

CHAPTER ONE - INTRODUCTION

Writing mastery is much valued as a means of expression be it in the form of poetry, fiction or non-fiction. In essence, writing serves to communicate perspectives of lives, time and cultures in attempts to share, to inform, to encourage, to warn, to prod, and to provoke. In fact, the vagaries and diverse functions of writing as a rich means of communication are so numerous that it would seem unreasonable to deny the significance of its communicative function. Consequently, the ability to write well not only serves to enrich others' experiences but also becomes a survival skill imperative to one's career and vocation. It is improbable to imagine anyone being able to perform effectively and efficiently if he or she is not able to communicate well.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

Many students of English have often found writing the most difficult skill to master in contrast with listening, speaking and reading. Hughey, Wormuth, Hartfield and Jacobs (1983) point out that if a contrast is made between the two productive skills, speaking and writing, writing often occurs in contexts where little feedback is gained from others. In other words, where speaking involves face-to-face interaction, writing can be likened to a solitary monologue between the writer and the piece of paper in front of him, or between the writer and an imagined audience (if he wants to or is able to

imagine one). This absence of audience results in several negative consequences.

Difficulty in gauging the readers' knowledge and expectations

The writer has to assume the readers' present level of knowledge and expectations regarding the topic of discussion. However, to what extent he is able to do so is questionable. As such, if he assumes wrongly, then he may lose his readers' interest or astound them with material higher than their ability to grasp or totally miscommunicate.

Little opportunity to clarify the writer's ideas

If miscommunication should happen, the writer has little opportunity to clarify his stand or his ideas. Having only one opportunity to present his writing to the reader, it becomes imperative to choose the right words, and construct and organise clear phrases and sentences in order to present a coherent meaningful flow of ideas (Hughey et al., 1983).

However, the Malaysian student writer normally writes for the teacher -- the one and only audience. Thus, the contents of his writing will often be what he thinks the teacher expects him to write, not what he thinks he should write. This not only denies him of the opportunity to discover, develop, reflect and refine his own ideas but also reduces the need or motivation to even revise.

Disregard for the value of revision

Disregard for revision might result in the writer being unsure of what he wants to write. Subsequently, he will not be focused in tapping his knowledge and experiences. Furthermore, he might not be aware of the direction or steps that he should pursue to achieve his writing goals.

This will greatly add to the difficulty of the writing task as not having a conceptual framework of what he wants to achieve and how he plans to achieve his writing goals will adversely affect the quality of the following period of incubation. On the contrary, if the writer has a conceptual plan, then the process of filtering through past knowledge and experiences to identify what information is available to him, which information is missing, and how he should narrow the topic will be facilitated.

In addition, if he does not shape his content in accordance with his audience and purpose, new perceptions that may be totally different or refined from the original idea will not form. Thus, if the students do not revise, then they will not discover new perceptions nor realise the value of revision.

Subsequently the process of writing usually stops at the first written draft. As there is little proper planning of a conceptual framework or iterative review of the content and organisation, the resulting product normally lacks coherence and cohesion.

The problem is worse for ESL (English as a second language) student writers. They often translate sentences, not ideas, from their native language to the second language. Consequently, the readers may have difficulty in understanding the product of the writer. The resulting incongruity in

translating from one language to another and the lack of revision thus makes the writer more susceptible to censure. This results in frustration and correspondingly, lack of motivation.

Lack of motivation to write

According to the Committee for the Planning and Co-ordination of English language programmes in Schools (1991) which functions under the Malaysian Ministry of Education, many students are not motivated or interested to write. A possible reason is that the students' writing is normally for examination purposes and only for the teacher to read and assess. The students' peers or anyone else seldom have the opportunity to read or appreciate what they have written. Furthermore, no one knows how much effort they have put in. The only important matter is what grade is given. This however, may not commensurate with the effort put in.

In addition, since the product of writing is considered a closed chapter after the dateline for handing it in is due, there is not much point in writing. What normally occurs in the writing class is that one or two class periods will be set aside for writing. Within this limited time, the teacher will give a topic, spend a few minutes telling the students what he or she wants, instruct the students to write and ask them to hand it in either at the end of the class or the following day. The essay will then be conscientiously marked, graded and returned.

