

Improving ESL Students' Descriptive Writing through Wh-Question Technique

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Abstract

This study examined the use of Wh-questions technique in English as Second language (ESL) writing class specifically descriptive writing. The objective of this study is to investigate whether the Wh-questions technique is effective for descriptive writing. The study is an action research with an experimental design involving 22 participants. The students were required to compose descriptive essay before and after the treatment which were treated as pre-test and post-test. Apart from that, an unstructured interview was conducted to identify the students' perception towards the use of Wh-questions technique. The outcome of this study proves that the Wh-questions technique is an effective pre-writing technique for ESL Malaysian secondary school students. Students indicated positive perceptions towards the use Wh-questions technique in descriptive writing.

Keywords: Wh-questions technique, descriptive writing, writing in ESL, pre-writing technique.

Introduction

There are four skills to be mastered in the English language. They are listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening and reading are considered as receptive skills while writing and speaking are known as productive skills. Receptive skills are the skills involved in receiving and understanding a language. Productive skills are also known as active skills as the learners are required to produce the language. Among the four skills, writing is the most difficult skill to master as it involves students to think critically to generate ideas and construct sentences and paragraphs at the same time. According to Kellogg (2008), writing poses significant challenges to our cognitive systems for memory and thinking as well. Thinking is linked to writing to enable students to express their ideas and feelings through writing. Students have to think about the content of their text before they could start writing it. Students face problems in deciding on the content and how to put it into correct sentences. Students must make decisions about their texts so that their ideas could be put into readable form which brings in meaning.

Therefore, students need to be taught the proper way of writing. This study is focused on improving students' descriptive writing through Wh-question technique. Descriptive writing was selected as a mean to allow students to be imaginative and generate ideas. Students would be able to express their thoughts and ideas easily as there is no specific format for this form of writing. They are free to express their thoughts and ideas which would be a good way to identify the students' improvement in writing skill. Wh-questions will be used as a technique to help students to generate ideas and put their ideas into writing. The students would be taught on how to use Wh-questions to help them to generate ideas and thus they would be able to write.

There are some factors that influence the students' writing skill. One of the factors is lack of ideas to initiate writing. It is known that the main key in producing a good writing is through generating ideas. Generating ideas is the first step in the writing process. Most of the students dislike writing lessons as they lack ideas on what to write. Succinctly, they do not know the techniques of generating ideas. Thus, students are demotivated to write as they find it difficult to generate ideas and information. Therefore, teachers play a vital role to help students to generate ideas.

In the learning process of writing in secondary school, student should have the ability to develop and produce simple functional texts. In this study, students were required to write simple descriptive text. A descriptive text describes something or someone. It creates an impression in the reader's mind of an event, a place, a person or thing. The writing will set a mood or describe something in such detail that if the reader saw it, they would recognize it. It would be an interesting writing which would bring words to life. However, students often find some difficulties in writing descriptive text as they feel it difficult to generate ideas. Therefore, teachers should facilitate the students to generate ideas through learning activities.

In this study, the teacher uses the Wh-questions technique to help students to generate ideas for their writing. The teacher will provide tasks and some Wh-questions which would allow the students to brainstorm for ideas before they are able to put their ideas into words. This technique would be able to stimulate thought and creativity of students in expressing their feelings and opinions in writing besides changing the students' perception of writing as well. According to Rafika (2014), questioning helps students to place their story or ideas in order and in a correct flow. By answering questions students will be able to generate ideas, information, feelings and thoughts in oral or written form. Wh-question technique is a good way to initiate ideas for writing. It is a good way to bring a focus and manage the topic given for a short essay. The main purpose of this research is to investigate the effects of using Wh-questions technique to improve students' writing skill in descriptive essay. The research questions are as follows:

1. What are the effects of using Wh-questions technique to improve students' writing skill in descriptive text?
2. What are the students' perceptions towards the use of Wh-questions technique to improve descriptive writing?

Literature Review

Definition of Writing

Writing is one of the language skills which is used to communicate indirectly without having face to face interaction. According to Nunan in Mohaddese and Ramin (2013), writing can be defined by a series of contrast which involves the act of both physical and mental. The physical action is the writing process whereby sentences are constructed which form paragraphs while the mental act involves the process of generating ideas which allow the writer to express his or her feelings and thoughts. This process eventually becomes a product of writing form which functions to impress the readers.

