POOR WRITING SKILL AMONG UITM STUDENTS: A QUALITATIVE SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON SIL'S LEARNER DOMAIN

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ABSTRACT

The second language (L2) learners, especially from Malaysian higher learning institutions, have always faced difficulty to master good writing skill. Though the importance of English language has been always highlighted in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), the students have yet to perform well in their writing assessments. Based on the performance analysis and the writing challenges prescribed in the SIL domains, the objective of this study is to further investigate on the SIL's learner domain on the poor writing skill and writing needs among the UiTM students through a systematic literature review. After analysing the related literature, the seven identified perspectives of poor writing skill include writing complexity, literacy, proficiency, critical thinking, information literacy, interlanguage, and writing anxiety. The findings denote a high demand for developing a supplementary web-based instruction (WBI) and a comprehensive framework such as Web-based Cognitive Writing Instruction (WeCWI) is highlighted to tackle efficiently the L2 writing predicaments.

Keywords: SIL; learner domain; poor writing skill; web-based instruction; WeCWI

1.0 INTRODUCTION

As the largest public institution of higher learning in Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) offers a number of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses to expose the undergraduates with different kinds of English language skills apart from what they had learned in secondary schools. English language is given a great emphasis in UiTM as the medium of instruction (Nor Aslah Adzmi, Samsiah Bidin, Syazliyati Ibrahim, & Kamaruzaman Jusoff, 2009; Rushita Ismail & Muriatul Khusmah Musa, 2006). English language is also the most important subject in the curriculum, which is also a mandatory course for all students (Rushita Ismail & Muriatul Khusmah Musa, 2006). Thus, the most immediate need for the undergraduates is to acquire academic writing skills. Nevertheless, there are some observable setbacks that have restrained the students to perform well in the writing assessment.

1.1 Problem Statement

Even though Malaysian students are positive in general towards learning English (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992), UiTM students are facing problems in writing as compared to other language skills (Chittra Muthusamy, Faizah Mohamad, Siti Norliana Ghazali, & Angelina Subrayan @ Michael, 2010). Most L2 learners in universities are unaware about their weaknesses and mistakes in writing–knowing how to write an essay in native language does not necessarily denote that they will be able to do it in English (Kern, 2000; Ng, 2001).

As highlighted by Dzullijah Ibrahim and Peridah Bahari (2005), traditional teacher-centric way of teaching and learning have been practised for decades in UiTM, including 'chalk and talk' method, textual instructional medium, and students-write-and-teacher-correct routine. Based on the performance analysis of BEL 422 Report Writing in January-April 2011 and September 2011-January 2012, civil and electrical engineering undergraduates from UiTM Penang Branch were found to have performed poorly in report writing. This evidence is further supported by the nine L2 writing challenges prescribed in the SIL domains represented by a chain reaction diagram (Mah, Irfan Naufal Umar, & Thomas Chow, 2013).

1.2 Objective of Study

Based on the rise in research findings and reports about the dismal ability in the mastery of English among UiTM students, the objective of this study is to conduct a systematic literature review to further investigate the perspectives of poor writing skill and writing needs among the UiTM students. By analysing the past studies on the learner perspective as mentioned in SIL (Mah et al., 2013), a more targeted and meticulous solution for UiTM students can be proposed, executed, and further tested for its effectiveness in future.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

A call of concerns of the poor writing skill among UiTM students had been reported in a number of past studies as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Poor Writing Skill of UiTM Students Reported in the Past Studies

Research Area	Past Studies on Writing in UiTM
Writing module	Affiana Kadriana (2007)
Writing performance	Noriah Ismail et al. (2013); Rahmah Mohd Rashid (1999); Rohayah Nordin and Naginder Kaur Surjit Singh (2003); Surina Nayan (2002); Yah Awg Nik et al. (2006)
Writing anxiety	Noorzaina Idris (2009)
Writing apprehension	Nor Shidrah Mat Daud (2003); Noriah Ismail, Suhaidi Elias, Intan Safinas Mohd Ariff Albakri, P Dhayapari Perumal, and Indrani Muthusamy (2010)
Writing process	Nor Shidrah Mat Daud (2005)
Writing needs	Noriah Ismail et al. (2012); Noriah Ismail, Supyan Hussin, and Saadiyah Darus (2012a, 2012b)
Writing creatively	Chittra Muthusamy, Faizah Mohamad, et al. (2010)
Teacher written feedback	Noriah Ismail, Sumarni Maulan, and Nor Haniza Hasan (2005, 2008)
Writing attitude and learning problems	Noriah Ismail et al. (2012a, 2012b)

