

A STUDY ON COMMON WRITING ERRORS OF ENGINEERING STUDENTS: A BASIS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: *This paper aims to investigate the self-reported writing problems of Filipino learners of English Language. A total of sixteen (16) Mechanical Engineering Technology (MET) students of Technological University participated in this study. An instrument consisting of two parts was used: Part I asked for background information. Part II asked the students to write on a given topic. Second instrument is a checklist. The checklist used was adapted from Kamimura (2000) as cited in Mojica (2010). Writing difficulties were coded into three before writing, while writing and post writing. The results of the students' report shows that students are likely to think critically as they advance to the next writing stage. On the other hand, post-writing stage obtained a highest mean, showing that students have more attention to the content, audience, grammar, vocabulary, and the final output.*

KEYWORDS: Common Writing Errors, Engineering students, Curriculum Development

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to analyze and identify the writing problems of English as Second Language (ESL) learners. Recently, there has been growing interest in learning the English Language; however, ESL students and English as Foreign Language (EFL) students find it difficult to escape the writing problems when they are asked by the teacher to write. Writing problems appear due to the different expectations of writing at tertiary level (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; in Darus, Fong, Kim, & Stapa, 2009). Reid (1990) and Preto-Bay (2004) underscore that students need to be aware of the “expectation of readers, the content of writing, degree of formality in writing and contextual elements in writing” (in Darus, Fong, Kim, & Stapa, 2009, p.46).

Brant (1946) states that standard of satisfaction among language educators on the written works of language learners are good grammatical structures, appropriate punctuation marks, verbs in their right tenses, pronouns in the right case and correct spelling of words. On the other hand, the skills on “handwriting, spelling, vocabulary, sentence construction, and paragraph writing” primarily contribute to the overall writing quality. These skills are seemingly considered as the “building blocks of proficient writing,” students who fail to develop these skills are at risk for writing difficulties (in Santangelo & Olinghouse, 2009, p.16; Berninger & Amtmann, 2003; Graham, Harris, & Fink, 2000; Graham, Harris, & Fink-Chorzempa, 2002).

In addition to this, Jung (n.d.) stated that writing skill in the studies of a second or foreign language may be described as a mean of “measuring individual’s language proficiency”(p180).

In her investigation, Msanjila (2005) conducted a study on the students of Morogoro Secondary Schools in Tanzania to explore the six glaring writing problems such as capitalization and punctuation problems, inexplicitness or fuzziness, poor organization or illogical sequence, spelling problems and grammatical errors. Similar to this investigation is the study of Chen (2002; in Mojica, 2010); he used freshmen and sophomore Taiwanese students' through letting his participants write a self-reflective report on writing problems in English. Chen's result of the study are the following (in Mojica, 2005; Chen, 2002):

(1) Word usage and English expressions, (2) confusion about the subtle differences among similar words due to insufficient cultural knowledge, limited vocabulary, (4) grammatical errors, (5) organization, (6) errors on prepositions (idioms) or slang, (7) L1 influence, and (8) independent thinking – ranging from lexical, syntactic levels to rhetorical and cultural levels. (p.26)

Further, Al-Hazmi and Scholfield (2007) conducted a study on Saudi University students. They enforced use of checklist and peer feedback in EFL writing to determine the difficulties of their samples experienced in ESL writing. In their study, Al-Hazmi and Scholfield found out that basic English language problems as well as discourse organization, paragraphing and cohesion are the main problems of EFL learners. Meanwhile, Lozada and Magsangya (2009) investigated on the errors committed by sophomore students and its relationship to their English Language exposure. They used one hundred sixty (160) high schools students to answer the checklist and asked to write an essay on a given topic. Results show that the students with high exposure have significantly less frequency in their errors in wrong case, fragmentation, parallelism, punctuation and verb tense.

Through discussing the studies conducted, it can be noted that the grammar as a main concern in writing competency is the most common error of the students. However, in a study on teaching low – level ESL students' composition, Taylor (1976) claims that writing abilities does not only include paragraphs that are “well defined, brief, sensible and persuasive or may contain good grammatical sentences” (p.33). Taylor argues that writing good sentences is not a measurement of a well written work but requires intertwining of these sentences in one cohesive thought. However, these writing problems are not only committed by EFL or ESL learners, because according to Thomas (1963) that even average students cannot execute correct spelling, punctuation marks, and good sentence construction. With regard to this finding, Taylor (1976) suggests that training in English writing should not be limited to ESL but to native speakers as well. (Lozada & Magsangya, 2009).

FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Writing is one of the most powerful tools to demonstrate what we know. This study was informed by Kamimura's (2000) paper on integration of process and product orientations on EFL writing instruction and of Mojica's (2010) paper on the self-reported problems and actual writing deficiencies of EFL Learners in the beginner's level. In her study, Mojica required the 26 EFL participants to write two to three paragraphs on a given topic. Two English teachers were asked to be her interrators of the study. Rating the data collected from the samples shows the most frequent

errors are on vocabulary and grammar. Grammar, in her paper, was collectively coded, the same with the study of Chen. Mojica's study's result presents that there is a deep involvement in thinking process before writing and it diminishes during the writing stages to post writing stage.

Kamimura (2000) investigated the processing tasks that are considered by EFL writers before writing, during writing and after writing. His studies tried to determine the relationship between process and product approaches to EFL writing. Both of these studies will serve as frameworks to derive with the writing problems investigation. The researcher will use Mojica's collection and analysis errors of data from the student respondents. Researcher's two colleagues from Technological University of the Philippines, who both had master's degree in De La Salle University and Philippine Normal University, will serve as integrators of the study. The researcher will also be replicating the Kamimura's table on processing tasks considered by EFL writers.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What problems do L2 learners encounter in writing?
2. What are the sampled self-reported writing difficulties in writing?
3. What are the sampled actual writing difficulties in writing?
4. What aspects of process knowledge are considered by the participants before, during and after writing?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

A total of sixteen Mechanical Engineering Technology (MET) students of Technological University participated in the study. There are 5 males and 11 females, who are enrolled in Technical Writing (Eng3), in the academic year 2011-2012, Second semester. The table above shows the languages spoken that the participants used at home.

Language spoken at home	f	%
Tagalog/ Filipino	12	81.25
Ilocano	1	6.50
Filipino and English	2	12.25
# of participants	16	100

As can be seen on the table 1, more than $\frac{3}{4}$ (75%) of the participants used Filipino/ Tagalog as their major language used at home. On the other hand, less than $\frac{1}{4}$ (15%) of the participants considered Ilocano as their first language. The table also shows that slightly less than $\frac{1}{4}$ (15%) of the participants claim that they are using two languages at the same time at home: Filipino and English.

Instrument

The researcher used a questionnaire as her instrument. This instrument is composed of two parts: the first part is created to get the personal information of the participants including the students spoken language used at home; and second part requires the students to write at least two paragraphs on a given topic. Second instrument is a questionnaire adapted from Kamimura's (2000; in Mojica 2005) concerning what students thought and did before, during, and after writing.

Data Gathering

The instrument was administered on the 23rd day of March 2012 at the Technological University of the Philippines (TUP)- Manila; 9-11 in the morning during their English class. Students were asked to complete the questionnaires. After collecting the instrument, on the 24th day of March, the researcher asked the students to rate themselves when it comes to writing. This procedure will help the researcher to compare ratings from the students and from the raters.

Interrating

Two English teachers were invited to interrater the writings of the participants. One is a graduate student of M.A in English language Teaching (MATEL) in De La Salle University and the other one obtained her Master's degree in English Language in Philippine Normal University.

Statistical Treatment

Writing difficulties were coded and categorized, similar to Mojica (2010) and Lozada and Magsangya (2009). In this study, the raters are also asked to code additional errors through checking the actual writings of the students. The data will be analyzed through comparing the means.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The table below was used to code the writing difficulties of ESL and was adapted from Mojica's (2010) study about EFL writing difficulties. However, as can be seen, the researcher of the study added the capitalization in the table and combined it with the punctuation section. The number of frequency of committing errors in capitalization leads the researcher to do this. This table summarizes the writing difficulties of participants as identified by the raters. As can be seen, punctuation or capitalization is the main writing problem of the ESL learners of TUP. This finding is different from the study of Mojica (2005) in which grammar was 26 topmost writing difficulties of the participants. This finding is somewhat similar to that of Lozada and Magsangya (2009) which punctuation, verb form, spelling, preposition are the top errors committed by the ESL participants.

