

Challenges Encountered by Teacher Trainees in Descriptive Essay Writing in English

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Abstract: The low performance of teacher trainees in descriptive essay writing calls for a review of the approach to teaching writing. The teacher trainees faced problems in the areas of idea organization, elaboration and word choice. A lot of research has been conducted to investigate whether Process Writing has any influence on improving learners' writing skills. However, little is known whether such a process has any influence on teacher trainees at the Malaysian Teacher Education Institutes (MTEI's). This study, therefore, is aimed at exploring the challenges encountered by the teacher trainees in descriptive essay writing in English among teacher trainees at MTEI. This study found that the teacher trainees were not able to present their ideas coherently and clearly through participants' behavior, generating ideas and lack of interaction. The results of the interview showed that the teacher trainees preferred the Process Approach because it provided a good discussion platform for the teacher trainees. Process Writing can be successfully implemented in schools with the cooperation of the teacher trainees and the school administration. Further research could be conducted in other educational institutes to establish the outcomes of the effectiveness of the Process Approach.

Keywords: Process Approach, Challenges, Idea Organization, Idea Elaboration, Word Choice

1. Introduction

Writing is a challenging task, especially for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Writing plays a vital role in learning a language as it helps learners to express ideas, feelings and thoughts which are also perceptible as a mode of communication in a written form (Anh, 2019). Chow (2015) emphasizes the importance of writing skills. However, it is evident that the challenge faced by English as a Second Language (ESL) students in the teaching and learning environment is writing especially in

higher institutions. According to Ajoke (2018), students' academic performance is enhanced through the effective use of the knowledge required and the application of writing skills.

The low standard of English language learning has always been debated among Malaysian students (Musa, Lie & Azman, 2012) due to the prevalence of English as a global language, an intermediate language in communication and relaying information globally (Ramsan et al., 2018; Solak & Bayar, 2015). However, it is discouraging to see many undergraduate students in Malaysia still lacking the capability in overcoming the barrier of mastering the English language, particularly in the writing component. English is taught as a second language in Malaysian secondary schools and ESL writing is one of the essential components in the curriculum.

Most of the teacher trainees from the researcher's Teacher Education Institute are of Intermediate level in English language proficiency. This was also observed in the pilot study. The paper tested the TESL teacher trainees on English language proficiency including essay writing. The results did not reflect the quality expected by the Malaysian Teacher Education Institute. So, it could be clearly seen that the teacher trainees have difficulty in writing essays in English. The result of a pilot study conducted with the six teacher trainees showed that they performed poorly in essay writing. It was found that they had problems in writing especially in the areas of idea organization, idea elaboration and choosing the suitable words to be used in their essay writing. The current study is aimed to identify the challenges encountered by teacher trainees in descriptive essay writing in English. Table 1 shows responses obtained from the pilot study based on the document analysis on the teacher trainees' essays.

Table 1.0: Examples of Problems

AREAS	PROBLEMS
Idea Organization (R1)	Wrong sequencing
Idea Organization (R3)	Wrong grouping of ideas
Idea Elaboration (R2)	Lack of clarity
Idea Elaboration (R4)	Lack of clarity
Word Choice (R5)	Poor vocabulary
Word Choice (R6)	Wrong concept

2. Materials and Methods

A qualitative approach was adopted in this study in understanding the English language teacher trainees' writing ability in teacher training institute in Malaysia. According to Draper (2004), the qualitative approach can be described as a naturalistic and interpretative approach to understand social phenomena in their social settings to produce 'thick description'. Creswell and Poth (2016) point out that qualitative research is "multi-method in focus, involving an interpretative and a naturalistic approach to its subject matter".

This research was a qualitative study undertaken to identify the challenges encountered by the teacher trainees in a Malaysian Teacher Education Institute (MTEI), identifying and investigating their perceptions of practising the Process Approach in descriptive essay writing in English. The study is hoped not only to be useful for the weak students but also for the good students to teach the weak students in the future. Six weak Teacher Trainees were selected from the Foundation of TESL Programme. The focus of the study was on idea generation, idea elaboration and word choice. Data were collected for both sets based on observation and semi-structured interview. The data provided a thick description of the findings and the findings were interpreted to help improve the Respondents' writing performance. The Case Study research design was selected due to the nature of the research questions. It offered a positive and successful avenue to understand the challenges encountered by them.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

This section deals with the following themes: Participants' Behaviour, Generating Ideas and Lack of Interactions. Classroom observation was conducted on the six teacher trainees in order to gain knowledge about the challenges that they encountered during the Process Writing. The classroom observation and the interviews were conducted with the teacher trainees. Data from classroom observation and the interviews were triangulated to identify the challenges encountered by the teacher trainees in descriptive essay writing in English.

