

Students' Attitude towards Writing and Its Implications to St Mary's University

Assaye Teklu and Tekalign Mamo

Faculty of Teacher Education, St Mary's University, Ethiopia

Abstract

The major objective of this research is to find out what the attitude of college students towards writing is and its implications. To meet this objective, the researchers used students' questionnaires as a major data collecting instrument. 100 students who have at least taken 1 writing course have participated in this study and the data has an interesting picture to depict. Although instructors try to employ varieties of instructional techniques, these techniques are not interesting enough to the students. The majority students do not rely on the way assignments and tests are treated by their instructors and they feel that their instructors give excessive emphasis to their form related mistakes than their effort to generate analyze and synthesize idea. Less emphasis has been found to be given by instructors to learners' cognitive skill while correcting written assignments and tests although satisfactory amount of cognitive skill consideration is made while instruction. What is very interesting perhaps is that despite all these odds, students have managed to develop positive attitude towards writing after taking writing course in the college.

Key words: Cognitive skill, process writing, instructional techniques, language form

Introduction

Nearly, all students in the college level take at least one writing course at the first or second year of college. The writing courses are essentially targeted

towards equipping the student with the essentials of writing, which will very much help them in their academy and employment thereafter. In the case of the Ethiopian higher education, writing courses are mainly offered in such a way that students' capability to communicate ideas in written forms could be taken care of. Although students belonging to various fields of studies may defer in terms of the level of demand they could have towards the writing courses, one issue remains glaringly vivid-all need writing to boost their educational success and stay competent in the employment market after leaving college.

The implication is clear-providing a college student with an effective writing course is not something that limits itself into the success or failure of the individual course only. Rather, it is more of helping the students improve their confidence of using the written communication, mark improvements through effective instruction and finally benefit from it both in their academics and that of their employment. Thus, it would be vital to capitalize on the need to provide an effective writing course(s) to college students, and study factors which may work for or against the effective delivery. The way students feel about the very course 'writing' is one of the most important factors which should be investigated with this regard. Not only this, checking whether there exists a reasonable match between the way students want the writing courses should be given to them and the actual experience they have on the ground do also need a thorough scrutiny.

Scope of the study

This study limits itself to the regular and extension students of St. Mary's University collage since these degree students necessarily take at least one

writing course in their collage stay and they can elicit the required information regarding the research questions indicated. In addition to this as the researchers belong to this institution; they considered that collecting data would be easier and more effective finance and time wise. The research also limits its scope to studying the attitude of college students towards writing course and their evaluation of the effectiveness of the instructional process as a whole.

Significance of the Study

This study is of a paramount significance in that it gives information regarding the way writing instruction should be crafted in such a way that students' instructional demands are adequately catered .The research also gives clue as to what the attitude of college students towards writing is and probes instructors and other concerned bodies such as material writers and language curriculum developers to design instruction process and materials in such a way that they could develop positive attitude towards writing. Not only this, researchers could also find necessary input for their researches around such areas as, effective material preparation, effective writing instruction and appropriate exploitation of the cognitive skill of learners.

Objectives of the study

The major objective of this research is to explore the type of Attitude College students have regarding writing courses and to assess their level of satisfaction regarding the way the course is given to them. With this objective in mind, the research has the following specific questions.

- A) What is the attitude of college learners towards writing?
- B) How do students like to get written feedback?

- C) How do students like to be instructed in writing courses?
- D) Do instructors treat the cognitive and linguistic inputs of writing in a balanced manner?

Conceptual Framework

Why writing in the realm of Education and Employment?

As indicated in the introduction writing is an irreplaceable skill both for the college and employment life. Colleges as well as employees desperately need their students and employees have a good mastery of the skill. The success or failure of a student in college or employment will highly be determined by his written proficiency. As the scholars put it.” Effective writing skills are central in both higher education and in the world of work that follows. (Ronald and et..al 2009:3)

Challenges of Writing Skill

Writing according to Jahin and et.al (2012) is a difficult skill for native and nonnative speakers alike. Many Scholars likewise agree with the idea that the very act of writing as well as the instructional process in general is a major challenge. For instance, Crank (2012) indicates that all college teachers across the curriculum face a challenge when helping students develop college-level writing skills. As one may anticipate, this hurdle of instructing writing course could be the result of the negative attitude students have towards the course, the inferior quality of writing course provision or the inappropriateness of the instructional inputs. In fact, the less entertaining scenario writing usually involves, the less productive the writing instruction would be .For some scholars, it is not mainly the instructional processes that pose threat to the learning of the skill. According to Graham, Harris &

Mason (2005), writing is generally regarded as a difficult skill and complex task among the majority learners. This inclination has indeed got a lot to do with determining the attitude of learners towards writing courses. In a way, it would be significant to single out matters which made the writing skill difficult.

