CHAPTER FIVE : CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The study was designed to investigate the effects of the two methods of scoring (holistic and analytic) on students' writing performance in short-term (16-hour) writing courses. In addition, this study also investigated the students' and teachers' perceptions of these two methods of scoring in 16 hour language preparatory courses. The following sections will now discuss the findings in relation to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1.

5.2 Research Question 1: Do the methods of evaluation used for scoring essays affect students' writing performance?

In both courses, the overall improvement calculated using the IELTS Band Descriptor Scale and the ESL Composition Profile Scale showed that the students in Course A, (who were exposed to the analytic method of scoring) showed a greater level of improvement in their writing performance in comparison to the students in Course H (who were exposed to the holistic method of scoring).

In fact, according to the IELTS Band Descriptor Scale, the students in Course A recorded an improvement of at least one band and above whereas students in Course H recorded a less significant improvement (< 1 band) in terms of band

scores. The ESL Composition Profile Scale also showed that the students in Course A achieved an overall improvement that was almost three times higher than that achieved by the students in Course H.

Hence, exposure to the analytic method of scoring which lends itself more easily to diagnostic information about the students' writing had a greater effect on improving students' writing performance even in a short-term, 16-hour language preparatory course. Thus, it is argued that this method of scoring can perform a certain diagnostic role in providing the students with full profile reporting (Chitravelu, 2004) of his or her strengths and weaknesses which the holistic scoring method is incapable of doing (Hughes, 2002) even if the students have been exposed to it for a short period of time.

Previous studies by several researchers have claimed that students who receive feedback would be able to arrive at better quality written work, essays or research papers (Ferris, 1997; Ferris and Roberts, 2001). However, other researchers have challenged this, stating that students did not revise better or arrive at more accurate texts although they received feedback from their lecturers (Truscott, 1996; Truscott, 1999; Conrad and Goldstein, 1999). The findings from the present study support the studies carried out by Ferris (1997) and Roberts and Ferris (2001) and further confirms that feedback can help students improve their writing skills even in short-term writing courses.

Overall, students from both courses showed an improvement in scores. In other words, with or without feedback, the students from both courses showed improvement. This is of course due to the 16-hour course that they had attended – the practice exercises, classroom instruction and course notes, etc., that they were exposed to. However, because the students from Course A showed greater improvement than the students in Course H in overall percentages and also in the five skill areas, it can be argued that the method of scoring had an effect on the students' writing performance. This finding confirms Goldstein's (2004) claim that "... students cannot become proficient writers by just reading and writing ... they need some form of feedback..." It also supports the findings of Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) and Reid (1993) that students need to be made aware of how others are reading their writing and what corrections would strengthen their writing. Hence, feedback from lecturers is absolutely necessary in any writing context.

The students in both courses, A and H also recorded an overall percentage of improvement in all the five aspects of writing which were investigated - content, language, organization, mechanics and vocabulary. The highest percentage of improvement was recorded in the area of organization, followed by content, language use, vocabulary and mechanics, in that order.

The ranking above was probably influenced by the emphasis on the different skill areas by the lecturer during the 16-hour course. Moreover, given the limited hours for classroom instruction, the researcher, who was also the lecturer, was forced to be selective and place emphasis on the areas that carried greater weight in the IELTS exam – namely content, organization and language use. The course content did not involve activities that developed aspects of vocabulary or mechanics, hence resulting in a lower level of improvement in these skill areas amongst the students in both courses.

Furthermore, the students from Course A recorded an average percentage of improvement that was two times higher than that recorded by the students in Course H in organization, content and language use. The students in Course A also recorded a higher percentage improvement than the students in Course H in the aspect of vocabulary and mechanics.

The researcher, who was also the lecturer of the 16-hour course provided feedback in the areas of content, organization, language use, vocabulary and mechanics to the students in Course A since the analytic method of scoring was used to score class work. However, this was not done in Course H. The students in Course H only received a score and a general end comment on their written work. Therefore, it can be argued that the feedback that was given to the students in Course A helped the students develop in the different aspects of writing according to their individual abilities. This supports Hughes' (2002) viewpoint that the analytic

method of scoring is more meaningful and valid because it avoids the flaw of uneven development in the different criteria or skills.

The findings from the current research also supports Hamps-Lyons' study (1991) which indicates that in order to improve writing performance as a whole, a writer needs to pay conscious attention to all the different aspects (content, language, vocabulary, organization and mechanics) of writing. Furthermore, it also supports studies by Ferris (1997) and Fathman and Whalley (1990) too, which also showed that feedback given on specific skill areas – content or language, can help students improve their writing in those specific skill areas, produce better drafts or improve their overall writing accuracy.