Subsequently, the students will rewrite their incorrectly written grammatical sentences and hand in their corrections to the teacher who will

ensure that these corrections have been done. Satisfied that it is so, the essay is considered a completed product and both teacher and student proceed to the next writing assignment.

There is little time for discussion or remedial work to address the students' weaknesses. Reasons often cited for the lack of time are the comprehensive syllabus that has to be covered and the large number of students in class. As such, the students are often left to themselves and their own means of helping themselves. This may be minimal or none at all. Thus, teachers should not be the only source of knowledge and guidance. In other words, there should be a means to enable the students to obtain guidance from other sources such as by collaborating with their peers or even with experts in the field concerned.

NEED FOR CHANGE IN THE TEACHING PARADIGM

The Committee for the Planning and Co-ordination of English Language Programmes in Schools, Malaysian Ministry of Education (1991) acknowledges that much has to be done to address the problems listed above.

Need to highlight the communicative function of writing

Undeniably, the traditional form of teaching and learning writing does not highlight the communicative function of writing to students. In fact, if writing classes continue to be carried out in the above manner, the primary purpose for writing will be reduced to merely providing practice and training

in mastering the superficial elements of the language in terms of punctuation, grammar and vocabulary. Emphasis on the surface features of the language however, does not provide training in the actual art of writing and communicating.

Need to highlight the process involved in writing

The committee further recognises that good pieces of writing can only be obtained if due consideration is accredited to the processes involved in writing i.e. brainstorming, mapping, linking, and developing ideas and finally, revising drafts based on feedback from the teacher and if possible, from their peers.

Need to provide interaction

However, opportunities for interaction are minimal thus reducing the significance of any audience and subsequently, any purpose for writing other than for grading purposes. Furthermore, if the writer has already spent much time and effort on a piece of writing, his perspective and line of thought become more attuned to what he has already produced. Objectivity is reduced and identification of error in ideas or organisation becomes more difficult. The clarity of communication is therefore compromised.

Need to provide a supportive collaborative environment

As writing is usually solitary in nature, the grades received label and categorise the individual student's achievement. If a writer is to improve, he needs to identify his own weaknesses and seek ways to deal with these weaknesses. However, as Malaysian schools encourage competition, help from peers is seldom rendered and sought. The only other source of help and guidance is the teacher who is responsible for thirty to forty students in a class. Hence, personal attention is improbable and the likelihood for improvement is minimised. Even if he earnestly seeks to improve in his writing, meaningful guidance is sadly lacking, resulting in demotivation and frustration.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Difficulties faced

Many students cannot write well even after ten years of learning English. In the briefing on 1119/1322 English conducted by the Malaysian Ministry of Education to the district heads of the English department (1997), four main weaknesses in students' writing were identified as

- a) inability to elicit the information that they needed to answer the question, resulting in recall and elaboration on anything that they had learned about the topic;
- b) inability to develop interesting and thoughtful ideas, resulting in predictable and monotonous essays;

- c) inability to present ideas clearly and coherently, resulting in confusion about the idea presented;
- d) inability to plan paragraphs or essays cohesively, often resulting in repetitious and irrelevant ideas and a lack of direction in their writing

Possible reasons for the state of writing in today's Malaysian schools

Considering that the teaching and learning process is subject to various diverse variables, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons for the problems by students during the writing process. However, Zamel's (1988) research on writing points out possible reasons for the problems faced during the writing process. She identifies these as lack of training in forming conceptual frameworks, insufficient reason to explore ideas further, lack of knowledge about the audience, and lack of feedback and remedial exercises from the teacher.

Lack of training in forming conceptual frameworks

Students are usually not trained to form conceptual frameworks that help them to analyse the requirements of the question, the target audience, and how to outline and develop their ideas into a meaningful coherent structure.

They will normally start writing before knowing what they want to say. After recalling everything that they had learned regarding the topic, they will start writing and continue to elaborate, albeit, aimlessly, regardless of whether

their writing is relevant to the topic concerned. The assumption is that as long as some points are there, some marks will be awarded.