What makes writing difficult?

“Writing is a process through which writers explore thoughts and ideas, and make them visible and concrete” Jahin and et al (2012:16). One of the reasons why writing is considered difficult could be the lack of knowledge learners and instructors have regarding the very nature of the skill indicated above. Obviously, writing is a process that involves multiple stages especially as its size increases. In this regard Kellogg (2008) argues that writing an extended text at an advanced level involves not just the language system but the cognitive systems for memory and thinking. Instructors failure to identify the value of this cognitive system by over emphasizing the form of the language will naturally create panic on learners. This leads students to avoid writing at any cost. In other words, they don't exploit their cognitive skill, which is perhaps the most important tool to improve the writing skill, simply because they are afraid of making grammatical, spelling, punctuation and other mistakes related to the form or structure of the language.

As a matter of fact, writing is more of cognitive than it is mechanics and form bound for many scholars. According to (Kellogg 2001) a good writer uses more of his cognitive skill and faces more of cognitive challenge than language form problems as he tests much of his memory, language, and

thinking ability. That according to Kellogg demands rapid retrieval of knowledge about the topic from long-term memory which requires an advanced skill. In reality, writing instructors should encourage students to exploit this skill and allow them to move on to the form specific details step by step rather than discouraging their writing on face value, considering the mechanical aspects of the language only. Mature writing requires numerous transitions among planning, generation, and reviewing (Hayes& Flower 1980; Levy & Ransdell 1995). Unfortunately, researchers found that much of the instructor emphasis has been found to go for aspects of language form. David asserts “a great deal, if not most, of what passes for writing instruction at the secondary and college levels is rule-ridden and formulaic and unrelated to writing as it is actually done by people who write” (2002:73) Such an attitude of course makes writing such a difficult task.

How can we make the best out of writing instruction?

Balance between cognitive skill and Linguistic competence

A central factor in the development of expert performance across a wide range of both physical and cognitive task domains is the use of deliberate practice (Ericsson 2006: 22) Here we can see that the practice of an effective writing instruction essentially emanates from the due recognition of the nature of writing-that it is a process which basically involves the cognitive skill and the linguistic competence of the learner. The failure of the instructor to help learners use any one of these two attributes in a balanced manner leaves the whole instruction inadequate. Kellogg (1994) argues that, we must train college-level writers rather than merely instruct them. By this he means both knowledge of correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, diction,

thesis statements, topic sentences and cohesive links within a paragraph and global organization of texts which involve the cognitive skill of the learner would be mandatory for an effective writing instruction. To further illustrate this he uses the analogy of writers and musicians—who both should be trained so that what they know is retrieved and creatively applied during composition. That way we can in fact train writing rather than merely teaching it.

Exploit previous knowledge of Learner

The more advanced learners are the more experience they will have in life which will serve as an input to writing. This may imply that advanced writing will have a lot to benefit from learners background knowledge. College instructors likewise will need to duly make use of the advanced background knowledge across their instruction. Teachers must build on students' previous practice as writers by helping them contextualize all of these choices as social—as choices grounded in a deep understanding of the conventions of a variety of academic and professional discourses (Crank 2012:60).

The other option is ghastly! If learners are not trained to use what they already know to their writing activity effectively as Kellogg (2008) effectively puts it, their knowledge remains inert during composition signifying no purpose.

In fact there are some important ways of helping our learners use their background knowledge in their writings. Among these rules of thumb, encouraging students to write about ranges of topics which are of their

interests and closer to their experiences could be few but to mention. Effective use of knowledge will require that college students deliberately practice the craft of writing extended texts.

Lack of Meaningful Writing Practice

Effective writing instruction highly relies on a sustainable practice. The more we allow our learners to practice writing through various approaches, the more they will be able to write meaningful pieces. As Hillocks(1986) puts it, deliberate practice of writing is the core of effective writing instruction.

