AN ESL WRITING COURSE: UNRAVELLING STUDENTS' NEEDS AND CONCERNS

Zuraidah Ali
Institute of Liberal Studies, Universiti Tenaga Nasional

Melor Md Yunus
Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a study on a university writing course exploring what our students think about writing. The study attempted to obtain university students' reaction and perceptions regarding the importance of being interactive or active in the writing process. It also highlights the needs of students, their opinions on writing and also their expectation of the writing course. The implications of the study are discussed and several recommendations with regard to a university writing course are made.

Introduction

The transition from school to university can mean many things to students. Among others is the need to improve their writing skills to equip themselves for undergraduate courses as well as for examinations, without really abandoning their passion and personal preferences for certain writing modes and genres. As for the teacher, a new student in a new writing class can bring fresh insights and motivation. With these in mind, teachers aim for the best tailored writing course to offer to undergraduate students. However, with such variety in the way courses are run around the world, there is no single model which is ideal for any particular group of students. There can be overlapping and conflicting viewpoints as to the tasks teachers as well as students are expected to perform in order to produce good writers and writing.

Blue (1988) and Jordan (1997) suggest that because demand is so great among students of various courses and backgrounds, it becomes necessary to study the writing needs of the students in designing a writing course. Silva (1990) talks about preparing students for writing acceptable genres for the host academic institution. Researchers have also discussed the necessity to improve students' writing for cultural adjustment in university. O'Brien (1988) underlines the significance of adequate practice in writing class to equip students with a natural flair for writing in examinations.

In the case of University Kebangsaan Malaysia, it is perhaps useful to get students' feedback regarding the writing course that is offered thus suggesting ways

to re-examine the syllabus and approach. The aim of this paper, then, is to explore and understand students' needs regarding writing. It is a document of students' perceptions, expectations and feedback of a writing course implemented in UKM.

Literature Review

Most writing courses attempting to help students develop language skills, feature students from diverse content areas as well as specializations (Blue, 1988). In such a situation, it is important to develop a course design that can cater to the needs of students from various backgrounds. The common obstacle would then be to work with a particular group of students who perceive the writing course as partially relevant especially because they tend to view the "subject specialization in very narrow terms" (Blue, 1988:95); or they actually have their own perception and expectation of a writing class.

According to Jordan (1997), writing is so essential to students that it is not surprising that we have many approaches and types of practice to choose from and implement. He suggests four factors that should be considered in outlining a writing course. They are namely an underlying approach, the starting point of the students, the purpose and the type of writing or personal preference. With adequate research in any of these determining factors; the course can help to fulfil the needs of more than half, if not all, of the candidates who enrol for writing courses.

How much will students benefit from a writing course if course designers acknowledge what they need to learn in a writing class and thus improve their writing course from time to time? In consideration of students' needs,
O'Brien (1988) compared writing styles of native-speaking psychology undergraduates in coursework essays and examinations. Her preliminary findings showed that under examination conditions, the students' writing deteriorated in quality due to anxiety in two aspects: organization and style. It is suggested that examination writing shows a close "relationship to the writer's own thought processes" (O'Brien, 1988:69), a situation where he can only refer to his "own thoughts and memories" (O'Brien, 1988: 69). In other words, if it has become a habit to write well, with adequate practice in organization and style in their everyday and classroom writing, it will be reflected in the examination script as the end product.

Methodology

This study employed a survey design in order to measure perceptions and expectations of students pertaining to ESL writing. For the purpose of the study, 48 third year students from different disciplines were involved. These students were those registered for the Writing Skills course. This study was conducted using the

survey format. To elicit data for the study, the students had to respond to three major sections: 1) perception 2) expectation 3) feedback. Items for perception asked about respondents' perception towards writing, the importance of writing, their weaknesses in writing, as well as attitude towards writing. Items on respondents' expectation on an ESL Writing course are designed to elicit respondents' expectation of the role of teachers and peers in the writing process. Items on feedback asked about respondents' feedback on several areas namely writing genre according to individual preference, their reaction toward group projects, and the importance of writing class in preparing for examinations. The questionnaire came in two forms: items on perception, expectation and feedback were measured by a three-point scale yes-neutral-no. for consistency of response. Responses to these constructs were also extracted through open-ended questions to enable students the freedom to give opinions and feedback. The instrument was partially adapted from Hedge (1988). She developed a questionnaire to be used in class to elicit students' perception and expectation of their writing.