Insufficient reason to explore ideas further

As Murray, in Hughey et al. (1983), an authority on the teaching of writing will testify, "writing is exploration --discovery of meaning, discovery of form -- and the writer works back and forth, concentrating on one of the... basic skills at a time so that he can discover what he has to say and how to say it more efficiently" (p.10).

The traditional teaching method does not provide sufficient reason to motivate students especially weaker ones, to treat writing as an iterative process of discovering new perceptions. There is little reason to explore and discover, much less refine their own ideas as they write. There is no appreciation or compliment from peers, nor any opportunity to publish their writing in any form. They write because they have to, for assessment purposes.

Furthermore, since the culture of peer learning and teaching does not exist, the students are often left to fend for themselves. Therefore, in these circumstances, there is insufficient reason for them to make the effort to explore and discover meaningful and thoughtful ideas.

Lack of knowledge about the audience

The fact that writing is often solitary and deprived of feedback from possible audiences further causes the writer to disregard any audience as an important component in the process of communication. In other words, development, clarification and revision of one's ideas to a target audience become of little significance.

This causes the writer to assume matters that are already obvious to him. He seldom considers what others may not know or may not view from his perspective. Neither does he consider what his readers may already know or prefer, thus resulting in confusing essays. Subsequently, it may hinder the reader(s)' ability to understand his writing. Thus, when the student writer receives his paper back from the teacher, he may be left wondering why the teacher circles or underlines his writing as unclear. Consequently, since writing is often only for assessment purposes and there is little remedial effort to address the problem, the students' attempt to develop ideas will usually stop once the number of words required by the teacher is achieved.

These problems have to be dealt with seriously, as the development and presentation of original ideas are skills that will serve them well in examinations, society and their future workplace. Education should not merely be the study of facts, but also the development of the mind.

Lack of feedback and remedial exercises from the teacher

Considering the large number of students and the comprehensive syllabus, the teacher seldom has time for remedial work or in-depth discussions. Consequently, many students are often left in the dark as to why their ideas are deemed so poorly developed and presented. There seems to be little reward but much opportunity for censure by the teacher. Since there is little feedback from the teacher to remedy their weaknesses, the writing assignment becomes merely an exercise to be completed without much direction or purpose.

However, this defeats the purpose of training them to write, i.e. to communicate their own ideas through their own analysis and perspective. Furthermore, as the foundation for their writing i.e. the idea and the direction of argument or discovery of ideas is not well-founded, it is not surprising that they are often unable to arrange their words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs cohesively.

Therefore, the lack of training in forming conceptual frameworks will result in inefficient and ineffective means of exploration and repetitious, irrelevant ideas springing up at different points of discussion without a clear sense of congruity or flow in argument. Since writing is an individual matter, there is little opportunity for peer feedback. Hence, the writer will have great difficulty not only in identifying his mistakes but also difficulty in thinking of ways to remedy these mistakes.

Solution: the networked classroom

In view of the problems of lack of audience and the lack of opportunity to learn from peers that impede the process of writing, the networked classroom is posed as a viable means to provide actual audiences that function as friendly collaborators -- co-planners, co-developers and co-editors. These provisions will enable the students to write with a clearer sense of purpose while communicating, provide a stronger platform for presenting their ideas as well as opportunities to learn from each other at their own pace and place.

Research in developed countries have indicated that integration of Internet collaborative activities within, between and among classrooms in academic and non-academic contexts for English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) kindergarten to junior high (K-12) students has the potential to contribute towards this aim. In other words, technological innovation in telecommunications can create a borderless classroom to address the problem of lack of feedback, development of ideas, reflection on their writing, and revision. Reasons for the success encountered are as follows:

Virtually extended classroom

Dillenberg and Sneider (1995) point out that Internet tools have enabled education over a distance, spreading resources through its network of links and decentralising avenues for learning and interaction. Thus, the emergence of a

virtually extended classroom extends opportunities for collaborative learning and actual communication.

Not constrained by time, space and geography

Ellington (1992) claims that as the virtual classroom is not constrained by time, space and geography, synchronous and asynchronous learning enable students to learn at their own rate and place. The communication resources are available at their convenience. They do not have to depend solely on the teacher anymore to teach them. In other words, the students are encouraged to decide the nature, direction and result of their learning. They are empowered to think, collaborate and decide by themselves.

