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Abstract

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Intervention Learning Plan to address the issue of poor writing skills among students of Al Ittihad Model Schools

Abstract

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1. Identifying the Issue:

English teachers who teach in UAE Model Schools know perfectly well that the sweeping majority of their students have poor or no writing skills. They often report that their students' writing is "almost incomprehensible because of poor handwriting and spelling" (Morgan & Odom, 2005: 117). Final pieces of writing produced by our students are often replete with mistakes, lack effective organization and cohesion, and do not

communicate ideas clearly. Their writing is a mess in the full sense of the word. Hardly can we read their handwriting because of its illegibility and most of the ideas expressed are “undeveloped and make no sense” (Ibid 2005: 118). Our students, who exhibit poor writing skills, are often intimidated by writing. They simply despise writing and consider it a boring and meaningless activity. Their comments when doing a writing activity can be summed up as follows: “I hate to write. I’ve never been any good at it. I just can’t do it” (Harvey, 1998:53).

I have come to the conclusion that whenever I ask my students to write a few sentences about any topic we have already discussed in class, I would be overwhelmed by the pieces of writing they come up with. Only few of the students produce clear, fluent, and well-structured paragraphs. Others, however, write very little, and their writing reflects nothing but simply disconnected thoughts. The most frightening of all is that the majority of them produce nothing (Overmeyer, 2005). Even those who have been successful in producing a nice paragraph cannot be described as students who really exhibit good writing skills because the paragraph they have generated is not their own production. These students are only good at memorizing paragraphs handed over to them by their teachers as modal paragraphs. It seems clear that these students tend to use the part of their mind that copies but never the part that creates (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

The sample paragraph (Fig 1) below backs up my claims. It reveals the work of a student who has spent ten years learning English but is still struggling with his second language literacy. It is evident that this student exhibits weakness in planning, sequencing his ideas, and editing and revising his work before submitting it to his teacher. He also has problems with the “mechanical aspects of the task such as handwriting, spelling and punctuation” (Westwood, 2006:74).

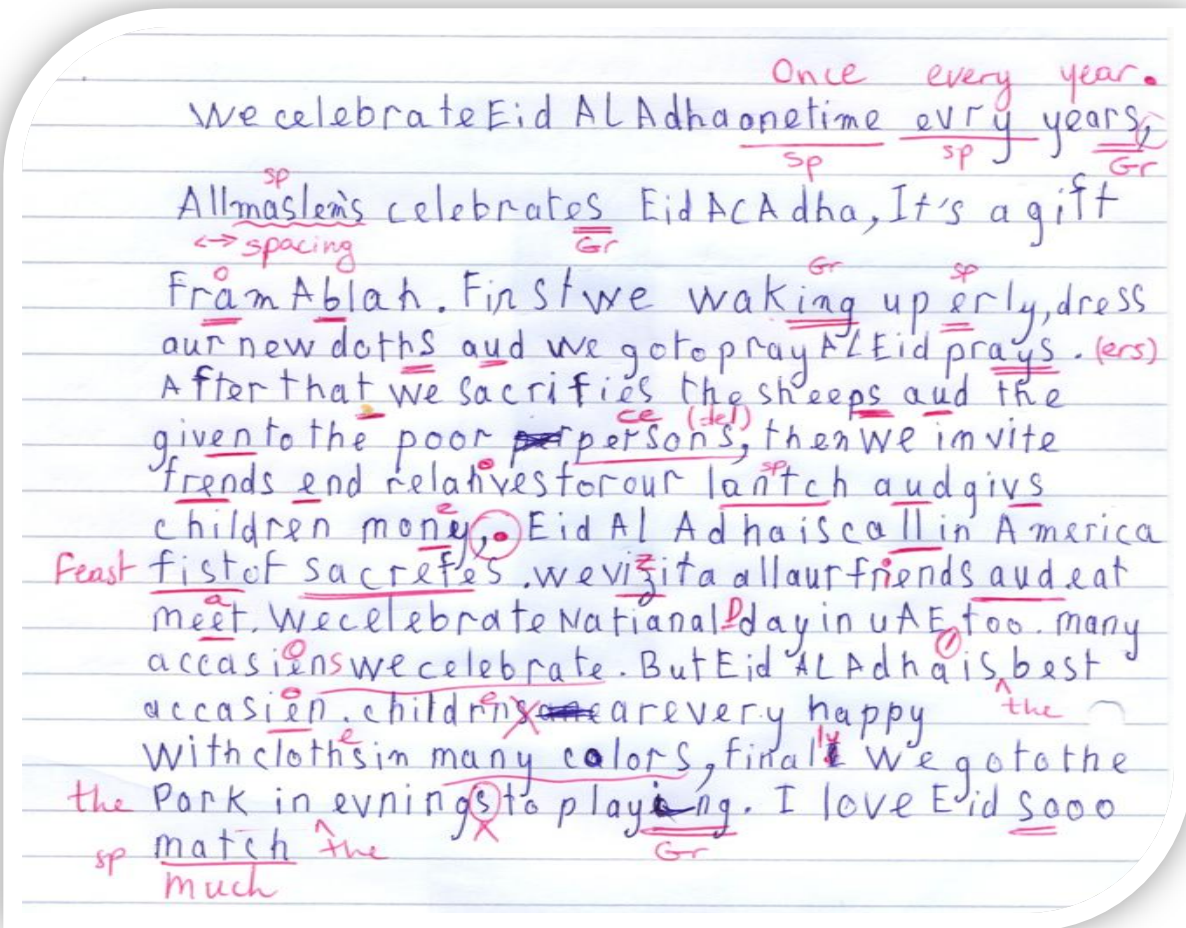


Fig 1.1: Student writing sample: Celebrating Eid Al Adha in the UAE

When we put our students' writings under careful scrutiny, many focal questions will arise. Why do our students fail to produce successful pieces of writing although they have been learning English for more than ten years? What strategies should we implement to

help students with claims such as: “we have problems in writing. We just feel helpless. We don’t know where to go” (Harklau et al., 1999)?