Findings

Students' Perception towards Writing
In general, our survey found that students have diverse perceptions towards writing. For instance, with respect to which is the more difficult skill, 41.67% said that writing is actually more difficult compared to speaking, while 56.25% disagreed with the statement. About half the respondents surveyed perceived that they have "many problems in writing" while 41.67% of the respondents perceived that they do not really have many problems in writing. The only question where there was a more unanimous view was with respect to the amount of writing in the L1. 60.00 per cent don't write very much in their first language, while 37.5% write a lot and another 2.08% were not sure as to whether writing in their first language plays any significant role in their life. The results are tabulated below in Table 1.

Table 1: Perception toward writing

Perception	Yes (%)	Neutral(%)	No (%)
1. I think writing in English is more difficult than speaking	41.67	2.08	56.25
2. I don't really have many problems in writing	41.67	8.33	50.0
3. I don't write very much in my first language	60.0	2.08	37.5

Table 2: The importance of writing

Perception	Yes (%)	Neutral(%)	No (%)
4. Writing is important to me because:			
a. I may have to write in English in a job	77.08	14.59	8.33
b. I may have to pass examinations in English	77.08	12.5	10.42
c. I want to write letters in English to friends	64.58	14.59	20.83

Table 3: Students' weaknesses in writing

Perception	Yes (%)	Neutral(%)	No (%)
5. Students' weaknesses in writing.			
a. Spelling and punctuation.	25.0	39.58	35.42
b. Rewriting sentences to get word order correct.	68.75	12.5	18.75
c. Linking sentences or ideas with connectives.	70.83	12.5	16.67
d. Adding extra sentences to make the meaning clear.	72.92	8.33	18.75

Respondents generally agreed that writing is indeed important to them. 77.08% said they may have to write in English in a job as well as examinations. Another 64.58% expressed their wish to write letters in English to their friends (Table 2).

Most of the respondents (Table 3) consider themselves quite weak in adding extra sentences to make the meaning clear. This is reflected in a high percentage of 72.92% compared to only 18.75% who claimed to have no problem with it. The second difficulty they encounter is linking sentences or ideas with connectives (70.83%) followed by rewriting sentences to get word order correct (68.75%). Only 25.0% expressed difficulty in spelling and punctuation.

Table 4: Students' attitude toward editing

Attitude	Yes (%)	Neutral(%)	No (%)
6. I usually check through my writing before I hand it in.	77.08	2.08	20.83
7. I make careful note of the teacher's correction when I get my work back	81.25	-	18.75
8. I usually read the comments and look at the grade but I don't study the corrections in detail.	60.42	-	39.58

Based on Table 4, most respondents not only edit their work but pay attention to

the teacher's comments and corrections. A high percentage of students surveyed (77.08 %) usually check through their writing before submitting it to their teacher whereas 20.83% don't actually edit their work. 81.25% of the respondents make careful note of the teacher's corrections when they get back their work. However, only 39.58% of them actually study the corrections in detail.

Students' Expectation of an ESL Writing Course
Students have high expectations of an ESL writing course. Most respondents expect to do a lot of their writing in an ESL writing class in the classroom rather than at home or as homework. In fact, almost a third of those surveyed (29.17%) disagreed that writing should be assigned individually as homework.

A majority of the respondents would like their teacher to discuss their writing sometimes (95.83%). 85.42% wish the teacher would look at their work and offer help while they are writing in class. Only 14.58% of the respondents dislike the involvement of the teacher in the writing process in class.

As for students' expectation of their teacher, 87.5% want the teacher to mark all of the mistakes in their work whereas 10.42% expressed their disagreement regarding the idea. Another 95.83% would like the teacher to show some discretion and mark only the most important mistakes in their work. Another 93.75% welcome feedback from their teachers concerning the good and weak aspects of their writing.

The students responded quite well to the idea of sharing their writings with friends. The majority of the respondents (81.25%) expect to hear/ see other students' writing. 14.58% dislike this idea and another 4.17% are quite neutral about it. Most of them (75.0%) believe that peer editing is indeed important in a writing class (see Table 5).

