Learners' Self-evaluation of their ESL Writing Skill after an Intensive English Program in a Malaysian University

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Abstract

The study investigated L2 learners' self-evaluation of their writing skill, having completed an Intensive English Program (IEP), which was offered by a private university in Malaysia. The focus was on three different aspects of the students' writing skill, including lexicon, morphology and syntax. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The data were collected through interviews and a questionnaire. To find out their areas of L2 writing difficulty a group of undergraduate international students (n = 30) in a private university in Malaysia responded to the questionnaire while 4 students were interviewed. The qualitative results indicated that the majority of the students perceived themselves as able to produce correct sentence structures in English language. Overall, the qualitative results illustrated the challenges faced by these students regarding L2 writing skill after completing the course. Additionally, based on the quantitative results, on average the students were at a moderate level regarding the three aspects of their L2 writing skill. Further in-depth research is required before findings of the study can be generalized.

Keywords: Self-Evaluation, Intensive English Program, English as a Second Language writing

1. Introduction

A huge body of literature is available on English as a Second Language (L2) courses. Recently, intensive English programs have attracted the interest of researchers who aim at investigating the effectiveness of these courses. The Intensive English Program (IEP) that is the focus of the present study is a short course designed to prepare L2 learners who intend to improve their level of English language proficiency before they pursue the tertiary level. This program is divided into three levels which can be completed over an academic year. Throughout the year, the students go through a course which covers listening, speaking, reading and writing skill as well as vocabulary enrichment. The learners are evaluated based on the overall result at the end of each level and are expected to attain a minimum result of 55% or grade D. The learners are international and come from a variety of countries. They are not required to go through the course if they obtain an overall score of 520 in TOEFL or a band 5 in IELTS. No previous study is available on the students' evaluation of their own L2 writing ability after completing the program. The current study was conducted to explore the areas of difficulty these students have in L2 writing after completing the program as well as investigating the students' self-evaluation of their writing ability. The following research questions were addressed:

2. Research Questions

1. What are the major areas of difficulty faced by the degree students in a private university in Malaysia in relation to their L2 writing?
2. How do the students evaluate their own knowledge of lexicon while writing in English?
3. How do they evaluate their own knowledge of morphology while writing in English?
4. How do they evaluate their own knowledge of syntax while writing in English?

2.1 Lexicon

Lexicon is defined as word register, vocabulary, or mental dictionary of a language (Fromkin, Rodman, Hyams, 2011). To be able to write in a language, learners are required to know how to use words appropriately. When writing in the second

language, the variety of words used will not only help the learners to go through a smoother journey throughout the whole writing composition processes, but it will also help them write better. Items in the questionnaire constructed required the learners to self-evaluate on different aspects of lexicon with regards to L2 writing.

Moreover, lexical knowledge helps learners to distinguish words in utterances. In academic setting, learners at tertiary level are expected to be able to jot down notes throughout the lecture. Notes are given in two forms; spoken and written. Written notes are usually presented on the screen by projectors, or distributed in papers. However, educators may also choose to explain further in spoken form. L2 learners may face difficulties to distinguish words in utterances especially when it comes to special terms in their respective fields; engineering terms, scientific terms and business terms. This difficulty may be stressful and may result in demotivation of learning throughout the semester. Knowledge of lexicon also involves the ability to create sound-meaning relation. Some words may carry more than one meaning. For example, '*bare*' and '*bear*' are words that pronounce in the same way but carry different meaning, while words with the same meaning but different sounds are '*sofa*' and '*couch*'. Items in the questionnaire under subcategory of lexicon focused more on learners' self-evaluation with regards to vocabulary richness that allows them to distinguish and use inflected and non-inflected words of English language while items in the questionnaire under subcategory of morphology focused more on grammatical aspects of word formation.

2.2 Morphology

Morphology deals with deeper analysis regarding the minimal units of words of a language. Morphological aspects of L2 writing in this study focused on learners' self-evaluation on the ability to use free morphemes and bound morphemes of English language. Acquiring lexical knowledge of a target language will give learners the ability to distinguish inflections added to base words that intended to change word forms. Inflections are changes that are added and aimed at expressing grammatical functions or attributes, for example tenses, moods, person, numbers, cases and genders. There are two types of inflections; verb inflections and noun inflections (Klammer, Schulz, and Volpe, 2013). Changes in the form of words are usually done by adding affixation in English language; prefixes and suffixes. However, there are no infixes found in the language. Items constructed under this subcategory aimed at measuring learners' self-evaluation to distinguish and understand root words and their possible inflections.