Therefore, even though students have only been exposed to feedback for a short period of time, that exposure seems to have had an effect on the students' writing performance. Hence, the analytic method of scoring is certainly more effective than the holistic method of scoring especially in short -term language preparatory courses.

5.3 Research Question 2: Do the two methods of evaluation (holistic and analytic) affect students' attitude toward their writing?

The majority of the students in both courses (Course A and Course H) rated themselves as fair writers, although all of them had scores ranging from P1-P3 for

the SPM English Language paper. Very few rated themselves as good or excellent writers.

About two thirds of the students in Course A and one third of the students in Course H expressed indifference toward the holistic scoring method. However, a majority of the students from Course H and a third of the students from Course A expressed dissatisfaction toward the holistic method of scoring. We can therefore argue that many of the students from both courses did not place much value nor approve of the holistic method of scoring. This supports Park's (2004) study which claims that the main drawback of the holistic method of scoring is its inability to provide specific feedback to the students other than give a few brief, general end comments and a grade (Park, 2004).

The high level of indifference amongst students toward this method of scoring can be considered to be a result of not being informed of the shortcomings in their written work. These findings further support Moskal's (2004) study that the holistic scoring method does not give an adequate profile of a student's language abilities, hence making it quite impossible for any form of error correction to take place.

Interestingly, the majority of the students who expressed dissatisfaction toward the holistic method of scoring were made up of the students from Course H, who were exposed to the holistic scoring method throughout the four week, preparatory

course. Thus, it can be concluded that exposure to the holistic method of scoring even for a short period can affect the students' perceptions towards this method of scoring. These findings support the findings of several studies (Leki, 1991; Ferris, 1995; Ferris, 2004) that have been done on feedback / error correction, which confirm that students value feedback from their lecturers and not getting any feedback can demotivate or frustrate students.

On the other hand, a majority of the students from both courses showed a far more positive attitude towards the analytic method of scoring. Therefore, it can be argued that whether the students had or had not been exposed to the analytic method of marking, the majority of them favoured and valued feedback. This finding supports several previous studies that students find feedback, both desirable and helpful (Hyland, 1998; Chandler 2003; Goldstein, 2004; Lee, 2003; Chitravelu, 2004).

Further analysis of the students' questionnaires also showed that students with fair or poor writing skills expected feedback from their lecturers far more than the students with good or excellent writing skills. Hence, the findings show that the lower the ability of the students, the greater the need for feedback.

Generally, the students in Course A also expressed more concern over the essays that were returned by their lecturers and made some efforts to learn from their mistakes and do some error correction. In contrast, the students from Course H

displayed rather complacent and indifferent attitudes toward their written work that they received from their lecturers. Therefore, once again the methods of scoring used in the two courses seem to have influenced the attitude of the students in the respective courses.

Exposure to the holistic method of scoring which does not provide feedback seems to have had a negative influence on the students' attitudes in Course H. The findings support Ferris' (2004) claim that, "...students will rebel and complain and lose confidence..." if they do not get any feedback from their lecturers. In contrast, exposure to the analytic scoring method had a positive influence on the students in Course A.

The percentage of students from Course H who stated that they felt lecturers feedback had no effect on their writing performance was twice the number of students who expressed similar concerns in Course A. The students from the former course gave reasons from vague or end comments from lecturers and language confusion to be some of their reasons. These findings are supported by Zamel's (1985) study on teachers' responses to students' writing which found that students who felt their teachers' comments were too vague and complex, was of little use and did not enable them to improve their writing skills.

In contrast, a majority of the students in Course A, who spent their time thinking over the feedback given by their lecturers, played a pro-active role in dealing with

their errors. They took their teachers comments and commentaries seriously and responded by either discussing their errors with their lecturers or using resources such as dictionaries, the internet or consulting their peers. The students from Course A also felt that feedback from their teachers helped them improve their writing performance in general as it aided them to have a better understanding of their errors, encouraged them to inculcate a reading habit, made them more resourceful (students reported using resources such as books, the internet, dictionaries) and increased their awareness towards the comments and mistakes they made.

These findings support the study by Ferris (1997) which investigated teacher feedback and students' responses. Ferris' (1997) study showed similar findings that students valued teacher comments and that feedback helped them improve their writing skills and made them have a more positive attitude towards improving their writing performance. Hence, even in a short-term course, students value feedback and can be motivated by feedback.

5.4 Research Question 3: Is there a preference for holistic / analytic scoring amongst teachers teaching short-term language preparatory courses?

A majority of the teachers who were interviewed expressed that it is definitely worthwhile to use the analytic scoring method over the holistic scoring. They felt it was capable of providing the students with much diagnostic information in

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relation to their writing, extensive feedback on their areas of weakness such as content, language, organization, vocabulary and mechanics. These findings reinforce the views of Hamps-Lyons (1991) which claim that a detailed scoring procedure that attends to the multidimensionality of ESL writing is necessary in order for students to improve their writing abilities.

