

EXPLORING THE PROBLEMS AND NEEDS OF REPEATERS IN LEARNING ESL WRITING: A CASE STUDY

R.,Kassim¹,A.A.,Md. Zamin²andM.F.,Kamaruddin³

¹Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development,
International Islamic University Malaysia,53100,Gombak, Malaysia.

²Department of English Language & Literature,
Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge & Human Sciences,
International Islamic University Malaysia, 53100, Gombak, Malaysia.

³Centre for Languages and Human Development,
Universiti Teknikal Melaka, Hang Tuah Jaya, 76100
Durian Tunggal, Melaka, Malaysia.

Email: *¹marsya@iium.edu.my; ²ainul_azmin@iium.edu.my; ³mohdfauzi@utem.edu.my

ABSTRACT:The purpose of this research was to find out the problems faced by repeaters in learning writing in English in a pre-sessional course at an international university. The case study involved two students who had repeated the same writing course in three consecutive semesters. The research had two main objectives. One was to explore the challenges the repeaters faced in learning second language writing and the other was to elicit their needs with regard to learning that particular skill. The main data collection method was face-to-face semi-structured interviews. With regard to the difficulties that the repeaters faced in learning ESL writing, they highlighted low motivation and their inability to identify their own weaknesses in writing as their main challenges. They also pointed that these problems were further aggravated by lack of support from their teachers. In terms of their needs, the repeaters cited that they would want individual help and support from their writing teachers so that they could learn and perform better. It can be concluded that the roles played by teachers are vital in enhancing the quality of the repeaters' learning process and experience.

KEYWORDS:*Repeaters, Teaching Writing, Learning Difficulties, Students' Needs, Learning Writing.*

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For a second language learner, writing in English is indeed the most

difficult and challenging task [1]. This is a fact which is true for both native and non-native speakers of English who are learning writing. As such, it is common to find many writing courses which offer extensive and specialized instruction in many colleges and universities worldwide. Meanwhile, within the context of second language teaching, the teaching of writing has taken a central position primarily due to the need of students to be able to write well and effectively in their academic examinations, reports and assignments. In other words, the ability to write well is key to a student's academic success.

Perhaps, the most obvious factor that distinguishes many second language writers from native speaker writers is their ability to express themselves in English. While native speakers have abundant vocabulary and an intuitive ability to handle the English grammar, second language writers, on the other hand, especially at the beginning of the learning process have to struggle with learning to write and learning English at the same time. As a result, we can observe that there will always be unsuccessful learners who perform badly in writing and what is more alarming is when they continue to fail despite repeated instructions. The question that needs to be raised here is, what are the factors that may have led to these students' failure? If so, what are they and how influential are they? Therefore, this paper will examine the problems and challenges faced by the repeating students that may contribute to their difficulties to learn the writing skills.

The study was conducted at a language centre that offers pre-sessional English courses for pre-university students. At this university, English is the medium of instruction and communication. As such, each faculty has determined its own minimum language requirement for the students to achieve before they are allowed to embark on their courses in the faculty. Generally, students are required to achieve an average band 6.0 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), 550 in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or band 6.0 in its own English Placement Test (EPT). Should students fail to achieve the required band, they would have to undergo English proficiency courses for a minimum of one semester or a maximum of two years at the centre.

The English Language proficiency courses offered were divided into several levels which are level 1 (zero English), level 2 (beginner), level 3 (very low intermediate), level 4 (low intermediate), level 5

(intermediate), level 6 (intermediate) and specific skill courses which focused on individual skills (writing, reading, listening or speaking). The repeaters who were the central focus of this study were those students who were in the SSC Writing class and had failed the course at least twice. As a lecturer teaching some of these proficiency courses, the researcher had observed a very worrying trend of students failing in the SSC Writing skill course. What was more worrying was in several cases, the same students failed more than two times. This situation raised some concerns among the university's authority, students and also the centre itself. Hence, this study was carried out to probe this issue. The objectives of this paper were twofold. Its primary purpose was to investigate the difficulties faced by the repeaters in learning second language writing from their own perspectives. Secondly, it aimed to understand the students' needs and problems better, so that their problems and needs could be addressed with the hope that the repeaters would be more successful in their learning. Having said that, therefore, this paper tried to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the problems and challenges faced by the repeaters in learning writing?
2. What are the needs of these students in learning L2 writing?

