

Lecturer's Perceptions on the English Writing Competency in a Public University: A Focus Group Discussion

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Abstract— This study has been conducted to find out the lecturers' perceptions of the students' writing competency in a public university. The objective of the study is to explore the definition of a good piece of writing according to the lecturers and to know the strength and weakness of the students. In this public university, in all Faculties, major assignments are completed through writing, therefore students have to express themselves clearly and efficiently through their writing. This is a qualitative study using Focus Group Discussion with a total number of eight lecturers representing four main Faculties at the main campus. The Faculties are Laws, Economics and Management Sciences, Engineering and Human Sciences. Based on the Focus Group Discussion, the lecturers considered ideas and content, organization, grammar and spelling as the three top important elements in writing. The lecturers considered the students as confident writers or 'shameless' writers which they believed is a significant element of being a good writer. The students have difficulties generating ideas. Thus, they will not be able to expand their writing further for their written assignments or projects. The lecturers added that lack of ideas is related to reading as well. Students who read more will be a better writer.

Keywords: Confident writers, ideas and content, writing skills
Introduction

I. Introduction

English is used as a lingua franca all around the globe. One of the vital skills is writing as everyone has acquired this skill since elementary. If a student has a weak foundation in writing, it could lead major drawbacks in his/her academic performance. Writing skills is needed at the tertiary level, especially in completing their assignments and projects. At the public university where this research was conducted, students who undertake Faculty courses will use writing skills to complete their assignments and project. The students need to excel in English, especially in writing because to project the image of the university as the global university. Students must analyze, justify and express their ideas using their writing skills. Therefore, students need to be proficient in written skills to pass their Faculty courses. Faculty courses are also known as content-based course. Here, the content-based courses will focus on specific subject such as business, sociology, science and chemistry.

This study will answer two research questions as below;

1. What is the definition of good writing according to lecturers?
2. How are the writing sub-skills being ranked by the lecturers?
3. What are the students' strengths and weaknesses in writing?

II. Literature Review

Students will face many challenges in writing. Motivating students to be interested in writing among the major challenges in writing [1]. This is because they students did not read well. Better writers read more compared to poor writers [2]. Writers who read more are able to response critically in their content writing as the gain ample knowledge to argue in their writing [3]. [4] mentioned that reading will help the students with their vocabularies and as reading and writing are inter-related. [5] stated that while writing for an audience, the language should be simple as you are not expecting the readers to constantly refer to a dictionary in order to comprehend the conveyed message. He added that writers should not strive to impress readers with complex vocabulary, as this will frustrate them as readers are mainly interested in receiving information.. [6] mentioned that students occasionally use difficult words due to the direct translation from their mother tongue into English. [6] outlines "...only spelling out some sentences could not make a good writing. Thus it is necessary to analyze discourse from the point of view of coherence, cohesion, construction and so on. All these elements are influenced greatly by culture and thinking patterns. What we lack is the teaching of cultural differences in our class. We need not only to develop the students' English skill, but also their cultural awareness. Maintaining the Integrity of the Specifications

III. Methodology

This qualitative study focuses on lecturers from four major Faculties in a public university. These Faculties represent the significant population of the public university, namely the Faculty of Laws, Faculty of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, Faculty of Economics and Management Sciences and Faculty of Engineering. Two lecturers were selected from each Faculty to join the Focus Group Discussion. The results were then analyzed using thematic

analysis. The lecturers were asked about the definition of good writing, the rank of the writing sub-skills and the strengths and weaknesses of students' writing.

IV. Findings and Discussions

Table 1 presents the definition of good writing based on the views of the Faculty lecturers.

TABLE 1. DEFINITIONS OF GOOD WRITING BASED ON KULLIYAH LECTURERS' VIEWS (DIRECT QUOTATIONS)

Lecturer 1	<i>Well the organization must be there not necessarily good grammar, it has to be cohesive, ideas must be clearly elaborated, and grammar is part of it. That is how I define good writing.</i>
Lecturer 2	<i>For me is good communication because you should be able to convey what you want to say that means putting your ideas across licitly, clearly and it does not have to be complicated or complex sentences. Usually for communication to work well is always done in short sentences. Structure is important and grammar is important. For me structure comes first. When I teach writing structure must come first grammar comes after that.</i>
Lecturer 3	<i>I would prefer students to write with good grammar and good spelling and good choice of words. Cohesiveness is important as well so that there is a logical flow of ideas in their writing. That's it.</i>
Lecturer 4	<i>Well the ideas and content should come first. Then grammar and spelling.</i>
Lecturer 5	<i>I think I prefer a writing with good spelling and grammar also with good content and ideas. I believe that if you have good ideas and content that automatically your spelling and grammar will good. That is my belief. However, it is not true all the time.</i>
Lecturer 6	<i>For me content is more important then I will look into grammar and punctuation. Sometime students do not like to put full stop in their sentence. That is my definition of good writing that is content which means it needs to be cohesive as a whole.</i>
Lecturer 7	<i>Even for me ideas and content should come first. Then followed by grammar, spelling and organization.</i>
Lecturer 8	<i>I think ideas and content should come first too.</i>