Free morphemes are single units of words that are independent, for example '*girl*', '*beauty*', and '*language*'. Meanwhile, bound morphemes are single units that are added into free morphemes aiming at changing the word class or expressing grammatical functions. For example, {-*ing*}, {-*ly*}, {*un-*}, and {*trans-*}. As mentioned earlier, affixes include derivational affixes; prefixes and suffixes, and inflectional affixes; suffixes.

Derivational morphemes; prefixes and suffixes, are added to a base and aim at deriving new meaning of a word. For example, a noun {*girl*} with addition suffix {-*ish*}, will change the word class into adjective {*girlish*}. However, some derivational suffixes will not cause changes in word class, for example noun {*human*} and suffix {-*ity*} to become noun {*humanity*}. Other function of derivational prefixes such as {*un-*}, {*in-*} and {*de-*} is to derive negative meaning of the base word. For example {*unable*}, {*incomplete*} and {*degenerate*}. Inflectional morphemes are not affected by (only) suffixes which are added to express grammatical function in a sentence. There are eight (8) types of bound inflectional suffixes; third person singular present {-*s*}, past tense {-*ed*}, progressive {-*ing*}, past participle {-*en*}, plural {-*s*}, possessive {-*'s*}, comparative {-*er*} and superlative {-*est*}. Meanwhile, free morphemes are open class words and closed class words. Open class words are defined as free morphemes which carry lexical meaning of a word, such as nouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. Closed class words are words that are used to carry grammatical functions in sentences. For example conjunctions (*and*, *or*), prepositions (*between*, *through*), pronouns (*I*, *us*), and auxiliary verbs (*are*, *is*).

The present study focused on grammatical function of English language morphology, were measured via students' self-evaluation of this aspect of L2 writing. Knowing a word includes knowing particular sequence of sounds associated with a particular meaning, which is necessary to be able to convey our thoughts.

2.3 Syntax

Syntax represents the analysis of sentence patterns of language or part of grammar that represents a speakers' knowledge of sentences and their structures. This study referred to the basic four (4) rules of syntax, including:
1. combining words into phrases, and phrases into sentences;
2. describing the relationship between the meaning and the particular arrangements of a particular group of words;
3. specifying grammatical relations that will provide information of a sentence; and

4. specifying other restraints that sentences must follow in construction of grammatically correct sentences (Fromkin et al. 2011).

Acquiring a language does not only entail richness of vocabulary of the target language, but it includes the ability to obey the rules applied to the grammatical system.

Therefore, this study aimed at measuring learners' self-evaluation of their ability to arrange structures that make well-formed sentences which include grammatical, semantic and lexical aspects of English language writing. Grammatically, items constructed were designed that require learners' self-evaluation on their ability to use tenses uniformly, allow readers' understanding with regards to subjects and direct objects, as well as writing in correct grammatical order; noun phrases (subject) and verb phrases (predicate). Other than that, learners were required to self-evaluate on the choice of words when writing sentences in English language. Words are ambiguous and they often have variety of meaning. This helps to avoid confusion among readers on what they were actually trying to say.

3. Literature Review

Intensive English program is designed to better prepare the L2 learners with sufficient basic linguistic knowledge known as Basic Internal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Kyungsim Hong-Nam and Leavell, 2006). Within shorter period of time compared to regular English language classes throughout school years, the L2 learners are exposed to activities and assessments which aim not only at introducing the system functioning in the language and variety of words used, but also to motivate learners to acquire the personality of the target language itself. L2 learning processes should not stop once the period of intensive language program is over. Becoming a competent writer of English language, the L2 writers ought to develop self-regulatory learning processes throughout the period of using the language (Zimmerman and Risemberg, 1997). Self-evaluation which is a reflection of learners' self-efficacy and it is known to be one of the important keys toward self-regulation learning processes (Zimmerman, 1998).

