

Challenges of Teaching English Writing Skills for Post-Graduate English Non-Major Students

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Abstract

The study aims at finding out the difficulties that post-graduate English non-major students at Tra Vinh University usually face (TVU) while studying English writing skills. Therefore, some recommended solutions will be proposed to help students overcome those difficulties. In this study, some final writing products are used to collect data. Answers to the following research questions will be searched: (1) What are the students' problems in writing? (2) What are the possible causes of the problems faced by the students? and (3) What possible solutions can be proposed to solve the students' problems based on the students' work? With this paper, the researcher tries to find out the students' common errors in terms of content, organization, and language use including vocabulary, and grammar. The findings of the study will be discussed, and some solutions will be recommended to the problems. With the findings and some essay writing suggestions for post-graduate English non-major students, the researcher hopes that students will know what their problems are and how students can overcome them successfully.

1. Introduction

No one can deny the importance of writing together with the other skills in teaching and learning English. Additionally, writing is a productive skill which “helps language learners to stimulate thinking and organize their ideas. Furthermore, it increases learners’ ability to summarize, analyze, and criticize” (Rao, 2007, as cited in Siwaporn, 2010). However, English writing is a difficult skill for them to acquire. In fact, the majority of post-graduate learners are generally the ones who have interrupted time in learning English because of their work after their Bachelor’s degrees. As other post-graduate English non-major students in Vietnam, those at TVU usually find their writing course uneasy. This has also been the case that Bailey (2006) observed, “Those students who are not native speakers of English often find the written demands of their courses very challenging” (p.vii). Therefore, to the lecturers of English non-major writing course for post-graduate candidates, they have to clearly understand their learners’ challenges in order to help them finish the course successfully.

Although writing checklists in different textbooks have various items, learners just need to focus on the three following ones: content, organization, and language use. First, content deals with ideas that are contained in a piece of writing. Second, organization works with how to arrange the ideas in a logical order. Finally, language use assesses whether words, phrases, and sentences are used by the learners accurately. As a result, the researcher has made use of the mistakes in the three mentioned areas made by her post-graduate English non-major learners in writing English to study more about the topic: *Challenges of Teaching English Writing Skills for Post-Graduate English Non-Major Students*.

1.1. Research aims

The main aim of this paper is to find out the problems and offer solutions to improving writing skills for post-graduate English non-major students at TVU. In order to reach this aim, the paper sets the following objectives for investigations:

- identifying the Master in Management learners’ problems in writing;
- indicating the possible causes of their problems;
- proposing the possible solutions to the problems based on their work.

1.2. Research questions

Aiming to gain insights into the difficulties in the English writing skills of the Master in Management majors – Class MM2 and MM3 at TVU, this study is to find out the answer to the following research questions:

- (1) What are the students’ problems in writing?
- (2) What are the possible causes of the problems faced by the students? and
- (3) What possible solutions can be proposed to solve the students’ problems based on the students’ work?

1.3. Hypotheses

The Master in Management majors in TVU have several problems in their English writing. They find their English writing skills very hard to be developed. If their difficulties are considered closely and seriously, and appropriate recommendations are adequately given to the students, they will surely improve their writing skills by minimizing the pitfalls they have been facing.

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research design

This study involves an exploratory design combining data collection and analysis. First, the students' final writing products are used to identify the common mistakes. Second, the analyzing result is a good basic that is used to propose some recommended solutions to help students tackle difficulties and improve their writing skills.

2.2. Participants

There are twenty students of Class MM2 and MM3 who are chosen randomly as the participants of the research. Because of the time limitation, it is impossible to carry out the study with all the members in Class MM2 and MM3. Therefore, in the study, there are only twenty Master in Management majors at TVU who are involved to participate in the research. In the total number of twenty students who are chosen, there are ten males and ten females. Actually, the Advanced Grammar and Composition course is taught at the beginning of their Master's degree program while they do not too worry about other of their major courses.

2.3. Settings

The students' final writing products were done on April 4th 2013 for Class MM2 and March 31st, 2015 for Class MM3. Each test lasted 3 hours.

2.4. Instruments

The instruments used in the research were students' twenty final writing products.