The lecturers have their own views on the definitions of good writing. It can be summarised that a good writing should be well organized in terms of content and ideas; ideas should be vivid, cohesive alongside a good choice of words, good grammar, spelling and punctuation. [7], mentions that a good writing simply means writing that contains no mistakes; in other words no errors in grammar, punctuation or spelling, additionally it has to be clear in purpose as well with sentences that are connected and well-arranged.

Lecturer 2 mentioned that a good piece of writing "is good communication because you should be able to convey what you want to say that means putting your ideas across licitly, clearly and it does not have to be complicated or complex sentences. Usually for communication to work well is always done in short sentences..."

In any university, students need to write effectively to communicate with their peers, lecturers, professional colleagues and employers. They are not always experienced writers when they enter university and they do not always receive formal teaching in written communication while undertaking their undergraduate degrees. The researcher believes that this is true with assignments or examination writing scripts where the language should be simple and clear so that students do not to lose marks as the examiners or lecturers might get confused about the students' intention. In other words, a good writing is considered an important part of communication. If the writing is clear and free from errors, then it is easy to get good marks as the lecturers who evaluate the writing understand what the students are trying to convey [5]. Also for students to be good in writing, the lecturers should teach the cultural differences in their class, as culture plays an important role in the way the students think and express themselves [6].

The second question for the focus group discussion was to ask the lecturers to rank order six writing sub-skills; namely, ideas and content, organization, style and vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and grammar.

TABLE 2. THE RANKING OF THE WRITING SUB-SKILLS BY KULLIYAH LECTURERS (DIRECT QUOTATIONS)

Lecturer 1	<i>For me, organization, ideas and content, spelling, grammar, punctuation and style and vocabulary.</i>
Lecturer 2	<i>As for me, ideas and content, organization, grammar, spelling, style and vocabulary and punctuation.</i>
Lecturer 3	<i>Grammar, spelling, ideas and content, style and vocabulary and punctuation.</i>
Lecturer 4	<i>I believe ideas and content should be first, then grammar, spelling, organization, punctuation and style and vocabulary.</i>
Lecturer 5	<i>As for me too, ideas and content should be first, but then organization should be second, then style and vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation.</i>
Lecturer 6	<i>For me, ideas and content, grammar, spelling, organization, style and vocabulary and then punctuation.</i>
Lecturer 7	<i>Ya ideas and content should be first, then grammar and spelling, then organization and style and vocabulary then punctuation.</i>
Lecturer 8	<i>As for me, organization should be first then ideas and content then style and vocabulary, grammar, spelling and punctuation.</i>

To summarize, five out of eight lecturers (Lecturers 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7) selected ideas and content to be the first joint sub-skills that are important in writing. [8] states that ideas in writing are the most important sub-skill; and in order to get good ideas and content, it requires in-depth knowledge and great skill. [9] adds that when it comes to writing, ideas and content are the most important elements. Students need to have memories, insight and knowledge in order to find ideas for writing. [9] also states that knowledge can be gained through experiments, readings, lectures, research and discussions. Teachers or lecturers can help students by brainstorming; brainstorming is like scribbling the students' trail of thought. There are a quite a few methods such as quick clusters of ideas around a central topic, free association, listing, drawing symbols and typing furiously without revising. Any technique that produces a rapid unfiltered flow of ideas will work. Idea generation and free writing can release students from the misconception that all writing must be formal and correct.