2. Description of the issue in relation to the context where I teach

Richards and colleagues (2002) maintain that “writing is usually thought to be the most difficult skill to acquire”. Ferrer shares the same view as well. He argues that “writing is a complex and difficult process, and that it takes time and effort to write effectively” (Ferrer, 2001: 49). Moreover, “teaching writing is a difficult task for teachers” (Stewart et al., 2003:180). It “requires not only willingness, enthusiasm ... but also an understanding of the “concepts” of composition on which effective classroom pedagogy is based” (Clark et al., 2003: xvii). Students in UAE Model Schools “rarely read and definitely despise writing” (Morgan et al, 2005:117). A good number of them do not do well on exams because of the essay section. Students tend to skip the essay section because they cannot write anything. They think that writing is a complex skill, so they never take the risk of writing a paragraph.

2.1.Data Collection

I have based my claims that students have poor writing skills on the data collected by means of questionnaires, students’ writing samples, informal interviews with students of different classes, and my own observations in class. The variety of instruments I have adopted to gather my data has for objective to add more validity to my research paper.

2.1.1. Teacher and Student Questionnaires

The teacher and student questionnaires sought evidence of poor writing skills among students of UAE Model Schools, students’ attitude towards writing from a teacher’s and student’s perspective, and the teaching practices teachers adopt when dealing with writing tasks. Statement one (1) in the teacher questionnaire, for instance, checked with teachers whether their students are good at writing (see Appendix A). It is worth noting that 13, (65%), out of the 20 teachers who responded to my questionnaire stated that their students exhibited poor writing skills. Only one teacher, (5%), claimed

that his students were really doing well in writing. The chart below represents the percentage of the teachers who agree/ disagree with the statement that students have problems with writing.

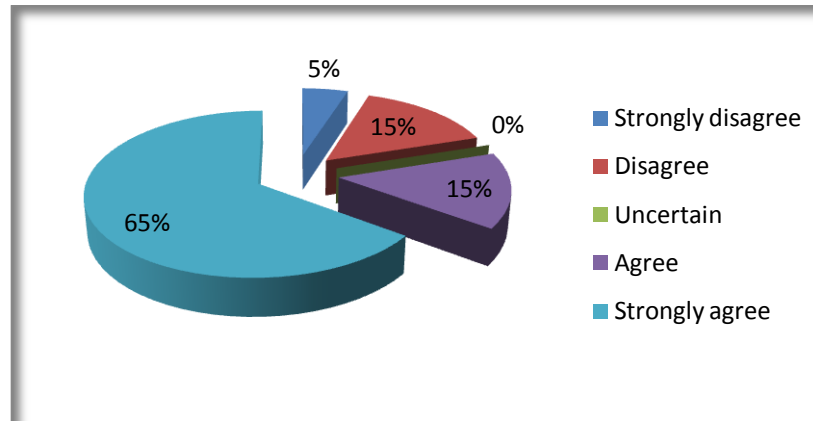


Figure 2.1.1.1.: Teachers' view of the students' writing skills

Students themselves were aware of the problem they had with writing. Statement one (1) in the student questionnaire supported the claim that students of UAE Model Schools were not good at writing. 77 out of 100 students, (77%), for example, stated that they had poor writing skills by agreeing with the questionnaire statement number one (see Appendix B). Only 9 students affirmed that they exhibited good writing skills. The chart below sums up the students' view of whether they are good at writing.

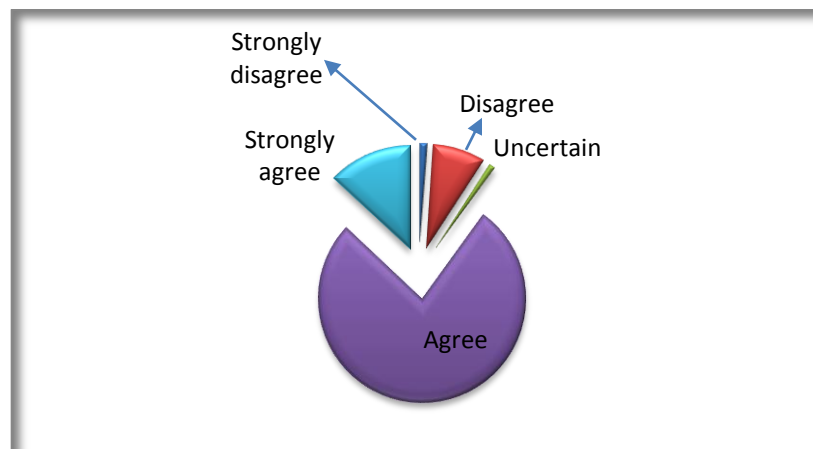


Figure 2.1.1.2.: Students' view of their writing abilities

Statement two (2) was meant to investigate students' attitude towards writing tasks in general. Most of the teachers reported that their student showed reluctance to write "and learned to hate writing" (Schulze, 2006: 181). Fourteen teachers,

(70%), by way of example, strongly agreed that their students hated writing activities and three teachers, (15%), agreed. The chart below illustrates the teachers' views of their students' attitudes towards writing.