Language skills	Fazdilah (2013)
Writing creatively	Chittra Muthusamy, Faizah Mohamad, et al. (2010)

Besides the writing predicaments, different writing needs of students and instructors were identified from the local studies. Researchers like Nor Aslah Adzmi et al. (2009), Noriah Ismail, Saadiyah Darus, et al. (2012), Noriah Ismail, Supyan Hussin, et al. (2012a), and Rohayah Nordin and Naginder Kaur Surjit Singh (2003) called attention to the writing needs of UiTM students beyond the existing writing curriculum. Self-instructional materials were found imperative in improving UiTM students' performance (Jamilah Karima, Peridah Bahari, & Norhayati Mohammad Noor, 2003); students could learn better in advanced information and communication technology (ICT) aided environment (Fook & Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, 2009).

In addition, UiTM students perceived online writing program using blog and digital forum as their favourite learning tools. In a study on the students' readiness to use web-based resources in UiTM Penang Branch, web-based resources were found capable of providing them with the latest and useful extra information. They also suggested that lecturers could provide extra and in depth explanations by referring to the web-based resources (Peridah Bahari & Salina Hamed, 2008). Moreover, some theoretical and pedagogical expectations from the instructional tool's content, instructor, and peers were highlighted to facilitate their L2 writing process. Table 2 shows the writing needs from both learners' and instructors' perspectives.

Table 2: Writing Needs among Learners and Instructors from UiTM Branches

Writing Needs	Learners	Instructors	Past Studies
Online writing program that can guide them to be critical in their writing process.	UiTM Johor Branch	Noriah Ismail et al. (2012), Noriah Ismail et al. (2012a)	
Online-based with suitable writing tools, guides, links, and resources. Online discussion on writing through blogs and e-forums			
Acquiring good English language proficiency	-	UiTM Kedah Branch	Nor Aslah Adzmi et al. (2009)
Implementation of process writing approach instead of product writing approach to teach writing	-	UiTM Perlis Branch	Rohayah Nordin and Naginder Kaur Surjit Singh (2003)

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Systematic review is a scientific investigation by collecting the original studies through comprehensive search, selecting all the potentially relevant articles based on explicit criteria, as well as synthesising and interpreting the results of multiple primary research; conversely, a summary of research without explicit descriptions of systematic method is referred as narrative review (Cook, 1997). According to Tranfield, Denyer and Smart (2003), systematic review is essential to identify the key scientific findings to an identified research scope in a study. Ahi and Searcy (2013) conducted a systematic review as a research methodology to

identify and analyse the definitions of GSCM and SSCM published in the peer-reviewed literature.

This study employed a qualitative systematic review (Cook, 1997) by summarising the results of related main studies without combining them statistically. Rooted from the performance analysis and the nine L2 writing challenges from SIL (Mah et al., 2013), the scope of literature review has been narrowed deductively by focussing on the poor writing skill from SIL's learner perspective: reading habit, language proficiency, and influence of first language (Mah et al., 2013). Through scrutinising on these areas of concern, the learners' problems in L2 writing are listed and discussed further.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After analysing the findings and discussion of the related literature, seven perspectives of poor writing skill have been identified. These seven perspectives include writing complexity, literacy, proficiency, critical thinking, information literacy, interlanguage, and writing anxiety, which are further discussed as below.

4.1 The Complexity of Writing Skill

Writing has been claimed as a very difficult skill to be acquired by ESL learners long time ago (Chittra Muthusamy, Rasaya Marimuthu, Angelina Subrayan @ Michael, Siti Norliana Ghazali, & Jeyamahla Veeravagu, 2010; Faizah Abd Majid, 2007). It is also widely known as the hardest skill to acquire and to learn as compared to the other language skills: listening, speaking, and reading (Allen & Corder, 1974; Beare, 2011; V. Cook, 2001; Haynes, 2010; Noorzaina Idris, 2009; Noriah Ismail et al., 2005; Rohayah Nordin & Naginder Kaur Surjit Singh, 2003; Yah Awg Nik et al., 2006).