The majority of the lecturers also felt that the analytic scoring method could motivate students to improve their writing performance. This reflects the findings from a study by Ferris (1995), which investigated the influence of teacher commentary on student writing, The study showed that feedback actually helped to motivate the students to improve their writing abilities. Another study on error correction by Ferris (1999) also shows that an absence of feedback could frustrate students who believe in error correction. One of the lecturers however, supported the views of Polio et. al. and Fregeau (1999), that feedback did not have much influence on a learner's attitude than what teachers themselves assumed or desired.

Despite the above mentioned optimism about the analytic scoring method, only one teacher admitted using it in short term writing courses. All the other teachers stated that they did not employ the analytic method of scoring in short term preparatory courses because of the time constraints. This reflects the findings of White (1994) and Park (2004) which state that the analytic method of scoring is time consuming and also not cost effective.

Therefore, although the findings confirm that the analytic method of scoring is the more effective of the two methods to use even in short-term language preparatory courses, the teachers did not deem it possible, given the practical constraints such as large class sizes, short duration of the course, etc.

Furthermore, some of the lecturers felt that the students did not even bother to read over their essays, hence their time and energy spent on scoring using the analytic scoring method would prove futile. However, the findings on students' perceptions refute this belief (Refer to 5.3).

The general perception amongst the lecturers was also that it takes time to improve one's writing skills. Therefore, the lecturers felt that whether the students were given feedback or otherwise would not really count as one month was too short a time to expect much improvement from the students. This claim too was proven wrong, as the students essays scores showed clearly that the students from Course A, who were exposed to the analytic method of scoring, showed greater overall improvement than the students who were exposed to the holistic method of scoring.

Although most of the lecturers did propose the use of the selective scoring approach as discussed by Chitravelu et al. (2004) interspersed with peer editing and self-editing methods as alternatives to the analytic scoring method, the findings in the different skill areas clearly show that writing performance improves

the most when feedback is given in the various aspects of writing such as content, organization, language use, vocabulary and mechanics.

5.5 Conclusions

In the past, no investigation has been carried out to determine if the methods of scoring used in the ESL classroom can affect students writing performance in short-term language preparatory courses, hence the importance and relevance of the current study.

Based on a summary of the findings, both the methods of scoring used in the preparatory courses (Course A and Course H) helped students improve their writing performance. Exposure to the analytic method however, had a greater effect on student writing performance compared to exposure to the holistic scoring method even in short term writing courses.

The effect or level of overall improvement was apparent in all aspects (content, language, organization, vocabulary and mechanics) of writing, with the exposure to the analytic scoring method again having a greater effect on every aspect in comparison to the holistic method of scoring.

Based on the summary of the findings, it can be concluded that the students from both courses recognized the superiority of the analytic scoring method, hence,

showed preference for this method of scoring to be used in scoring students' written work.

In addition, exposure to the analytic method of scoring even in a short-term language preparatory course proved to have influenced students' attitudes in terms of motivation levels and improvement in writing performance.

The exposure to the holistic scoring method, on the other hand, had an opposite reaction – a less positive attitude. This method of scoring had led to feelings of indifference, discontentment and low motivation levels to improve their writing skills.

The study also refutes the teachers' claims that students do not take feedback seriously and that in a short term course, the method of scoring used will have no effect on students' writing performance.

5.6 Implications for Teaching

Even an increase of one band is extremely significant for these college students who enroll into a 16-hour (short-term) course, as it could be the deciding factor for the students to get acceptance into a foreign university.

Furthermore, given the limited time and financial resources, if the teachers could make the students improve by one band or more, it would be very beneficial for the students as they would be able to enter the academic mainstream as quickly as possible in order to ensure successful college study.

Moreover, instead of giving just vague or end comments, when scoring essays, teachers should provide feedback on all pertinent aspects of writing such as content, language use, organization, vocabulary and mechanics.

Precaution should also be taken by lecturers when employing the holistic method of scoring as prolonged exposure to this method of scoring could change the attitude of their students and lead them to become indifferent towards any form of feedback which could eventually de motivate and reduce their confidence as writers.

5.7 Recommendations

It is therefore important that the following recommendations be given some serious thought.

1. It is necessary to educate teachers on the superiority and benefits of using the analytic scoring method even in short-term language preparatory courses although it may prove more tedious.

2. Students should be encouraged to take teacher feedback seriously as it can aid them to achieve greater improvement in their writing.

3. Some consideration is given by institutions to have small class sizes - 15 students per course especially for short-term language preparatory courses in order to facilitate teachers to give feedback to their students on their performance.