Provision for active and interactive learning

This leads to active and interactive learning which promote dynamic interaction and “interweaving of ideas” with their peers, with others world-wide as well as with international experts in the subject matter. Learning with a heterogeneous group of people from different backgrounds, cultures and educational systems can help to enrich students’ knowledge and experiences. With this tool, students should not have any excuse for their lack of ideas and knowledge. Mere regurgitation of what the teacher has taught should be a matter of the past. As such, essays should no longer be predictable, boring nor lacking in depth.

Encouragement of critical thinking skills

Active and interactive learning further contribute towards inculcating critical thinking. Facione and Facione (1990) note that when interaction occurs, students construct and reconstruct their own understanding of the information posed to them by interpreting, analysing, inferencing, evaluating, explaining and self-regulating their learning. This context for learning is regarded as optimum for formulating, sharing and refining ideas. As such, essays are expected to show more coherence and cohesion. This is because analysis of the requirements of a task, planning and revision of a conceptual framework and its contents are part of the formulating, sharing and refining context.

Furthermore, as they respond to others' ideas, the cognitive conflict that arises must be resolved in order to reach a consensus. Hence, the students will learn to view and analyse matters from multiple perspectives in an information-enriched environment. They will thus be better equipped to discuss matters in an in-depth and convincing manner. They should also be able to present these ideas clearly, having taken into consideration the various possible perspectives other readers may have.

Increase in the value of their ideas

Harasim (1989) further claims that encouraging students to question and solve problems that they encounter by themselves gives value to their ideas and helps them to form their own stand. Now that there is someone who really

listens and considers their ideas, there is a reason to make the extra effort. Since learning from peers is also less intimidating, the students stand to benefit emotionally as well as intellectually.

These “interdependent” means of learning whereby students learn from each other instead of from the teacher will encourage livelier participation and higher levels of motivation. This is because as the students get into contact with real audiences, exchange authentic language experiences and get immediate feedback from their newfound friends, communication becomes alive. The motivator is the fact that the audience is someone real, who can understand and respond to them, transcending cultures and language (Silva et al., 1996).

Regard for language as the medium, not product of communication

As such, Ortega (1997) claims that networked language classrooms can enhance interaction. Language should also not be regarded as a product of communication but as a medium of communication. This in turn promotes an interactive and task-oriented perspective towards learning, which further motivates students to broaden their linguistic resources to express the intended meaning accurately and effectively in its unique social context.

Exploration and discovery directed by their own initiative and strategies lend further meaning to their efforts to communicate with an actual audience via synchronous and asynchronous communication (computer-mediated communication). Furthermore, with asynchronous communication, i.e. e-mail, the anxiety often associated with an instant need to reply is reduced. Thus, the

students can read others' opinions, reflect on these and when they are ready, respond.

Clearer writer-reader relationship

With stress reduced and time given to think and respond, changes will occur as communication translates into writing. It becomes easier to see the change in writer-reader relationship. The students begin to realise the importance of their own voice and clarity in presenting this voice to different audiences. Thus, this social act of communication enables a crucial discovery of their own "voice" (Davidson & Tomic, 1994).

Greater willingness to revise

In addition, where previously students may dread revision as a tedious task, writing electronically provides an impression of ephemerality whereby anything written is not permanent. It can easily be changed anytime. Therefore, they can concentrate on the process of writing instead of trying to produce a perfect product in their first attempt. This facilitates their progress as they revise their conceptual framework, outline, and development of ideas. In this manner, the students are more likely to produce a meaningful coherent flow of ideas and cohesive phrases, sentences and paragraphs.

Conclusion

Internet collaborative activities are able to provide a playground for adventure, exploration and discovery that will encourage students to form their own learning strategies, think critically and learn together in a collaborative environment where they help each other. Learning then becomes meaningful whereby knowledge becomes alive as a tool to explore and advance-- not an inert mass to be memorised only for the sheer purpose of passing exams.

