

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background to the Study

The poor performance in writing skill among teacher trainees has been a perpetual and persistent problem in the language curriculum. My personal experience teaching these students over the past eight years has revealed that they find writing to be a most difficult and formidable task. I noticed that they make so many surface level errors that the text becomes unintelligible. In brief, they are bewildered with the complexities of grammar. This lack of proficiency in the language explains the problems in the writing skills of these students.

Writing is a complex process which requires the use of various sub-skills such as thinking and language abilities and therefore, writing is often referred to as a higher order language skill. Furthermore, contemporary research on the composing process points out that writing is a “complex mental activity” (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1981; Flower & Hayes, 1980 cited in Lawlor, 1983). In fact, researchers like Bereiter and Scardamalia (1982, 1987) have discussed methods of enhancing learners’ abilities to expand the problem spaces within which composition takes place, that is, providing learners with assistance (cited in Knudson, 1988).

In Institut Bahasa Melayu Malaysia, where I teach, writing instruction involves the conventional process writing lesson which often includes: (a) limited pre-writing instruction and some brainstorming sessions to generate and organize content, (b)

production of a first draft, (c) teacher responding to students' work and/or correction to improve clarity, and (d) production of a final draft. Although these students had years of instruction in writing and grammar, they are still fundamentally weak. Some examples from their work below reflect glaring competence errors:

While he wanted to sit, his axe fell and dived into the pool.

Then he throw into the pool and swimming to find his axe but he couldn't find his axe.

When he dived into the pool, he was saw one old box at here.

He take the old box because he want to know what have inside the old box.

These errors range from word-part substitution errors, word deletion errors, word-part deletion errors to concord errors such as subject-verb agreement. These errors have been explained through formal grammar lessons as well as writing lessons. But to no avail: these errors keep coming back in all their writing assignments. Thus when the essay is full of errors, communication of thoughts may be distorted, misconstrued and may even distract readers.

Process writing, on the contrary, has assumed that the writer has all the grammar resources that he needs and is seeking for an appropriate approach for expressions. To put it briefly, the focus on process writing has not addressed the needs of my low proficiency students which are different from the needs of L1 composition students. In fact, my low proficiency students are neither lacking in ideas nor meaning but sorely lacking in vocabulary, grammar or language to express their thoughts.

In a paradoxical situation like this, do I throw out teaching writing as a process or do I continue to teach grammar to equip the students to handle the variety of writing tasks? I believe if these low proficiency students want to improve writing skills, they must first have an understanding of possible problems with sentence structure so that they not only can reorganize but write effective sentences as well. For that reason,

what they need is, more language skills to enable them to write. In other words they need structure and they need models to practice to improve their composition skills. Yet, they need time to generate ideas, to revise and edit to improve their writing.

My main concern then is, how I can improve my students' writing competence. I recognize that my students are not linguistically independent and therefore, process writing alone does not seem to help the low proficiency students. The issue at hand is not only the process my students go through but also the completed pieces of writing. Although I am not putting a claim that grammar is the most important thing in writing, I realise students must at least be able to write reasonably acceptable simple sentences before they can even embark on learning the essential organizational structure of the paragraph. These composition skills can be trained and practiced after they have mastered the writing of sentence structures which can then be incorporated into the writing programme. Hence, I believe that training in writing should begin with training at the sentence level for low proficiency students.

My goal then, is to improve writing among my students and I am convinced that grammar consciousness-raising activities by way of sentence models are essential in teaching writing. Ellis (1993) defined consciousness-raising as:

activities that will seek to get a learner to understand a particular grammatical feature . . . but does not require the learner to actually produce sentences manifesting that particular structure. (cited in Hopkins & Nettle, 1994;158)

I believe that the benefits of traditional grammar which is so complex and is always taught in isolation cannot be transferred to writing. I also agree with the observation of Gatbonton and Seglowitz (1988) that many traditional teaching methods have not promoted the automatic use of correct grammar because they have been aimed at

abstract structures rather than at particular utterances. Based on such observations, I, therefore, do not subscribe to activities solely devoted to grammar and punctuation because such activities alone cannot improve the quality of writing.

Research has also shown that just teaching grammar terminology by itself is ineffectual because the grammar instructions are focused on individual rules and no connection is made to bridge grammar to writing. Since grammar terminology is enormously abstract with hidden assumptions, students need numerous examples and extensive practice sessions in order to grasp the concepts underlying it. In other words, grammatical terminology must be kept to a minimum and the emphasis should be on sentences in context. I fully support McCleary (1995) who pointed out that “What we may need . . . is a ‘pedagogical grammar’ that is both accurate and simple” (cited in Hunter, 1996). By *pedagogical grammars*, he means “grammars intended to be used in teaching of writing”. And according to Kolln (1996, p. 28), he calls it “functional grammar” which means learning about a language structure in the context of writing. This functional grammar must be taught as a means of improving composition skills. Hence, one of the ways to overcome this problem is to connect grammar and usage problems with relevant exercises in the students’ own writing.

