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6+1 Writing Traits in a Matriculation ESL classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the use of the 6+1 Writing Traits approach in improving teaching and learning of writing in a Matriculation ESL classroom. This is due to the fact writing instruction has become a field of increasing interest at higher learning institutions and at pre- university levels in recent years. As a result of this interest, there have been many innovations to the teaching of writing in the evolution of language teaching and these have led to several significant shifts on how writing is taught in the ESL classrooms. The 6+1 writing traits is one such innovation. Writing traits such as Ideas, Organization, Convention, Sentence Fluency, Word Choice and Voice are important in any writing attempted by learners. Therefore, it is vital that Matriculation learners are exposed to the 6+1 writing traits in order to be able to produce a comprehensive essay that meets the requirements of the Malaysian University English Test examination. This proposed research will be a qualitative research. Pre-test, lessons plans, classroom observations, questionnaire and post-test will be used to elicit data in support of this research. Learners will learn to review peer essays thus enhancing their writing proficiency. This research will also look into the challenges faced by learners and lecturers in the course of implementing the 6+1 writing traits in the classroom.

Keywords: *6+1 writing traits, Matriculation college, MUET, writing proficiency*

1.0: Introduction

The ability to communicate through writing is essential across the spectrum of learning and learners. From simple short messaging systems (sms) through formal email and letters, the need to express our thoughts and opinion through writing has never been greater. It is crucial that students develop exemplary written communication skills to compete in a global economy. The ability to communicate through writing is also central to success in school and participation in the workplace in a democratic society. This is perhaps why research on writing, especially ESL writing is vital. The traditional method of teaching composition in a Malaysian classroom or most of South East Asian classrooms is to introduce a topic, allot a time-frame and instruct the students to submit it for correction. This approach has stood the test of time due to several reasons; the status or importance of the language and the restricted time factor. This conventional approach of providing an essay topic and asking the students to complete writing and submitting it for correction has not been effective. It is crucial for educators to provide students with the ability to clearly and concisely convey a message in writing. Daly and Sharko (2010) describe writing as an activity that is as emotional as cognitive, and suggest that affective factors influence all phases of the writing process. Therefore, a strong need exists for researchers and educators to explore the affective factors that contribute to students' writing performance

2.0: Statement of problem

The aim of the English Language instruction in Malaysian schools and colleges is to enable the learners to communicate effectively and efficiently in English in social and professional situations. They should be able to use English for different purposes. Writing is the skill most students are least proficient in. It requires the students to think, plan, organize and express their thoughts and ideas in words. They have to master spelling, punctuation and grammar to construct sentences without errors. In the context of Malaysian schools, English language is primarily taught using the product approach to writing (Chitravelu, 2006). So, teachers should ensure that their students have every chance of being successful in carrying out the writing task that they set. Writing is a very difficult skill and a writer needs to know some basic things about writing. First and foremost, he has to gather information regarding the subject matter. The writer has to make references to books, journals and also rely on his general knowledge and experience before he could produce a piece of meaningful writing.

Students in my classroom find writing to be the most difficult skill. There are two key factors contributing to this difficulty. By nature, writing is a very complex skill. It involves a combination of many elements like thinking, planning, organizing, editing and the mechanics of writing. Malaysian students are not exposed to an English environment. Most of them tend to speak either in Bahasa Malaysia or in their own mother-tongue. Thus, they lack the fluency in speaking as well as in writing. Since the usage of English is limited in scope, the students do not have the opportunity to improve their vocabulary or syntax. English language instructors, too, find it difficult to teach writing for they have to deal with students who have low language proficiency while having to complete

the syllabus on time. Matriculation students' level in writing performance is weak. Owing to the increasing awareness of matriculation students' needs to write for academic success and global communication, teaching writing in its own right has been an issue in our matriculation ESL classroom. A good mastery of the writing skill will pave the way to the students for their academic success. Thus, the researcher has investigated the adoption of the 6+1 writing traits in the Matriculation ESL classroom.

3.0: Research gap

Many children have difficulty mastering the writing skills necessary to produce a coherent and clear message (Saddler & Graham, 2007). Through observation and findings from Literature, there is a significant gap between classroom instructional practices and theory based on research driven solutions. There are numerous obstacles and challenges that surfaced during teaching and learning of writing. Among them is the approach undertaken by ESL teachers who view writing as a product rather than a process. When educators focus merely on conventional errors in student writing, they are missing the opportunities to learn about what the student does well as a writer and where they have gaps in their writing (Angelillo, 2002; Strong, 1999; Wilde, 1992). Another factor from previous research that postulates that the majority of educators who have had negative experiences when learning how to write do not have a good understanding of the writing process, and as a consequence, lack knowledge and confidence in teaching writing (Brashears, 2006; Foster, 1999; Norman & Spencer, 2005). Foster (1999) discovered that teachers with a lack of understanding of the writing process and little training in instructional practices of writing had a negative attitude towards the subject.

