Students' Writing Needs: Basis for Language Intervention Program

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ABSTRACT

Assessing students' writing needs provides English language teachers a baseline information in designing an appropriate intervention program. This study determined students' writing proficiency in English. It identified the most common and frequent errors committed by the respondents. Data were collected from the essays which were rated using a rubric designed for this purpose. Errors were categorized into three: grammatical, mechanical, and structural. Results show that among the errors frequently committed by the respondents, grammatical errors ranked first, followed by mechanical and structural errors. Findings further indicate that subject-verb agreement in grammar is the most common error committed. More than half of the respondents were classified as intermediate writers whose written outputs contain short and incoherent ideas which are difficult to follow. Learners could be considered proficient if they belong to at least advanced level. Thus, there is a need for a language intervention program.

Keywords: *writing needs, language, intervention, program*

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the essential dexterities that English as second or foreign language learners should improve. This skill, if mastered, gives an individual a "passport" to employment. Many of the job opportunities published in the newspapers include important qualification: competence in oral and written communication. Consequently, many of the job hunters cannot get the desired position (Salazar, 2007).

The March 2006 Social Weather Station (SWS) survey, commissioned by Promoting English Proficiency (PEP) in the Philippines, revealed that there is a significant waning of the English proficiency among the Filipino adult learners. More specifically, the figure shows that only 48% are proficient in written communication compared to 61% in December 1993 and September 2000 surveys (Salazar, 2007).

Similarly, the English language ability of our college graduates had significantly declined as revealed in their flawed composition (e.g., in grammar, spelling, punctuation, organization, etc.). The decline is so fast (in few years' time) that the possible employment of the graduates here and abroad might be endangered. One of the reasons different employers preferred (for employment) Filipino people is attributed to their English proficiency compared to other nationalities, but they might lose the edge if the deterioration of language skills would continue (Macasinag, 2011).

The experience of other English as second language learners (ESL) is more likely similar to the situation of students in Central Mindanao University (CMU). For example, informal assessment of some general education subject teachers (both language and content-area teachers) revealed that students' written outputs such as laboratory report, reflection paper, expository essays were poorly constructed. The result of the teachers' informal evaluation would be strengthened by a formal assessment, a research-based inquiry, which would serve as the basis for a need-based design for an intervention program that could help address the students' writing problems. Thus, this endeavor was conceptualized in consonance with the department's objectives to provide ESL learners with quality instruction that would help enhance their mastery of the English language and to help them become competent language teachers.

The study is based on the concept that committing errors in English is part of the second language (L2) learning. In fact, many errors committed by L2 learners are universal. This means that students learning a second language, regardless of their first language (L1) make common errors like an omission, overgeneralization, and negative transfer. Errors are a noticeable facet of learner language, and these

are valuable information that guide language educators what language concerns they would focus and how to address them (Ellis, 1997). Thus, identifying errors is an important step to do. Learners' language needs could be dealt with by doing a pedagogic needs analysis. The term was introduced by West (1998 as cited by Songhori, 2008) which includes deficiency analysis, strategy analysis or learning needs analysis, and means analysis. Errors found in the writing of ESL students vary depending on their proficiency level. From such error analysis, appropriate action could be done.

The intervention program is a kind of input which could address the gap between the actual and the ideal proficiency level of the students. According to Myles (2002), the input is vital in the writing process, specifically in a classroom context. It will likely improve students' writing competence if it caters their needs. Thus, this study identified the most common and frequent language errors committed by the respondents such as subject-verb agreement, fragment, parallelism, spelling, shifting subject, verb tense, coherence and use of cohesive devices, and a determiner. Then, it determined their writing proficiency level and proposed a need-based language intervention program.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a descriptive approach to its inquiry. It is an assessment research which involved the 317 (204 female and 113 male) first-year college students of Central Mindanao University, Musuan, Bukidnon. They were chosen, using a stratified random sampling, from the nine colleges: Agriculture, Arts and Sciences, Business and Management, Education, Engineering, Forestry and Environmental Science, Human Ecology, Nursing, and Veterinary Medicine. Their participation was voluntary, and their identity was kept anonymous.