3.1.1 Participants' Behaviour

Before writing the first draft, the teacher educator conducted the planning and idea-gathering session. Firstly, the teacher educator gave the respondents the essay topic they were about to write. The teacher educator started the ball rolling by generating ideas from the respondents. Techniques such as brainstorming and listing the ideas of the respondents were used. Pictures and related vocabulary were shown to the respondents to assist them in the process of generating ideas. These techniques are helpful as they enable the students to develop ideas, clarify and add more information to original ideas (Chitravelu, Sithamparam & Teh, 2005).

All the respondents were busy discussing with their peers the selection of pictures and the words provided to describe the scenery. At first, the teacher trainees seemed to be wondering what picture to choose for writing the essay. Then, they were struggling to get ideas. This was in line with Respondent 1's view that ideas have to be generated first before one can begin to write as mentioned below:

Respondent 1: *"Ideas have to be generated first before one can begin to write."*

(Appendix V-R1 PPISMP 3.0.1-3.0.2)

The six respondents were seated in pairs before the teacher educator in the classroom. The white-board was placed on the right-hand side behind the teacher educator. The activity began with the brainstorming session. The teacher educator provided sample pictures and also related vocabulary to motivate the teacher trainees. However, after some brainstorming, they settled down. Respondent 2 justified the longer time taken in conducting the Process Approach. He compared the Process Approach with conventional writing that consumes lesser time and involves no writing stages. Therefore, he disclosed the teacher trainees' preferences in choosing the conventional approach compared to the Process Approach. He explained that:

Respondent 2: *"Conventional writing takes place faster because there are no stages involved whereas the Process Writing is slower due to the intermediate stages. So, it is time-consuming."*

(Appendix V-R2 PPISMP 10.0.1-10.0.5)

"Students do not like to spend sufficient time on writing the essay because the Process Writing is time-consuming."

(Appendix V-R2 PPISMP 6.0.1-6.0.3)

"I think they do not have the patience. Maybe, they are used to the Product Approach."

(Appendix V-R2 PPISMP 7.0.1-7.0.3)

They exchanged ideas and helped one another. Respondent 6 seemed to have some difficulty in organizing the ideas and Respondent 5 helped him. It was clearly seen that all the respondents were actively engaged in the task. Respondents 1, 2, 3 and 4 were seen to be more interested in their work. The teacher educator reminded the respondents to use their imagination to make the essay interesting. However, the cooperative spirit prevailed among the respondents.

The six respondents seemed to have different levels of engagement in their activities. Respondent 1 and Respondent 2 were actively engaged in their respective activities. Respondent 3 was talkative. He often approached his peers and engaged himself in lengthy conversations. In fact, they were discussing their personal matters rather than discussing their writing. Respondent 4 was not quite confident and was expecting his friends to help. He was slow compared to the others. Respondent 5 was able to focus on his work and also helped Respondent 4 with sentence construction. However, Respondent 6 was a little shy and was not very much involved in the activity. Basically, students must be interested in the activity. Only then, will they find their work enjoyable. Respondent 5 and Respondent 6 also highlighted the challenge of the Process Approach. They complained that the Process Approach demands the students to spend more time writing, unlike spontaneous speaking. Therefore, the impatient students lost interest in writing and decided to stop writing. Respondent 5 and Respondent 6 stated that:

Respondent 5: *“Using the Process Approach to teach essay writing needs more time and effort. I can motivate and guide the students to write the essay. However, some tend to lose their interest half-way through and do not complete writing the essay.”*
(Appendix V-R5 PPISMP 5.0.1-5.0.7)

Respondent 6: *“It requires more time to complete writing an essay unlike speaking which is spontaneous.”*
(Appendix V-R6 PPISMP 11.0.5-11.0.8)

The negative attitude towards writing is stated by Mohammadipur (2018) who believes that students do not enjoy writing as much as reading because they see it as a chore. Nevertheless, judging from their behaviour, the Researcher believed the respondents enjoyed the writing activities in spite of the challenges they encountered.

3.1.2 Generating Ideas

Participants started thinking about the tourist spots. They found it difficult to generate ideas at first. However, they started brainstorming. Respondent 2 emphasized the importance of idea generation as mentioned below:

Respondent 2: *“Idea generation should be the first step in writing, especially, in the Process Approach.”*
(Appendix V-R2 PPISMP 2.0.1-2.0.3)

They moved around talking to their peers and giving suggestions. They referred to the sample pictures they had selected to describe. During brainstorming, the teacher educator received some suggestions from the respondents. The teacher educator accepted the relevant ideas put forward by the Respondents. After the brainstorming activity, the Respondents were asked to list and organize their ideas accordingly.