Of course it is true that the mere repetition of activities will not serve a good purpose except leading students to boredom. Instead activities should be of various types and contextualized to the actual life and experience of students. Ashbaugh and Warfield (2002) argue that practice can markedly improve college student writing when it is done in the context of a professionally relevant task domain that motivates efforts to learn.

Methodology

Questionnaire has been used as the major data collecting instrument in this study. Both close ended and open ended questions are incorporated to draw information about students' attitude towards writing courses and their level of satisfaction regarding the way the courses are delivered. The subjects of this study are 50 regular and 50 extension degree students who at least have taken one writing course in college level. As 20% of the total population in this case has been taken as a sample, it is considered representative. Frequency distribution table has been used to analyze data .Data acquired

through questionnaire has been effectively recorded, tabulated and analyzed quantitatively.

Sampling and Data collection Instruments

This research which has the major objective of investigating college students' attitude towards the writing skill and students' evaluation of the way writing courses are given used students' questionnaire as a major data collection instrument. 100 students from the accounting, marketing, management and information technology department who have taken at least one writing course in the college are taken as a sample. Then they were made to fill questionnaire.

This research is quantitative and data acquired through questionnaire has carefully been recorded, tabulated, analyzed and finally interpreted. Simple descriptive statistics method has been employed and percentage has been used to clearly interpret what the data has to reveal.

This section has five tables under which each has interrelated student questions. The first two tables mainly focus on identifying the attitude of students have regarding writing in general and students' evaluation of the extent to which their cognitive effort is put under consideration by their instructors. The next two tables are about investigating whether the writing courses they have taken in the collage have positively influenced their attitude towards writing .Furthermore their perception regarding the reliability of the evaluation their writing instructors make is also treated in this section. Finally, questions which probe students to elicit information regarding whether they consider the time they spent learning writing in the collage was worth spending or not are treated.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1: Students attitude towards writing courses in general

No	Items	Total	SD %	D %	A %	SA %
1	Writing courses are given in the collage the interesting way.	100	20	22	30	28
2	Writing instructors employ various interesting techniques while teaching writing	100	18	22	32	28
3	Writing is an interesting language skill.	100	35	20	20	25
4	No matter how much I learn, I can't improve my writing skill	100	20	22	30	28
5	I wouldn't take writing course if it weren't a must to take in the college	100	22	26	23	29

As we can see in the table, 42 % of the respondents, that is the significant minority fall under the disagreement category with regard to the attractiveness of the writing instruction in the collage although the slight majority belong to the other category. In fact, it would be important to investigate some possible reasons for such a huge level of dissatisfaction about the way writing instruction is not given interestingly enough. The other related question which could give us a clue with this regard, that is whether instructors are giving opportunity for their students to learn writing through verities of interesting approaches, a good deal of students, about 60 % of them, belong to 'agree' category.

At this point, it is easy to witness that although instructors try to employ various techniques of instructing the writing skill, they need to work far more in terms of making these various approaches more attractive to learners. In fact, it could be very important to check if this attitude of not considering the writing course delivery approach not interesting enough is the result of the inherent aversion students have towards the very skill, writing. Accordingly, students were asked to what extent they consider writing as an interesting activity.

As many researchers found out, the majority respondents in this study, about 55% of them consider writing as a boring and difficult activity. In fact, what the data has to reveal regarding whether the students take writing as a learnable activity has been found to be quite fatalistic. Although we have the minority response range with this regard, 42%, the fact that we have such a huge number of students who never trust the value of writing instruction to their improvement as a whole should naturally remain as a major cause for concern. In simple terms, it would be logical to deduce that there are four out of ten students in the writing class who simply attend class for the sake of attendance.

With this unpleasant scenario in mind it would be wise to read what the data has to say regarding what students would do if they had the chance to choose between taking and not taking writing course if they had the authority to do so. The finding we have in here once again depicts such an alarming picture. More than 50 % of the students would avoid writing course had they had the authority in a way that complements the findings we have in the other related questions of this table. Here, it is very easy to witness that although students

acknowledge the effort of instructors with regard to using multiple instructional techniques, they still have a big doubt with regard to the effectiveness of the instruction. For one thing, majority of them essentially have negative attitude regarding the skill itself and more importantly they consider any type of writing instruction as a mere waste of time, impacting no positive change in their performance.

