Approaches to the Basic Problems of Classroom Writing for Adult Competent Non-Native Students of English Worldwide

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Abstract

One of the most significant current discussions in supportive methodology is about the problems of writing for Non-Native Students (NNS)s. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the problems of writing in an English medium for Non-Native Learner (NNL). The purpose of the present study is to deal with the major problems of NNS`s writing in the classroom and to investigate some strategies for the solutions to these problems.

In order to achieve the aims of the present study, certain approaches and techniques to writing in English as a foreign language are applied to solve the problems. The findings reveal that the most important problems result from the bad organization of the students' ideas. For this, NNSs should try to read a lot in order to be able to master simple sentences first and present coherent paragraphs then.

Keywords: Methodology, Writing, Strategies, Techniques.

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1 A brief introduce

It is widely accepted that many NNSs have problems with the writing rather than with the other three skills of Methodology, such as: speaking, listening and reading; as it can be seen in many Asian countries. Moreover, writing helps students to use the knowledge they have already learnt; and it is an opportunity to practise the language. Furthermore, it reinforces the rules of students` grammar and vocabulary.

The aim of this paper is to point out some of the problems that students face during their classroom writing, especially in some Asian countries, and to discuss some techniques to help them to overcome these difficulties.

The paper consists of three chapters and a conclusion, besides the introduction. The first chapter will introduce the concept of the problems. The second chapter concerns the problems and is sub-divided into two sections; the first section will discuss the major problems of classroom writing for NNSs and the second will talk about the differences between the written and the spoken language. The third chapter deals with the solutions to these problems and is sub-divided into two parts; the first will suggest some solutions by giving the approaches and the strategies used to teach writing, and the second will explain the effect of Indirect Corrective Feedback (ICF) on NNSs. Finally, a brief conclusion will summarize the paper.

1.1 An overview of the concept

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Second language writing is an increasingly important area in Methodology; and students face difficulties with writing mainly, rather than with the other skills. They are educated classes which have a non-native environment; for example, there is an absence of both English native students and teachers. We, personally, think that the absence of teaching methodology in classes appears to be one of the crucial problems that students face nowadays, because they are not aware of classroom writing techniques. Additionally, the system of education is not up to date, as both Matsuda and Depew (2002) argue that most of the Second Language (L2) writing problems are due to the previous academic background. It means that students are judged according to their previous classroom backgrounds, such as their performance in exams and their previous academic marks.

However, Kubota (2003) points out the problems and states that gender, class sizes and different races have a greater influence on the students` writing at the intermediate level. In addition, Kubota proclaims that there is a wide range of publications on the problems of the writing which are associated with different age and social factors, whilst there is not much explicit attention on the effect of gender or class sizes on the teaching and learning of the classroom writing strategies. Kubota mentions that there is a binary relationship between gender and the writing strategies, because there is a greater effect of biological traits on students` writing. It is believed that females are more sociable and use more discourse than males. In contrast, males are more dynamic and process the information easily.

Furthermore, Kibler (2010) carried out a survey on a number of students who struggle with their writing due to the influence of First Language (L1) on their writing. Kibler

illustrates that L1 plays an important role on the writing difficulties in different stages of writing. It seems that students share the knowledge of both L1 and L2 to continue their writing and directly translate the ideas from L1 competencies to L2. In contrast, Kubota (2003, cited in Carson, 2001) states that L2 writing has a pragmatic concern at a discourse level for NNLs, as it is more concerned with competence.

Conversely, in our point of view, we believe that students pay less attention to reading comprehensibility. As a result, they find difficulties in writing their pieces of work. The idea can be supported by the work of Baba (2009), which he states that the lexical proficiencies and linguistic abilities are considered to be the main impacts on students` writing. Moreover, Baba prefers reading-based writing to other strategies.

The students may not be able to paraphrase and summarize every kind of work, and so some of them copy from the original version. Further evidence can be found in Hyland (2002), who describes the effect of discourse on writing. However, he found out that every strategy should be applied to students both theoretically and practically, rather than sticking to one method in order to see improvements.

There are different types of Corrective Feedback (CF) that will be applied to students. Each type has its importance in different stages of learning. Some CF will be direct, whilst others will be indirect. This paper will discuss the most crucial type and its effect on teaching and on the students` writing and Methodology.

2 Problems of foreign students` writing
2.1 Classroom writing problems for non-native students

Recently, one of the major problems for NNSs concerns writing and putting their ideas onto paper as well as the development of the technologies for written communication. Hyland et al (2003) put the blame on levels of education, training of the teachers for L2 learners and the use of English language proficiency in the classes. The writers prefer the use of multi-literacies in the class. This was carried out on a group of NNSs in the United States, where it was found that classroom activity had a greater influence on brainstorming ideas for writing. It seems that usually NNSs transfer their L1 expressions to L2 and this leads to difficulty in finishing their writing. Likewise, many students understand the grammatical structures and can use them individually with a wide range of vocabulary. Yet, when they are asked to write a paragraph they still have problems with the production and cannot use the accurate grammar and a wide range of vocabulary.