2.0 RELATED LITERATURE

Studies dealing with unsuccessful second language learners' difficulties in writing seem to be the concern of several researchers. One such research was carried out to explore and understand the writing difficulties experienced by second language writers [2]. Choosing two second language learners, the researcher studied their past history, school work, interviewed them, and analyzed their informal written products (through e-mails). The participants had spent quite a substantial amount of time in the U.S (between 8 to 10 years) and had their schooling there prior to enrolling in the college where the researcher was a writing professor. The learners had failed the writing course at least two times, yet they seemed to pass their major's core courses.

In the study, it was found that both learners had difficulty in transferring their good syntactic and grammatical command of spoken English to writing. One learner on the other hand, showed more success in the transfer, but had difficulties with word endings,

such as plural, third person singular and tense markers. The researcher accorded this problem to the interference of his first language. It is also important to note that both learners wrote much better in their informal written communication compared to academic work. Regarding the effects of the sense of audience and purpose in their writing, both learners said that it did not make any difference to them. They did not really think about the audience when they were writing.

In another study, the writing apprehension between more successful students and weaker students was compared [3]. The researchers wanted to find out the how anxiety affects students' performance. They adopted the Daly and Miller's (1975) Writing Apprehension TEST to measure the participants' writing apprehension. Based on this study which was conducted on 186 third year students of the MARA University of Technology in Terengganu, it was discovered that the weaker students experienced higher anxiety than the better students. The researchers asserted that the lack of writing skills was a likely reason for the weaker students' high anxiety level. Thus, it is obvious that high anxiety level is indeed a problem that the poor learners had to face.

On the same note, it was asserted that poor learners generally lack writing skills, for example, revising skills [4]. It cannot be denied that the revision stage is extremely critical in the writing process and when we look at the ability of poor learners in revising their writing, it proves to be problematic. Meanwhile, another study revealed an important finding [5]. The study analyzed the writing knowledge in EFL composing among four Spanish undergraduate students enrolled in an English course. Two students were identified as effective writers while the other two were categorized as less effective writers (poor writers). The students were given an English test and asked to write an argumentative essay to determine their level of proficiency. Later on, they were asked to write another essay and a thinking aloud protocol was applied to illuminate their metacognitive knowledge about writing. The researcher found that for the poor writers, their metacognitive knowledge was far limited and inadequate if compared to the successful writers.

In essence, based on the studies reviewed, we can highlight several salient points. We will notice that unsuccessful learners on the whole, employ learning strategies which are different from the successful

learners. Even if they do employ similar strategies, they are less effective than those employed by the successful learners. Furthermore, the problems encountered by the unsuccessful learners in learning second language writing vary. Basically, they have difficulties transferring their language skills, for example, from speaking to writing. As a result, a learner who is a successful learner in speaking skill might not be successful in writing in the second language. Apart from that, the literature also indicates that while some unsuccessful learners write well in an informal setting, most of them perform poorly in an academic setting. To add, it is also worth noting that the unsuccessful learners were reported to have high anxiety level but low metacognition. Finally, the influence of the first language and individual learner's differences has also been proven to pose problems to learners learning a second language. Hence, acknowledging these problems will indeed assist us in understanding why some learners become unsuccessful learners in second language writing.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

This case was carried out qualitatively and the data was collected through semi-structured face to face interviews. The researcher was interested to explore the students' perspective and personal views on issues regarding ESL writing and semi-structured interview provided the researcher with in-depth understanding of the participants' perspectives. Hence, semi-structured interview was chosen due to its flexibility and recursive nature [6]. Two students who were repeating for the second time (taking the same course for the third time) were selected to participate in the research. Both students were identified by their writing instructors and had agreed to take part in the research. Each interview which took about twenty five minutes was conducted separately. The interviews were transcribed, coded and interpreted. The main ideas which were related to certain central ideas were grouped into subthemes and then into themes.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research question 1: What are the problems and challenges faced by the repeaters in learning writing?