Kellogg (2008) explained writing as an extended text at an advanced level which poses significant challenges to our cognitive systems for memory and thinking as well. A writer should be able to generate ideas of what to say and how to say it. It is closely related to generating ideas and thus individuals who write well are seen as critical thinkers. Kellogg (2008) states that writing ability marks the literacy of a writer as it is a dual process of generating ideas and putting those ideas into words and paragraphs.

Writing gives a chance for the writers to discuss their ideas in written form. Brown (2001), states that writing pedagogy focuses on writers' way of generating ideas and organizing them into reading form which is the product of writing. It is by the organization of sentences and text, into a coherent whole, that the writers are able to communicate successfully with their readers through the medium of writing.

According to Harmer (2006), writing is a basic language skill, as important as speaking, listening and reading. Students need to know how to write letters, how to put written reports together, how to reply to advertisement and increasingly how to write using electronic media. It is important for our daily routine just like speaking, listening and reading skills. Writing is characterized as written thinking. Students should be encouraged to express their ideas, experience, thought and feeling. It is an end product which conveys messages to the readers.

In this study, writing skill was selected as a skill to investigate as the students' were weak in this skill compared to other skills. They found it difficult to start writing as they had the impression that writing was a difficult task. It is agreed that writing is a skill that needs extensive practice to be mastered. It is one of the skills that the students should master in order to pass the examination of the English language. Besides, writing skill is needed in everyday routine such as filling up a form, expressing thoughts and ideas. Therefore, writing skill should be taught in school by providing proper and suitable technique for the students to master.

Purpose of Writing

In all languages, writing is commonly a difficult activity. Writing is the skill in which many students are least proficient, be it in their native language or foreign language as writing has the least use except to some professionals. In school, writing test is a compulsory test to evaluate the students' mastery. Students who are not able to write well could not even cross the passing marks. Writing is taught to the students from elementary to secondary school. Some students in tertiary level learn writing skill too as they need to take up English courses too.

According to Sproat, Driscoll and Brizee as cited in Krisdian (2016), writing serves a variety of purposes that can be categorized under two main headings. The first one is for practical purposes where we use it for everyday living, social contact, getting and giving information and study purposes. The second purpose is for entertainment and self-expression. In this study, writing is used for both study purposes and self-expression. When the students write, their writings are marked and evaluated by the teacher which serves the study purpose. On the other hand, writing descriptive text enable the students to express their self and thoughts freely allowing them to generate ideas.

Relationships between Questioning and Students' Achievement

Winne (as cited by Sahin, 2015) defines higher order questions as questions that require students to mentally manipulate bits of information learned previously, to create an answer or to support an answer with logically reasoned evidence. This definition of higher-order questions matched the application, analysis synthesis and evaluation levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. Lower order or convergent questions are defined as those inquiring for exact recall or recognition of facts discussed previously or explained by the teacher. This definition aligns with the levels of knowledge and comprehension in the Bloom's Taxonomy.

Based on the study conducted by Sahin (2015), questioning does improve the students' achievement intrinsically and extrinsically. Usage of higher-order-questions in classrooms shows a great impact on the students. Students were able to elicit longer answers by providing the logical reasons that support their answers. In fact, students seemed to be more interested in participating in the lesson actively when the teacher asks higher-order-questions. Besides, it improves the language proficiency of the students as they are able to practice the language by speaking when they are answering the questions.

Lower-order questions are equally important in classrooms too (Harrop & Swinson, 2003). Students who are at the beginner or intermediate level of language proficiency find lower-order questions as interesting questions to deal with. It helps them to recall and relate the current knowledge with the past knowledge. Some students prefer repetitions of the lesson so that they could see the clear relationship between the past and current knowledge. Lower-order questions are not necessarily used for the students who are in low level of language proficiency. It could be used for students of any level of language proficiency to test their understanding and evaluate the learning process.

Questioning is the main key in this study as Wh-questions are used as a technique to stimulate students to generate ideas before writing. Both higher-order and lower-order questions where used to promote critical thinking and to allow students to participate in class discussions using Wh-questions to help them to generate ideas. Most of the students were quick to answer the lower-order questions during the discussions. However, they took some time to produce answers for the higher-order questions. The teacher provided the students with enough waiting time and examples to allow the students to produce the answers. This method helps the teacher to identify the improvement of the students in term of generating ideas for their descriptive writing.