Table 5: Students' expectation of a writing course

Expectation	Yes (%)	Neutral(%)	No (%)
9. I expect to do a lot of writing in class	81.25	-	18.75
10. I expect to do a lot of writing by myself at home	66.67	4.17	29.17
11. I would like the teacher to look at my work and help me while I am writing in class.	85.42	-	14.58
12. I would like my teacher to talk to me about my writing sometimes.	95.83	2.08	2.08
13. I expect the teacher to mark all of the mistakes in my work.	87.50	2.08	10.42
14. I expect the teacher to mark the most important mistakes in my work	95.83	2.08	2.08
15. I want my teacher to write comments about what is good or not good in my writing	93.75	4.17	2.08
16. I would like to see/hear other student's writing sometimes (reading a loud in class)	81.25	4.17	14.58
17. I would like my friends to look at my work and give comments	75.0	4.17	20.83

ESL Writing Course Feedback
Our findings reveal there is indeed a marked difference between the most popular writing genre and the least popular. Most of the respondents (75.0%) believed that Description is actually the most important genre to be taught in writing class followed by Cause and Effect (72.5%). Third in their list of importance is Narration (62.5%) and fourth is Compare and Contrast (57.0%). Next is Process (52.5%). Argumentation as well as Division and Classification are   not considered   important by respondents with only 45.0% and 35.0%. The results are tabulated in Table 6.

A significant percentage (97.92%) of the respondents said that writing project should be maintained as one of the components in the writing course as shown in Table 7. They believe that the project assignment provides practice as well as experience.

With regard to whether writing classes contribute to students' preparation for exams, a high majority of the respondents (97.92 %) admitted that the skills they have learned in the writing class help them to do better not only in the ESL writing exam but also in other exams or subjects (79.17%). Only 10.42% said that what they have learned in the writing class does not prepare them for other exams. (see Table 8).

Table 6: Writing genre according to students' preference

Genre	%	Rank
a. Description	75.0	1
b. Cause and Effect	72.5	2
c. Narration	62.5	3
d. Compare and Contrast	57.5	4
e. Process	52.5	5
f. Argumentation	45.0	6
g. Division and Classification	35.0	7

Table 7: Students' reaction towards the writing project

Reaction toward Writing Project	Yes (%)	No (%)
19. Do you think the writing project should be maintained?	97.92	2.08

Table 8: Writing class as preparation for exams

Writing class as preparation for exams	Yes (%)	Neutral(%)	No (%)
20. Do you think the skills you have learned in the ESL writing class help you to do better in the writing exam?	97.92	2.08	-
21. Do you think the skills you have learned in the writing class help you to do better in the exams (other subjects)?	79.17	10.42	10.42

Discussion

From the survey, it can be concluded that nearly half of the respondents find writing more difficult than speaking and they face many problems. Most of them consider themselves weak in certain areas especially adding extra sentences to make the meaning clear, linking sentences or ideas with connectives and rewriting sentences to get word order correct. These aspects can indeed be given due emphasis in a writing course.

When asked about their perception regarding the importance of writing, the majority believed they need the necessary preparation in writing skills to sit for exams in English. Some of them said that writing class can help to "add knowledge and vocabulary" as well as "increase quality in writing". Not only that, some even

claimed that writing class "helps in daily life" and prepares them for their job as well as their future.

From the research, we also discovered that students perceive writing as an essential communication tool. Some expressed the importance of learning the effective way of "communicating and presenting ideas and thoughts". Some said they want to write letters or send e-mails to friends in English. One student mentioned that he needs to learn to write in English because he "has to communicate with the world".

It is indeed encouraging to understand that students don't only enrol for writing classes to prepare them for specific exams. Rather, most of them perceive writing as a communication skill which must be acquired to suit daily as well as future needs. They also believe writing classes can improve their ability in writing out ideas and perception thus preparing them for their jobs in future.

On top of all reasons discussed, several students claimed that writing is their passion. They "love to write" and "want to enjoy writing out their imagination". Perhaps, these students perceive writing class as an avenue to learn to better express themselves. There is also the idea of completion; as one student put it: "I want to be completely good in English, speaking and also writing".