The physical skills of writing involve forming letters for higher cognitive skills like spelling and constructing meaningful sentences (Cook, 2001). Thus, it consumes time and effort to learn since it has many aspects and dimensions involved in its process and product (Suleiman, 2000). Since written words in English require a higher formality, accuracy, reflection, and readers' expectation (Beare, 2011), it could be the contributor of high failure rate in report writing results among Industrial Design students in the past semesters (Nor Aslah Adzmi et al., 2009).

4.2 Low Literacy Skills

According to Fong (2012), the basic level of literacy rate in English language is 90.30%, which is lower than Malay language as 95.20% in Malaysian secondary schools. Moreover, based on Ambigapathy Pandian (2000)'s literacy survey in 2000, 80.1% of university students were classified as "reluctant" readers in English language materials. Moreover, students in UiTM Penang Branch showed very low interest in reading (Leele Susana Jamian & Emily Jothee Mathai, 2003; Rushita Ismail & Muriatul Khusmah Musa, 2006); due to a busy learning schedule, reading in English was not a priority for them (Leele Susana Jamian & Emily Jothee Mathai, 2003).

Since poor reading leads to low literacy skill particularly in writing, it was difficult for UiTM students to perform satisfactorily in English language courses (Rasaya Marimuthu, Chittra Muthusamy, & Jeyamahla Veeravagu, 2011). According to Choo (1996), the integrated approach used in language teaching in UiTM has over-emphasised grammar instead of

developing writing skills. This would cause the students facing difficulties to go beyond the surface idea in writing (Leele Susana Jamian, Suchitra K. Sankaran, & Noranisah Abu Bakar, 2006).

4.3 Interlanguage Errors

As highlighted in Larry Selinker's theory of interlanguage in 1972, L2 learners express differently as compared to the native speakers even though they are using the same language to deliver the same meaning (Mah, 2009). Nunan (1999) asserted that producing "a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing" in English for L2 learners is an arduous challenge due to the difference in rhetorical conventions of English texts from L1 (Leki, 1991), the culture-specific nature of schemata (Myles, 2002), as well as the cognitive and social challenges related to SLA. They have to think about all the English rules and tend to use their L1 knowledge to cope with the insufficient knowledge of English language (Wan Fara Adlina Wan Mansor & Noraisah Muhari, 2010).

According to Marlyna, Tan and Khazriyati (2007), the most frequent interlanguage encumbrance in writing caused by Malay grammar are articles, subject-verb agreement, and copula "be"; while in morphological aspect, they are affixes, adverbs, adjectives, and plural forms (Norsimah Mat Awal, Kesumawati Abu Bakar, Nor Zakiah Abdul Hamid, & Nor Hashimah Jalaluddin, 2007). Owing to mother tongue interference, three errors mostly found in local undergraduates' writing are verbs, prepositions, and word choice (Wan Fara Adlina Wan Mansor & Noraisah Muhari, 2010). Interlanguage errors were detected in their writing including negative transfer, avoidance and overuse (Majdah Chulan, Yang Salehah Abdullah Sani, & Siti Sarina Sulaiman, 2013).

4.4 Low Language Proficiency

As highlighted by Marlyna et al. (2007), not all language errors are caused by mother tongue interference. Even after eleven years of learning English from the primary to the secondary education, Malaysian students are found to be unable to master or even comprehend the language (Norsimah Mat Awal et al., 2007). Singular/plural form, verb tense, word choice, preposition, subject-verb agreement and word order are the six most common errors committed by the secondary school students before entering universities (Saadiyah Darus & Kaladevi Subramaniam, 2009).

A study by Fazdilah (2013) has found that UiTM students were influenced by their language skills' problems when composing. Most of the Malay students have difficulty using the definite article the accurately (Wong & Quek, 2007). Language problems found in UiTM students' writing include subject-verb agreement of number and subject-verb agreement of person (Surina Nayan, 2002). Furthermore, local, global, and spelling errors as well as inter-lingual and intra-lingual errors were the common types of writing errors made by students from UiTM Penang Branch (Leele Susana Jamian et al., 2006).

