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Problems Faced by Students when Preparing FYP Reports

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Abstract

The Final Year Project (FYP) is a compulsory assessment for students of higher learning institutions; Diploma and Degree level. FYP assessment is for students to demonstrate a wide range of the skills learned at the institution during their course of study. It asks them to start with formulating a problem, suggest alternative solutions, and then implements one of the solution by delivering a product that has passed through the design, analysis, testing, and evaluation stages. The inclusion of FYP assessment which is also known as academic report writing serves as competency measurement standard that has been made compulsory by The Board of Engineers Malaysia (1972). One of the objectives for the requirement is to bring engineering Profession to greater heights and to project the image of engineers in the right perspective. Of the three elements of writing which are content, organization and language, it is found that language has been considered the most difficult task for second language writers due to their limited language proficiency or limited linguistic knowledge. This study will discuss what are the factors that attribute in writing problems frequently faced by engineering students and to investigate the report writing strategies usage by these engineering students.

Introduction

According to Bowker (2007), writing is a skill that is required in many contexts throughout life. The main aim of writing is to communicate the events that have happened in your life or to include your personal judgements and evaluations, which may be measured by your feelings and thoughts. FYP writing in contrast does many of the things that personal writing does not.

FYP is also different from many practically-oriented or socially-oriented writing tasks as it requires you to look beneath the surface for underlying principles, theories, and concepts that can offer mainstream as well as alternative explanations for common practices, processes, and procedures.

FYP writing is an essential skill for engineering students. Engineering students are often required to analyse data or perform experiments, present results and conclusion and make recommendations in a logical, precise and accessible manner. A research report is a condensed form or a brief description of the above work done by the researcher.

Writing a research report or Final Year Project (FYP) report is both a requirement for completing an engineering qualification at the university and a central part of succeeding in future employment. The ability to prepare a research report is one of the competency standards specified by The Board of Engineers Malaysia (BEM), 1972. BEM is committed in its role in bringing the engineering profession to greater heights and to project the image of engineers in the right prospective.

Background of Study

FYP report writing is a very difficult task for most students as it is different from essay writing. Most students may carry out their research with ease; but writing the research or reporting the research in the form of a FYP report is something most students have problem producing. Students face different kinds of difficulties in writing a thesis or research report and this has resulted to research methodology subject being introduced as a compulsory subject.

FYP report writing is also a challenge especially for non-native speakers or second language writers due to their limited language proficiency or limited linguistic knowledge. Due to the constraints of limited second-language knowledge, writing in a second language may be hampered because of the need to focus on the language rather than the content.

It is a great challenge for most students to be able to write in good, grammatical English. Individuals with writing problems may have difficulties in one or more aspects of writing skills such as proper use of grammar, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, report formatting and some of the basic and initiating aspects of writing. A student into his school should first master the structure of the language he studies. A write up with perfectly grammatical language is intelligible to all; but a report in a poorly grammatical language will make things disastrous. Learning the rules of language in report writing and mustering the ability to write it without grammatical errors should be the target of every student across the levels of education.

In a technical university that offers various engineering courses, the common problems observed among second language learners is about understanding the conventions of report writing.

Objectives

This study was initiated to address some of the concerns of common writing problems faced by engineering students undertaking the FYP subject. The study was carried out based on three objectives.

The first objective of this study is to identify what are the factors that attribute to writing problems faced by engineering students in writing their FYP report. Of the three elements of report writing which are content, organization and language, is language the main factor that attribute to problems in report writing.

The second objective of this study is to identify the use of report writing strategies by engineering students. Report writing strategies use by FYP students can be categorized as reports as high, medium and low strategies users.

The third objective of this study is to suggest some of the methods to reduce the problems faced by second language writers in writing the FYP report. The suggested methods listed is based on the factors that attribute to writing problems and based on report writing strategies that can be applied in FYP report writing.

Scope and Limitation

This study was carried out to investigate problems faced by students in writing FYP reports and the scope of this study focuses only on language aspect. The scope of this study is to look at grammatical aspects and language functions used in report writing. The respondents for this study are students undertaking FYP subject. The limitation of the results of the present study is that the study is focussed on second-language learners of one particular school and cannot be generalize for students from other university or college.

Literature Review

According to Barkaoui (2007), writing is one of the most difficult skills that second-language (L2) learners are expected to acquire, requiring the mastery of a variety of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies.

Hyland (2002) explains further that sociocultural factors have an influence in the writing development of second-language learners as it emphasizes on genres, values, and practices of the target community. Such writers go through a socialization process in which they learn the values (i.e., how to see, value, and do things), expectations, knowledge, and genres (i.e., what, how, and why to write) of their target communities, whether professional or academic (Parks & Maguire, 1999; Spack, 1997).