Meanwhile, Lecturers 1 and 8 (two out of eight lecturers) selected organization to be the first and most important sub-skill in writing. [10] maintain that organization is the structural framework for writing. Organization is important for effective writing because it provides readers with a framework to help them fulfill their expectations for the text. A well-organized piece of writing assists readers by making it easy for them to follow, while a poorly organized piece leads readers through a maze of confusion and unmet expectations. In a simpler way, organization is the logical progression and completion of ideas in a text. Organization focuses on two areas: text structure that is specific to the particular genre and the cohesive elements that tie clauses, sentences and paragraphs together into a cohesive whole. In short, text structure consists of the framework of a text's beginning, middle and end. Different narrative and expository genres have different purposes and different audiences, and so they require different text structures. Beginnings and endings help link the text into a coherent whole. The term cohesive can be considered as the glue that holds the structure together. Transition words can be used in order to indicate the relationship between different sentences and ideas. Poor writers tend to loosely connect their sentences with *and* and *then*. Good writers use transition words that show causal and logical relationships between words, sentences and paragraphs, such as *because* and *after*.

Lecturer 3 (one out of eight lecturers) selected grammar to be the first sub-skill that is important in writing. [11] states that grammar is the most crucial element in writing and teachers should not neglect teaching grammar. [12] claims there is too much emphasis on the importance of grammar, particularly in writing. He adds that grammar is the foundation of communication because the better the grammar, the clearer the message will be and thus enabling the reader to understand the writing's intended meaning. Furthermore, reading is important in order to have good grammatical knowledge.

Ideas and content, organization, grammar and spelling can be considered as the top three important elements to the lecturers. According to [13], who is a well-known lecturer in the USA, the important elements of writing are idea and organization, which is similar to the researcher findings where ideas and content as well as organization have been the important elements for the lecturers.

As for spelling, Lecturer 3 (one out of eight lecturers) selected it to be the second most important element in writing while Lecturers 1, 4, 6 and 7 (four out of eight lecturers) selected it to be the third most important element in writing. For [14], spelling should be considered the most important elements in writing; as spelling is closely related with English proficiency. The more deeply and thorough a student knows a word, the more likely they are to recognize it, spell it, define it, and use it appropriately during writing. [15] note that the major goal of the English writing system is not merely to ensure accurate pronunciation of the written word but to convey meaning. If words that sound the same (e.g., rain, rein and reign) were spelled the same way, their meanings would be harder to differentiate. Therefore, it can be said that spelling can be one of the major important elements in writing.

As for style, vocabulary and punctuation, the lecturers prefer both these elements to be in either the last or second to last place. [16, p. 111] states that "without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed." As for punctuation, [17, p. 1] states that "punctuation is more important than spelling". Punctuation is an essential element of writing and it is acknowledged as "the marker of the relations of speech and writing" [18, p. 126]. [19] mentions that grammar does not involve punctuation. However, these elements work together to produce a mechanically coherent piece of writing. [19] also adds that punctuation and grammar skills can be inherited through intensive readings.

From the focus group discussion, it can be concluded that the lecturers mostly preferred that good writing should be well organized in terms of content and ideas (ideas should be vivid, cohesive alongside a good choice of words), good grammar, spelling and punctuation. Thus, ideas and content hold an extra weightage for the lecturers.

Table 3 shows the responses of the lecturers in the focus group discussion in relation to students' strength in writing.

TABLE 3. STRENGTHS IN WRITING BASED ON FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION (DIRECT QUOTATIONS)

Lecturer 1	<i>Some can write quite well.</i>
Lecturer 2	<i>They are very confident and creative.</i>
Lecturer 3	<i>They are confident but they are not thinking. Thus when they write they lack ideas.</i>
Lecturer 4	<i>Confidence in writing.</i>
Lecturer 5	<i>Some are creative. But they do not plan.</i>
Lecturer 6	<i>Some are good in grammar. If they are not good they are really not.</i>
Lecturer 7	<i>I believe they are confident because even when they are weak they still write.</i>
Lecturer 8	<i>Ya confidence is one.</i>

The majority of the lecturers stated that most of the students were very confident in writing. Lecturer 2, for

example, mentioned that “They are very confident and creative”, while Lecturer 3 stated that “They are confident but they are not thinking. Thus when they write, they lack ideas”. Lecturer 4 said that the students are “Confident in writing”. Lecturer 7 added that “I believe they are confident because they are weak they will still write”. Lecturer 8 agreed by saying that, “...confidence is one”.

At the same time, the lecturers also mentioned that the students were creative in their writing. For example, Lecturer 2 highlighted that the students “they are...creative”. Lecturer 5 also stressed that “Some are creative...”. Thus, it can be concluded that student’s confidence and creativity are their strengths in writing.

Table 4 shows the descriptions of students’ weaknesses in writing as stated by their lecturers.