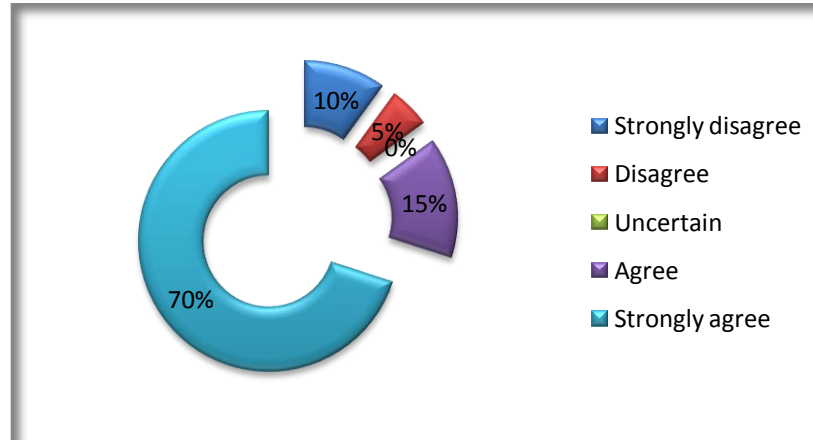


Figure 2.1.1.3.: Teachers' views of their students' attitudes towards writing

Students who responded to my questionnaire did not show any appreciation for writing. The majority of them, (66%), strongly disagreed with the statement holding that writing is an exciting activity and (12%) only disagreed with it. The percentage of those who strongly disagreed and agreed with the student questionnaire statement number 2 clearly confirms the teachers' claims that their students do not enjoy doing writing. The chart below outlines the students' perception about writing tasks.

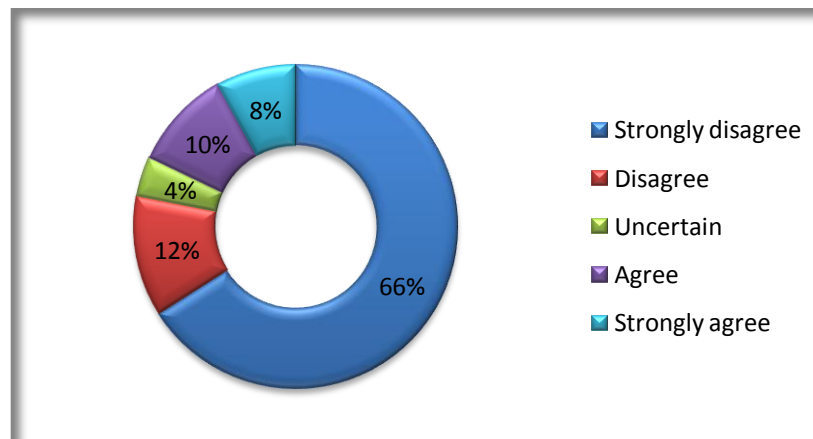


Figure 2.1.1.4.: Students' perception about writing

As for statement three (3) in the teacher questionnaire pertaining to whether students tend to memorize model paragraphs or create them, 10 teachers, (50%), strongly agreed and 6 teachers, (30%), agreed that their students preferred memorization to creation. The students' responses to their questionnaire statement three (3) are in line

with the teachers’ claims. 58 students, (58%), strongly agreed and 24 students, (24%), agreed with the statement holding that it was easier to memorize a paragraph than to create it. Below is a chart outlining teachers’ and students’ views of memorizing model paragraphs.

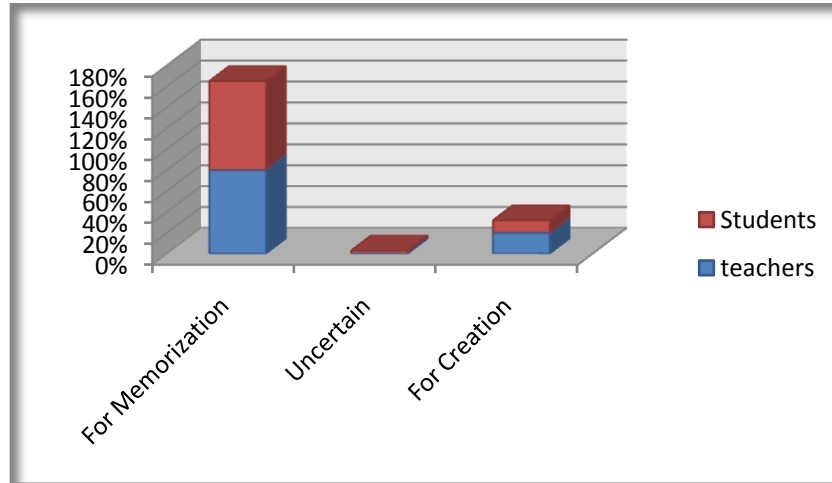


Figure 1.1.1.6.: Teachers' Vs Students’ perceptions about memorizing / creating paragraphs

It is evident that students in UAE Model Schools “demonstrate a deteriorating attitude towards writing” (Pressley, 2007:180) because they have problems generating ideas and branching out from them. Creating paragraphs seems far-fetched hence the majority of the students resort to memorizing them. 56 students, (56%), strongly agreed and 28 students, (28%), agreed that coming up with novel ideas was really hard. The percentage of those who claimed that they were not stuck for ideas was really low. Only 12 students, (12%), stated that they had no problem with hatching ideas. The chart below illustrates the students’ views about how difficult generating ideas is.

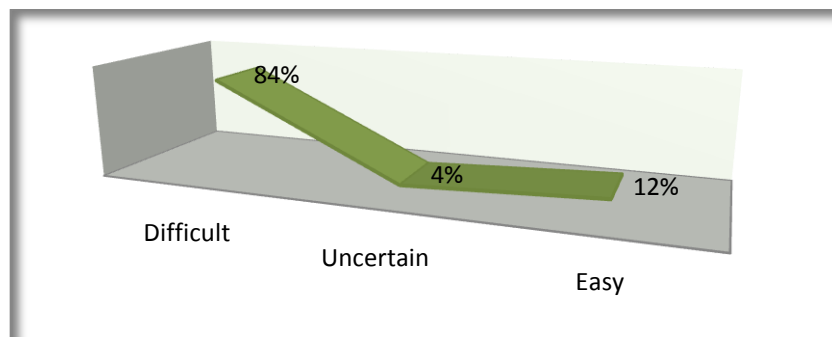


Figure 2.1.1.7: Students' views about generating ideas

In an attempt to solve the problem of students' inability to generate ideas, teachers provide students with model paragraphs and ask them to memorize them. Students have to memorize at least six paragraphs for each mid-term exam. We can clearly see how this teaching practice encourages students to use the part of their mind that copies but never the one that creates (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). It is not surprising, then, that 16 teachers, (80%), stated that writing is an activity that could be assigned as homework. Acting on the premise that writing is a time-consuming activity and that what really matters is curriculum coverage, teachers rarely invest time and effort into teaching writing. Below is a chart that recapitulates the students' views of the frequency of the writing tasks done in the classroom.