4.5 Lack of Critical Thinking

Essay is a reflective platform to display the level of critical and creative abilities in writing (Chittra Muthusamy et al., 2010). When the idea is fully being aware of through reading, writers begin to think critically, reflect, and react to it based on logical analysis. By thinking critically, learners' curiosity will be extended beyond the classroom to the real world. Nonetheless, according to Krashen (1992), most writers tend to write about what they have

already known instead of discovering new ideas, who prefer rote learning by memorising the model essays. Critical thinking does not take place in their minds since they do not figure out the ways and alternatives to solve the problems (Siti Akmar Abu Samah, Kamaruzaman Jusoff, & Abu Daud Silong, 2009).

UiTM students were found to be hardly applying strategies to think critically about their writing process, to plan, to develop content, to edit, or even to revise (Noriah Ismail et al., 2012a). Besides, they were also too dependent on the lecturers when engaged in their learning quest (Rasaya Marimuthu & Elangkeeran Sabapathy, 2005). They preferred requesting the lecture notes and learning materials from the lecturers. The failure to think critically during their writing process (Noriah Ismail et al., 2013) and questioning their writing steps had resulted in a lack of in-depth content and dull presentation in their essays (Noriah Ismail et al., 2012).

4.6 Low Information Literacy

According to American Library Association (2000), information literacy is a set of abilities requiring individuals to recognise the needed information and be able to locate, evaluate, and use them effectively. In the era of information overload or "infobesity", learners are confronting the challenges of vague quality and expanding the magnitude of information on the Internet. Retrieving information from any Internet sources requires an understanding of how the information is originated, organised, retrieved, as well as used effectively (Mohd Idzwan Mohd Salleh, Ahmad Faiz Abdul Halim, Raja Abdullah Raja Yaacob, & Zulkarnain Yusoff, (2011).

In UiTM, the negative attitude toward computers due to no experience (Rugayah Hashim & Wan Narita Mustapha, 2004) and the low acceptance of e-learning as the consequence of low information technology literacy (Chow, Ng, & Salwah Che Mat, 2007) might affect the students' academic grades (Mohd Idzwan Mohd Salleh et al., 2011). For instance, information literacy is essential for the undergraduates to learn more effectively, to develop the creative thinking and to produce a high quality piece of academic assignment of a course of study (Mohd Idzwan Mohd Salleh et al., 2011).

4.7 L2 Writing Anxiety

Writing in one's L2 is a very anxiety-provoking language skill. Besides associating with "torment", "hard-work" (Yah Awg Nik et al., 2006), and "most difficult language skill", writing anxiety is said to be one of the factors affecting the L2 learning process among UiTM students, particularly those with low language proficiency (Affiana Kadriana, 2007). A study shows that the UiTM students suffered anxiety due to lack of writing skills; the better students experienced less anxiety than the weaker ones (Nor Shidrah Mat Daud, Nuraihan Mat Daud, & Noor Lide Abu Kassim, 2005).

Furthermore, the negative attitudes towards writing (Noriah Ismail et al., 2010) and low confidence in independent writing (Noorzaina Idris, 2009) also led to writing apprehension among UiTM students. Anxiety of their attempt to write has impeded the quality of writing: lack of creativity and imagination (Noriah Ismail et al., 2012; Noriah Ismail et al., 2010), dull and dry, boring chronological events, and having no life (Chittra Muthusamy et al., 2010). According to Nor Shidrah Mat Daud (2003), a positive correlation that happened between language ability and writing apprehension was further sustained by the positive and

significant correlation between writing apprehension and the subjects' SPM English 1119 and English grade (Mainstream English I) of previous semester.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Writing is yet an important productive language skill though it is the most difficult language skill to learn and to teach. L2 learners like UiTM students are always facing difficulty to master good writing skill. In response to the writing predicaments of UiTM students in seven perspectives, writing needs of UiTM learners and instructors as well as the limitations found in the existing web-based writing systems, there is a high demand for developing a supplementary WBI to facilitate them as proficient writers to fulfil their academic needs. Hence, a comprehensive framework is required to develop and design a WBI to tackle their students' writing problems in a more analytic and holistic way.

According to Mah (2015), WeCWI offers a solution focussing on the literacy (complexity of writing skill and low literacy skills), language (interlanguage errors and low language proficiency), cognitive (lack of critical thinking and low information literacy), and psychological (L2 writing anxiety) developments. It is used to develop and design an online writing program using the instructor's preferred web 2.0 platform such as blog to improve the learners' writing process and product. By adopting this framework, the instructor's role is also being transformed into an aggregator, curator, publisher, social networker, and web-based instructor through the use of multiple contemporary web tools (Mah, 2014).

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