

TENSES WITH ESL WRITING TENSES : A CASE STUDY OF BHUTANESE SECONDARY STUDENTS

Lobzang Nima^{1*} Nipaporn Chalermnirundorn²

Abstract

Writing as an element of the English curriculum is generally a pre-conceived difficulty even among the language teachers in Bhutan. Although, no research has been done to validate or conclude this topic with writing difficulties in Bhutanese schools, this research seeks to answer the questions particularly with what could be the major reasons for children having difficulty to write essays in their exams. Writing is an important skill for language production. However, it is considered a difficult skill, particularly in English as a second language (ESL) contexts where students face many challenges in writing. Therefore, this study was conducted with an aim to find out problems and challenges in Bhutanese ESL learners writing and what are other some other factors that hinder their writing skills. For this purpose, group of Bhutanese English language learners from grade VIII were used as participants. Writing samples were also collected from 90 ESL students to find the major problems in their writing. The interviews and essays were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The findings revealed that the major problems in Bhutanese secondary ESL learners were appropriate command over Grammar (Use of tenses), syntax, vocabulary, writing anxiety, lack of ideas, reliance on L1, lack of reading and writing practices, and large classrooms. Besides these obvious problems and challenges, teaching writing for ESL learners was mainly focused on the 'writing process' with no extensive teaching of tenses and other grammar topics.

Keywords : Writing skills; Writing in ESL; Bhutanese ESL learners'

¹ M. Ed Program student, Suryadhep Teachers College, Rangsit University.
e-mail: lobzang.n60@rsu.ac.th (+66 95 391 7071)

² Lecturer, Suryadhep Teachers College, Rangsit University. e-mail: nipaporn.c@rsu.ac.th (+66 86 884 6226)

* Corresponding author, e-mail: lobzang.n60@rsu.ac.th (+66 95 391 7071)

Introduction

Writing imaginatively marks a significant point in children's written literacy development. There is a discernable shift in cognitive development and the growth and sophistication in vocabulary use. Children generally may be expected to have control over the lower level development skills of printing and spelling. When they transit to grade four, analytical disposition in writing is demanded by the curriculum. Writing constitutes an integral part of communication if children are taught early. When children reach grade VIII, they are expected to write an essay, a letter, some exclusive grammar for the first part. However, in the later part of the assessment, children are expected to answer to questions from a read essay, an unseen short story and also an unseen poem. For a timid mind to grab so much of language and literature is found to be a Herculean task. Thus, this is a research based on not all the components that make up the Bhutanese English Curriculum but specifically on the writing component. Children until the elementary level face little or no difficulty writing in general but once a child graduates out of the elementary grades, an evaluative and creative writing is demanded by the curriculum.

Millsa et al. (2015) points out that there is a need to document the nature of children's writing skills across the grades when children are learning to write. There must also be a comprehensive and validated assessment methods to elicit and analyze children's writing products. To gain deeper insight into possible approaches to optimizing students' writing, it is important to investigate how student characteristics, teacher characteristics, and classroom writing practices are correlated with elementary students' writing performance. As to student characteristics, both cognitive and motivational aspects should be considered because of the complex nature of the writing process in which writers have to skillfully manage cognitive, psychomotor, and affective processes (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Hidi & Boscolo, 2006).

To write effectively, students have to master: (a) writing knowledge (e.g., knowledge about text genres), (b) spelling), (c) writing strategies (e.g., planning, text production, and text revision) (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Graham et al., 2013; Graham & Harris, 2000). In light of this complex interplay between writing knowledge, skills, and strategies, novice writers often experience difficulties while writing texts (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987).

More specifically, they fail to apply planning strategies (Cameron & Moshenko, 1996), fluent text production (McCutchen, Covill, Hoyne, & Mildes, 1994), and deep-level revision (McCutchen, Francis, & Kerr, 1997). Based on influential cognitive models of writing (e.g., Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1981), it is predicted that writing strategies such as planning, composition, and revision strategies will be positively correlated with students' writing performance. All in all, this research will be a mixed method research, (Investigative research)

The motivational aspect in writing is self-efficacy, which has been principally conceptualized as a uni-dimensional construct (Bruning, Dempsey, Kauffman, McKim, &

Zumbrunn, 2013). Recently, however, Bruning et al. (2013) argued for recognizing its multidimensional character by distinguishing between different types of self-efficacy for writing namely, (a) self-efficacy for ideation (i.e., beliefs about one's ability to invent ideas), (b) self-efficacy for conventions (i.e., beliefs about one's ability to apply writing conventions), and (c) self-efficacy for regulation (i.e., beliefs about one's ability to regulate writing behavior). Based on previous research (Bruning et al., 2013), it is expected that self-efficacy for conventions will be more strongly correlated with writing performance compared to self-efficacy for ideation and self-efficacy for regulation. This idea of self-efficacy is what I exactly seek to investigate through this research. Writing is an essential part of the K-12 curriculum, students are expected to compose texts to demonstrate, support and deepen their understanding of themselves, their relationships and their world (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley; and Wilkinson, 2004).