The students were also asked to respond to statements that reflect on their expectation of a writing course. Generally, they do expect to do a lot of writing either in class or at home. However, some expressed their disagreement concerning writing assignments to be done individually at home. In other words, the majority of the students prefer writing tasks to be carried out during class hours.

Perhaps the nature of tasks should be such that students can work together either in pairs or groups. Most of the students also welcome the teacher's close supervision of their work. Most of them would like the teacher to look at their work while they are writing in class. This leads to a more interactive approach to writing which does not only encourage discussion but also allows immediate feedback in the writing classroom. A greater majority of the students would like the teacher to talk to them about their writing sometimes. This can indeed be achieved through conferencing or small group discussion.

The job of the writing teacher does not end here. Obviously, with writing tasks and assignments come loads of works to be marked. What, then, are students' expectations regarding marking and corrections? In the survey the students were asked whether they prefer their teachers to mark all of the mistakes, the most important mistakes or write comments about what is good or not good in their writing. Most respondents wish to see all mistakes being highlighted, which may sound quite discouraging to weaker students and very demanding on the part of the teacher. The majority only want the most important mistakes highlighted. However, with such a high percentage in both aspects, it can be said that students are quite confused themselves regarding the extent their work should be 'butchered' by writing

teachers. Regarding feedback on their writing tasks, it is indeed enlightening to discover that a large majority of the students do not only welcome verbal comments from teachers but also written comments indicating good and weak points in their writing. The majority of the respondents also welcome other students' comments on their work.

Regarding their preference for writing genre, out of 7 genres listed in the syllabus, most of the students chose Description and Cause and Effect as the two most important genres. Considering the fact that the respondents actually come from various faculties, it can be concluded that both these genres must be the most frequently used across courses at UKM. Argumentation is the second least popular choice among the respondents. Perhaps the fact that this particular genre is often emphasized at secondary school makes it less popular.

The feedback we received from respondents implied a qualified "yes" to whether the writing project should be maintained as one of the course and evaluation components of the writing course. The majority of them also gave reasons that highlight the importance of projects especially when it's done in pairs or groups. Among others, most respondents see the project assignment as an "opportunity to write long essays". In the process of writing, they don't only learn to "develop ideas" as well as "improve writing skills"; but emphasis would be more on their ability to "seek relevant information especially in English", "compiling", writing and editing their masterpiece. It will indirectly reflect whatever skills they have acquired in the writing class. Some said they "will have to do further reading in the library" to produce quality work. Through this kind of reading, students can also gain considerable insight and exposure to published writing (Hedge, 1988).

The respondents also welcomed the idea of pair work and group work in completing the task. It allowed them to exchange ideas with friends as well as edit each other's work. Moreover, it "teaches them to co-operate and co-ordinate between themselves". However, some students preferred projects to be done individually so that "the instructor will really detect the weakness in the students' writing".

As for the nature of the writing project which actually contributes to the cumulative assessment, students think it helps them to "cover" or better their marks in case they don't perform well in the final exam. It is also fair for them since they are given "time to do their work". Furthermore, it helps in "dividing the marks allocated for the whole course" so that students' overall achievement be assessed rather than concentrating on the final exam alone.

In conclusion, it can be said that the writing course, on the whole, has benefited the students in a variety of ways. Most importantly, they agreed that the skills they have learned in the writing course help them to perform better not only in the writing final exam but also in other exams.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is indeed significant to note that students expect to have more practice in class regarding the rhetoric and devices, spelling and sentence structure. We, however, believe that with the constraints within a semester, it would be more beneficial to offer practice at text level which encourages the writing of the whole text rather than simple tasks which work on a text as a framework. This is indeed the most effective method in coaching students to produce "coherent and cohesive writing" (Hedge, 1988). As for contributory skills like paraphrasing, supporting with examples and connectors, they should be taught within the context of a text rather than treated as isolated activities (Wong, 1991).

Feedback from students strongly suggests that the writing course should be maintained. However, it can be improved in certain ways to better suit the needs of the present population. It can indeed be useful for the course to include certain genres like case studies and research papers besides essays, reports and projects to familiarize students with well-developed schemata as expected by the host academic institution (Silva, 1990). Besides their academic goals, students also need exposure to writing at the workplace. They can perhaps be introduced to models of writing like executive summaries and progress reports. With too much to cover within a semester, the writing course can perhaps limit the modes of essay writing to the three most popular among students namely Description, Cause and Effect and Narration. The rest of the course content can then cover the areas mentioned above.