Previous study by McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer (1985) hypothesized a strong relationship between writers' evaluations of their own general writing skills and the overall quality of their written products, and therefore, defined self-evaluation as assessment of self-efficacy (McCarthy et al., 1985). Practicing English language writing skills should be continuously performed not only to become a better writer, but also to be a proficient user of the language. Another study indicated that there are positive relationship between self-efficacy and writing performance (Parilah Shah, Wan Hamidah Wan Mahmud, Rosseni Din, Aminuddin Yusof and Khalid Mat Pardi, 2011). This study hypothesized the idea of self-efficacy as a necessary component acquired throughout lifelong learning journey to develop the skills of writing in the second language. The finding of this study supported previous studies by other researchers that students who evaluated themselves as having high self-efficacy would write better and are able to negotiate with rules and mechanics while maintaining accuracy of the language.

L2 writing skills are measured via linguistic aspects of writing such as vocabulary, grammar and punctuation, and the best approach to improve writing skills among the L2 writers is via extensive reading (Herrero, 2007). Extensive reading helps writers, particularly those of non-native speakers, to enrich lexicon knowledge i.e. mental vocabulary of English language. This can be done by self-regulating extensive reading session after class and throughout the weekends. Reading session could have been made more exciting when it is done out of learners' interest, in which learners are given flexibility in choosing reading materials. Non-native speakers may find reading not only helps to enrich their lexicon, but also to understand the system of the language itself; grammar. In IEP, extensive reading is an assessment that helps the L2 learners to stimulate motivation as well as to enrich lexicon knowledge in order to better understand the use of each word of a language. This is further supported in a study that reading is an effective way of enriching vocabulary, lexicon and grammar (Willis, 1996). Other aspects of English language writing include semantic and pragmatic in which L2 learners ought to be able to express the degree of doubt and certainty in their writing (Hyland and Milton, 1997). In addition to that, Anderson (1999) mentioned that lack of vocabulary knowledge is the common problem faced by many second language learners. Extensive reading is a way to help curb this issue. Previous researchers have found that lack of vocabulary to be one of the main problems in understanding a text (Anderson and Cheng 1999).

Problems such as lack of ideas, interest and mental block are examples of writing difficulties commonly faced among the L2 learners when performing writing task (Sharifah Nor Puteh, Rashidah Rahamat and Aidah Abdul Karim, 2010). The previous study revealed the need for teachers' motivation and assistance especially when facing writing difficulties among low achievers of English. This is further supported in a study by Ilyana Jamaluddin, Melor Md. Yunus and Hamidah Yamat (2011) which analyzed the effects of teacher's assistance in L2 learners' writing self-efficacy. The study concluded that learners require support from teachers in developing positive self-beliefs in writing which will result

in improvement of their writing skills. The L2 learners, regardless of achievement level, employ individual language learning strategies and the frequency of to apply respective language learning strategies differentiates between more successful and less successful learners. Learning a second language is unlike learning any other subjects in school as it involves motivation to both learning and acquiring the language. Educators play crucial role to stimulate English language writing in order to produce graduates who are not only excellent in their respective fields, but also competent and proficient users of the global language. The ability to communicate in English language is one of the essential tool to meet the demands of both national and international companies (Herrero, 2007). Therefore, it is important for educators to provide autonomous teaching approach in order to develop self-determined motivation in L2 learning (Koka, A., and Hagger, M. S., 2010).

4. Methodology

Qualitative method was followed to explore an answer for the first question; and therefore, four students were interviewed to identify the major problems they faced in L2 writing. Then quantitative method was followed to address the remaining research questions. For this purpose, a random sample (n = 30) of the target population was surveyed using a questionnaire developed by the first author.

4.1 Location of the study

The university selected for the purpose of data collection is a local private university in Malaysia, established more than 15 years ago. It offers short courses, pre-university programs, undergraduate programs as well as graduate programs. Each academic year is divided into 3 terms, starting in March, June, and September. As an international university, it has students from more than 50 countries. It has six (6) different schools, namely the School of Communication and Language Studies (SCLS), School of Business Infrastructure (SOBI), School of Architecture and Built Environment (SABE), School of Engineering and Technology Infrastructure (SETI), School of Information and Technology Infrastructure (SITI), and School of Applied Science and Foundation Studies (SASFS). When the study was conducted, the School of Applied Science and Foundation Studies was the only school that offered Foundation program; and therefore, it was excluded from this study.