In fact, numerous authors such as Braddock, Lloyd-Jones & Schoer, 1963; Bereton, 1978; O’Hare, 1973 point out that experiments in formal grammar instruction during the last 50 years have resulted in no improvement in the quality of student writing (cited in Knudson, 1988). Moreover, a highly structured and specific approach to composition instruction associated with the teaching of grammar and mechanics (Shaw, 1986; Hillocks, 1984) has also been proven to be ineffective in teaching students to write. The criticisms raised with regard to the effectiveness of traditional

grammar, brings a pertinent question to mind, namely, What kind of composition instruction should a teacher offer in her writing assignments?

This is the kind of dilemma a writing teacher faces and therefore current views on writing and research findings on the issues above are required to provide some insights. Research conducted over the past 20 years suggests that students can improve their written sentences by participating in focused practice activities. According to Hillocks (1986, p. 247), the most effective teaching emphasizes “structured problem-solving activities, with clear objectives, planned to enable students to deal with similar problems in composing”. In short, teachers who provide direct instruction and practice on form skills associated with writing may prove to be useful. For that reason, I realise that an integration of the process approach and modelling sentence-level syntax may work well for low proficiency students. Modelling exercises are intended to guide the students to expand narrative content, including the use of detail, increased use of descriptive vocabulary and more complete sentences. In fact, Scardamalia (1981) points out that such activities are particularly important for beginning writers:

For the skilled writer we may suppose that many aspects of writing are automated and that cognitive space-saving strategies make writing possible without inordinate demands on processing capacity. For the beginning writer, however, very little is automated and coping strategies are lacking. (p. 81)

This prompted me to investigate whether the integrated sentence modelling approach with sentence patterns practice activities can help to develop the writing skills of these low proficiency students. I also hope to provoke thoughts and discussion and to bring some insights on some issues that are likely to be important for teachers in similar situations, that is, those who work with writers of low proficiency.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate to what extent the integrated sentence modelling approach in writing instruction can improve the quality of writing among low proficiency students. An attempt is made to discover whether low proficiency students who are exposed to an integrated sentence modelling approach will write less grammatical error essays by modelling the different sentence patterns.

Statement of the Problem

Based on the fact that learners must have some mastery of the syntax and a common vocabulary of the language, a study is therefore deemed necessary to investigate strategies that can assist teachers in developing the students' writing skills. If low proficiency students do not have such skills, then there is a need to help them to write "reasonably acceptable simple sentences" (Taylor, 1976; p. 310). Thus, this study is an adaptation of Noyce and Christie's study on the Integrated Sentence Modelling Curriculum (1983). Basically, the Integrated Sentence Modelling Curriculum (ISMC) is designed to acquaint students with complex syntactic structures through four types of activities, namely:

1. Listening- The students listen to the teacher read a literary selection in which a target structure (e.g., If I had a tuba, I would play it) is repeated many times. This listening experience is followed by a discussion of the selection and the target structure.
2. Speaking- The students make up sentences that follow the target pattern and present them orally to the class in various kinds of activities.
3. Reading- The students read children's books that repeat the target structure.

4. Writing- The students write sentences following the target pattern and stories including these kinds of sentences.

Noyce and Christie's study was aimed at comparing the ISMC with a sentence modelling curriculum that focused exclusively on writing. 63 students in three third grade classrooms in a middle-class suburban community participated in the study. It appears that the teaching of complex syntax through informal activities that involve children in both receptive and productive experiences with model sentences yields dividends in reading and writing. In addition, learning the syntax is basic to the students' ability to write (Myers, 1997).

I am, therefore, certain that this model which is meant for L1 students in elementary schools can be modified to suit the needs of my low proficiency students. These students need guidance to notice grammatical patterns and subsequently derive generalizations themselves. Hence, I propose a modified version of the Integrated Sentence Modelling Curriculum approach and I called it the Integrated Sentence Modelling approach. The third step in the model has been purposefully deleted because it involves reading children's story books and thus may not be suitable for adult students.

The rationale behind this model is that the process of repeating the structures allows my students to learn grammar in context using an integrated approach of listening, speaking and writing. According to Cook (1994), repetition though condemned by acquisition theorists, can actually help to assimilate form and subsequently grammar and meaning begin to emerge. Thus, in this model, students repeat some key examples which are read by the teacher. Sometimes a contrasting pair of examples are intentionally selected to give students practice on variation. Students

will learn to master the structure of the sentence through the practice skills and these sentence structures taught will be reinforced during writing. This practice sentence skills can be used to familiarize students with the notions of using subordination, adverbial clauses of time and prepositional clauses. Moreover, the students need practice sentence skills that can fit in and that will eventually contribute to the construction of a piece of writing. On that account, I have also taken into consideration the controlled practice in situation or context. If such controlled exercises are tried out in isolation, they will become mechanical and students may not find this beneficial. I also discard the definitions of subordinators, adverbial clauses and prepositional clauses with the hope that my students can internalize the grammar aspects they have learned in the sentence skills so that they can apply what they have learned in the actual writing. It is hoped that students will deliberately use the sentence structure to enable them to internalize the required pattern and by doing so, gain confidence as such practice exercise progresses.