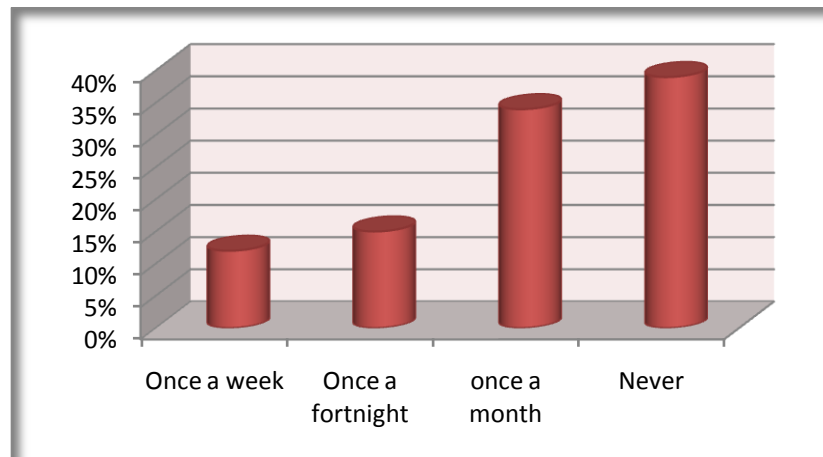


Figure 2.1.1.8: The frequency of the writing tasks done in class

Statements six (6) and seven (7) of the teacher questionnaire sought to investigate the effectiveness of the process-focused approach over the product-focused one. I was surprised to find out that 30% of the teachers were uncertain of the best approach to adopt to help their students become better writers. This clearly shows that they have no clear strategies to deal with their students' problems with writing. 7 teachers, (35%), favored the process-focused approach over the product-focused one. The remaining 35% of the teachers took a good stand in favor of the product-focused approach. Worth noting is the fact that those percentages do not represent the actual teaching practices. They only refer to teachers' views about which approach would best help their students enhance their writing skills. These views are illustrated in the graph below.

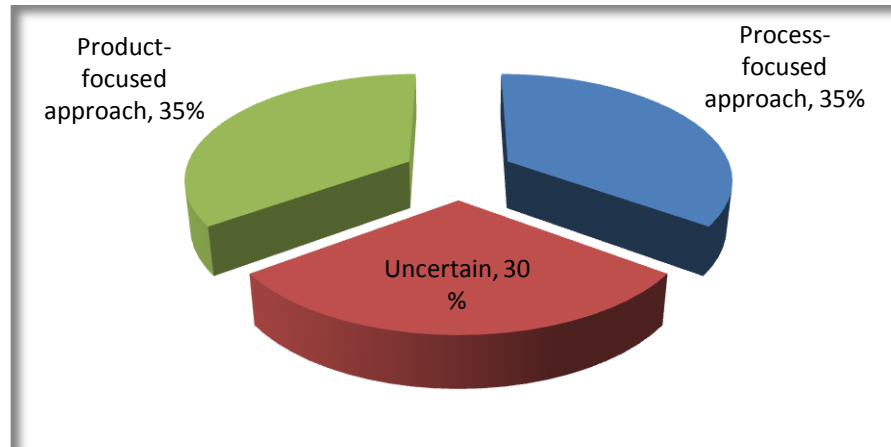


Figure 2.1.1.9: Process- Vs Product-focused Approach

When asked about whether they are familiar with the writing process, 52 students, (52%) responded negatively. Only 15 students (15%) responded positively. This clearly shows that students “have, at best, rudimentary and inarticulate ideas about the writing process” (Gallimore, 1999: 195). This is not surprising since the writing process is rarely implemented for many of the teachers consider its implementation a waste of time. They have deep conviction that providing students with model paragraphs to memorize is better than squandering time on writing activities that would not help them score high on their mid-term exams. The chart below illustrates the students’ familiarity with the writing process.

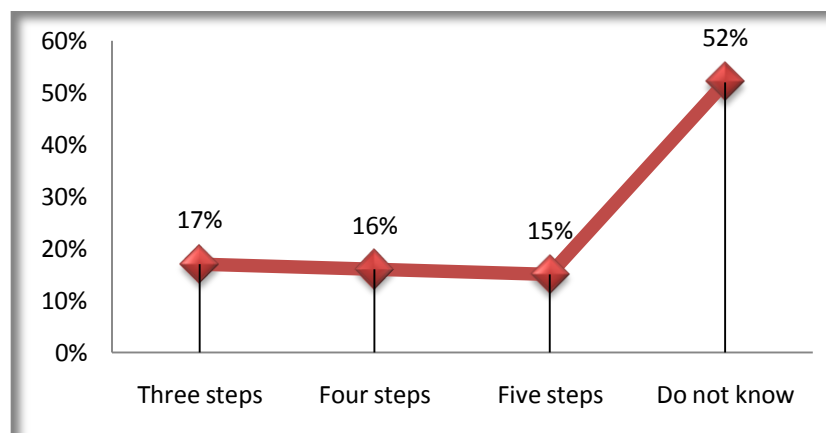


Figure 3.1.1.10.: students' perception of how many stages there are in the writing process

The second part of the teacher questionnaire sought to explore the student’s level of competence in English. Based on the teachers’ judgment of the proficiency level of their students, we can easily deduce that their literacy development lags far behind that of other students who have spent more than ten years learning English as a second language

in other contexts. These students do not show a real mastery over the English Language. The sweeping majority of them are poor spellers and demonstrate inconsistent and little command over English grammar. The graph below shows the teachers' perception of their students' proficiency level in English.