4.2 Respondents

In order to answer research questions two, three and four, 30 respondents were randomly selected. They were all international students, who had completed their IEP and were pursuing degree program in varying faculties in the same university. They came from Asian, Middle Eastern, and African countries. To address the first research question, from the 30 respondents four informants were purposively selected, one from each School.

The majority of the respondents were males. 74% of these respondents completed this intensive program within 1 academic year, while only 6% of the extended for at least 2 semesters. The biggest number of respondents came from Middle Eastern countries in which they covered 64% from the total number of participants, while other respondents came from Asian, African and American countries. More than a third (37%) of the respondents came from SETI, 23% from SCLS, 23% from SOBI, 14% from SITI and 3% from SABE. However, demographic data will not affect the result of this study.

4.3 Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire (see the Appendix) consisting of two main sections, Section 1 with 6 demographic questions and Section 2 with 15 items using 5-point Likert scale. The items were constructed to elicit the students' self-evaluation of their knowledge of lexicon, morphology and syntax. The items in the questionnaire were distributed randomly to ensure reliability of the answers. Items 1, 4, 7, 10 and 13 covered lexicon, items 2, 5, 8, 11 and 14 focused on morphology, while items 3, 6, 9, 12 and 15 covered syntactic aspects of English language writing.

5. Results

This section presents and discusses the results of the current study following the order of the research questions.

5.1 Areas of L2 writing difficulty

Based on the results of the interview, the major areas of difficulty faced by the students were listed. Three students from SETI reported to be facing difficulties in understanding the choice of words, sentence structures and English language terms from textbooks and take-home note prepared by the lecturers. They also experienced writer's block condition when writing assignments in English language. As on student said, "I have no idea where and how to start when they ask me to produce something in English". This, as the student mentioned, resulted in delaying submission of assessments. As it was reported, most lecturers, especially from the non-English departments, took English for granted. Construction of correct grammatical sentences was not included as one of the main requirements when doing assignments. This made it a demanding challenge for the students to write up their final year projects.

The students indicated that after completing the IEP, their respective schools no longer provided support on students' English language challenges; instead, they focused on their own specialized courses. Also according to the results of the interviews, excluding SCLS, the other four schools did not take language proficiency a serious matter when it came to students' assessment. Therefore, students from non-linguistic departments lost momentum of making an effort to improve their second language skills.

5.2 Self-evaluation of lexical knowledge

The second Research Question aimed to analyze self-evaluation among L2 learners with regard to their English language lexical knowledge. Table 1 indicates the results for this research question:

Table 1: Students' perception towards their lexical knowledge

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Negative	1	3.3
Neutral	18	60.0
Positive	11	36.7
Total	30	100.0

As the results show, having completed the program, majority (60%) of the learners were unsure about their English language lexical knowledge while writing. One in three learners only perceived themselves able to distinguish what changes in word form would give a negative meaning to a word and able to choose the right word when conveying their thoughts; however, they faced difficulties in distinguishing words when transferring spoken utterances to written materials.

5.3 Self-evaluation of morphological knowledge

Research Question 3 aimed at analyzing the L2 learners' perceived morphological knowledge in English language writing. Table 2 shows the results for this research question:

Table 2: Students' perception towards their morphological knowledge

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Negative	1	3.3
Neutral	20	66.7
Positive	9	30.0
Total	30	100.0

Majority of the L2 learners were hesitant about their ability to add prefixes or suffixes in order to create new words and to identify the function of prefixes {un-}, {in-} and {de-} that indicate negativity in the meaning of a word. Only 30% of the learners had positive perceptions towards their own morphological knowledge. This reflects that overall, the learners perceived themselves as unable to distinguish the functions of inflections to convey lexical or grammatical meaning of a base word.

5.4   Self-evaluation of syntactic knowledge

Research Question 4 addressed the learners' perception towards their knowledge of syntactic aspects of English language writing. Table 3 indicates the results for this research question:

Table 3: Students' perception toward their syntactic knowledge

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Negative	1	3.3
Neutral	15	50.0
Positive	14	46.7
Total	30	100.0

Majority of the learners were not confident about their ability of choosing the suitable tenses and word classes as well as determining the correct word order. Additionally, they did not perceive themselves as confident in conveying thoughts between the subject and direct object when writing. This suggests their inability to follow the correct grammatical order when writing a sentence in English language. In contrast to the previous results, however, the percentage of the learners who had positive perceptions towards their syntactic knowledge was relatively higher, with just under half (46.7%) the learners indicating positive perceptions.