Table 2: The extent to which instructors consider the cognitive aspects of students' writing

No	Items	Total	SD %	D %	A %	SA %
1	My writing instructors dominantly concentrate on my linguistic mistakes while evaluating my writing assignments.	100	40	10	25	25
2	My instructors give due consideration to the substance of my writing rather than grammar and mechanics	100	23	22	15	40
3	My instructors effectively evaluate my writing in a progressive manner.	100	14	32	30	24
4	My instructors encourage me to generate ideas and write the way I like-disregarding grammar and mechanics	100	5	11	45	39

In the above table, attempt has been made to investigate the type of Attitude College students have regarding writing. Consequently, it has been found important to examining the presence of inputs which could add flavor to the instruction of writing have in the instructional process and if there exists any

significant correlation between the students' attitude towards writing and the way writing courses are given in the college. Hence, attempt has been made to look at the incorporation of cognitive inputs while instructing writing in college.

The first question which asks the student to label the extent to which writing instructors emphasizes on the linguistic mistakes of the students shows a perfect balance between the two response categories- 'agree' and disagree'. Here, we can see that half of the respondents agree with the idea that writing feedbacks they get from their instructors are form bound which almost matches with the findings of Kellogg (1994) in the literature. For the other related question, whether teachers give due consideration to the content of what students write rather than the form, only the slight majority of respondents fall under the 'agree' category. Here we can see that although instructors' consideration of cognitive skill to encourages students to generate idea for their writing is good although instructors' treatment of cognitive aspects of the language while correcting written assignments and tests doesn't appear to be as such adequate.

Table 3: The attitude of students regarding the effectiveness of teachers' evaluation techniques for writing

No	Items	Total	SD %	D %	A %	SA %
	The continuous assessment does not properly evaluate my writing skill	100	21	22	20	37
	The writing assessment techniques in the college are essentially form bound and rigid.	100	46	22	20	12
	Assessing Writing skill is too subjective and I can't rely on the teachers' fairness while giving grade	100	55	20	20	5

While table 2 mainly concentrates on the students' evaluation of the instructors' fair and balanced treatment of cognitive and linguistic components of writing, Table 3 reveals data which specifically investigate students' perception regarding the effectiveness of the evaluation techniques employed by writing instructors. Here, the majority respondents, 57 %, consider the continuous assessment as something that doesn't properly measure their actual writing skill. Although students have a big doubt with regard to the validity of continuous assessment, they are not ruling out the potential of a professional evaluation to properly discriminate writing. 75 % of the respondents believe in the potential of a professional evaluation to give them the score or grade they deserve.

At this point it is clear to testify that there are majority of students who are not satisfied with the way their writing activities are evaluated and at the same time believe that their activities have been subject to the wrong evaluation- one way or another. Here it could be important to see what might probably led these much number of students to become skeptic about the validity of continuous assessment. Accordingly, they were asked if their teachers excessively focus on form, than content. The majority respondents, 68%, do not agree with this idea. Thus it would be vitally important to make further investigation in this area and get more account of what is behind the students' dissatisfaction regarding the reliability and validity of continuous assessments in writing.

Table 4: Positive influence of writing courses on student's attitude towards writing

No	Items	Total	SD %	D %	A %	SA %
1	My attitude towards writing was positive before taking writing course in the college.	100	33	20	10	37
2	My attitude towards writing has become positive because of the writing course I took in the college.	100	21	25	30	24
3	I have found it difficult to learn writing both before and after taking writing courses in the college.	100	34	33	25	8

The above table which is aimed at investigating whether the writing course students took has positively influenced their attitude towards writing has got interesting information to tell. As we can see in the first item the majority respondents, 53%, had had negative attitude towards writing before they take writing courses in the college. However, the majority of the students, 67%, confessed that their attitude towards writing has changed to positive after taking writing course in the college. Although the findings in table 1 illustrates a different picture, it would be obvious to see that students at least develop attitudinal change towards writing courses after taking writing course in the college. Only the minority of the respondents, 33% indicated that they didn't have any positive attitude towards writing course both before and after taking the course. Here we can learn that although the writing instruction is not being carried out as interestingly as the students like it to be in the collage, it has at least induced a change of attitude towards the perception students had had before taking writing course in the college.