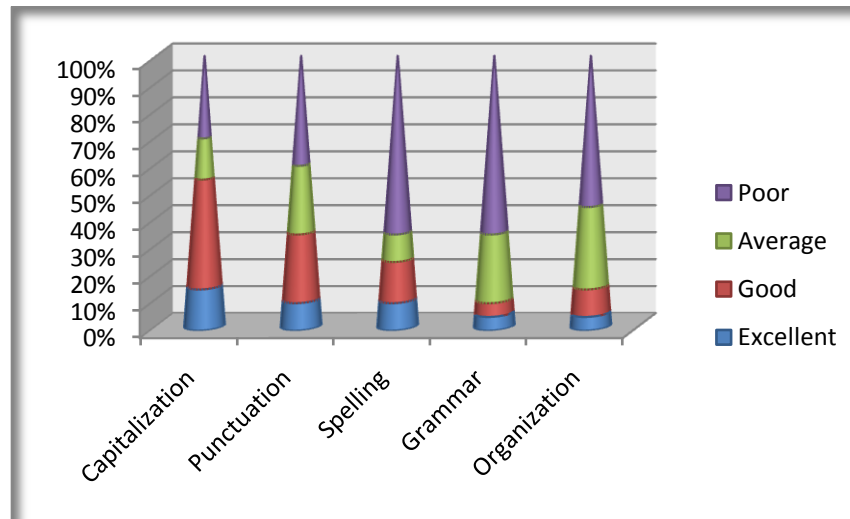


Figure 2.1.1.11.: Teacher's judgment of their students' level of proficiency

2.1.2. My own observations

Teacher observation is a valid assessment tool for gathering evidence of how well our students are achieving learning objectives (Flynn et al., 2004). Besides, it is a useful technique for it helps us “maintain accurate account of each student’s development” (National Council of Teachers of English, 1975:703).

Observations of my students in classes (10/3, 20 students) and (10/5, 20 students) have provided me with some valuable assessment information to gain insight into their weaknesses and needs. In class (10/3), by way of example, there are four students who are unable to express themselves in clear English. Their handwriting could be best described as cuneiforms for its illegibility. They need great deal of support in developing their language and literacy skills to a level that would enable them to take part in any learning activity. It is no wonder that these students feel bored during English classes. The previous unsuccessful experience of learning English has resulted in their lack of

motivation and an increase in avoidance tactics especially when they are assigned a writing task.

In class (10/5), I have noticed that the majority of my students are poor spellers. They demonstrate little knowledge of fundamental English spelling rules. My observation is echoed in figure 2.1.1.11. which means that spelling is a major problem common to most of the students in UAE Model Schools. Some students reported that their previous teachers did not focus that much on spelling. I am aware of the fact that we should emphasize content over form in an attempt to urge students to take authority over their writing (Babin & Harrison, 1999:222), but the evidence in my students' case is really a big problem. The paragraph below was produced by one of my students in grade (10/5).

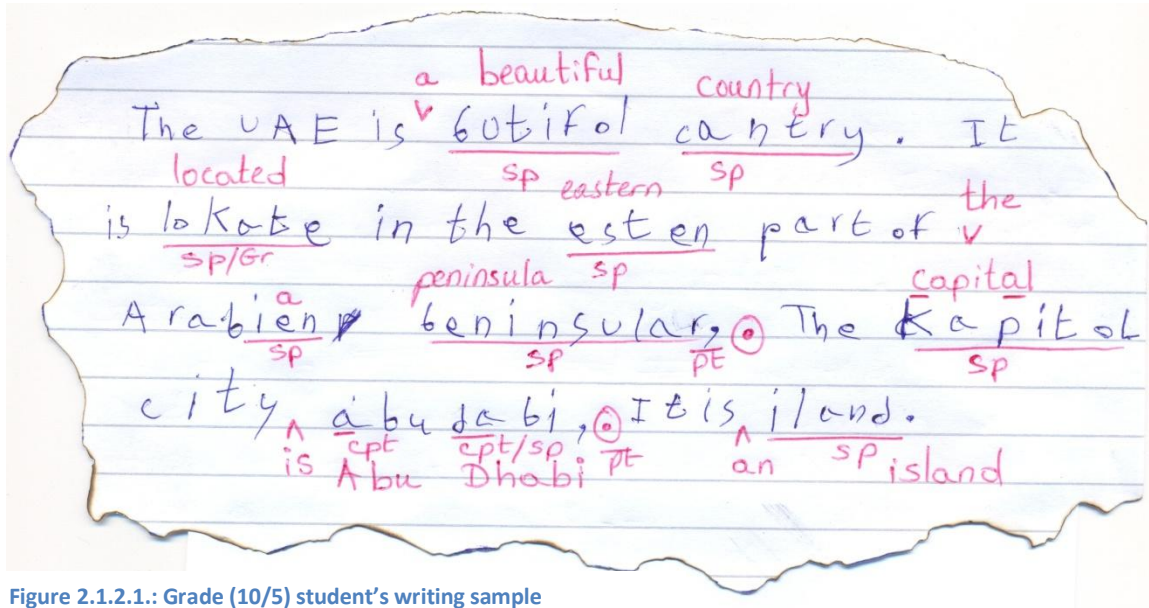


Figure 2.1.2.1.: Grade (10/5) student's writing sample

When a student who has gone through ten years of formal schooling comes up with such a piece of writing, immediate intervention is highly required. This student has written 23 words out of which 9 are misspelled. The rate of spelling mistakes made in this short paragraph is close to 40%. If we exclude the definite and indefinite articles together with the prepositions and the copular 'be', the rate will rocket up to reach 60%.

I have also noticed that when students are engaged in a writing task, they often ask for assistance in spelling. Although I always encourage them to ask for and give help to their peers, many students report that their peers themselves need help.