In fact, I can ascertain that these students still cannot write well although they underwent two semesters of grammar input. These students are not able to grasp the broad outlines of grammar even if they are presented with rules after rules. It is therefore, important that students should recognize them as patterns and the many examples of the sentence patterns allow the students to familiarize the patterns, thus indicating that the students are following rules.

I also echo Grabbin's (1996) stand that students need to know certain rules of grammar which he identified as "generalizations" (p. 56). These generalizations are impressions that become arrested over time which then describe a recurring pattern. Some form of explanation of the pattern is required to enable my students see the

connection between grammar and writing, thus allowing them to make some form of generalizations. Hence, I decide to develop activities which have grammatical focus that enforces the use of a particular structure. Usually low proficiency students need practicing a skill over and over to make it more automatic and thus enabling them to use it more successfully. As such, I believe that details of some structures are best learned and accepted through generalizations.

Here, I focus on narrative essays and the sentence patterns I want to expose to my students take into consideration the relationship of events in time. In narration, students can make use of key words that are prepositional phrases telling when or subordinators in adverbial clauses of time. Thus, I would teach subordinators such as *while, when, before, after, prepositional phrases* as well as *sentence connectors* that are very much needed in narration to show the sequence of events.

Furthermore, the integrated approach to learning further kindles my interest as I seem to agree with Wolfe (1993, p. T18) that reading, speaking, listening and writing are complementary processes. That is, growth in any one enhances growth in the others. By talking and by listening to others, students often are stimulated to read or write; during and after reading or writing. The exchange of perceptions through oral and written activities further broadens and deepens students' understanding. Doing exercises orally, either with the whole class or in small groups, is a particularly effective activity. In addition, studies have suggested that writing elements are interrelated and "writing ability was learned as a whole rather than as a series of separate components" (Perkins et al. p. 81). And according to Megyeri (1996), reading aloud "instills a sense of ownership and pride in the creation of a written work" (p. 74). It triples students' concern for their writing when they know the class will hear

and critique their work. It helps students comprehend the content of a work and subsequently improves language and speaking skills. Moreover, the teaching of writing with the other skills actually allows the students the freedom to express themselves meaningfully. Teaching strategies, thus should not isolate the elements in writing like grammar, syntax, style, and content. Instead, students should be taught writing and listening, speaking and reading skills in the context of communication goals to convey meaning to produce successful learning of skill and content.

It seems then that, this is an appropriate time to explore strategies that provide these students direct help with model sentences which focus on certain syntactic structures in the hope of improving the writing skill of these low proficiency students. It is hoped that the integrated sentence modelling approach will enable my students to recognize for themselves the pattern behind a particular English structure and subsequently use it in their writing successfully.

Research Questions

This study seeks to measure the effect of an integrated sentence modelling approach on writing. This study then attempts to answer the following questions:

- a. To what extent does sentence modelling practice improve the quality of writing among students of low proficiency in the classroom?
- b. To what extent do students find the integrated sentence-modelling approach helpful?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will inform writing research and pedagogy in significant ways. It should be more apt to recognize a need for additional information

about the teaching of writing. The results of this study contribute to that understanding.

Sentence-modelling practice can help students develop the syntactic skills they need to produce clear and comprehensible paragraphs. However, effective writing instruction must certainly include guidance with other aspects of the composing process, such as generating and arranging ideas and revising and editing text. Therefore, sentence-modelling practice should be considered as an important component but not the only component of a comprehensive writing programme.

This highly structured approach to writing instruction is able to transfer the abstract rules or generalizations by application within the students' writing. Obviously, more research is needed on the sentence-modelling activities to increase our knowledge on the language development.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions of terms as used in this study would prove helpful for the purpose of interpretation:

- a. Sentence patterns: Students follow model sentence patterns when writing their own compositions. These models contain short and simple sentences that use target structures purposely selected for narrative compositions.
- b. Sentence modelling practice exercises: Exercises that require a learner to listen, read and speak, subsequently produce sentences exemplifying the model sentences that focus on a grammatical feature.
- c. Target structures: Structures such as adverbial phrases of time, prepositional phrases, sentence connectors and adverbial clauses that are taught through model sentences using the integrated approach of listening, reading and speaking activities.