To gain more reliability and validity for the study, the researcher spends a large amount of time and effort to study these samples. Twenty writing papers are selected from 60 students at different range of levels from good, quite good, average and not good. The reason of doing this is to use them as an instrument to analyze the common errors of students. Moreover, the papers are on the same topic and at the same period of time to make the analysis more reliable and valid.

Class MM2 was asked to write a 600-word essay on the following topic: "Typical characteristics of a good manager" while Class MM3 was require to write a 600-word essay on the following topic: "Benefits of living in your province".

Every essay has about the same mistakes on organization, content, and language use. The advantages of these essays' analysis are that the results will be reliable and helpful for the research. On the other hand, the disadvantages are that it takes time, and it is not easy for the researcher to analyze them.

3. Results

3.1. Students 'problems in writing

3.1.1. Organization

a. Introductory paragraph

Essay organization was examined in three parts: introductory paragraph, body ones, and concluding one. First, in the introductory paragraph, 90% of the essays had general statements 30% of which was well-expressed; 50% of the thesis statements stated the specific topics or listed the subtopics 30% of which was very well-written, and only 5% was not very closely related to its body paragraphs; 65% of the thesis

statements clearly indicated the pattern organization again 30% of which was obviously described. Only 10% of thesis statements was too general while 5% of them just made a simple announcement, and none stated an obvious fact.

Introductory Paragraph					
General statements	Thesis statement				
	State the specific topic/List the subtopics	Indicate the pattern of organization	Too general	Making a simple announcement	Stating an obvious fact
90% 30% (good)	50% 30% (good) 5% (limited)	65% 30% (good)	10%	5%	0%

b. Body paragraphs

Second, 100% of the body paragraphs had the topic sentence 25% of which was excellently presented; but, only 25% of the topic sentences included controlling ideas; for concluding sentences, 30% summarized the main points whereas 15% repeated the topic sentence in different words; with regard to supporting sentences, examples accounted for 55% meanwhile 50% was statistics, 45% was occupied by quotations, and 70% owned clear connection between the borrowed information and the writer's idea – one interesting fact was that 5% of all the three kinds of supporting ideas was so well-stated.

Body Paragraphs							
Topic sentence		Concluding sentence		Supporting sentences			
Topic	Controlling ideas	Summarize the main points	Repeat the topic sentence in different words	Examples	Statistics	Quotations	Clear connection between the borrowed information and the writer's idea
100%	25%	30%	15%	55%	50%	45%	70%
25% (good)				5% (good)	5% (good)	5% (good)	5% (good)

c. Concluding paragraph

Finally, 35% of the concluding sentences signaled the end of the essay 20% of which was outstandingly written; 85% summarized the subtopics or paraphrased the thesis 20% of which was accurately stated; in connection with leaving the reader with the writer's final thoughts on the topic, making a prediction accounted for 40% while

25% suggested results or consequences, and 10% suggested a solution – none called for action or quoted an authority on the topic.

Concluding Paragraph							
Signal the end of the essay	Summarize the subtopics OR paraphrase the thesis	Leave your reader with the writer's final thoughts on the topic by					
		Making a prediction	Suggest results or consequences	Suggest a solution	Make a recommendation	Call for action	Quote an authority on the topic
35% 20% (good)	85% 20% (good)	40%	25%	10%	10%	0%	0%

3.1.2. Content

As regards the content of the essay, unity and coherence were exploited. For unity, 95% discussed only one idea in a paragraph as well as always stayed on the topic in the supporting sentences. With coherence, 95% repeated key nouns; 80% used consistent pronouns; 80% arranged ideas in some kind of logical order 30% of which was well-done and 15% was badly structured. Furthermore, 10% of the essay was from very good to excellent; 30% was really well-organized; however, 5% of which was out of the topic and 25% was shorter than expected.