Furthermore, it is now possible to expose our students to state-of-the-art technology that has overtaken us in every sense of the word and therefore equip them with tools to enhance and direct their own learning. With this, it is hoped that the teaching-learning process will enhance retention of knowledge, higher levels of understanding and the active use of knowledge - the prize of learning. There is no point forcing knowledge down their throats. Knowledge has to be built block by block. For this to happen, the students need to be given time to form the scaffolding that supports such structure (Pickering, 1996).

Thus, bearing in mind the problems faced in the writing classroom and the potential solution made possible by collaboration in networked classrooms, this study aims to consider whether collaboration in networked classrooms will facilitate or hinder the writing process.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research will therefore look into whether the success of Internet collaborative activities experienced in the ESL context in developed countries is applicable to the Malaysian context in a non-academic setting i.e. a virtual contest.

Questions that will be answered are:

- 1) Did collaboration in networked classrooms create a supportive learning environment for writing? ✓
- 2) Did collaboration in networked classrooms face obstacles?
- 3) Did collaboration in networked classrooms motivate students to write and communicate?

This will be carried out by

- 1) exposing students to two popular Internet communication applications, namely e-mail and Internet Relay Chat;
- 2) providing opportunities to use these applications in a non-academic educational context i.e. a virtual classroom contest based on the theme of water pollution;
- 3) providing opportunities for students to experience collaborative work via the Internet in terms of producing a storyline, the content and their subsequent means of publication, the web page.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The main significance of this study is in exploring whether the Internet can be a viable educational tool that will improve students' writing process by providing an actual audience to help them to brainstorm, present their ideas, defend their arguments, reflect, and construct their own meaningful representation of knowledge. The subsequent need to identify the needs of the audience further increases the value of a process-based form of writing as they attempt to clarify their communicative content and presentation. Having sufficient reason to explore their ideas further, they will be motivated to not only write and communicate but also be able to learn more effectively in a fun and meaningful manner. The identification of some of the problems encountered when collaborating with overseas partners will serve as possible reference for future projects.

If it is found that networked classrooms can support the writing process, then networked classroom activities should be incorporated in the planning of lesson objectives. The teacher will have to gradually ease his or her grasp on authority to allow more student-centred and student-directed learning. In other words, the teacher has to accept his or her role as a facilitator and rethink his or her instructional strategies to encourage the students to venture out and explore information that will enhance their learning of curriculum-related and non-curriculum-related matters.

Student autonomy and initiative should be encouraged. Critical thinking skills in dealing with real-world possibilities that challenge them to discuss

and find a reasonable solution should also have a place in classroom activities. As such, the scope for learning should therefore not be restricted only to what is in the curriculum. Since knowledge is often interdisciplinary in nature, the students need to discover for themselves that learning is enriching. It is not just a matter of paper qualification.

Teacher training should also be seriously considered to equip teachers with the relevant skills. Most importantly, teachers should be persuaded and convinced that the process of writing and the communicative function of writing has to be given more preference in order to provide actual training and practice in writing. Just as there is no shortcut to discovery and exploration, any attempt to produce a meaningful piece of work cannot be manufactured with an end-product mentality that denies the contribution and significance of the social and human element.

The findings of this study may also help future teachers to better foresee possible problems and plan in advance with other like-minded teachers how to overcome the various obstacles. As effective education is a result of diverse administrative, educational, technological and social factors, collaborative effort among teachers themselves in upgrading their knowledge with respect to technological and pedagogical innovations will prove to be imperative and essential. Hence, teachers should consider setting up collaborative teams too to discuss and share their experiences, success and failures.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is carried out on twenty five MARA Junior Science College students who are familiar with computer application software such as word processing, spreadsheet, graphics and programming. Thus, they are equipped with basic computer knowledge, and keyboarding skills.

It is also important to note that since the sample size is small, the findings of the study cannot be regarded as representative and thus should not be generalised to other samples.

Furthermore, as this study is meant only as a preliminary survey of the value of incorporating technology into the writing classroom and does not deal in-depth with the group dynamics inherent in co-operative learning groups, the findings are therefore tentative pending confirmation from further research in the future.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following is a list of terms which will be used for the duration of this study as stated by Berge and Collins (1995); Cornish and Monahan (1996); Frizler (1995); Hughey et al. (1983); Lunsford and Ede (1992); Riel (1990), Slavin (1983) and Smither (1998). These definitions are arranged in alphabetical order for ease of readership.