Marjatta Huhta (2007) reported that second-language learners experience with English is normally limited to everyday English seen and heard in films, songs, on the Internet and on TV, colloquial or marketing English or text-books with relatively easy English. In order to get an idea of research report writing, they should first read a number of research books and articles in the field. This helps to familiarize them with the genre, register and style of the student's own field. The challenges for the student are real and unexaggerated.

Students are usually assigned to write different types of reports. FYP is a compulsory requirement for all the programmes in UniKL. Students are given a time frame of 14 -18 weeks to work on a project and most can plan and execute the projects within the time given. However the setback is the second-language learners sometimes face the problems in writing their FYP reports despite going thru series of consultation with their respective supervisors which results to plagiarized work been submitted. The literature will list some of the linguistic problems face by second-language learners when writing their FYP REPORT.

Problems in Writing the FYP Report

Writing the FYP report is the most formidable task for most students. This is not merely because of the daunting size of the report that needs to be produced but it is due to the high standard to which the project report is upheld. The challenge is too demonstrate the technical knowledge that is related to the research in an understandable and coherent manner.

Besides the content, the language use in report writing plays an important role in ensuring the work produced can be understood and is coherent. Some observations of challenges engineering students face with language when writing drafting FYP reports are:

Too much description, not enough analysis. A common complaint of lecturers is that students in general tend to describe rather than analyse in their writing. It is usually not enough simply to outline what you have read. You need to evaluate the ideas, compare them with those of other writers, and examine issues and perspectives critically.

Poor structure. Students are not able to write the correct sub-headings and there is no consistency between introductions and conclusion. Linking words and transition sentences are not used to connect ideas between paragraphs.

Code switching. Some students have the tendency to use slang or colloquial language and idiom in their reports

Wrong register (language too informal). Students tend to use spoken English in their reports rather than academic English. Engineering reports should consist of jargons and terminologies used in the respective field. General vocabulary should not be used

Ineffective paraphrasing. Students who attempt to write their reports at the very last minute of the submission date usually produce paraphrased patchwork to be

submitted. They do not use the rule of paraphrasing that is being taught in their English subject.

Plagiarism. Failure to acknowledge the source of all ideas is a serious matter. Copying directly from another text without acknowledgement is even more serious. Students are not able to write the ideas extracted from other sources which causes them to do wholesale copying.

Punctuation, Capitalization and Indentation. Kharma (1985) indicated that English as a Foreign Language students attempting to write a proper English discourse failed to organize a passage, use the devices (punctuation, capitalization, indentation, paragraphing) normally, develop coherence, unity, and topicalization, use methods of development and develop a whole theme in several paragraphs of expository prose

Active and passive voice. Some students feel that the use of the passive voice (verbs which do not indicate who or what is doing the action) can lead to writing in which sources or agents are not clear. Students are not sure if personal pronoun can be used in reporting the project that has been carried out.

Report Writing Strategies

The process of report writing involves the integration of several skills including the ability to generate, plan and organize ideas, express it with words and structure sentences in proper order. However second-language learners at this university often leave the report writing to be the last task to be carried out as they have difficulty organizing their thoughts on paper.

Report writing strategies involve teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions. In order to improve report writing skill for second-language learners, the students should be given suitable guidance and scaffolding, lots of practice on report writing, and other strategies listed below.

Summarization, which involves explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts

Collaborative Writing, which uses instructional arrangements in which adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions

Specific Product Goals, which assigns students specific, reachable goals for the writing they are to complete

Sentence Combining, which involves teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences

Prewriting, which engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition

Process Writing Approach, which interweaves a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing

Study of Models, which provides students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing

Academic Phrase bank, which provides a complete reference for learning suitable transition words and ways of citing and quoting information.

Methodology

This part addresses the research design, procedure, participants, instruments, and data collection procedure. This study followed a survey research design to examine three common writing problems among ESL students in a secondary school in Malaysia and teachers' experienced feedback towards students' writing problems. Such a design was applied to collect data randomly from ESL students through a questionnaire.

Design and Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire questions were constructed by the researcher. The questionnaire was divided into two sections. The purpose of the questionnaire was to collect data on students' self-assessment of their writing problems based on their experience and to investigate the use of report writing strategies in writing FYP reports. The response for the questions were assessed based on each of these parts contain 5 Likert-scale items (1=Always, 2=Sometimes and 3=Never) and the students' were supposed to circle the suitable answers.

