writing is undoubtedly a complex activity. Understanding the complexities would serve to validate ESL classroom practice and effect innovation. Without information obtained from a systematic evaluation, it would be difficult to plan for something better that could bring about desirable improvements. A systematic investigation into affect could contribute to the direction of how affect may be weaved meaningfully into theory and pedagogy in such a way that each will build and inform the other.

Writing behaviour is generally seen as a composite whole. It needs to be reiterated that affect is but one of the many essential facets that function simultaneously, recursively and/or in a linear fashion in the process of composing. A keen awareness of the demands of writing is presently not part of the ESL writer's behaviour. The ESL writers often failed to specify the features and benefits that accompany the act of writing coherently. In spite of the many years of exposure to writing at school, the writers had yet to grasp the many fundamentals that characterize good writing behaviour.

From the study conducted at UPM, it can be concluded that writing had been a neglected skill. The writing ability of the ESL writers at the tertiary level, which is seen to prepare students for the workplace, has been found to be mediocre. This translates into a lack of a sound platform for the development of tertiary students' writing ability to reflect the use of academic "educated" language skills.

Linked to the impact of affect, the aspect of useful feedback from teachers to writing appeared lacking. The ESL writers and teachers had not shown a sense of commitment towards writing development. This points to the need for the establishment of a strong base structure for the cultivation of writing skills at the elementary and secondary levels in order to prepare ESL writers to meet the demands of tertiary writing.

The knowledge base with regard to writing appeared weak. This also places a burden on tertiary writing instruction. Therefore, before ESL writers exit the school system to enter the tertiary level, much more is required if a broader knowledge base conducive to good writing performance is to be established. Appropriate learning must be implemented and the preparation of materials must be handled more effectively in accordance with ESL writers' prior experiences. Motivation, attitude and training should play important roles in shaping writing behaviour.

Writing is a social act in which the writer imposes his or her beliefs and fears. Affect is related to beliefs and emotions that govern the cognitive as writing is an intellectual activity operating in an emotional environment. Understanding the workings of affect within a writing discourse model would enable the writer to interact with the task environment more efficiently and holistically.

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