The Use of Wh-questions in Teaching Descriptive Writing

Teaching writing requires the teacher to be selective and creative with the techniques used. To improve students' ability in writing a descriptive text, certain techniques could be used. Questioning is one the best ways to guide students to initiate writing (Rafika, 2014). Wh-questions allow the teacher to guide the students to generate ideas. Students would be

able to generate ideas by answering the Wh-questions posted by the teacher. In other words, questions would ease the students to accumulate information to initiate their descriptive writing.

In teaching writing process, the teacher should be able to stimulate thought and creativity of students in expressing their thoughts, feelings and opinions on a certain subject. The teacher should teach descriptive writing using Wh-questions by providing a list of Wh-questions related to the theme selected. The teacher should discuss the list of Wh-questions with the students to guide them to generate ideas. The questions posed by the teacher could help students to make new concepts and ideas. Wh-questions technique would be a good platform for the students to generate ideas before initiating the descriptive writing.

Besides helping students to generate ideas, using Wh-questions creates an interest in the students towards writing lessons. This happens as the students begin to learn the technique that improves their writing. They would be more confident and motivated to complete their writing using their own ideas rather than copying their friends' work.

Relevant Studies

There are many research conducted using Wh-questions as a technique in improving students' writing skill. In the research conducted by Jeprianto (2011), it was found that students are able to improve their recount writing through the use of Wh-questions. Students were able to develop ideas using the guide of Wh-questions. The teachers also claim that posing Wh-questions before the students start writing enable to them to have some idea of what to write in their recount text. The main aim is to enable the students to generate ideas in the pre-writing stage and it is proven that Wh-questions help in generating ideas to write recount text.

Another research conducted by Sujarwati (2005) investigated the influence of using Wh-questions as teaching guidance also proved some significant improvement in the students' writing skill. The students are more encouraged and motivated when the teacher used Wh-questions in the lesson. According to her, students participate actively during the lesson as there is two ways between among the teacher and the students. The result is students are able to generate ideas and are more confident to start writing.

Teachers spend most of their instructional time conducting questioning sessions. In the classroom context, questions by teachers and answers by students are considered as powerful teaching approach as they promote critical thinking and leads to exploration (Sulaiman, 2013). Questioning, especially Wh-questions, is important to follow up and elaborate on what a student has said, to enhance students' understanding and keep them actively involved in the learning. It is also a good tool to evaluate students' learning progress.

Murcia and Freeman (2000) suggested that teaching WH-questions as lexical units at the earliest stages of English language development is one method of fostering the benefits of Wh-questions without confusing students with the complex grammar involved in their formation. There are some students who do not understand the interrogative form of Wh-questions as the technique used by the teacher is incorrect. Students need to be taught the Wh-questions as it is an important aspect of language. In writing text, Wh-questions can be used to improve students' achievement in writing.

Brown (2000) states that Wh-questions play an important role in interrogative words. For instance, “what”, “who”, “where” and “when” can be used to ask for information in the orientation as orientation includes the title and introduction of the characters, setting of time and place of a story. It creates a clear picture of the subject being described which would set the mood and atmosphere of the writing as well.

Rafika (2014) conducted a research on Wh-questions to teach descriptive writing. The researcher came to a conclusion that teaching descriptive text writing through guided Wh-questions was effective. It was proved that the students enjoyed in learning descriptive text through guide Wh-questions as they became active learners. It was an experimental design without a control group. Also, the research was conducted over a period of one year.

Wh-questions technique is used to improve students’ descriptive writing in this study as well. However, this study was conducted for a period of three months only. In addition, there was a control group in this study which explained the difference between the research conducted by Rafika (2014) and this study. The study aims to help the students to generate ideas using the Wh-questions technique to improve their descriptive writing.

Methodology

This study is an action research and exploratory case study. It is an action research as it aims to improve the teacher’s practice and students’ learning. On the other side, it is also an exploratory case study as the study is to explore the students’ writing problem and intends to solve the problem through Wh-questions technique.

This study involves the qualitative research approach. The students’ scores in both pre-test and post-test would allow the teacher to evaluate the students’ improvements by identifying any increases between the two tests. Students were taught to use Wh-questions to improve their descriptive writing and the main focus is on the content of their writings rather than the length or number of words. Therefore, the rater who evaluates the students’ writing scripts plays a vital role in identifying the richness of the content of the students writings in both pre-test and post-test.

