



**CHALLENGES STUDENTS FACED IN LEARNING ESSAY WRITING
SKILLS: THE CASE OF GRADE 11 STUDENTS AT FITCHE
PREPARATORY SCHOOL**

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to assess problems facing grade 11 students at Fitch Preparatory School in developing well-written essay in English. The specific objective of the study was to investigate challenges students faced in learning essay writing skills. The study was based on the process approach. A descriptive survey research design was adopted in this study. The target population was grade 11 students at Fitch Preparatory School. Simple random sampling technique was used in selecting the sample for the study. Thus, a sample of 60 students was used as the respondents of the study. Data were collected by the use of a questionnaire for the students. The findings of the study indicate that most teachers dominated in the classroom interaction. It was also reported that the teaching methods used were mainly teacher centered such as lecturing and question and answer. However, group work and pair work which have been proven to enhance essay writing skills among other methods were the least used. The results further revealed that major challenges students faced in learning essay writing skills include: incorrect use of grammar, first language interference, limited vocabulary and inadequate teaching and learning resources. Recommendations based on the study were made to enable curriculum developers,

policy makers and teachers to address the challenges students faced in the learning essay writing skills through process writing approach.

Keywords: writing problems, essay writing, process writing approach

INTRODUCTION

Writing is considered as the most important skill that students require in order to enhance their personal development and academic success (Mukulu, et.al, 2000). In addition, Adam and Keene (2000) note that learning to master writing skills can help students deal successfully with their academic demands and perform effectively in their disciplines and professional contexts. In the academic context, students are required to produce specific writing genres such as essays, summaries, and reports (Evans, 2001).

In the teaching and learning process of writing skill, Byrne (1988) notes that writing is learned through the process of instruction in which the student is expected to master the written form of the language and to learn certain structures that are not common in speech but which have vital importance for effective communication. In addition, Hyland (2002) asserts that writing is an activity which must be mastered in order for students to express their ideas effectively in writing.

Advanced skills, on the other hand are related to proper organization of ideas, correct use of grammar and originality of expression. They further observe that in L₂ learning situation, writing skills are the most difficult to master. In addition, Graham and Perin (2007) claim that a well written essay focuses on the topic and has an organizational pattern that enables a reader to follow the flow of ideas. It also contains supporting ideas that are developed through the use of examples, appropriate vocabulary and follows the conventions of standard written English language such as correct spelling, capitalization and sentence structure.

To have an effective teaching learning process and to help students in their day to day real life communication as well as in their academic success, a good writing skill of teachers as well as of students is doubtlessly important. Related to this, Wallace (1991) said, language teaching learning, especially of great world languages which are seen as international channel of

communication becomes ever more important as the pressure to communicate increases because of globalization.

Many scholars have mentioned that the importance of writing skills; in addition they have also stated difficulties in learning and teaching writing skill; It is obvious that teaching and learning of essay writing is difficult. Therefore, the researcher intends to know the challenges which affected the learning of essay writing. By identifying the challenges of learning essay writing, it is possible to enhance the students' essay writing skills.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study was to assess the challenges of learning essay writings through process writing approach.

Process writing Approach

Hyland (2002) indicates the process approach focuses on how a text is written instead of the final outcome. He adds that it has a major influence on understanding the nature of writing and the way writing is taught. Therefore, it emphasizes on the importance of certain procedures such as pre-writing, drafting, evaluating and revising. Moreover, it involves introducing techniques that help students identify and engage in a topic. Students are required to produce multiple drafts of a work. After discussion and feedback from evaluations, the students would revise the drafts. Rewriting, revision and editing are essential parts to writing in this approach. Jordan (1997) states that it enables the students to make clear decisions about the direction of their writing by certain procedures such as discussion, drafting, feedback and revision choices

Tribble (1996) explains that when using a process approach to teach academic writing, students should brainstorm in small groups on the topic to be discussed in writing; this helps them to generate ideas before starting to write. This is followed by making an outline of the essay. At this stage students also revise their first draft and give them to other students for pre-reviewing and commenting on the final stage editing the essay the writer himself or herself to eliminate any language errors. Thus, this approach focuses on process rather than product.