Apart from the English department, most of the other departments in eastern universities conduct lectures in their own languages, which are not English. Of particular relevance to this problem is the work of Rabab`ah (2011), which puts forward the point that in Middle Eastern countries, students usually learn English language in their home countries, where the native language is not English. Further, the class environment is Arabic and the teachers are also Arabic speakers. Although they receive a good education in the classes; the classes do not fulfil their desires and demands and do not have a high effect on their production. He states that the students only see English native speakers as tourists. Later, he conducted a study on a group of students from different Arabic Universities and he illustrates that the students can use correct grammar and punctuation, whilst they still have problems with organizing their ideas. As well, he argues that in some Arabian countries, such as Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, there is a low proficiency level of English for some students; whilst they are still accepted in English departments. According to Rabab`ah, the lack of information on teaching methodology in Arabic universities made most of the NNSs face difficulties in their writing.

It appears to us that the most of the students learn English language just to pass the exam or for a specific purpose, rather than the source of admiration. This can be supported by the work of Al-Khasawneh (2010); as he argues that the most of the students in the Arab universities learn English to find a job rather than for their desire to learn the language. He illustrates that Arabic students have difficulties in organizing their ideas, because of the lack of experience. As a result, he conducted a research on ten Arab postgraduate students who studied in Arabic universities. The study found that most of the students had problems with English academic writing. Furthermore, they had a problem with expressing their ideas clearly and with the use of correct vocabulary in the correct place. In contrast, they had much less difficulty with the grammar. Through the writers' data, through the data these points could be concluded:

1. The effect of the non-native environment on the students.
   a. The low motivation of students to learn the language.
   b. The low experience of teachers in the class.
2. The weak method of teaching writing in the classes.
   a. The use of Arabic language in the English classes.
   b. The effect of an isolated culture.
   c. The lack of writing practise in the classroom.

In addition, poor quality of teaching writing and the effect of the non-English environment in the classrooms resulted in students having difficulty in expressing their ideas and they could not make their writing coherent. A study conducted by Darus and Ching (2009) found that writing is considered as the most difficult skill in

methodology. They point out that Chinese students face difficulty in writing, because both the teachers and the students are using the Chinese language (Mandarin) in their classrooms. Likewise, the students struggle with the structuring and composition of their ideas, rather than worrying too much about grammar and punctuation. They cited in (Lo and Hyland, 2007) and discovered that the writing problems demonstrated by students in Hong Kong. Lately, they uncovered that the Chinese students use direct translations of some Chinese expressions to English; however, most of the students translated them improperly. Moreover, they examined a group of seventy students in a public university and the students were asked to write a free composition. The results showed that 19.1% of the mistakes were accounted for through mechanical mistakes, such as: wrong word order, direct translation of the Chinese expressions, non-coherent text- and wrong capitalization; whilst they only made 12.1% grammatical mistakes. The same problems can be found in the most Arabic countries including our country (Iraq); based on educational experience many students cannot express and organize their ideas in an appropriate way and they translate the expressions directly from their L1.

2.2 The differences between spoken and written language

It is very important to show the difference between both written and spoken language, since each is used for a specific occasion. According to Nunan (1991), the written language is entirely different from the spoken language. Also he mentions that students should be aware of these dissimilarities after learning the writing strategies; he explains written language as:

1. An action: gives an instruction, such as: public signs on the road.
2. Information: gives information, such as: newspapers.
3. Entertainment: gives enjoyable things, such as: film subtitles.

In addition, he says writing is more decontextualized and the message of writers is remote from readers in terms of both time and place. As a result, writers should include the relevant information to help readers understand the context.

As university instructors, we both anticipate that many NNSs can speak easily and with little hesitation although the ideas are expressed rapidly. However, they think more deeply about the written texts and the ideas expressed in writing can be revised and edited, but still they find difficulty with writing and organizing their ideas. This view can be supported by the work of Schmitt (2002), who mentions that constructing and arranging ideas is much more difficult than uttering them, because writing needs

more ability and the writer is not only a physical body, but also s/he has to build the ideas in an appropriate way.

Furthermore, students should be more aware of the degree of formality needed in their written texts, unlike spoken, and use more complex sentences in comparison to the spoken language. As Raimes (1983) explains, written language and spoken language are two different concepts. She argues that students can speak the language without any systematic instructions. In contrast, written language needs both systematic and discourse instructions. She notes that spoken language can be universal and gestures can be used; by contrast, they are both absent in the written language. Moreover, Hedge (2000) illustrates that the written form requires planning and the message should be given more precisely, because the organizing of the work will differ according to different situations, such as: formal letters, newspapers, books or letters to friends. In contrast, spoken language could be easier because of the use of body gestures.