2.1.3. Conversations with teachers

I struck up conversations with some of the teachers from teaching grade ten and eleven students. Some of them had low opinion of their students and were too much concerned about their low academic achievements. Others went to an extreme to express their frustration. “They’re unable to make sense of any text they read. They’re unable to write anything meaningful! It’s as if they’d never been to a school before” said one of the teachers. There was unanimity among teachers concerning students’ underachievement. Almost all of them attributed their students’ failure to meet the minimum performance standards to lack of motivation in school and absence of parental support at home.

When I asked them if they ever assigned to their students interesting short stories to be read at home for pleasure, the answer was a unanimous ‘NO’. “Do you expect students who come to class with undone homework to read for pleasure?” commented one of the teachers.

Although the teachers I spoke to were aware of their students’ severe reading and writing problems, none of them tried to devise an intervention plan to develop their language and literacy skills. The majority of them were overwhelmed with frustration and had no idea whether any intervention plan would really work. They even doubted its success given the rigid curriculum that forced them to cover a large amount of data in a short period of time.

2.1.4. Informal interviews with students

I have been working as an ESL teacher for more than fifteen years now, so I have developed the habit of integrating ongoing informal interviews with average and low-achieving students into my normal, daily schedule. I always “seek relaxed and spontaneous conversations with individual students to uncover their perceptions, thoughts, and attitudes” (Schmuck, 2006:48) about their language learning experiences.

The ongoing informal interviews I conducted with my ‘at-risk’ students helped me gain some insight into their learning difficulties. I have learnt that these students find writing really difficult and try to always avoid it. They have problems with spelling

because they see English spelling as illogical, even random. They have problems with generating ideas because they were not taught how to do so. Their language difficulty is sufficiently severe to impair their academic achievement and lower their motivation. Besides, engaging in writing activities with only limited output and success has caused them to dismiss any meaningful opportunity to enhance their literacy skills.

I have also learnt that these students do not enjoy reading. They said they had problems with reading because they had never got into the habit of reading in Arabic, let alone in English. In addition to that, they stated that their very limited language repertoire was a hindrance to making sense of anything they read. “Reading... er .. you know ... er... difficult. I don't understand” said one of them. These low self-esteem students often demonstrate low self-confidence. They think they cannot catch up to their peers because they fell behind a long time ago.

2.2.The call for an immediate intervention plan

The data obtained by means of teacher and student questionnaires, my own observations of the students while they are working on writing tasks, conversations with teachers, and finally ongoing informal interviews with students indicate that students in UAE Model Schools have not yet developed second language literacy skills that would qualify them as successful learners. Therefore, the call for an immediate intervention plan that would clarify some of the students' language problems and enhance their writing skills has become a crucial necessity.

3. Literature Review

The writing skill is often considered as “the most difficult language skill’ (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2006: 93). It is a skill that “requires a higher level of productive language control than the other skills” (Ibid, 2006: 93). It involves many elements such as handwriting, spelling, grammar, syntax, ideas, organization, etc.

3.1. The traditional approach to teaching the writing skill

Traditionally, writing was assigned mainly to catch students’ grammar and spelling errors. The only writing students used to do in their early stages of learning was to change nouns from plural to singular or to turn a text in the active form into the passive. Hardly any attempt was made to give those students a real chance to create their own texts because teachers then adhered to the Comprehension Approach which “was [is] based on the belief that learners should not be asked to produce the language before they were [are] ready” (Dicker, 2003: 136). Besides, this belief is echoed in the Natural Approach whose proponents maintain that “children often go through a silent period before trying to express their thoughts in a second language” (Ibid, 2003: 103). In more advanced classes, however, students were assigned compositions to write. Since the focus was primarily on form, errors were to be avoided at all cost. The fewer mistakes students made, the higher their marks would be. Little or no attention was given to the development of their ideas when judging their writing. Therefore, if their ideas did not fit into what they already knew how to say, they would try out something easier, something they knew they could control (Leki, 1991: 171). Such a traditional approach to teaching writing, in which learners had to follow a prescribed pattern, was mechanical and rigid by nature, and more often than not, it led students to neglect the communicative and “creative aspect in language use” (Chomsky, 2006). The pieces of writing most students came up with were uninteresting and unimaginative because every student used to use the same vocabulary and sentence structure.

3.2. The new approach to teaching writing

Attitudes towards teaching writing have changed over the last few years. The emphasis that was once being overly focused on the mechanical aspect of writing is now

being focused on its social and communicative aspect. Students' attention is now being directly directed at the message they want to convey through their writing. This is often done by encouraging students to develop a sense of audience. As a result, they no longer feel intimidated by writing because they are not focused on grammatical error. They are instead writing to someone who cares about the message and not the medium, and who understands their English and tolerates their mistakes. In this sense, the social and communicative aspects of language will be highlighted and students will “develop confidence and a sense of power over the language” (Leki, 1991:171). Moll (1990: 421) posits that

the theory and research reviewed here suggest that there are interesting possibilities for development when this notion is reversed, that is, when the social and communicative aspects of written language are given primary emphasis before mastery of basic skills.

The new emphases in teaching writing in second language classrooms have come into existence thanks to the abundance in literature pertaining to the most effective ways of teaching this skill. These new emphases are of paramount importance in the sense that they “allow students develop a [this] sense of success with the second language” (Leki, 1991: 171).

3.2.1. The rhetorical context

The rhetorical context refers to “the purpose of the paper, the audience for it, and the situation within which it would be produced” (Clark et al., 2003: 206). It is the situation that surrounds the act of writing. With its focus on what, why, and for whom students are writing, the rhetorical context helps them keep their thinking clear, focused, and organized.

Teachers should tell students about the genre they are expected to write. I quote Cooper who broadly defines genre as “the types of writing produced everyday in our cultures, types of writing that make possible certain kinds of learning and social interaction” (Cooper in Clark et al., 2003: 206). Teachers should encourage their students to recognize the close relationship existing between the social function and the textual form of any written text. It is known for a fact that the questions any writer should ask before setting

her / his pen to paper are, “Why am I writing?”, “Who am I writing for?”, and “What do I have to say?” The content and the genre of the writing will depend on the answers to these questions. Only by having a message to communicate and an audience in mind can students commit themselves intellectually to what they are writing.