The student respondents were requested to write a short essay (250-500 words) which were analyzed for common errors and were rated by the researcher based on specific writing rubric to assess students' writing proficiency. Writing rubric which the researcher adapted from Paltridge (1992 as cited in Brown, 2001) was originally developed by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). It was used to evaluate the students' essays based on the linguistic features such as content (ideas and arguments); accuracy regarding the use of cohesive devices and lexical, grammatical, and relational patterns; fluency; appropriateness; and intelligibility. Scoring ranged from 0 to 5 for each aspect (0 for lowest and 5 for highest point). The result of the evaluation was used as a basis for designing a need-based intervention program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Writing Errors

Academic essay is singled out as the most common writing task assigned to students (Bacha, 2002). Traditionally, it has been one of the most important instruments used to evaluate students' understanding of their subject areas (Campbell, Smith & Brooker, 1998; Al-Makhzoomi, 2011).

Table 1 shows the specific writing errors found in the essays of the 317 respondents such as structure, grammar, and mechanics. It also indicates the number of respondents who committed errors in each category. For the grammar category, subject-verb agreement marked the highest number of errors as committed by 80 of 317 respondents (25.23%), followed by an error on the use of verb tense (29 of 317 or 0.09%), determiner (6 of 317 or .02%), and vocabulary (2 of 317 or .006%) respectively.

Table 1
Language Error Categories

Errors	Respondents		Total
	Male N=113	Female N=204	
Grammar			
Subject Verb Agreement	30	50	80
Tenses	9	20	29
Determiner	2	4	6
Vocabulary	0	1	1
Mechanics			
Contraction	18	35	53
Capitalization	8	19	27
Spelling	6	10	16
Abbreviation	3	6	9
Punctuation	3	4	7
Structure			
Elaborating Details	21	29	50
Subordinating Conjunction	11	20	31
Incomplete Sentence	2	2	4
Parallelism	0	2	2
Shifting Subject	0	2	2
TOTAL	113	204	317

For mechanics category, use of contraction ranked first, and punctuation ranked last among the errors committed by the respondents. Also, elaborating details and use of subordinating clause are among the top two errors on structure category. The findings of the study are similar to that of Yang (2010) who found that grammatical or syntactic is the most severe errors committed by ESL learners. This category was followed by the incorrect usage of contraction in mechanics and elaborating details in structure respectively. The least number of errors was seen in vocabulary, parallelism, and subject shifting. Also, the result of this study is also consistent with the findings of Dizon (1997) which revealed that most of the students committed an error in subject-verb agreement.

Research done on error analysis revealed that approximately the most common types of errors are all similar; they are focused on grammatical errors such as subject-verb agreement. It is clear that the greatest linguistic problem lies in grammar. Although the results of the study indicate that majority of the respondents are still making a lot of grammatical errors (Dizon, 1997).

Errors about structure are the least of the three categories committed by the respondents. However, it does not mean that the respondents have already mastered aspects of a structure such as elaborating details, use of conjunctions, and consistency of tense. Instead, their lack of knowledge of such linguistic features might lead to avoidance (Ellis, 1997). In the context of this study, it could be inferred that respondents resorted to avoidance as revealed in their written outputs. For example, the short essay with limited details of the ideas expressed might have been an offshoot of their language deficiency.

Table 2
Most Frequently Committed Errors

Errors	Respondents		Total N=317	Rank
	Male N=113	Female N=204		
Grammar	41	75	116	1
Mechanics	38	74	112	2
Structure	34	55	89	3
TOTAL	113	204	317	

Table 2 shows the errors, most frequently committed by the respondents, which were categorized into grammar, mechanics, and structure. It reveals that among the three categories, grammar is the most commonly committed error (116 of 317 respondents or 36.60%). Grammatical mistakes rarely occur in native speakers writing but very common in the work of less skilled ESL students. This error was followed by mechanics, where 112 of 317 (35.33%) respondents had difficulty in the technical conventions in writing. The least error committed was found in structure with only 89 of 317 (28.07%) respondents had difficulty in organizing text.