This research studied the difficulty Bhutanese children faced to write English essay once they enter class (VIII). The focus of this research was based on grade eight students who encountered creative and narrative writing once they reach grade eight whereby the foundation of such forms of writing is taught less or otherwise not taught at all in the elementary classes. Furthermore, this research pin-points the difficulties such as grammar, vocabulary and reading habits from among a host of other possible reasons.

When considering how writing is taught, it is important to consider both the quantity and quality of current writing instruction. The quantity of writing instruction refers to the amount of time spent on writing and applied writing activities (e.g., writing stories, informational texts, and poems). The quality of writing instruction refers to specific writing practices. (Teaching writing skills, teaching writing strategies, collaborative writing, and integrating ICT).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the writing problems, factors that hamper writing development, and some suggestions to improve writing skills of Bhutanese secondary ESL learners. The research was carried out to answer the following research questions:

- What are some aspects of writing difficulties faced by children of grade VIII?
- Are tenses a challenge for writing in Bhutanese students?

The conduct of this research began with providing a topic to the research participants on essay writing. (Your favorite book, how you spent your Sunday?) With this topic the participants were provided with forty minutes of writing time and the researcher was there for the entire duration. The topics were chosen based on the standards and expectations set by the curriculum. Later, the researcher asked the participants to write an essay and later fill out a questionnaire which made this part of the research, a qualitative one.

A teacher perception questionnaire was also used to gauge the teachers who teach grade VIII English of their experiences while teaching writing and its difficulties. These questionnaires were then brought back for further compilation to arrive at a specific data which then denote, what were the findings or difficulties children face in writing in grade VIII Bhutanese schools. This research was done comprehensively in one months in which one and half month was be exclusively used for data analysis.

Findings

Findings of this study have been categorized into following two major areas: ESL learners' writing challenges with tenses, other language-challenges responsible of these writing problems and Findings from the student survey questionnaire. The findings of the writing samples analysis is for ESL learners challenge with tenses.

Student Essay Analysis

The one hundred and eighty essays that students wrote were used by the researcher to specifically look for the predominant challenge in students writing essay. The analysis of ESL learners writing samples revealed a total of 1217 problems in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, word form and word order, spoken expressions, contracted forms, cohesion, repetition of ideas and L1 influence. (See Table 1)

Table 1 Reliability and Validity Values

Writing Problem/Challenges	Frequency of Occurrence
Grammar (Tenses)	442
Syntax (Word order)	171
Vocabulary	157
Spelling	113
Punctuation	95
Spoken Expressions	61
Others (Influence of L1)	14
Total	1053

The highest number of errors was made in grammar. Grammatical errors included errors of subject-verb agreement, and forms of singular and plural, for example, “*these activity helps a proper ways to write better from others*” (22) “*every day the plan goes bad to bad*” (12) and “*their personality impress by everyone.*”(36). Grammar mainly stressed the lack of

knowledge in subject-verb agreement which ultimately gave an insight into the use of tenses in a typical writing activity.

Grammar was followed by syntax. Syntactical errors show learners' lack of command over structure of a sentence. They wrote sentences like, '*I am going in weekend and more enjoy our family and see previous struggle.*' (02). Third highest number of errors belonged to vocabulary, for example, 'Using the connection between the student and teacher, this (psychological) error *'from our society can evaporate.*' (16)

Spelling and punctuation errors were also found in abundance. Some spelling errors were '*invention*' (invention), '*indivisually*' (individually) and '*fascility*' (facility), whereas punctuation errors included capitalization, use of comma and apostrophe.

Learners also used incorrect word forms like *disorder-ness*, *energetic drinks* and '*I was feeling such a greatness*'. Similarly, the order of words was also found to be inappropriate causing difficulty in expression of meaning. They wrote: '*That was probably my unforgettable day of life*', and '*after completing the long 2 hours journey.*'

As pointed out by the respondents, the use of spoken and informal style of writing was also observed. Spoken expressions like 'let's talk about television' and 'now if we talk about life without them' were used by learners in their writing. Moreover, the learners used the contracted form mostly in their negative sentences using *don't*, *won't*, and *can't*. Another set of errors belonged to cohesion, repetition of ideas and influence of the national language. Although they did not occur as frequently as other problems, they also needed to be addressed.