Asynchronous communication

Communication does not occur at the same time. Thus, it is also known as delayed communication. In other words, only one person can communicate at one time.

(Frizler, 1995)

Clarity

Able to convey its exact meaning at first reading.

(Hughey et al., 1983)

Coherence

An essay with a meaningful flow of ideas.

(Hughey et al., 1983)

Cohesion

An essay with well-chosen words, phrases and sentences that are clearly associated with each other to express the meaning intended by the writer.

(Hughey et al., 1983)

Collaboration

Working together to achieve common objectives with the intention of creating something new or different through the act of collaboration as contrasted to the mere sharing of information or relaying of instructions.

(Riel, 1990)

Collaborative learning

It involves inter-group collaboration with the nucleus being the subgroup. Each subgroup undertakes a particular task that contributes toward the whole group's common goals. The result of the subgroup discussion is then presented before other subgroups. After a consensus is reached, the contributions are forwarded to the other groups (other classrooms) in the team. Further discussions will ensue among the groups within the team and a final decision reached to determine the final product.

(Riel, 1990)

Co-operative learning

Similar to collaborative learning, students work in small heterogeneous groups. They are also assigned specific tasks for their groups. Group members will then work among themselves to achieve their own group objective. There is little inter-group collaboration. In fact, groups often compete against each other.

(Slavin, 1983)

Computer-mediated communication

It reflects the manner in which telecommunication technologies have enabled us to transfer, store and retrieve information and to communicate. Thus, the computer network serves as an intermediary, not merely a processing house. Often associated with educational uses, computer-mediated communication offers e-mail, and real-time chat capabilities, delivers instruction and enables student-to-student and student-to-teacher communication within the classroom and/or across classrooms around the world.

(Berge & Collins, 1995)

Electronic mail (e-mail)

Basically, e-mailing is similar to sending a letter through regular mail (snail-mail). The difference is it is faster and cheaper as the charge is equivalent to a local call. This type of communication is also asynchronous, as the communicators do not need to be online at the same time.

(Cornish & Monahan, 1996)

IRC (Internet Relay Chat)

A text-based virtual reality environment, it allows users to chat synchronously (at the same time as in real-life communication) or in other words, in real time.

(Cornish & Monahan, 1996)

Motivation

An inner state that energises people toward the fulfilment of a goal. In industrial and organisational psychology, motivation is the force that moves people to perform their jobs. Workers with high levels of motivation want to achieve and perform to the best of their abilities but those with low levels of motivation will perform poorly, showing signs of apathy.

(Smither, 1998)

Networked classroom

The networked classroom is a network of computers and peripherals that are connected together with the primary aim of communicating and sharing resources globally. The main components that have been identified as effective and invaluable educational tools are the World Wide Web with its extensive database and hypertext links, e-mailing and real-time chat facilities.

(Cornish & Monahan, 1990)

Writing as a process

The emphasis is on an iterative and recursive process of brainstorming, outlining, developing and revising ideas, in line with a conceptual framework of ideas. As such, writing often involves a series of drafts whereby each draft refines the earlier version. During this period of incubation, students are encouraged to concentrate on getting the ideas onto the paper and worry about grammar later.

(Hughey et al., 1983)

Writing as a product

The students are told to focus on the end product of their writing. The process through which this product comes about is not paid much attention. Activities include imitating, copying, and transforming models of correct language at sentence level. As such, the primary focus is on sentence construction and grammar.

(Hughey et al., 1983)

Revising

It involves re-vision or a review of the flow of ideas in terms of its development and clarity in presentation and cohesiveness in sentence and paragraph structure.

(Hughey et al., 1983)

Schema

The writer's existing knowledge, experiences, opinions, feelings.

(Lunsford & Ede, 1992)

Students

The term students is used interchangeably with the term writer. From Chapter Three onwards, this term refers to the Malaysian MRSM students participating in the contest.

Synchronous communication

It is also known as real-time communication. It often involves face-to-face communication with two or more people communicating with each other simultaneously either at the same place or at different locations.

(Frizler, 1995)