The result of the study corroborates with the findings of Lasaten (2014) revealing that the 100 second-year students in Mariano Marcos State University College of Teacher Education in Laoag City had difficulty in writing English, particularly on the aspects of grammar and mechanics. Similarly, the findings agree with the result of the study by Sarfraz (2011) showing that the majority of the 50 undergraduate students of Fast National University in Pakistan committed errors on grammar and that interlanguage process caused the errors.

The data of the study show that some respondents committed only a few errors among the three categories, yet their proficiency level is far behind the international standard of English competence. It could be inferred that the respondents resorted to avoidance. This means that they have tried to avoid using linguistic features that are either difficult or not familiar to them.

Level of Writing Proficiency

Table 3
Writing Proficiency of the Respondents

N=317 Respondents	Proficiency Levels						Total
	Beginner	Elementary	Intermediate	Upper Intermediate	Advanced	Superior	
Male (N=113)	0	7	72	29	5	0	113
Female (N=204)	0	29	107	55	13	0	204
Total	0	36	179	84	18	0	317

Table 3 presents the writing proficiency level of 317 student-respondents. Specifically, 36 (11%) were classified as elementary, 179 (56%) as intermediate, 85 (27%) as upper-intermediate, and 18 (.06%) as advanced. Respondents who belong to the elementary level are considered, generally, sporadic writers which writings are very hard to comprehend. Specifically, the content of their essays shows very few ideas with no clear elaboration of details. In addition, the written outputs show that the writers have very limited knowledge of English in terms of words/vocabulary, grammar, and other aspects of language (e.g., verb tense, voice, spelling, etc.) that make them difficult to understand by the readers.

Respondents who belong to the intermediate level have writing proficiency that is a little above the elementary level. This means that their written outputs contain short and incoherent ideas. Although their essays show a little development and convey essential meanings, they are still difficult to follow. In addition, respondents in the upper intermediate level are classified as moderate writers whose written outputs are quite easy to read and comprehend even if their compositions still lack some details and show occasional mistakes in punctuation, spelling, grammar, verb tense, and other linguistic aspects because ideas are arranged clearly.

Respondents in the advanced level have acquired competence in English although they may still commit (occasionally) some mistakes in punctuations, verb tense, spelling, voice, and another language aspect. Their essays contain relevant ideas which are well-organized and easy to understand. The findings of the study are consistent with the claim of Macasinag (2011) stating that English language ability of college graduates significantly declined as revealed in their flawed composition (e.g., in grammar, spelling, punctuation, organization, etc.). Similarly, Fernando and Azucena (as cited in Geronimo, 2012) found that only 6.59% of the senior high school graduates of the academic year 2004-2005 could read, communicate, and understand English and 44.25% had not acquired the skills in English that is essential for college studies.

Also, findings of the present study are in congruence with the results the study done by Mojica (2010) who investigated the writing difficulties and actual flaws of the 26 EFL students in the novice level at the Center for Language Learning of De La Salle University. Findings reveal that respondents committed errors in grammar and vocabulary. Similarly, the study of Cabansag (2013) shows that students committed errors like mechanics, verb usage, tenses, and proper capitalization.

Only 18 (.06%) of the 317 respondents belong to the advanced level, and 179 (56%) belong to intermediate level. This result suggests that there is a need for an intervention program to help the second language learners improve their

proficiency for them to cope with the change/need of time – the globalization. Universities abroad require particular proficiency level from its international students for admission. For instance, the University of Chicago only admits students who can demonstrate a superior level of English language (The University of Chicago, 2015). The result of the study reveals that students are far behind from the international standards. If the goal of an institution would be to help its students compete globally, then appropriate program specific to learners' needs would be desirable.

Proposed Need-based Language Intervention Program

Writing is one of the core competencies of the English language. It is regarded one of the most difficult among the four macro skills. In fact, even native speakers of English experience difficulty acquiring competence in writing (Johnstone, Ashbaugh, & Warfield, 2002). Development of writing skill has been included in the syllabus because it is a primary constituent for learners' academic journey. In fact, advanced writing proficiency is an essential requirement for excellent academic achievement (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002).