It was found that the great challenges that they faced was within

themselves which came in the forms of lack of motivation and boredom that led to loss of interest. These indeed gave a substantial effect on their learning process. Another internal factor that proved to be a problem to them was the fact that they did not know their own weaknesses. This was primarily due to the fact that their lecturers did not explain to them in which areas they were weak in and consequently, they did not know why they kept on failing. The challenges mentioned above can be supported by some of the students' responses below:

"Jadi kadang boring madam untuk study tu kan." [**Sometimes I feel bored to study**] (Respondent 1 / DU 218).

"Mmm(masalah motivasi)." [**Motivation problems**] (Respondent 1 / DU 232).

"I don't know, my teacher eh my lecturer aaa after I gave him an assignment, (laugh) he never gave back.." (Respondent 2 / DU 286).

"So saya pun kadang-kadang kan madam kan saya kadang-kadang kurang tahu jugak entah di mana salah yang saya writing saya kurang (laugh) tahu madam dari pertama saya ikut EPT sampai sekarang cuma 5 koma 5 {5.5}, kurangnya xx(mumblng) cuma sekitar koma 5 {0.5}." [**I don't know what was wrong. I only got band 5.5**] (Respondent 1 / DU 292).

Both respondents also pointed that the problems that they faced originated from the teachers themselves. They asserted that one reason was because the teacher was not helpful enough in explaining their weaknesses and problems in writing. Obviously, to the respondents, that hindered them from improving themselves.

Having to repeat the course several times also proved to be the source of their lack of motivation and frustration. They learned the same thing over and over again, yet they kept on failing and had to repeat the same course. In other words, repeating the course looked like the main reason for the difficulties that they were facing. The responses below confirm this:

"...saya dari level 4, 5, 6, skills, skills and skills." [**I was from level 4, 5, 6, skills, skills and skills**] (Respondent 1 / DU 224).

"Aaa.(sebab ulang banyak kali)...A'ah keseringan.Yang kena udah sering kan?...Aaa repeat." [**Because I have repeated so many times**] (Respondent 1 / DU 270 – 274).

In essence, the main challenge that they faced was due to internal factors. Lack of motivation and not knowing their own weaknesses were cited as the main problem they were facing. What were the

causes then? The respondents attributed the problems to the teacher and also the fact that they were repeaters. Lack of motivation among learners is indeed nothing new. There are many studies which reported that personal factor such as lack of motivation can be a great barrier for learners in learning a second language [7, 8].

Research question 2: What are the needs of the students in writing?

Considering that both respondents had been repeating the course at least twice, it was worrying to discover that they actually didn't put a lot of efforts to overcome their weaknesses, in order to improve their writing. The second respondent for instance, revealed that he did not do much. This is illustrated by his response below:

"[just] I think {laugh} I did very little thing I don't know."
(Respondent 2 / DU 182)

After further probing, the respondents disclosed that even if they did take measures to improve themselves, they generally focused on reading, mainly reading core courses' coursebooks to improve their vocabulary. Another main idea gathered from the data was that the respondents also read their own essays to learn the structure and they believed by doing so they would learn how to make grammatically correct sentences. A respondent said:

"...saya aa setiap aa apa lecture bagi topic saya selalu refer untuk ada saya punya writing, punya writing dari lecture saya aa apa saya selalu refer ke ini ke ke topic itu walaupun topiknya berbeda tapi secara formalnya saya mengi... mengikuti stuk apa strukturnya situ..... Cara cara menulis ayat.....Aaa (boleh bantu grammar)." **[I always refer to my previous essays. Even though the topics are different, I follow the sentence structure... the grammar]** (Respondent 1 / DU 98 - 102).

Clearly, the respondents had their own belief towards the way that they thought they would learn best. In addition, they believed that for them to learn best, the key would be the teacher and the teaching approach adopted by the teacher. To them, it is crucial that the teacher pays individual attention to students regardless the class size or the big number of students and explains to them their weaknesses. They seemed to really appreciate that and by the teacher doing so, they would be able to understand and improve themselves. The following excerpts clearly show this point:

"see and make sure that every students doing anythings right. That's what I like, [and]..." (Respondent 2 / DU 244).