Bougey(1997) argues that process approach is one of the best methods for teachers to use in teaching FL writing skills. He notes that students are able to improve their writing abilities step by step since teachers guide them through the whole process of their writing tasks by giving them feedback and enough time and opportunity through peer and teacher reviews. Myles(2002) states that process approach enables the students to understand the steps involved in writing and recognizes learners' efforts towards the development of their writing abilities and their input brought to the writing classroom contributes to the development of their writing abilities. It also helps students develop cultural thinking and learn not to depend only on teachers' feedback.

Difficulties of Writing Essays through Process Writing Approach

In writing, there may have barrier of communication unless the correct form of language such as language structure, words, mechanics and others are used effectively (Pincas, 1982). Besides, Raimes (1983) showed the linguistic problems that the students faced in their essay writing and attempted to mention some: writing ungrammatical and long sentences, the unbalanced distribution of words in the given samples, wrong distribution of parts of speech, and some of grammatical errors are believed to be major areas in which linguistic problems can affect essay writing.

Grammatical Problems

Students have committed a number of mechanical problems in their foreign language (English) writing (Hedge, 1988). For example, according to Tyner(1987), students may not use verbs properly. This means, they don't realize that verbs can make different forms depending on these, subjects are used with. Therefore, due to this problem, students may face a great challenge when they take a test of writing essay with careful instruction to keep the proper grammatical patterns. Moreover, students have problems with subject verb agreement, pronoun references, and connectors and so on (Krashen, 1984). From this; one may realize that if students are not well acquainted with grammatical usage of the language, it is challengeable to practice essay writing through process approach.

The Problem of Diction

A good writing or composition should consist of appropriate and varied range of vocabulary

used along with proper grammatical and varied range of sentences (Norrish, 1983). When the writer makes a choice of vocabulary that would reflect a concern for the reader and purpose of writing, the composition written would give sense to reader (Reid, 1993). However, writing in foreign language or second language using appropriate words in their right place is a major problem for most students. White (1980) says that most students usually use 'big words' which may not go with the actual context in writing their essay writing to impress their teachers. Inevitably, this attempt leads to a problem of diction, so the problem with diction can lead students to a negative attitude towards their essay writing in English language.

Punctuation Problem

Students most often encounter punctuation problems in any form of writing. According to Carroll and Wilson (1995), there are three basic reasons which make to use wrong punctuation for students to learn and apply in their essay writing. Firstly, the rules of punctuation are not universal or absolute to the meaning they give. Secondly, punctuation marks are complex to learn and lastly, punctuation relies on the style of the writer and the intended meaning. When students take writing tests, they have to know the actual words which should be capitalized. Kroll (1991) explains that capital letters have always signified important words. Besides, they are useful to sentences initials, important words in headings or topics, in proper names, and even including first person pronoun (I) wherever it appears; it should be capitalized.

Spelling Problem

Using correct spelling has an important role to practice writing through process approach. However, owing to the influence of the other languages variant pronunciation and other historical reasons, the English spelling system which has become inconsistent and complex for students (Kharm, 1986). That is why students are expected to study or memorize the spelling rules before they are going to it for writing. This is because teachers while checking students answer scripts, most often consider spelling as one parameter in giving marks. As students know this very well, they usually get frustrated when they are not sure of the correct spelling of the words in their writing.

Organization Problem

Students may also have problems of structuring the essay topic development of essay, organizing the whole discourse and theme (Krahm, 1986). As Pincas (1982) showed that students or writers have problems of writing united essay. The reason is due to their failure to use cohesive devices appropriately. Using these devices may help the writer to create clear transition from idea to the next developing coherent essay, summarizing main points, and putting them chronologically.

Lack of Motivation

Motivation has a great role for the success and achievement of good writing. According to Hamer (2006), people involved in language teaching often say that students who really want to learn will succeed whatever circumstances in which they study. This indicates that motivation is highly related to achievements. Learners may lack confidence about their writing but teachers should motivate them. The majority of students fear making mistakes when they practice writing essay. Some of the students may not show their hand writing to their friends even.