Skill in writing is a major academic requirement for students in college-level work, whether in overseas or local colleges. The Commission on Higher Education Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 20 series of 2013 on intellectual competencies-based outcomes, expected students to be proficient in writing. In practice, these outcomes means, among others, that general education extends beyond orientation requires higher writing competencies. However, the study reveals that more than half of the respondents (56%) are intermediate writers. Their written outputs contain inadequate and incoherent ideas. Although their essays show little development and convey essential meanings, they are still difficult to follow which fails the expectation of CHED to its students. Moreover, (11%) of the respondents were classified as elementary writers, (27%) as upper-intermediate writers, and only (.06%) of the respondents were advanced writers. Students who have obtained the required proficiency often need an additional writing instruction and practice before they can meet the standards set in traditional freshman competition courses. Every effort to learn something is attended by lapses, slips, or errors. Without committing errors, learning is incomplete, and language learning is no exception. Some people are open to errors and even willing to accept them, some may even not notice them (Ulla, 2014).

In the context of Central Mindanao University, more than 50% of the respondents have not acquired the needed writing competence for university students. The result of the present study suggests for an appropriate intervention

program to bridge the gap between the present writing proficiency level of the students and the supposedly ideal competency level. However, developing writing skill is not achieved overnight. In fact, research findings reveal that it needs 4 to 12 years for the most advantaged second language learners to acquire native-like proficiency (Collier, 1995). Thus, this simple intervention program, an infant step, was conceptualized to help address students' writing concerns.

Based on the result of the needs assessment, the respondents experienced difficulty in the following linguistic aspects: subject-verb agreement, tenses, use of subordinating conjunctions, elaboration of details, and mechanics. These aspects will be the focus of the intervention program which will be participated by interested students in the university who wish to improve their writing proficiency.

Proposed Language Intervention Program

This proposed language intervention program contains topics and activities which are based on the results of the needs analysis. It primarily aims to help English as a second language learners acquire the desired mastery of the aspects of English which they can apply in their academic and other kinds of writing. Intervention program will last for at least two months, meeting three times a week and one hour per session.

Like any typical lessons, the proposed lessons that encompass the intervention program will follow/contain the template introduced by Feldman and McPhee (2008) such as practice, evaluation, closure, after-class work. The activities for all the lessons will adhere to the principle of a balanced teacher-student talk to offer learners opportunities to share ideas, while the teacher maintains the role of a facilitator. Table 4 contains the lessons and activities of the proposed intervention program.

Table 4
Matrix of Activities

Time Frame/ Schedule (PM) MWF 5-6:00a	Terminal Objective: At the end of the intervention program, the participants must have acquired mastery of the aspects of English which they can apply in their academic and other kinds of writing.	Content	Activities	Materials	Resource Persons
1 session			Orientation Program		
		GRAMMAR			
1 session	Enabling Objectives: At the end of the session, learners must: --answer correctly pre-test on grammar	Grammar	Pre-test	-Questionnaire -Answer sheet	J. Nueva Student-assistant
2 sessions	--examine the given text focusing on aspects of SVA; --participate actively in a group activity; and --share group outputs to the class	SVA	1.Text analysisfocusing on SVA (group work) 2.Output presentation 3.Processing/Giving feed-back	-Reading Selection -LCD -laptop -Hand-out	J. Nueva Student-assistant
2 sessions	--accomplish assigned tasks promptly; and --evaluate other students' outputs	SVA	1.Practice Activity/Exercises 2. Processing/Giving feedback	-Questionnaire -Answer sheet -LCD -Laptop	J. Nueva Student-assistant
2 sessions	--write a short essay observing accurate use of SVA aspects; --share group outputs to the class --give feedback on fellow students' output	SVA	1.Writing activity 2. Output Presentation 3.Giving feedback	-Yellow paper -pen	J. Nueva Student-assistant
2 sessions	--examine the given text focusing on tenses --participate actively in a class discussion	Tenses	1.Text analysis focusing on tenses 2.Processing of text analysis activity/ class discussion	-Reading Selection -LCD -laptop	J. Nueva Student-assistant
2 sessions	--accomplish assigned tasks promptly; and --evaluate other students' outputs	Tenses	1.Practice Activity/ Exercises 2. Processing/ Giving feedback	-Questionnaire -Answer sheet -LCD -Laptop	J. Nueva Student-assistant
2 sessions	--write a brief essay applying knowledge on tenses; -- share group outputs to the class --give feedback on fellow students' output	Tenses	1.Writing activity 2. Output Presentation 3.Giving feedback	-Yellow paper -pen	J. Nueva Student-assistant
1 session	--answer correctly post-test on grammar	Grammar	Post-test	-Questionnaire -Answer sheet	J. Nueva Student-assistant