"I hope one day if the lecturer gives us a topic, she will write on it too and show to us how it is done" (Respondent 1 / DU 166).

The critical issue that could be elicited from the findings is the respondents' revelation regarding the fact that they seemed not to know how to help or improve themselves and they appeared not to be getting the proper assistance they needed. As a consequence, they perceived reading as a good way to help them improve their writing. Perhaps this was because the respondents thought that they were weak in vocabulary and through reading they found that they could enrich their vocabulary.

Nevertheless, the researcher believes that the respondents failed to see the bigger picture. They tend to overlook the fact that there are other ways to improve L2 writing proficiency besides reading, such as doing a lot of essay writing practice. So, this brings us to another pertinent issue emerging from the data, which is the role of the teacher in the classroom. The respondents both agreed that they would learn best if they get individual attention from the teacher. It was important also for the respondents that the teacher was able to provide them with clear explanation regarding their strengths and weaknesses. In other words, they need constant and constructive feedback regarding their L2 writing. Should they get the sufficient attention and necessary feedback, the respondents believed that they would learn better.

One recurring idea that also surfaced when the researcher was answering the first and the second research questions was that the respondents need their teacher to guide them. This goes back to back fact that, to them learning L2 writing was something foreign and as such, they need a teacher to assure them that they are on the right track. To illustrate, the first respondent hoped that the teacher would provide a model essay every time the teacher asked him to write an essay. What does this indicate? This highlights the respondent's need for assistance and clear guidelines from the teacher.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In summary, based on findings, the researcher wishes to highlight several points. Apparently the repeaters were generally weak in all aspects of writing skills, unfortunately, very limited corrective measures were taken

by them. If these weaknesses and problems were left unchecked, the students might continue to fail. To add, the repeaters' expectation towards the teacher also should not be taken lightly. Teachers' attitudes, disposition and teaching approach were mentioned many times by the respondents. Thus, it should be emphasized here that teachers need to be more sensitive to their students' needs and preferences. Furthermore, teachers play important roles in helping and ensuring the success of their students in learning language skills [9]. The researcher would like to suggest that teachers should take the matter of repeating students' motivation level seriously because once their motivation level is too low, they will probably give up totally on learning writing. The fact that they keep on failing also will also de-motivate them greatly. As such, if we want to help the repeaters, the best thing to be done is to pay extra attention to them and this will definitely boost their motivation and self-confidence. It cannot be denied that the situation faced the repeaters is indeed very complex. Hence, it is hoped that this study provides us with better understanding of the repeaters and the input will enable us to find the best way to make learning L2 writing skills more meaningful and successful for them.

REFERENCES

- [1] K. Hyland, *Teaching and Researching Writing*, 3rd Edition. London: Routledge, 2016.
- [2] L. Blanton, "Student, interrupted: A tale of two would-be writers," *Journal of Second Language Writing*, vol. 14, pp. 105-121, 2005.
- [3] N.S. Mat Daud, N. Mat Daud and N. L. Abu Kassim, "Second language writing anxiety: Cause or effect?" 2008. Available: http://www.melta.org.my/Doc/second_language_writing.pdf
- [4] C. C. Lee, (2007). Graphic organizers as scaffolding for students' revision in the prewriting stage, *Proceedings Ascillite Singapore 2007*. Available: <http://www.ascillite.org.au/conference/Singapore07/lee-cc.pdf>
- [5] M. Victori, "An analysis of writing knowledge in EFL composing: A case study of two effective and two less effective writers," *System*, vol. 27, pp. 537-555, 1999.

- [6] M. Q. Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*. CA: Sage Publications, 1990.
- [7] O. Poverjuc, "A longitudinal case study of students' perceptions of academic writing and of themselves as academic writers: The writing experience of five students who spoke English as an additional language," Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Warwick, Coventry, UK, 2010.
- [8] H. Mo, "A study of the teaching of ESL writing in colleges in China," *International Journal of English Linguistics*, vol. 2, pp. 118-127, 2012. Available: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v2n1p118>.
- [9] H. S. Q. Al-Badawi, "The perceptions and practices of first year students' academic writing at the Colleges of Applied Sciences in Oman," Ph.D. dissertation, School of Education, Univ. of Leeds, UK, 2011.