As to Seow (2002), the process writing approach consists of the following stages: 1) planning or pre-writing, 2) drafting, and 3) revising. He further discussed the stages as follows. In the stage of planning or pre-writing, a teacher proposes the writing topic to class, raises motivation, sets up writing purposes, determines audience, discusses the contents with students, screens and orders contents, plans the writing, and outlines it.

During this stage, there are many techniques to employ such as brainstorming, discussing, making notes, clustering, and rapid free writing. The second step is the drafting (composing). After the students get enough ideas to produce a piece of writing, they put the idea on the paper quickly. They do not still need to pay much attention to appropriate language, grammar and spelling. The focus of this stage is on the ideas that the students want to convey to the reader, the purpose of writing and pattern, and mechanics appropriate to the topic. Teachers who are trying to implement the process approach to writing instruction are mostly expected to facilitate their students' learning by giving them ample time to plan, think and discover meaning through their writing (Seow, 2002).

In general, the teachers' role is to organize and facilitate situations for learners to write continuously and abundantly (Mesfin, 2013). In connection with this, Richards (1988) as cited in Mesfin (2013) further suggested that the teacher is a facilitator of the writing process employed by the students; his/her observation and discussion mechanisms to identify more successful techniques would help students pass through the process more successfully.

Stages of Writing Skills

Writing has three stages called pre writing, while writing and post writing. Below we are going to see them one by one.

2.3.1 Pre-writing Stage

Pre-writing stage is a stage in which writers get a chance of collecting their attention and schema towards the topic that they are going to write. In accordance with the importance of schema, Petty & Cacioppo (1986) stated that individuals use their schemata to organize new information when they are exposed to a new or unfamiliar stimulus or concept. In relation, Petty, & Cacioppo, (1986) stated, "Essentially, for new information to be understood or useful, we must find schemata with which to link the new stimulus to previously understood experiences."

Richard & Willy (2002) also put pre-writing stage as a stage when any activity that urges learners to write by stimulating ideas to get in to writing are going to be given. This stage protects learners from being exposed to a blank sheet of paper with bare mind about the topic to write about. Therefore, in order to initiate learners' schema or background knowledge towards a certain topic to write, learners should be given opportunity of collecting their background. To do this, learners should pass through pre-writing stage since this stage aids learners to relate their schema with what they are going to write about.

2.3.2 While Writing Stage

While writing stage is writing stage that comes after pre writing. As it was put by Young, Hofer & Harris (2009) while writing stage is a stage in which learners are invited to draft and organize their ideas based on their pre-writing activities. In addition, it is also in this stage that learners do

the task of revising the content of their writing. Here, the task of editing the written text based on the appropriate language is allowed to be done.

2.3.3 Post Writing Stage

A stage that takes place finally in writing is post writing stage. As Richard & Willy, (2002) wrote, post writing stage is a stage that constitutes any classroom activities done with the completed written text. In this stage, activities like: reading aloud, publishing and displaying the written works can be accomplished. This stage must be planned to lead learners to feel that they are writing for real purpose.

Research design

This study adopted a descriptive research design. With regard to Kothari (2004), a descriptive research design is appropriate to make investigation with narration of events and drawing of conclusions based on the information obtained from relatively large and representative samples of the target population. So, it was considered appropriate because it enabled the researcher to gather information from the respondents on challenges students faced in learning essay writing through process approach at preparatory school. This design was also chosen because it allowed the researcher obtain quantitative data concerning challenges students faced learning essay writing skills in English language.

Participants of the Study

Israel (1992) described participants as any set of people or events from which the sample is selected and to which the study results are generalized. Therefore, the target population of this study was grade 11 students of Fitch Preparatory School, Ethiopia. At Fitch Preparatory School, there were 280 students who were being taught in the 5 sections. From the 280 students, the researcher used lottery method to select one of the 5 sections which contained 60 students as Sidhu (1984) said that students are similar in many aspects and therefore, a study on some of them will throw significant light upon the whole students. All the students found in the one section were made to respond to the questionnaires.