MECHANICS

1 session	--answer pre-test correctly on mechanics	Mechanics	Pre-test	-Questionnaire -Answer sheet	J. Nueva Student-assistant
1 session	--accomplish assigned tasks on contraction promptly; and --evaluate other students' outputs	Contraction	1. Error analysis 2. Giving feedback	Sample text -LCD -Laptop	J. Nueva Student-assistant
2 sessions	--accomplish assigned tasks on capitalization promptly; and --edit and proofread texts contain -ing errors on capi-talization --evaluate other students' outputs	Capitalization	1. Error analysis 2. Workshop: Editing and proofreading 3. Giving feedback	Sample text -LCD -Laptop -Hand-outs	J. Nueva Student-assistant
3 sessions	--participate actively in spelling games; --edit and proofread texts contain -ing errors on spelling	Spelling	1. Spelling bee/ games 2. Workshop: Editing and proofreading 3. Giving feedback	-LCD -Laptop -Hand-outs	J. Nueva Student-assistant
1 session	--answer correctly post-test on mechanics	Mechanics	Post-test	-Questionnaire -Answer sheet	

STRUCTURE

1 session	--answer pre-test correctly on structure	Structure	Pre-test	-Questionnaire -Answer sheet	J. Nueva Student-assistant
1 session	--respond actively to some questions during the mini-lecture	Elaborating details	Mini-lecture	-Hand-out -LCD -Laptop	J. Nueva Student-assistant
8 sessions	--examine the given text focusing on supporting details; --participate actively in work-shops on outlining and writing essay; --write a short essay apply-ing knowledge of main and supporting details; --present written output to the class; and --evaluate other students' output	Conjunctions	1. Text analysis focusing on main and supporting ideas 2. Workshop on outlining 3. Workshop on writing main and supporting de-tails 4. Presentation of outputs 5. Processing/ Giving feedback	-Reading Selection -LCD -Laptop -Hand-outs	J. Nueva Student-assistant
6 sessions	--examine the given text focusing on conjunctions; --participate actively in work-shop on the use of conjunctions; --write a short essay apply-ing knowledge on conjunctions; --present written output to the class; and --evaluate other students' output	Structure	Post-test	-Reading Se-lec-tion -LCD -Laptop -Hand-outs	J. Nueva Student-assistant
1 session	--answer correctly post-test on structure			-Questionnaire -Answer sheet	J. Nueva Student-assistant
1 session			Culmination Program		

CONCLUSION

Based on the data of the study, three conclusions are drawn. First, errors committed by the respondents include three categories such as grammar, mechanics, and structure. Specifically, the following errors were committed: subject-verb agreement and tenses for grammar; contraction, capitalization, and spelling for mechanics; and elaborating details and subordinating conjunctions for structure. Second, aspects of grammar are the most frequently committed errors among the three categories. Third, more than fifty percent of the respondents belong to the intermediate level which is far behind the international standard. Conclusions imply that students' difficulty of the linguistic aspects necessitates for an appropriate and need-based intervention program to help the students improve their writing competence in English.

RECOMMENDATION

The conclusions suggest for further studies to address some delimitations on writing proficiency that the present research has imposed. First, a study that deals with an in-depth error analysis, not limited to identifying errors committed but also evaluating the factors that cause the errors (L1 negative transfer, over generalization) may be conducted. Second, the data show that some respondents committed only a few errors among the three categories, yet their proficiency level is far behind the international standard of English competence. It could be inferred that the respondents resorted to avoidance. Thus, there is a need to investigate further the veracity of this claim. Third, it is desirable to implement the proposed need-based intervention to help the students improve their writing proficiency level.

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