4.0: Literature review

Writing is a medium by which individuals express what they know and want to convey. As students move throughout school, there is greater importance placed on the competence in using writing for the purpose of demonstrating knowledge. Writing is a lifelong skill, not just an activity that students participate in during school, but one necessary for success in the workplace. The ability to communicate through writing is essential to the success of the nation. Effective communication plays a key role in an economy that increasingly values knowledge and instantaneous information. Corporations reported that a majority of salaried professionals have some responsibility that requires them to correspond through writing (Berman, 2001). Being able to write effectively is considered as a desirable trait for working professionals (Light, 2001). This is a conundrum that is facing the Malaysian English as Second Language (ES) landscape. Therefore, it is important that educators study the effectiveness of the teaching of writing in our schools. The teaching of writing will only be understood if exposures are given to the processes of writing; in contrast, the teacher's focus is more on the written product. As pointed out by Johnston (1996) and James (1998) that teachers are supposed to emphasize process approach but it is not without challenges. The teaching of writing will only be understood if exposures are given to the processes of writing.

Research findings indicate that student attitudes towards writing stem from the effects of instructional practices on writing. These findings do share similar characteristics in the Matriculation ESL classroom. In addition, researchers and educators identified instructional practices are closely associated with students' negative attitude towards writing and writing achievement (Lam & Law, 2007). They also found that the majority of educators do not have a clear and effective way to teach students the writing process (Lam & Law, 2007). Even less is known about the writing strategies and quality of instruction that teachers actually use in the classroom, but the available evidence suggests that considerable improvements can be made in regular education classrooms (Baker & Shahid, 2003). This is the reason why I am focused on the use of the 6+1 writing traits in an ESL Matriculation college.

Six traits of good writing focus on the goal of developing a writing program that goes beyond grammar and mechanics and grading. Spandel (2005) asserts that not only is the 6+1 Writing traits effective in raising students test scores, but also, more importantly, the model creates "strong and confident writers in any context for any purpose" (p.11). There are several reasons as to why the 6+1 writing traits are seen as an effective approach in teaching writing especially for Matriculation students. The first is that for the MUET examination, the learners are assessed on a number of criteria; task fulfilment and language and organization. Within these major components are assessment on content, organization, sentence structures, word choice, convention and cohesive and cohesion of the essay in its entirety.

The 6+1 writing traits approach primarily looks at how a text is written instead of the final outcome. As noted in Hyland (2003), the process approach has a major impact on understanding the nature of writing and the way writing is taught. Based on this claim, I believe that the 6+1 writing traits which are an extension of the process approach can make a difference in the ESL classroom. Research on writing processes has led to viewing writing as complex and recursive – not linear. Writing is more complex than this; hence writing pedagogy is important, as Brown states that writing is "as different from speaking as swimming is from walking" (2001:335). This is supported and developed by Hedge, who states that writing is more than producing accurate and complete sentences and phrases. The Six plus one Trait is a way of teaching, modelling, and assessing the instruction of

writing. The six traits of writing are Voice, Ideas, Presentation, Conventions, Organization, Word Choice, and Sentence Fluency. It creates a common vocabulary and guidelines for teachers to use with students so that they become familiar with the terms used in writing. It develops consistency. The Six Traits model allows teachers and students to focus on one or two elements of writing at a time creating a more manageable and effective way for students to learn how to write. It also is a means of providing specific feedback to students through the assessment of their writing.

4.1 Theoretical Framework

The history of second language writing research has witnessed theoretical and methodological controversies over whether L2 writing is primarily cognitive or social. There is an increasing emphasis on the social and motivational context within which the writing process is embedded. Writing is no more approached as an individually written product isolated from its context. This social view of L2 learning and, thus, writing has received extra impetus since the 1990s by an increasing interest in the application of the Vygotsky-inspired sociocultural theory (SCT) to second and foreign language research (Ellis, 1997; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997; Oxford, 1997; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; van Lier, 1996). It best describes the context of writing activity in its totality. It offers a perspective within which writing can be examined as a social practice, with students as active participants in constructing learning processes, and as a result, the interaction between different factors can be explored. Lantolf (2000, 2002) states that the central and distinguishing concept of the SCT is that the human mind is always and everywhere socially and semiotically mediated within the zone of proximal development (ZPD), or the domain of knowledge or skill where the learner is not yet capable of independent functioning, but can achieve the desired outcome given relevant scaffolded help" (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 196).

The present study, hence, investigates the impact of instructing the 6+1 writing traits within a sociocultural framework on the improvement of L2 students' writing ability using the 6+1 writing traits. Although acknowledging that group work may provide opportunities for creative thinking, this research is specifically concerned with the use and non-use of sociocultural strategies in groups and the possible effect it brings about on the quality of essay writing as a result of instruction and consciousness raising.

5.0: Objectives and Research Questions

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the implementation of the 6+1 writing traits in the Matriculation ESL classroom. Specifically, this research seeks to achieve the following objective:

1. To investigate the implementation, of integrating the elements of 6+1 writing traits in the teaching and learning of writing skills.