The survey also showed that the students are delighted over the opportunity to write long essays for projects. Being a literature-based project which is the most common and easiest to administer (Bloor & St. John, 1988), students are encouraged to read selectively with a specific purpose in mind. They will then reorganize the information they have gathered and present them in the new genre of the project.

The positive response from our students is indeed very motivating for writing instructors because we can see obvious interest in our students pertaining to the fulfilment of course requirements. We can very well contrast this with Bloor and St. John's finding in their article which says that " most students are more frightened of project writing than of any other language activity" because of the "lengthy piece of work" especially in a foreign language (Bloor & St. John, 1988: 90).

An interesting implication of the study is that students welcome a more supportive learning environment, not only from teachers but also from their own friends. Students want to be more active and interactive in classroom activities. A more communicative approach to writing would allow students to identify and emphasize not only the purpose of their writing but also the audience. The student's role in class is extended to reading and responding to other students' work: rewriting in another form, summarizing and making comments. As mentioned by Raimes

(1983), students can also role-play, exchange letters or give constructive comments. However, it shouldn't go beyond this. In other words, the teacher is responsible for any correction. A very much integrated approach to writing can benefit the students in various ways, other than producing a better piece of writing. To quote feedback from one respondent "I think I have improved the way I think, write and say after attending the class".

Besides a conducive environment, students expect to get feedback from their friends and teacher. According to Keh (1990), there are three types of feedback which can be provided to students in a writing class: peer evaluation, conferences and written comments. It can be quite demotivating when teachers are confronted with weak students. Marking can then, be tedious and very demanding. However, teachers shouldn't let this discourage them from giving the amount of written work that he feels could benefit the students (Edge, 1980). This is because no matter what kind and level of writing process students undertake, they have to go through the editing stage which provides certain feedback regarding acceptability and accuracy. Zamel (1985) states that there is evidence that students find teacher's feedback beneficial in improving their writing.

In providing feedback to students, teachers have to be conscious not to only give negative comments in the sense of correction without commendation for trying. Students need to know how they are improving in their writing. One way of achieving this is to expose them to the components of skilled writing ability which good writers seem to demonstrate. It can also be useful to involve students in the design of a grading scheme, negotiating and prioritizing criteria for marking (Hedge, 1988) and practice peer editing. This active involvement on the part of the students has many advantages. Among others, it encourages reformulating which is a valuable technique moving away from the narrow idea of correction. Students get the chance to analyze and find meaning in their own writing or that of fellow students. In circumstances when students have to explain points to their peers, they will be made to think of how important it is to write a clear and acceptable piece of writing. Moreover, peer editing as immediate feedback can be meaningful and useful to blooming writers.

Writing class can be more successful if teachers encourage their students to read works of successful writers whether pertaining to their content areas or special interest. Through reading, students will get exposed to models and collect a subject-specific list of words and phrases that can either be imitated or assimilated. It serves as a model for appropriate style (Shaw, 1991) and provides them with "schema" (Hedge, 1988). They also go through the process of analysing and synthesizing structures and patterns in deciphering the meanings in difficult texts. In this case, we can actually see that learning takes place incidentally with the students inferring thus digesting the structures of the texts.

With such positive interest and response from the respondents, it can be deduced

that writing teachers must be willing to play a more active role. Data gathered from the research strongly suggest that students want a teacher who is interesting and lively in the classroom. This is especially true when he or she has to encourage students to actively participate in discussions and any communicative activities. Teachers also need to have patience and tolerance not only while conducting classes but also during conferencing sessions and evaluations. In a nutshell, we can say that students seem to prefer a more integrated and active writing class.

It would be ideal to be able to teach students exactly what they need to know and how to best equip themselves for the real world. It would also be a language teacher's aspiration to be able to specify exactly and scientifically what needs to be learned and the best way to teach. However, with the growing number of new methodologies and approaches that are constantly being developed in response to the continuing demand, can there ever be an answer to this other than to study the needs of the students themselves?

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