Unity		Coherence				Notes
Discussing only one idea in a paragraph	Always staying on the topic in your supporting sentences	Repeating key nouns	Using consistent pronouns	Using transition signals	Arranging your ideas in some kind of logical order	
95%	95%	95%	80%	95%	80% 30% (good) 15% (limited)	5% (excellent) 5% (very good) 30% (well-organized) 5% (out of the topic) 25% (shorter than expected)

3.1.3. Language use

Regarding language use, vocabulary and grammar were checked for errors. 45% of the essays had spelling mistakes while word choice errors accounted for 40%. Additionally, 30% of verb tenses was used incorrectly; 40% of subject-verb agreement

was misused; and 70% of the mistakes was found in sentence structures. Totally, 36 vocabulary mistakes and 77 grammar errors were recorded.

NO	Vocabulary		Grammar		
	Spelling	Word choice	Verb tenses	Subject-verb agreement	Correct sentence structures
1	45%	40%	35%	40%	70%
2	20 mistakes	16 mistakes	11 mistakes	22 mistakes	44 mistakes

3.2. Primary causes of students 'problems

3.2.1. Lack of essay writing practice

According to my small study in these two classes 100% of whom is working and is still involving in their work while pursuing their Master's degree course, I have learned the following facts. First, my students are two busy with their current jobs, so they almost have no time to practice writing at home. Second, when starting to write, most of them have just drafted too general outlines; some have even never had any outlines; and the minority can have outlined their essays in details. In addition, when I have asked them to draft their outlines at home as their homework, they have just had time to surf the Internet for some ideas before entering the classroom.

3.2.2. Lack of ideas

One of the weaknesses of students is that they have not used the brainstorming skills for ideas as much as they need when writing. As a result, they have usually encountered these two problems: the main idea was not fully exploited and the arrangement of ideas was not so logical.

3.2.3. Lack of vocabulary and lack of time practicing grammar structures

Examining the students' mistakes in language use, the researcher can see that most students' vocabulary has been poor because the students have not got used to reading to enlarge their vocabulary. Besides, for three types of sentences, they tend to use mostly simple ones; only whenever they want to express a long idea in a sentence, do they start using compound and complex ones. Therefore, the majority of sentence structure mistakes have often fallen on the two latter ones.

3.3. Recommended solutions

By discussing with some of her students and colleagues, the researcher has come up with the following recommendations.

3.3.1. For management

- Build the Writing Center to help improve the writers; According to <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/faculty-resources/tips-on-teaching-writing/>, at the Writing Center, they are often asked "What makes good writing?" or "What makes someone a good writer?" Instructors wonder whether anyone can really be taught to write and why their students do not know how to write by now; Writing is a response; Writing is linear; Writing is recursive; Writing is both subject and object; Writing is decision making; Writing is a process.

- Have clear operation regulations.

3.3.2. For teachers

- Have reading exercises done as pre-writing activities to assist students with related vocabulary;
- Spend more time with students after class as writing facilitators;
- Improve the writers not the writing.

3.3.3. For students

- Spend enough time for reading to enlarge vocabulary;
- Practice writing as much as possible.

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary and discussion of the findings

By carefully studying the real works of her students, the researcher can find out their main difficulties when they write. From the problems, the researcher's students and herself identify the basic causes as well as propose recommended solutions to help both the students and the teachers improve the situation.

4.2 Teaching implications

As teachers of writing, the researcher and her co-workers have understood that teaching writing needs a lot of time and effort from both the teachers and the students. However, because of the limited time in class, it seems that there is never enough practice unless students use their time at home for their own writing practice. Another obstacle is that what free time teachers have for facilitating their students' works. In order to help students improve their writing skills, the management staff should think of building a Writing Center where students can be assisted in improving themselves as the writers. Nevertheless, how the Writing Center is operated, what the policies for teachers are, and how students are encouraged to use this Center are not easy to identify immediately.

4.3 Limitations of the study and recommendations for improving the present research

In order to improve the present research, the following modifications might be worth considering. First, more writing works might have been studied. Second, the differences between the two classes and the two sexes should have been identified. Finally, follow-up activities should have been applied to see how improved the student writers have become.

4.4 Suggestions for further studies

Several research directions for further studies are mentioned briefly below. First, similar research can be undertaken for undergraduate English majors to see the differences and similarities. Second, research on establishing a Writing Center should be done to measure its effectiveness. Finally, to improve the Writing Center to see how it works may be the follow-up research that can be done by the researcher's colleagues.

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