TABLE 4. THE DESCRIPTIONS OF STUDENTS’ WEAKNESSES IN WRITING BY KULLIYYAH LECTURERS (DIRECT QUOTATIONS)

Lecturer 1	<i>Mostly grammar. Which I find it is not too serious because they can easily remedy that. But most importantly they are lacking of cohesion when they write. They are lacking in terms of ideas and content. They do not know where to elaborate. They are not sure about organization as well.</i>
Lecturer 2	<i>My students they lack ideas as well. For me because the students they do not read a lot. If they read then they can improve their writing. We should expose our students to do a lot of reading as reading and writing they are related. Just as listening where speaking is related to listening. These two skills are connected.</i>
Lecturer 3	<i>I get put off by the spelling errors. My students have problems with spelling. Lack ideas because they will do copy and paste which I can easily catch them because they are using all the bombastic words. The language is different. Students should be thinking more and should not copy and paste and pouring their own ideas.</i>
Lecturer 4	<i>For me they have problems in ideas. They could not express well and why it happens because they are weak in English. They do not know what to write.</i>
Lecturer 5	<i>I agree with him students have problems with ideas. I have the same problem too. Plus they are weak in grammar and spelling. Some students are really good. They are not weak in grammar or spelling but still have problems in expressing themselves. Why? Because they do not read enough.</i>
Lecturer 6	<i>The students have problems with connecting ideas. They lack ideas and they will copy and paste. This is the only difficulties that I am facing.</i>
Lecturer 7	<i>As for me the students have difficulties in grammar and spelling. Especially grammar</i>

	<i>because by now they should know how to use past tense and present tense.</i>
Lecturer 8	<i>The students lack ideas and word choices. They are weak in vocabulary. Thus, they cannot get good marks for their project papers.</i>

The main problem in students’ writing as mentioned by all lecturers in the focus group discussion is lack of ideas. Lecturer 2 mentioned that “My students...they lack ideas as well.” Lecturer 6 stated that “They lack ideas and they will copy and paste.”

As stated by the lecturers, students lack ideas because they do not read for example Lecturer 2 highlighted that “...the students they do not read a lot.” Lecturer 5 mentioned that “...they do not read enough.”

Poor grammar and spelling were also mentioned by the lecturers as students’ weaknesses in writing for instance Lecturer 5 stated that “...they are weak in grammar and spelling.” Lecturer 7 added that “...students have difficulties in grammar and spelling.”

The researcher also inquired whether length is important for them, because based on the researcher’s personal experience the lecturers will give extra marks for lengthy essays. However, all the lecturers mentioned that length is not important as long as the students could present their ideas well.

As for confidence in writing, the lectures in the focus group discussion mentioned that the current generation of students is confident because they are ‘shameless’. However, they did not think while they were writing, though having confidence in writing was an element to be a good writer. [20] mentions that over-confidence can jeopardize your writing because you are in love with yourself, not your writing. Thus, the researcher believes that since the lecturers in the focus group discussion mentioned that the students are confident but with occasional errors, it could be the over-confidence that led them to make errors. [21] elaborates that a confident writer will write because he or she wants to write and not because he or she wants to please others. He or she will try to use simple words and make sure a point is being made.

In the focus group discussion, the lecturers mentioned that one of the writing difficulties that the students were suffering from was lack of ideas, which the researcher believes is related to reading as well. To strengthen this assumption, the lecturers were asked why they thought that the students were weak in generating ideas for their written assignments or projects. All the lecturers mentioned that the students did not read as much as they should. Essentially, it appears that reading affects writing and writing affects reading. [22] says that reading helps the students to expand their knowledge on the topic that they need to write about, as well as a good reading habit and skill improve students’ ability to write. In addition lecturers in the focus group discussion also highlighted that the students are weak in grammar and spelling as well.

V. Conclusions and Recommendations

To conclude, the lecturers stated that a good piece of writing is well organized in terms of content and ideas where

the ideas should be clear and connected. Also, the writing should have strong vocabulary without any grammar, spelling or punctuation mistakes. In ranking the six writing subskills that are ideas and content, organization, style and vocabulary, punctuation, spelling and grammar, the lecturers chose ideas and content to be the first in the rank order. This is because the lecturers believe that ideas and content can contribute extra mark. Confidence in writing is the students' strength in writing, while lack of ideas is their weakness. Lack of reading contributes to a poor piece of writing as the students do not have enough fact to support their writing. Although they are confident writers, or what the lecturers called as 'shameless' writers, 'shameless' because they just write without thinking or afraid of making any mistakes. It is recommended that before giving any assignments or project for the students to complete, a reading list can be given the students. This is to help them to gain more ideas and to think critically when completing their assessments since ideas will hold extra weightage in the rubrics.

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