Respondent 1 and Respondent 2 seemed to feel comfortable. They had already jotted down the descriptive words to be used. Respondent 3 and Respondent 5 paired themselves and exchanged ideas. Respondent 4 asked the teacher educator for help. He seemed to have difficulty in using the right descriptive words to match the scenery in the picture due to poor vocabulary. Weak vocabulary hinders the smooth flow of expressions for the writer is bound to get stuck on and off during writing. Respondent 3 expressed his opinion as below:

Respondent 3: *“Some of the students are weak in English.”*
(Appendix V-R3 PPISMP 7.0.1-7.0.2)

“Although they have ideas, they are not able to express them correctly.”
(Appendix V-R3 PPISMP 8.0.1-8.0.2)

However, Respondent 6 wrote down the ideas relevant to the tourist spot he had selected. Respondent 4 and Respondent 6 were found to be less confident in writing. This could be due to lack of reading and difficulty in constructing sentences. Respondent 6 attributed this weakness to the lack of fluency. Respondent 4 also seemed to agree with him as stated below:

Respondent 6: *“However, they tend to make some language mistakes.”*
(Appendix V-R6 PPISMP 6.0.3-6.0.5)

Respondent 4: *“They do not read widely. So, their vocabulary is weak. As a result, they do not know the precise descriptive words to elaborate.”*
(Appendix V-R4 PPISMP 8.0.1-8.0.4)

Fluency is developed through wide reading and the readers learn the sentence patterns which can be applied in essay writing. Brainstorming helped the respondents to improve their self-motivation and creativity. This is consistent with the view of Williams (2014), Li (2007) and Braaksma et.al. (2004) who found that pre-writing strategies were beneficial to student writing because the strategy used improved prudent writing in length and organization.

3.1.3 Lack of Interactions

Respondents interacted with their peers. It was observed that they were able to communicate with one another. Respondent 1 and Respondent 2 did not talk much but they still exchanged views when necessary. Respondent 3 was seen going around talking to his friends to get some ideas. He seemed to be lacking in confidence. He mentioned that:

Respondent 3: *“Undoubtedly, idea generation is essential in the Process Writing. Ideas have to be conceived first before they can be expressed. If there are no ideas, then, there is no scope for writing. This can be attributed to the lack of confidence.”*
(Appendix V-R3 PPISMP 2.0.1-2.0.7)

Respondent 4 and Respondent 5 were cooperating well. For instance, Respondent 5 guided Respondent 4 in expressing ideas correctly. However, Respondent 6 did not mix well and seldom communicated with the others. He emphasized on the importance of interaction in the Process Approach. He stated that:

Respondent 6: *“I think interaction among peers is an important factor. It enables exchanging of views during and after seminars to improve the writing skill. However, I face a challenge in interacting with my classmates.”*
(Appendix V-R6 PPISMP 12.0.10-12.0.16)

On the whole, the interaction of the Respondents could have been improved. Interaction is an important aspect of the Process Approach (Gan et.al., 2021). The teacher educator encouraged interaction for social development.

3.2 Discussion

The teacher trainees encountered some challenges in writing their essays. They faced the challenges in selecting the pictures to suit their interest. They had to strain themselves in the selection process. The problem of generating ideas arose. One reason was their lack of wide reading. Only through wide reading, can the writers gather relevant information (Pradani, 2021; Wang, 2012).

Another problem was that they found it difficult to link the descriptive words provided with the ideas they had in mind. Correlating the words with their ideas required language skill such as grammatical usage and syntax. Since they were weak in these areas, they found it difficult to construct meaningful sentences. Besides, there were other factors not related to language aspects which affected

their writing. For instance, a few of them were not actively involved in the writing activity. So, they were slow and moved around talking to the other Respondents disturbing the learning environment. The reason for the lack of interest could be attributed to low English language proficiency. This led to their feeling of shyness and lack of confidence.

4. Conclusion

The lack of proficiency in the English language, especially in writing skills, is one of the greatest problems in Malaysian schools and colleges. In this study, the findings showed that the teacher trainees found it difficult to generate ideas at first. However, after brainstorming, they gained confidence and started writing the essay. So, communication among the teacher trainees is essential for social development. Exchanging ideas helps to widen their mental horizon and the teacher trainees could become more positive in their abilities through contact with their peers. Under the Process Approach, learners do not have to wait until the end to find out their mistakes. They have the opportunity to review and revise their writing as they proceed. This study has proved that the Process Approach is effective in helping to improve the writing skill. Hence, the implementation is important for its success. Educators must put the Process Approach to writing in practice and the learners must be interested and actively involved in practicing writing.

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