3 Some recommended solutions for a better result

3.1 Approaches and techniques to writing in English as a second language

As a result of many problems caused by writing for NNLs, some writing strategies should be put forward to solve the problems. The strategies will help students to organize their information, produce their ideas, select appropriate language, review and revise the draft and to finally edit (Hedge: 2000).

Hedge and Raimes (1985) list some of the main strategies that increase the competence of the students:

- Planning is not the only aspect in writing, but it has a crucial role in the early stages of writing.
- Note taking, listing and drawing diagrams will help to brainstorm the ideas quickly.
- It is better to re-read the whole written paragraph rather than to deal with a specific chunk or phrase.
- Revising the written work, deleting some irrelevant information and adding some new ideas.
- It is better to deal with the surface-level features in the later stages of writing.
- It is better to continue the writing process than to get distracted from the ideas.
- In the final stages, the writer should revise the work and correct the errors in the text.

Alternatively, it appears to us that students should be taught the correct grammar sentences in the early stage of writing and then move onto being able to write coherent paragraphs. Further explanation can be found in Nunan`s (1991) work as he considered the formation of grammatical sentences as the main strategy. He prefers Conference Technique; this will help the primary writers to share their

first drafts with other students and the classroom teacher. Moreover, it will develop the critical thinking of the students and expand their knowledge to bring out different notions.

It is better for the teacher to provide different topics, rather than to restrict the student to a specific subject because students` interest in their topics will lead to better results in their writing. According to previous backgrounds, we assume that the selection of the subject by students will help them to broaden their ideas more and to correct their errors easily, because they will have a greater desire to finish an organized text. As Nunan (1991 cited in Zamel, 1987) and Schmitt (2002) argue, writing skills will develop faster if the student has the opportunity to select a topic.

3.2 The effect of indirect corrective feedback on the students` classroom writing

Responding to students` work can be considered as a technique to teach writing. CF will help students to develop their writing and ideas, rather than passing judgement on the quality of the writing. This section will deal with the role of ICF because in the intermediate and the advanced stages, errors should be identified rather than corrected. Personally, we perceive that this increases students` awareness towards their writing, because competent students will not pay much attention to their errors if they are corrected. It seems that it would be more productive if comments were given on the students` writing rather than correcting the errors directly. A relevant study for this idea is the work of Raimes (1983), who argues that errors should be indicated or circled and a specific symbol should be placed by the error, such as: p = punctuation, gr = grammar error and so on. Lately, a study was conducted by Paulus (1999) on a group of eleven undergraduate overseas students in an anonymous public university in one of the Asian countries[1]. Eight of the students took an intensive English course at the university and the other three took a course based on the proficiency exams. They were different nationalities, such as: Arabic, Malay, Portuguese, Japanese and Taiwanese. The students studied academic writing skills in the course and the course lasted for about ten weeks. She concluded that there was a positive effect of the teachers` ICF on the development of the students` writing. Furthermore, the students wrote a better piece of writing in their second and third drafts. The students corrected 32% of their errors in the second draft. The result showed a great influence of ICF (87% improvement) on students` writing.

Through our understanding, feedback on writing could help students to express and organize their ideas more

easily, and teachers should be aware of the use of ICF as an active procedure inside the class. Students in many Eastern countries prefer ICF to Peer Corrective Feedback (PCF) or Direct Corrective Feedback (DCF). We conceive that PCF or DCF have a negative influence on students` writing, because students usually feel ashamed when they are corrected directly by a friend or a teacher, due to the different social or cultural backgrounds. This idea can be supported by the work of Hyland (1998); he illustrates that the university students were pleased to have their errors corrected indirectly to develop both their content and linguistic skills. She examined data from a group of fourteen English proficiency students at a university in New Zealand. The students were asked to write a free composition and the study was examined carefully by the teachers. The results showed that ICF has a 90% effect on the students` second and the third drafts by the end of the research.

4 Conclusion

To conclude, this paper highlights the effect of L1 on students` writing, where they translate their L1 notions to English as a result of being taught in a non-native environment. Many of those problems have been discussed in the paper, but one of the most important is the organization of their ideas which depends on the subject title because usually NNSs are restricted to a specific topic. Allowing the student to choose the topic will help him/her to put many ideas in the paper based on the knowledge s/he has learnt. Later, another part of the paper gives some beneficial techniques to solve the classroom problems of writing, and ICF is accounted for as one of these important strategies.

The research discussed the problems that NNSs face in their academic life in my country and in many other Asian countries, and provided some strategies for the solutions of these problems. In our point of view, we take the view that NNSs should read as much as they can and try to master simple English sentences in the early stages and then move onto coherent paragraphs. Moreover, teachers should transmit the comprehensible information easily and try almost all of the strategies practically in their classroom activities to find out which one has the greatest influence on students` learning and writing.

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