3.2.2. The content

There has also been an emphasis placed on the content of student writing in the recent years. Teaching writing no longer means the systematic practice of grammatical structures; it no longer means involving students in redundant and meaningless activities which compound their boredom, lower their motivation, and have no valued currency in stimulating their desire to learn. Instead, students now write about topics that interest them and know a lot of things about. Good teachers are those who are able to use the students’ ‘funds of knowledge’ effectively in order to turn them around to literacy. When we ask students to write about things that really matter to them, we actually bring their “funds of knowledge and their [his] enthusiasm for purposeful writing powerfully together” (Kerkham & Hutchinson, 2005: 113). It is our role to capitalize on our students’ funds of knowledge and tailor our literacy pedagogies to meet the needs of previously marginalized students. Also, encouraging our students to make effective use of new literacies certainly leads to fruitful results. Kerkham and Hutchinson (2005) highlight the importance of the teachers’ turn to new technologies in engaging students, enhancing their collaboration, and extending their literate repertoire. Many students show a great deal of interest in working with multi-modal texts, texts that combine images, written and spoken words, video etc. These multi-modal texts help students display the content of their writing in many interesting formats. As teachers, we should encourage our students to move from print-based literacy to screen based literacies if we want to grant them a chance to publish their work to a global audience.

3.3.The process approach

Donald Murray gave rise to the notion of process writing in his 1968 edition of *A Writer Teaches Writing*. All of the new emphases I have mentioned earlier are aspects of this approach to teaching writing. When the product-focused approach was traditionally

implemented, the focus was mainly on the product itself. Thus, success depended on how the final product looked like. The paper had to be error-free, well-organized, and neat. By contrast, the new focus to teaching writing has shifted from the product to the wandering path that students have to take to get to that very product. Students are carried through five stages in an attempt to help them reach a decent product, “because of course the product is still important and grammatical accuracy is still an important goal” (Leki, 1991: 174) to achieve. The process-oriented program has proven to be an effective strategy to enhancing student writing. Graham and his colleagues (2007) posit that

most of the research does support the use of the process approach as being more effective than other approaches in terms of improving writing attitudes and products.

The writing process is “a powerful learning vehicle” (Freeman, 1995) based on the premise that good writers go through a process to achieve a final product. This process comprises five stages “commonly labeled Prewriting, Drafting, Revising, Editing, and Publishing” (Ibid, 1995: 5). Graham and his colleague (2007) assert that all these stages should be fully implemented so that students can build a good repertoire of writing strategies.

In the first two stages, the focus is placed primarily on generating ideas, meaning, and clarity whereas in the latter two stages the focus is shifted towards grammar, mechanics, and “preparing the manuscript for an audience” (Freeman, 1995: 5). Worth noting is the fact that grammar in the process-oriented approach is taught “as part of a real task rather than a discrete activity” (Graves, 1983 cited in Gram, 1998: 124). In this sense, students will see the importance of grammar because it serves a communicative purpose. This will bring me to mention teachers’ attitude towards error correction. It is high time teachers viewed their students’ error as an opportunity for learning rather than for correction. According to Gallimore and Tharp (1990), “a teacher cannot provide assistance in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) unless she knows where the learner is in the development process” (Dozier, 2006). From Vygotsky’s perspective, learning occurs in the zone of proximal development. In this way, students’ errors are both a good indicator of where in the development process our students are and a means that helps teachers draw on what they already know and how best they can learn.

Many aspects of the process-oriented approach to writing are of high value. The writing tasks are usually carried out in groups in a rich and engaging environment where students do not depend entirely on their teachers but rather “consult one another and make their thinking available to one another” (Allington & Johnston, 2002:211). In such an attractive learning environment, “students are [were] not only learning how to learn but how to teach and how to interact in ways that foster[ed] mutual learning” (Ibid, 2002: 211). Besides, the teachers’ provision of help to students during the writing process, provision of positive comments on the students’ written products, and absence of error-focused feedback enhances students’ motivation and facilitates the learning experience (O’Brien, 2000).

3.4. Writing in response to reading

Reading and writing are no longer viewed as two separate skills. They are two skills that develop together (Braunger & Lewis, 2006). If students are to reach a decent level of proficiency in L2 writing, then they should think of ways of increasing their exposure to the target language (TL). This premise is echoed in Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1983) which views natural and comprehensible input as the vehicle for L2 development. This means that the more students engage in reading (the input-based), the more proficient in writing they will be (the output-based).

Teachers should take advantage of the correlation between reading and writing if they are to optimize their students’ performance in writing. They should expose their students to a wide range of literature and think of effective ways of getting them to respond to it. Buss and Karnowski (2000: 3) claim that “students learn to be better writers from what they read”. What selection criteria should we establish for selecting stories? Some students may be influenced by the genre presented by the story. Others, however, may be influenced by the topic. What is really important in the selection criteria is that the students should manage the difficulty level of the story. The perfect choice would be a story whose topic is interesting and engaging and whose level of difficulty can be handled.

4. Suggested professional learning plan

How can we, as teachers, avail ourselves of the body of literature to redesign our pedagogical practices that would hopefully lead to improved writing quality?

4.1. Adopting the process-oriented approach

Operating on the premise that students who implement aspects of the process-oriented approach to writing outperform their non-writing process peers, I feel compelled to adopt this process to address the issue of poor writing skills among students in UAE Model Schools. To hopefully achieve the desired outcomes, I will be collaborating with my Australian literacy coach and a colleague of grades ten and eleven whom I feel comfortable working with. They attended one of my lessons in which I implemented the writing process and both were satisfied with my presentation (see Appendices F1 & F2). Performing collaboratively in professional learning teams will enable us to critically reflect on our teaching practices, to continually improve, and to precisely direct our energies towards ways that yield positive outcomes (Fletcher, 2005:21).