This study involves 22 Form One *Rancangan Khas* class students, aged 13, of one selected secondary schools in Malaysia, who were selected purposively in the academic year of 2016. Purposeful sampling is used in this study as to it is a qualitative research which requires samples related to the phenomenon of interest. The samples are of intermediate level of English proficiency as mentioned by the previous English teacher of Form One *Rancangan Khas*. They are able to comprehend the language and produce the language spontaneously although there are some mistakes and errors. The students received five treatment lessons as a part of the data collection procedure. The teacher conducted this study for three months. It began from July 18th, 2016 until October 19th, 2016.

Pre-test was conducted before the treatment phase while post-test was conducted after the treatment phase. All the students who were involved in this study were required to take both the tests. The students’ compositions were collected and rated. Unstructured interview was conducted after the post-test in this study. Unstructured interview is an open interview which does not restrict the interviewee’s answer to a certain extend. It is meant to

explore deeper about a particular subject using the interviewee's answers. Unstructured interview was used in this study to allow the students to express their opinions and thoughts about the Wh-questions technique. Besides, it allows the teacher to probe the students to provide a deeper explanation of their perception as well. Five students were interviewed to identify their opinions and feelings towards the use of WH-questions technique in descriptive writing.

Unstructured interview which was conducted with five students were transcribed to carry out a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is one of the most common forms of analysis in qualitative research as it emphasizes pinpointing, examining and identifying the theme within the data. It is important to identify the students' perceptions and opinions towards the use of Wh-questions technique.

Findings and Results

Student	Variables								Total
	HWTC	GI	CF	C	E	ST	UIF	HFE	
Student 1	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
Student 2	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5
Student 3	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	4
Student 4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	4
Student 5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	5

Code for variables:

HWTC	:	help to write composition
GI	:	generate ideas
CF	:	clear focus
C	:	confident
E	:	enjoy
ST	:	save time
UIF	:	useful in future
HFE	:	helpful in examination

Based on the interview of five students, a thematic analysis was carried out. The students gave almost similar responses to the use of Wh-questions technique in descriptive writing as the variable influenced their descriptive writing. All the five students agreed that Wh-questions technique was helpful to compose descriptive text. It enabled them to generate ideas and organize their writings. They agreed that they were able to compose descriptive writing in easily using the Wh-questions technique rather than using the conventional method. This is because they are able to engage their mind with the Wh-questions and start answering them one by one which sets as a pre-writing phase.

They had clear focus on what to write when they used the Wh-questions technique. The Wh-questions technique helps them to keep on track by avoiding ideas that are irrelevant to the topic of their descriptive writing. They were able to provide a detailed explanation in their descriptive writing by answering each of the Wh-questions.

Other than that, they were also confident to start writing their descriptive text as they had some clear picture of what to write in the text. The students are confident as they know what they would write in their descriptive text. The Wh-questions technique prepared the students to answer all the questions and jot down the ideas, words or vocabularies related to the topic and even identify the type of tenses that they need to use in writing later on. They also enjoyed the writing lessons which incorporated the Wh-questions technique as they have never learnt such technique before. It is something new and interesting for them and therefore, they managed to grab the technique easily and benefit it to generate ideas for their descriptive writing.

The students also agreed that Wh-questions technique saves up their time in descriptive writing. Using Wh-questions technique before starting their descriptive writing allows them to organize their ideas in order so that they would not get stuck at when they started to write later. They also perceive that the Wh-questions technique is useful for any other writing, not only for descriptive writing. The students also mentioned that they would use this Wh-questions technique in their examination as it saves up a lot of time and help them to generate and organize their ideas. Overall, all the five students who had been interviewed agreed that Wh-questions technique is helpful in generating ideas for descriptive writing.

It was found that the students began to develop positive perception towards writing after the treatment as compared to before the treatment lessons. The students enjoyed the writing lessons and interesting in writing skills. They were more confident and motivated after the treatment lessons as they were able to compose and even share their writings with their friends. The students are able to brainstorm for ideas in the pre-writing stage which eventually guides them to compose their essay. They began to like writing lessons when Wh-questions technique was incorporated in the treatment lesson as it is something new for them. They have never learnt such a technique in writing skill before which triggered their interest to implement the Wh-questions technique in their essay writing process.

Conclusion

Based on the study, it can be concluded that Wh-questions technique helps students to write successfully. The students' performance in the post-test clearly indicates the effectiveness of Wh-questions technique in improving students' descriptive writing. Wh-questions technique helps students to generate and organize their ideas other than boosting students' motivation and confidence in writing lessons. This study proves that good writing is a result of the correct use of Wh-questions technique. Wh-questions technique is also useful during examinations to help students score better grades. Thus it can be concluded this study has proven the importance of Wh-questions technique in improving students' descriptive writing.