DISCUSSION

In this part, the students' responses to the following items were analyzed and discussed. These items were designed to get information from the students with regard to their challenges to learn essay writing skills through process writing approach. As can be observed in item 1, 60(16.67%), 30(50%) and 13(21.67%) of the 60 sample students responded that they sometimes, rarely and never got different writing materials that would help them improve their essay writing respectively in the school where they were learning. On the other hand, the rest students, i.e. 7(11.67%) said that the resources were available in their school. This implies that the students had scarcity of materials related to their writing skills in the school. This is also supported by Eyinda and Shariff's (2009) ideas which showed that inadequate teaching and learning resources are challenges in the acquisition of writing skills.

Besides, as in item 2, 23 (38.33%) and 20(33.33%) of the respondents stated that they were sometimes and rarely given regular feedback while they were learning essay writing skills respectively. In contrast, 5 (8.33%) and 13(21.67%) of the students answered that they always and usually got feedback regularly after they had been taught essay writing skills respectively. It is possible to deduce from their responses that getting appropriate feedback that could indicate where the students' problems lay is challenging for them and this in turn affected them not to mitigate their essay writing skills.

For the question "Are you made to practice essay writing skills through process writing approach?" 20(33.33%) and 19(31.67%) of the students answered that they were rarely and never made to practice writing essays via process writing approach respectively. Nevertheless, the rest students, i.e. 7(11.67%), 8(13.33%) and 8(13.33%) said that they were always, usually and sometimes made to practice essay writing through process writing approach. The implication of the data is that the students did not practice writing essays and were subjected not to show progress in their writing.

Furthermore, almost all the students, i.e. 35(58.33%) and 20(33.33%) the respondents confirmed that their mother tongues always and usually interfered while doing the writing activities in pairs or groups respectively and this is not in agreement with Harmer's (2004) idea, i.e. in using the process approach, teachers are expected to spend time with learners on pre-writing phases, editing, redrafting, and finally publishing their work, but insignificant number of the students, 2

(3.33%) and 2(3.33%) said that they were rarely and never influenced by their first languages while they were in pairs and groups to write essays.

18(30%) and 34(56.67%) of the students' responses revealed that most of them, i.e. 18(30%) and 34(56.67%) had scarcity of vocabulary usage in the process of composing essays through process writing approach. In contrast, 4(6.67%), 2(3.33%) and 2(3.33) of the respondents said that their abilities to make use of vocabularies while writing essays through process writing approach were limited. Thus, from the aforementioned data, the students could not express their ideas coherently in essay writing due to limited vocabularies. The students were asked whether or not they rewrote the corrected version of the essays. In response to this, 28(46.67%), 15(25%) and 10(16.67%) said that they sometimes, rarely and never did not rewrite the corrected version of the essays respectively; however, 4(6.67%) and 3(5%) of the respondents answered that they always and usually rewrote the corrected version of the essays as per their teachers' comments. The data imply that the students did not get an opportunity to get what they had written corrected. 27 (45%) of the students said that they rarely rewrote appropriate grammar while composing essays.

In contrary to this, 11(18.33%), 8(13.33%) and 9(15%) of the students' answers show that they always, usually and regularly compose their essays with correct grammar respectively. On the basis of their responses, it may be inferred that the students lacked grammar abilities to produce essays that sound germane; moreover, the students could not implement the stages of process writing approach, i.e. planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing while writing different genres of essays. In this regard, 25(41.67%) and 23(38.33) of the students responded that they rarely and never used the stages in the process of writing essays respectively. On the other hand, 4(6.67), 6(10%) and 2(3.33%) of the respondents assured that they always, usually and sometimes used the stages to compose essays respectively. The implication of the data is that the students were not made to employ the salient steps in the process of composing essays.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed: The teachers need to give considerable attention to the essay writing skills through process writing approach to upgrade the students' essay writing abilities. The teachers should use varieties of essay writing activities through process writing approach in teaching writing to make the teaching of essay writing interesting and to help students express their feelings and ideas freely in writing in

English. The teachers should pay attention to contents and organizations of ideas than focusing mainly on the mechanical aspects such as grammar, punctuation and spelling. The teachers should use varieties of supplementary materials other than the textbook to meet the interests of most of the students and to help them improve their essay writing skills. The teachers should arrange tutorial classes especially for teaching essay writing through process writing approach to help their students get adequate time in practicing the essay writing skills in the classroom.

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