The Abu Dhabi Education Council (ADEC) literacy coach, my colleague, and I have already gathered twice, once before the mid-term exam and another time when students received their report cards, two days before the mid-term holidays. The results achieved by the students in the first mid-term exam clearly suggested that writing was a real issue among the majority of our students. My colleague, who was assigned the task of correcting students' essays, stated jokingly: "I was lucky to correct students' writing. Most of the composition answer sheets were blank".

During our two meetings, we discussed the learning plan I already submitted and made some modifications in view of the positive and negative points we came up with. We also agreed that we would start implementing our intervention learning plan immediately after the mid-term holidays. We managed to fit 60-minute writing workshop into our weekly schedule. The literacy coach would support each of us professionally once every other week. We reached a consensus on matters pertaining to the period the intervention plan will span over. We concurred that it would extend over three years,

targeting grade 10 only for this year, grade eleven for next year, and grade twelve for the year after. So our target students for the second mid-term will be those in grades (10/3), (10/5) – my students, and grades (10/5), (10/6) – my colleague’s.

The writing workshop model has the potential of helping students come up with professional pieces of writing (Ray, 2001). We will first introduce the writing process to our students, highlighting its recursive nature by modeling the five steps it comprises: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. Explicit teaching of these stages will be used and teacher assistance and guidance will be provided to every individual student to ensure everyone in class has become familiar with the five stages.

4.1.1. Creating ZPD Groups

To emphasize the collaborative nature of the writing process, we will divide the classes into 5 ZPD (Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development) groups where every four students having almost the same developmental level working together. Peters (1996 in Doherty-Sneddon 2003: 131) posits that “children working within their ZPD are much more likely to benefit from instruction compared with those who are not”. In an effort to build supportive student-centered writing communities, we will encourage these groups to cooperate in different ways at different levels on different writing activities in order to achieve a common goal: being good writers. Most of the activities to be assigned in our writing workshops will relate to the students’ personal interest to maximize their engagement in the task and raise their motivation. We will work hard to provide them with all the support they need in the early stages of their learning. Gradually, our involvement will be reduced to a minimum and will be restricted to providing them with feedback only.

4.1.2. The nature of the writing activities

Our writing workshops will be characterized by variety. We will make effective use of ‘Read-to-Write’ writing workshops. We will first introduce reading and writing genre to the students and make sure they understand the commonly shared attributes for each of the different genre. I think this will be an easy task because most of the students are already familiar with reading and writing genre in Arabic, their mother tongue.

Students will be asked to read self-selected stories that relate to their personal interest and with a level of difficulty that is slightly beyond their comfort zone. Members of the same ZPD group may be assigned the same story. They will have opportunities to read and then discuss what has been read to finally respond to the story by writing plot summaries. We will also encourage students to take part in journal writing exercises. We will try to get them into the habit of recording in their journals whatever comes to their mind, for instance, certain feelings, situations, frightening or happy experiences they had in the past, experiences pertaining to their learning process, etc.

4.1.3. Raising students' audience awareness

Being aware of how effective a strategy raising students' audience awareness is, we will invite our students to address various audiences. To achieve this purpose, we will design authentic and realistic activities. Writing emails to e-pals (see Appendices E1 & E2), letters to friends, or a complaint to a store manager are realistic writing activities that would lead students to make audience-specific changes in the writing style, degree of formality, word choice, etc.

4.1.4. The need for minilessons

It is evident that during the writing process, students will face some difficulties that necessitate the teacher's immediate intervention. Our intervention will take the form of five-to-ten minute minilessons. We will adopt an explicit teaching strategy during our minilessons. The topics of these minilessons stem from the needs that we see in our students' writing such as a convention, revision, or editing strategy. Cummins (2006: 35) maintains that "when teachable moments occur, teachers should take advantage of them". These minilessons are so important in the sense that they provide students with strategic and focused instruction that they can immediately put into effective use (Hoyt, 2000).

4.1.5. Establishing Assessment criteria

We will introduce students to an assessment rubric (see Appendix C) so that they can gain a fertile understanding of the evaluative criteria. Spandel (2004 in Paratore & McCormack, 2007: 215) posits that rubrics are important because "they make

expectations public and visible”. Since assessment rubrics provide clear expectations, students will develop the habit of reflecting and improving on their work. It is important that students learn how to evaluate and reflect on their pieces of writing. We will be demonstrating this through modeling. We will display four samples of students work representing different levels of quality and use a simple assessment rubric to rate them against predetermined criteria.

4.1.6. Student / Teacher feedback

Recognizing the importance of peer feedback, we will encourage our students to request one another’s feedback throughout the drafting and revision stages (see Appendix D). As a result of this peer writing conferences, students will make the necessary changes that would improve the quality of their writing. Teacher feedback is also vital. This will take the form of student-teacher writing conferences. In an effort to ensure the success of these conferences, we have to be supportive and encouraging rather than critical and destructive. We should provide our students with strategies that would guide them towards improvement and self-efficacy.

4.1.7. Students’ portfolios

We will be using writing portfolios to encourage our students invest in the literacy process. Although a portfolio represents an informal form of assessment, it will certainly enable us to gain insight into students’ performance on different tasks thus keeping track of their progress. Students will select samples of their drafts and final products to include in their portfolios. Schumm (2006: 403) posits that portfolios decrease the pressure of grades for students. It is through this assessment tool that students can become part of the assessment that has always been the realm of the teacher.

4.1.8. Methods of analysis and reflection

During the implementation phase of our intervention plan, we will be keeping reflective journals to write about our observations, to judge the efficacy of our strategies, and to reflect on our teaching practices. Together we will meet on a weekly basis to share our thinking and redesign our instructional practices to meet the students’ needs.

In an attempt to gauge the efficacy of our intervention learning plan, we will administer a writing test one month before grade 10 students sit their second mid-term exam. We would like to see if there has been any real improvement in our students' writing skills.

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