The students also had a positive attitude and belief concerning the use of Wh-questions technique. The students found that the Wh-questions technique helped them to generate ideas for their descriptive writing. They had a clear focus on what to write. Therefore, they were confident to write. The students were able to write a better descriptive text when they are able to organize their ideas using the Wh-questions technique. Although the students took some time to practice the Wh-questions technique before writing their

essays, eventually they were able to make it a habit in the pre-writing stage. Having enough ideas enable the students to start writing confidently prepares them for the writing process.

This study revealed that students of the treatment group are more inventive and creative in nature when developing their content of writing through the use of Wh-questions technique. On the other hand, students of the controlled group faced difficulties in generating ideas without the use of Wh-questions technique. This proves that Wh-questions technique enable the students to think creatively and generate sufficient ideas for their descriptive writing. In fact, this would lead to critical thinking for reasoning as well. Each of their ideas was elaborated with reasons which showed their level of creativeness in developing their descriptive writing in the post-test. The students are engaged in reasoning skill when they are answering questions. Their reasoning skill would enable the students to improve their writing skill as well as their confidence level.

Students were able to overcome writer's block, the condition of being unable to think of what to write or how to proceed with writing when they used the Wh-questions technique. According to Upper in Mclean and Thomas (2014), writer's block is a major hindrance in writing as it can cause the students to have a fear of writing. It happens to many students when it comes to writing process. Therefore, using a suitable technique could help to overcome this condition. In this study, the students were more confident to write the compositions when they used the Wh-questions technique. Wh-questions technique allows the flow of ideas through questions and answer session which is essential for a good writing. The students also expressed that they were able write in a more comfortable mood when they used the Wh-questions technique as they were not stuck during the writing process looking for ideas.

The students began to develop interest towards writing lessons as they were able to express their thoughts and feelings through the writing process especially in descriptive writing using the Wh-questions technique. According to Sahin (2015) questioning improves students' achievement intrinsically and extrinsically. When the students are motivated to write, they will be able to produce a good piece of writing which could reflect the learning process. The students involved in this were also able to participate actively during the writing activity after the treatment as compared to the conventional method. The results of this study proved that the ESL students who were involved were able to use Wh-questions technique for their descriptive writing successfully. It is concluded that Wh-questions technique can apply as a pre-writing technique to help the students to generate ideas during their writing lessons in classroom.

Based on the study, it was found that Wh-questions technique have important implication for practice for teachers, students and other researchers. Teachers should not merely concentrate in mechanics and grammar of writing as it can hinder the students' development of creativity in writing. Teachers are suggested to incorporate the Wh-questions technique in writing lessons and activities as one of the techniques in teaching writing in order to improve the students' descriptive writing ability. Wh-questions technique could facilitate generation of ideas and thus improve the students' descriptive writing. Teachers should implement this technique as frequent as possible so that it could form a habit for the students to use the Wh-questions technique. Besides, it would allow the students to develop their

creativity in writing as well as arouse interest in writing lessons. Teachers could create motivating environment towards learning English especially on writing lessons using the Wh-questions technique. Teachers should be aware of the different types of questions that could lead to generation of ideas for the writing process which could help the students to write successfully.

Students are suggested to apply the Wh-questions technique in writing so that they will be able to generate ideas and organize their writing accordingly. Besides, using Wh-questions technique would help them to keep in track when writing their essay rather than getting stuck in the middle or having writer's block. Chances of writing out of topic can be controlled when the students use Wh-questions technique. In fact, Wh-questions technique could boost the students' confidence and motivation to produce a good writing. They will be able to plan their writing process through Wh-questions technique. Besides, Wh-questions technique would be a platform for the students to showcase their creative and inventive thinking in their descriptive writing. They will be able to express their ideas and thoughts creatively when they implement the Wh-questions technique in their descriptive writing. Students could also use this technique during examination which could save their time for generating ideas. Using Wh-questions technique could help to reduce the students' pressure during examination as they do not have to waste long time thinking for ideas or facing writer's block.

Researchers who are interested to conduct research related to Wh-questions technique and writing skills might utilize this study as reference. The findings of this study might serve as a starting point or preliminary study for the future researchers who have the same problem statement as in this study.

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