According to table 5, the majority of the students, 62%, believe that the time they spent learning writing in the collage was worth spending. At this point, it would be important to remember the findings we have regarding whether students like to take writing course if they had the authority to choose and the fatalistic attitude huge numbers of students have regarding the help of effective instruction in facilitating their writing competence. Of course there exists a big gap of findings. Likewise, the overwhelming majority of learners consider the writing course they took as something which complement their performance in other courses in the way that majorly contradicts with what the data has to talk in the findings summarized in table 1. Of course, the overwhelming majority of respondents, 78%, consider the writing course they took to be helpful to their after school endeavor too.

Table 5: Student’s perception of the worth of the time they spend learning writing in the collage

No	Items	Total	Yes %	No Opinion %	No %
1	The time I spent taking writing courses in the college was not worth spending-which should have been spared for studying major courses	100	21	17	62
2	The writing course I took here in this college doesn’t help me at all for my success in the other courses.	100	7	14	79
3	The writing course I took in the collage helps me a lot for my after college career	100	18	4	78

Here we can indicate that although many students do not find the writing instruction in the collage interesting enough and even go to the extent of dropping the course had it not been mandatory, they still believe that it has helped them somehow in the other courses they take. More importantly, much more number of respondents also believes that the writing course they took will help them a lot in their future career.

Table 6: The attitude of students towards the time they spent to learn the writing skill in college

No	Items	Total	SD %	D %	A %	SA %
1	The writing course has taken the time that could be invested on other major courses.	100	10	8	53	29
2	Irrelevant tasks in the writing course have taken my time.	100	10	16	20	45
3	I used my time effectively to study the writing course	100	11	23	20	25

The above table consists of items that deal with students' perception regarding the soundness of writing courses in the college in light with the time they may take from other major courses. Based on this, the respondents were asked if the writing courses had taken their time which could have otherwise been invested on their major courses. As a result, 10% of the students strongly disagreed and 8% of them disagreed with the point. On the other hand, 53% of the respondents agreed and the rest 29% strongly agreed with this idea saying that writing course didn't take the time which otherwise could have been used for other major courses. As the data speaks, 82% of the respondents have the due time to give for writing courses rather than considering them as extra lessons. By extension it appears meaningful to conclude that the majority of the students have positive attitude towards the sensibility of the time they spend on studying writing in college.

Regarding the second item which is about whether tasks given in the course are relevant, 26 % of the respondents disagreed saying that tasks and activities are really irrelevant serving no good purpose to their improvement. On the other hand, 70% of them agreed with the point. They believe that tasks are relevant to improve their writing skill. Concerning the third item which is about using the time budget for the course effectively, 34% of the respondents said that they disagreed with the aforementioned point. 41 % of them however agreed and the rest 25 % of them strongly agreed with the point. Thus, 66% of the students didn't use the time allotted for their writing tools appropriately.

Major findings, Conclusion and Recommendations

Major findings

Most of the students find writing as boring and difficult activity. Writing instructors, as we can see in this research finding, employ varieties of techniques while instructing writing although their overall course delivery is not as interesting as the students' expectations. Though a slight majority of respondents believe that instructors evaluate their writing assignments effectively, the majority of students do not rely on the way continuous assessments are treated. Although instructors encourage their students to generate ideas while instructing writing (make use of their students' cognitive skill), they don't adequately acknowledge this skill while correcting assignments and tests. Rather, a huge number of instructors have been found to be form-bound while correcting written works of their students. Although

students developed positive attitude towards writing at the end of the writing course they have in college, there are quite a number of students who don't rely on the potential of effective writing instruction in terms of improving their writing skill.

Conclusion and Recommendation

As most language scholars agree writing is usually considered as such a difficult skill by most of the learners. However, it is perhaps the major tool of learning which could hardly be avoided from the arena of education. What we have seen in this research finding is not in fact different from what scholars have found. Most of the college students consider writing as boring and difficult activity. Moreover, the majority of the students once again are not interested in the way the writing courses are given in the college although they acknowledge the fact that their instructors toil to provide the lesson with varieties of techniques.

Instructors should work hard not only to employ varieties of techniques but also to make these varieties as interesting as possible .They should also give fairly equal amount of emphasis to their students' cognitive effort both while instructing and evaluating writing. The form bound tendency of writing instructor could perhaps work against an effective instruction of process writing. Writing is a process which could barely be improved over night. Instructors' consistent follow-up of this process is demanding but a must to do if the academia has to benefit from writing instruction as a whole.

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