Table 2: ESL Writing Difficulties

	female	%	Male	%	total of percentage
Vocabulary	2	12.5	2	12.5	25
Grammar	4	25	1	6.25	31.25
Spelling	1	6.25	1	6.25	12.5
Preposition	5	31.25	0	0	31.25
Articles/Determiners/ Numbers	4	25	2	12.5	37.5
Verb Tense	2	12.5		0	12.5
Word Order	2	12.5		0	12.5
Interference of L1		0		0	0
L-R system of writing in L1		0		0	0
Not good command	0	0	1	12.5	12.5
Punctuation/ Capitalization	5	31.25	3	18.75	50

Less than 40% of the participants committed errors on articles/ determiners, numbers. Moreover, more than 30% of the participants have problems on grammar and preposition. It supports to this data is the study of Blake (1906; in Lozada and Magsangya, 2009) that Filipino speakers and even writers find it difficult to use the English prepositions because Philippine official language [Filipino] has a very limited number of prepositions. Meanwhile, a little less than ten (15) % appears to have difficulties in verb tense, word order, spelling and one who reported for not having a good command in English.

On the other hand, raters noticed that majority of the participants have problems in organization of ideas. They have also noted that the students disregard the use of punctuation including the period, comma, and apostrophe.

Below are sample writing difficulties noted by the raters in students' papers:

A. Vocabulary/ Word choice

M3: the speech that every used was English. [it is not appropriate to use speech, it should be language]

F6: English was really important for being its international/ universal language. [she probably means that English is important because it is a universal language].

F12: It is the common language, as universal.

B. Prepositions

F4: because it helps us communicate...

F1: ... it is one to [of] the universal language...

F3: ... will help us to communicate many people...

C. Spelling

M2: Studying English helps us to comunicate....

M3: The competetent...

M3: The contineus speech of this

F5: ...helps us to communicate foreingn people

F12: if you're good in speaking and writing English

D. Articles

F5: English is an universal language.

E. Punctuation/Past participle

M1: Its an easy way to socialize. [He probably means "It's" or "It is"]

F5: ... universal language__ help us to communicate...

F9: English is so important, its the international language

M5: For us Filipino __it can help us

F. Number (Plural or Singular)

M3: M3: As we all knows...

F4: English Language is an important things..

F5: In finding a job, it is the one skills to easily hire you.

G. Verb tense/ Modals

M3: ... speech of this can managed the ...

M5: ...it will thaught us... [will teach]

H. Organization of ideas/Addressing the Prompt

F5: English is an universal language help us to communicate to foreign people in finding it is the one skills. An example above proves he disorganization of ideas, Although the student has an attempt to write in English, the rater's gave unsatisfactory rating due to the absence of punctuation mark and disorganization of ideas. The results simply indicate even when students are learning all the basic rules in the English Language, mastery of writing rules always take time. Despite Filipino have spent longer time in learning English, errors and difficulties are hard to avoid.

Self-Assessment vs. Raters' Assessment

The data collected from the students were re-evaluated by the raters. According to Sudman (1977; in Elliot and Huizinga), self-reports have not always been considered reliable since students tend to "overrate their written output," that results in big difference when compared to the assessment of the raters (p39). The table 3 below were categorized only in two types because almost of the ratings collected have big differences to each other when compared: (1) Similar, which means raters' and students' assessments have exactly the same ratings. (2) Not Similar, when the ratings are different from each other's' rating.

Similar ratings	%	Not Similar	%
7	43.75	9	56.25

As can be noticed, more than half (50%) of the students have different ratings from the evaluators/raters. Students tend to overestimate if not underestimate their writing capabilities. Slightly less than 50% of the students have exactly the same rating with the raters.

Finding simply implies that assessing own's work appeared difficult for the students. Mojica (2005) recommended that there seems a need to create objective assessment tool. Draska and Krekeler (2008) mentioned that there is a need to have a reliable self assessment due to difficulties experienced by the students.