Participants

The participants of this research were 50 ESL degree students, which have completed the FYP subject. The student and of this study were randomly selected from two different institution majoring in Aviation and IT studies.

Results and Discussion

About ninety seven percent (97%) of the respondents are of Malay origin and from this figure eighty seven percent (87%) of them chose Bahasa Melayu as their first language. The rest chose English as their first language. None chose others.

In Section B the questions are focused on self-assessment of English writing skills and they can be divided into two sub-section namely i) English language problem and ii) time management due to English language.

The responses are as follows:

Table 1

Section B: Self-Assessment of English Writing Skills

English Language Problem		
	Questions	Percentage
1	I organize my ideas from my native language to English when I write a paragraph	89%
2	I know the right vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the reader.	95%
3	I know to use appropriate spelling, capitalization and punctuation in my FYP report.	71%
4	I have problem to produce grammatically and structurally correct sentences in English.	89%
5	I am able to write an accurate summary of information that I have read in English.	97%
6	I am not confident with my English language writing skill.	74%

From the above findings, it is found that 89% of the respondents organize their ideas from their native language in this case it is Bahasa Melayu to English when they write a paragraph.

However more than half of them (95%) do not seem to have any problem in finding the right vocabulary and word forms to effectively communicate with the reader and 97% of the respondents are able to write an accurate summary of information that they have read in English. Seventy four percent (74%) of them have stated that they are not confident with their English language writing skill. The main problem that many respondents (89%) face is producing grammatically and structurally correct sentences in English.

Table 2

Section B: Self-Assessment of English Writing Skills

Time Management Due To The Language		
	Questions	Percentage
1	I need more time to write in English compared to my native language.	71%
2	Preparing my final year project in English will take longer time to me.	87%

The above findings show half of the respondents (87%) take longer time to prepare the FYP in English. Adding to that 71% of the respondents also have stated that they need more time to write in English compared to their native language.

In Section C, the questions are focused on the writing strategies. The findings are as below:

Table 3

Section C: Use of Report Writing Strategies

	Questions	Percentage
1	I discuss my FYP report draft with my project supervisor to get feedback on how I can improve my writing.	97%
2	I apply the academic style and format taught in Mini Research subject to write my report.	100%
3	I identify language errors in my work and work on the corrections.	86%
4	I use appropriate spelling, capitalization and punctuation where needed.	100%
5	I support and develop my report through paraphrasing, summarizing and citing information.	97%
6	I use online applications such as online dictionary and google translator to help me in writing my report.	95%
7	I use academic phrase bank website to check for suitable phrases when citing information.	89%
8	I consult my English subject lecturers to proof read/advise me about the report before submitting.	89%

It is found that 95% of the respondents use online applications such as online dictionary and google translator to help them in writing the report. About 89% of them use academic bank website to check for suitable phrases when citing information. Only about 89% of them consult English subject lecturers to proofread or advise about the report. Majority of them (97%), however, discuss with their project supervisor to get feedback on how to improve their writing. All of the respondents (100%) use appropriate spelling, capitalization and punctuation in their report. Also 100% of them apply the academic style and format taught in Mini Research subject to write their report. This mini research subject (Professional English 2) is taught by the English subject lecturers in UniKL.

Conclusions

This study presented findings concerning the problems faced by students when preparing FYP reports. It was found that majority of the students organize ideas in their

native language before translating into English. Another fact need to be highlighted here is students face problem in producing grammatically and structurally correct sentences in English. Students also admit that they do not have confidence in their English language writing skill.

In contrary majority of them do not have any problem in finding the right vocabulary in their writing, identifying errors, spelling, punctuation and capitalization. They are also able to write an accurate summary of information that they have read in English. This could be due to the fact that majority of them use online dictionary, google translator and academic phrase bank website to write.

These findings therefore explain that students are not able to construct the sentences in the report on their own in English but need help.

Time seem to be a major problem to the students in completing this FYP reports when English is used as the medium.

Professional English 2 subject and the English subject lecturers play a vital role in helping the students to write their FYP reports.

Suggestions

The following suggestions and remedies have been proposed by some experienced teachers and the researchers based on their experience to reduce the problems in conventions, punctuation, and language use.

- i. Writing classes must witness more practice than delivering lectures
- ii. The teacher must explain the use of all the punctuation marks
- iii. The teacher must explain the rules of capitalization
- iv. The teacher can engage the learners in memory/vocabulary games to build their confidence in using jargons and terminologies specific to their field
- v. The teacher must motivate and encourage the learners before the actual writing
- vi. The teacher must provide the language support on every single topic
- vii. The teacher must act as a prompter to assist the student at times

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