5.5   Overall effectiveness of the program

Research Question 5 looked at the learners' overall perception towards linguistic components of English language writing; lexicon, morphology and syntax. Table 4 illustrates these results:

Table 4: Students' overall perception

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Negative	1	3.3
Neutral	19	63.4
Positive	10	33.3
Total	30	100.0

Overall, a few learners regarded themselves as able to use their syntactic, lexical and morphological knowledge. However, majority of the learners (63.4%) were not sure about their English language skills while writing.

As the result showed the Intensive English program, at least as far as the majority of the students perceive it, fails to prepare the learners with the basic linguistic knowledge they need for success in their academic studies. Our findings were in line with those of Sharifah Nor Puteh et al.'s (2010), who reported students commonly face mental block while writing. The findings also support those of Ilyana Jamaluddin et al. (2011) in that the majority of the students were not really confident about their English language writing skills. Based on the findings of this study, it seems logical to argue that the aforementioned Intensive English Program (IEP) is in urgent need of improvements before it can be trusted as an adequate program to assist the students to improve their English writing skills.

6.   Conclusion

Findings from the present study proved that the L2 learners' perception towards their writing self-efficacy requires ongoing support and help from educators. Pursuing tertiary level especially in non-linguistic fields should not be made as an excuse to discontinue self-regulatory processes of learning the second language. Educators of non-linguistic fields should take English language a major concern especially when giving written class assessments. This way stimulate the students to perform extensive reading in order to gain further understanding with regards to common terms used globally in their respective fields of study. Educators should also stimulate motivation and help to learn non-linguistic fields in the second language. In addition to that, the students will be aware to regulate correct use of grammar when writing class assessments. Study by Herrero (2007) proved that faculties which take grammar and composition a major concern when teaching subjects is the best way to improve English language proficiency level of the students. Despite linguistic

problems faced among the L2 learners, educators and the university ought to include L2 language and communication skills as one of the requirement throughout their study in order to produce graduates who are not only excel in their respective fields, but also competent to communicate in the global language.

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Appendix: Self-evaluation of Learners' Knowledge of Lexicon, Morphology and Syntax in ESL Writing

Section A: Background Information

Gender:
Age Group: 15 - 20 ( )   26 – 30 ( )
               21 – 25 ( )   30 and above ( )
Nationality:_____
Department:
1. School of Architecture and Built Environment   ( )
2. School of Business Infrastructure   ( )
3. School of Communication and Language Studies   ( )
4. School of Engineering and Technology Infrastructure   ( )
5. School of Information Technology and Infrastructure   ( )

Section B: Self-evaluation

Table below shows the answer keys to the following questions

Totally Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Totally Agree
1	2	3	4	5

Please answer the following questions.

No.	Items	1	2	3	4	5
1	I am confident to write an essay because I know a lot of words in English language and I am familiar with them.					
2	I don't have problem to add prefixes (e.g.: irrelevant) or suffixes (e.g.: understanding) to base words in order to derive new meaning of the words					
3	I don't have problem in determining my sentence to be either in past, present, or future tense.					
4	My lecturers are amazed with my choice of words when I am writing my assignments / my classmates always refer to me to help					

No.	Items	1	2	3	4	5
	them finding the right word when doing assignments.					
5	I know how to use derivational morphology (exp: read + able, re + cover)					
6	When I'm describing a situation in my essays, I can get people to understand which group of words I am focusing on (subject and direct object).					
7	I know which changes in word form / what is added that turn a word to negative.					
8	I have no problem in identifying the root word of a morpheme.					
9	I am confident enough to write in the correct order.					
10	I believe that I always use the right choice of words when writing.					
11	I never get confuse in adding prefix into root words that will change the word to negative (un- & in-) for example: responsible & irresponsible.					
12	Sometimes, I misused the right word which changed the meaning (between subject and direct object) and people misunderstood me.					
13	I can easily segment words into smaller individual words.					
14	I confidently write a sentence with the correct form of hierarchical structure of words.					
15	It is unlikely for me to produce a hanging sentence or get people confused with what did I just wrote.					