This research sought to answer the following research question:

1. Can the 6+1 writing traits improve Matriculation learners' expository essay writing proficiency?

6.0: Method

A total of 10 respondents from the mechanical course (1class) were selected for this research. The respondents consisted of 7 males and 3 females. This action research spanned over 9 weeks. Every week comprised 3 contact hours and teaching and learning of writing encompassed 2 hours per week. Learners participated in this action research for 18 hours in total. This study was initiated with a pre – test. The pre- test was based on a single expository question entitled: **Experience is more important than advice. Do you agree? Provide relevant ideas in support of your stand.** This action research concluded with a post – test on the same essay question. This post-test was administered in week 10. During the course of the 6+1 writing traits intervention phase, 3 respondents were engaged for a semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview format, in line with previous writing approach research (Entwistle and Entwistle 1991; Hounsell 1997; Biggs 1988b), was used to allow maximum opportunities for depth, interpretation and expansion. My strategy was to alternate several open questions with several specific questions in order to provide a supportive framework. The questions were geared to reflect students' emerging comments regarding 6+1 writing traits and their experiences of learning in the writing situation. The following questions were asked of the interviewees:

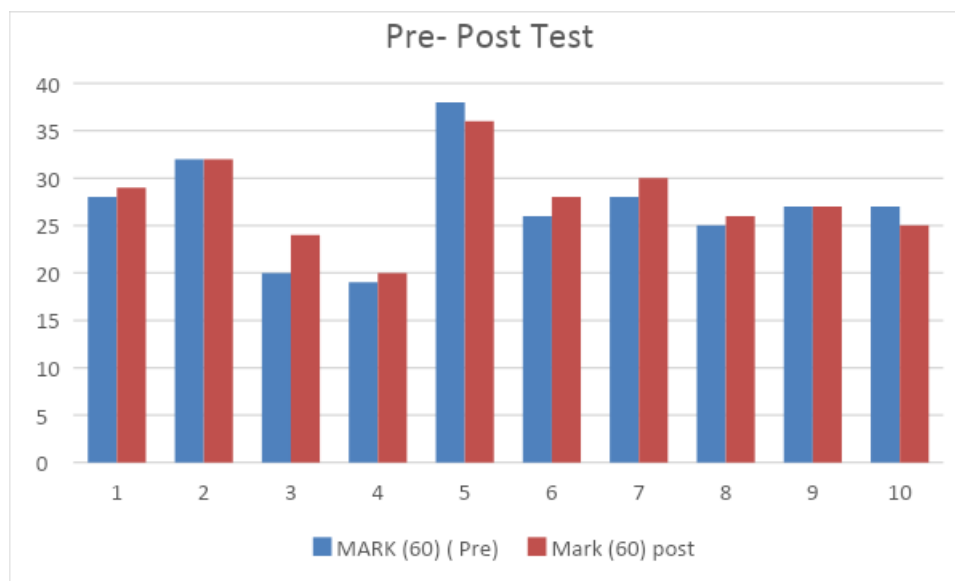
1. Do you think learning to write using the 6+1 writing traits is good? Why?
2. Do you like the writing lessons? Why?
3. Describe your experience of writing. Does your thinking change writing? Your interpretation of the task?

A key aspect of writing process approaches is the importance of seeking and responding to the feedback of others while a text is underdevelopment. Feedback on students' drafts may take the form of oral or written comments by peers or the lecturer designed to guide students in their revisions. With training and practice, students can fruitfully engage in peer review, which can help them develop their critical faculties and understand how other readers respond to their writing.

7.0: Findings**Pre- Test / Post – test result****Table 7.1**

RESPONDENT	MARK (60) (Pre)	Mark (60) post
1	28	29
2	32	32
3	20	24
4	19	20
5	38	36
6	26	28
7	28	30
8	25	26
9	27	27
10	27	25

This data can be summarised in the following pie- chart.

Graph 7.2

Excerpt from the semi- structured interview.

- Do you think learning to write using the 6+1 writing traits is good? Why?

R1: It's better than correcting but time consuming

R2: Too detail. As a practice it's ok.

R3: tired

- Do you like the writing lessons? Why?

R1: I like but vocab is weak

R2: Essay too long. Report is better. Less words

R3: I like speaking but writing depends on mood

- Describe your experience of writing. Does your thinking change writing? Your interpretation of the task?

R1: sometimes difficult to get ideas. Not sure my thinking change writing. Topic is good but no ideas

R2: I want to write but sometimes cannot. Why? No ideas and words. Not too difficult

8.0: Conclusion

The key to facilitating writing at the Matriculation level is found in designing a high quality writing environment to include generation of ideas, emphasis on revision and meaning, scaffolding, pair work as well as group revision. While these aspects may be familiar, the 6+1 writing traits brings a new understanding of teaching and learning writing. In terms of writing instruction, it is important to help writers to gain a positive identity in writing in conjunction with acquiring increased skills. Students need to be familiar with how writing works as a tool of learning and of self-expression as well as to find personal voice in expository tasks

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