Writing Process

Writing process includes before, during and after writing. The table below shows the self-reported tasks done by the learners before, during, and after writing. As shown in the table, 100% of the ESL participants are paying attention to the content and organization of ideas. This finding is similar to Mojica's (2010) that almost 80% thought about the content and less than 70% are trying to organize their ideas before writing. Most of the time, students tend to be conscious about what to write. Meanwhile, more than 85% seems to pay so much attention about their readers or audience. More than 70% confessed that they read instruction manu time and listed their ideas before writing. Close to 10% of the students insinuate that they made an outline and jotted down words. As appeared, it can be noted that the students' thinking process before writing are very high.

On the other hand, the thinking process in the while writing stage increases a little bit, probably because they are thinking about the ratings they will get from their teachers. 100% of the participants reported they still pay attention to the content and vocabulary, maybe because they have been allowed to consult a dictionary during the writing process. Nearly 95% claim that they are very conscious with their grammar, thought and wrote in English from the beginning, and organization of ideas. Close to 85% reported that try to write as much as possible, seldom stop in the middle and they are very mindful in using spelling and punctuation. The least percentage that can be seen during the writing process is that the students try not to avoid writing whatever ideas came in their mind, which obtained slightly more than 30%.

The thinking process of the ESL students continues to increase as they go along each stage. The highest mean among these stages can be seen in the post writing stage, it might be because they have so much time to re-read and revise their papers. 100% of the students implied that they pay more attention to content, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation, probably because they have time to do it unlike when they are in the while writing stage. Close to 90% admit they still concern with their organization while slightly less than 70% have less concern on the audience than to what have mentioned above.

This finding is very opposite to Mojica's study on the investigation of EFL self report writing and actual writing difficulties. In her study, students' thinking processes increasingly reduced as the EFL students proceed to the next writing stage. In this study, one possible reason, students tend to concern about the reaction of their teachers after reading the paper. Reid (1990) and Preto-Bay (2004), like what have mentioned in the introduction, underscores that students need to be conscious about the expectation of readers, the content of writing, degree of formality in writing and contextual elements in writing" (in Darus, Fong, Kim, & Stapa, 2009, p.46); and since the participants are taking up Technical Writing during that time, they have this mind while they are involving themselves in writing.

	Yes	%	No	%
Pre Writing (Before you write)				
1. Thought about the content	16	100	0	0
2. Thought about the organization of ideas	16	100	0	0
3. Thought about my reader or audience	14	87.5	2	12.5
4. Read the instruction many times	12	75	4	25
5. Made an outline	9	56.25	7	43.75
6. Listed ideas	12	75	4	25
7. Jotted down words	9	56.25	7	43.75
	Mean=	78.57143	Mean=	21.42857
While Writing				
8. Thought and wrote in English from the beginning	15	93.75	1	6.25
9. Avoided writing whatever idea came to mind	5	31.25	11	68.75
10. Tried to write as much as possible	13	81.25	3	18.75
11. Seldom stopped in the middle	13	81.25	3	18.75
Paid attention to:				
Content	16	100	0	0
Reader or Audience	11	68.75	5	31.25
Organization	14	87.5	2	12.5
Vocabulary	15	93.75	0	0
Grammar	15	93.75	1	6.25
Spelling/ Punctuation	13	81.25	3	18.75
	Mean	81.25	Mean=	18.125
Post Writing				
After writing, re read and tried revising it, paying attention to:				
Content	16	100	0	0
Audience	11	68.75	5	31.25
Organization	14	87.5	2	12.5

Vocabulary	16	100	0	0
Grammar	16	100	0	0
Spelling/ Punctuation	16	100	0	0
	Mean	92.71	Mean=	7.291667

Note. Adapted from "Integration of Process and Product Orientation in EFL Writing Instruction" (Kamimura, 2000; in Mojica 2010).

CONCLUSION

The difficulties experienced by the ESL students are hard to escape. The sampled actual writing problems and self-reported writing difficulties only prove the existence of language learning problem. There is much to be regarded with the writing skills of ESL learners. The difficulties reported by the students and noted by the rater simply show how this skill at times maybe disregarded by others. Assessing own writings can be a good way to monitor writing development. However, better assessment tool guided by the language instructors could be created to lessen these difficulties.

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