

FREQUENT LINGUISTIC INACCURACIES IN ESL UNDERGRADUATES' WRITING PATTERNS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The demand for Malaysian graduates to be competent in the English language has increased over the years. Most professions require candidates who are capable of speaking and writing in English fluently (Crystal, 2012). Apart from that, many students from different parts of the world travel to English-speaking countries to continue their higher education where English is the medium of instruction (Dearden, 2014). Therefore, English language learners at tertiary levels have increased due to its prominence as the global language of commerce, communication, science, technology and networking in developing countries. As English language is used in all the subjects taught in degree programmes, students need to be equipped with good writing skills in order to be able to transfer their ideas and thoughts into words. In the light of the current issues, this study aims to explore the writing patterns of ESL undergraduates to identify the common errors.

The practice of writing enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, rules, conventions, punctuations and structures to communicate their ideas effectively, and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary skills they learn in class (Bello, 1997). As the main mode of non-verbal communication, writing is a crucial skill that should be taught with precise strategies. According to Auerbach (1992), ignoring writing skills is akin to ignoring the development of other language skills altogether.

LEARNING IN A CHANGING WORLD

Students may be able to hear and understand spoken English but often confuse sentence structures and grammar when rewriting the same points again. Teachers often face problems with sentence formatting and the grammatical requirements needed for writing to be coherent (Crystal, 1987). Some of the common problems observed in students' writing activities are punctuations, grammar forms, spelling, capitalization, conventions and language use. Another major problem students are known to face is when trying to use correct grammatical items, like tenses, articles, conjunctions and prepositions. Punctuations such as comma, full stop, exclamation marks, question marks that are not visible while speaking, but are very significant in writing are usually missed out.

Given the lack of research in investigating the English language problems, this study was conducted to find out problems faced by English-major Malaysian students in an ESL context observed by their lecturers. This research also intends to offer some solutions to resolve these problems, which can pave the way for ESL learners and lecturers to make writing an easier and fun task to accomplish.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 The Importance of Writing

Hyland (1997) studied first-year university students from eight disciplines which included biology, engineering, business, history, English, economics, physics and chemistry at five Hong Kong tertiary institutions. Hyland's results confirmed that the students were aware of the value of the English language classes offered in their programmes as they deemed that English language proficiency was a significant determinant of their academic achievements in an English-medium environment.

Nik, Hamzah, and Rafidee (2010), on the other hand, found that effective writing programmes helped students to reinforce their grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary, providing opportunities for students to be more adventurous with the language, thus permitting them to go beyond what they have learnt and to take risks. The researchers concluded that the importance of effective writing lied in students' ability to develop language skills in terms of fluency, accuracy and appropriateness in communication and being able to convey the right meanings and messages within the stipulated contexts.