The findings although multiple in responses, the grammar component came out to be the major challenge of grade VIII students particularly notwithstanding the fact that students were learning English as a second language (ESL). When the assessment of student essays were carried out, the predominant tense that formed the majority of errors thereby making it a challenge came out to be the past tense and present tense. Not much of errors with the future tense was found from the student papers. The major challenge was with coherence of the tense, meaning continuing with the tense initially used. 142 papers had this common problem of transitioning from present to past tense and vice versa. The subject verb agreement which formed the basis of all tenses was a general observable problem when research participants showed a high interest and the highest level of satisfaction among the participants. Dr. Fareed Siddiqui (2004) in his research opined, "You need to know how to conjugate verbs properly by focusing on the structures of tenses and modal tenses, so that you can create clear and effective sentences."

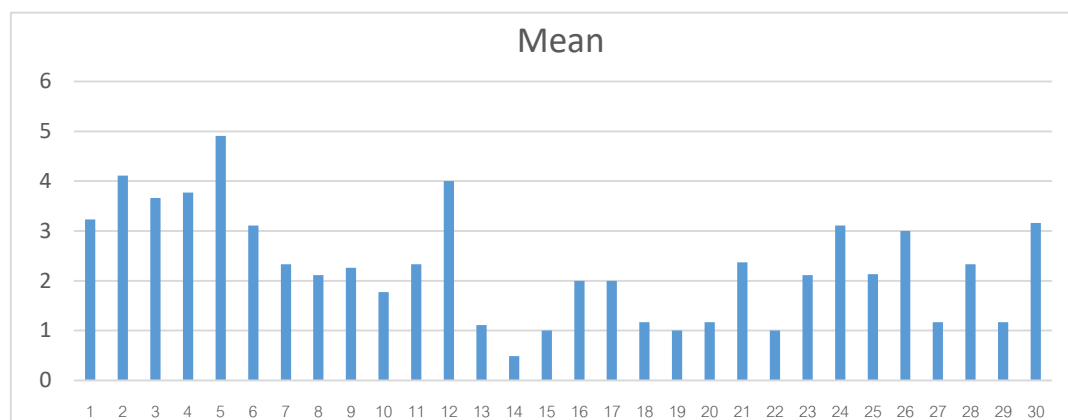
Perception Questionnaires Analysis

The questionnaire for students made a stark revelation besides indicating grammar as the challenge, that vocabulary (item 4) and writing (item 2). Since the two items is

directly proportional to its effects and impacts. Vocabulary as indicated shows a mean of 3.77 which shows a significant high thereby giving rise to the mean of 4.11 depicting the use of new words in writing for students. Item 22, the researcher has found out to be very revealing. All research participants responded with a mean score of 1.00 indicating an observable effect that teachers have been not holding a conferencing after the feedback on the written pieces.

The questionnaire sample was adapted from Maxim (1999) basically to garner both qualitative and quantitative data. The five point Likert scale was used to evaluate the learning satisfaction of the participants towards identifying writing challenges for ESL in one of the secondary schools in Bhutan. For the greater good of the readers of this research study, all research participants were satisfied with the interview questions although some of the questionnaire items had to be explained to the participants. (The figure below represents the mean score of items form the questionnaire)

Table 2 Representation of mean for items



Discussions

Based on the researcher's data analysis, it is found that tenses is of paramount importance for the learner of ESL classrooms especially when it comes to the learners of secondary classrooms. The research participants too feels the need to teach grammar separately with some broader time allocated to Tenses. Undergoing and carrying out the research, the researcher also found out many other challenges in writing of which 'vocabulary' showed the second highest satisfaction according to the student questionnaire. The vocabulary enhancement which traditionally was 'just read from the books' notion is now not applicable anymore due to availability of ICT. But sadly, these ICT in its advantageous help is yet to make its way into the classrooms of Bhutan and most classrooms remain under-connected or not

connected at all to the ICT. This trend needs to change-is the researchers observation while undergoing the research.

Tenses in its entirety is being taught in the classrooms integrated to literature as of now and writing for the graduates of this so called 'new curriculum' is sub-standard. The skills required to acquire vocabulary from various materials is encouraged in the curriculum but users of this curriculum feels the implementers (Teachers and Students) have so much to cover in so little time. Considering the vastness of the curriculum and the deadline set by the Royal Education Council (REC) to finish delivering the curriculum before the end of term II in every academic year.

The researcher has also learned from the findings that the research of this kind must be conducted, carried out and undertaken in its entirety with more participants at a national level if not at the district. A thorough qualitative research taking the implementers (teachers) as research participants also needs to be conducted for a broader understanding in assessing the impact on students writing while delivering grammar in an integrated curriculum. The findings of this study will provide a basis to rethink about the integration of all grammar topics and look into the possible solutions of what alternatives could be further incorporated to ease the curriculum since its vast now.

Recommendations

According to the findings of this study, the following recommendations are anticipated for the effective delivery of writing component in the current English curriculum for 8th grade students:

- Teaching tenses as a separate topic during the English classes and not as a part of the whole reading and literature curriculum. Teaching of grammar especially tenses must follow through in every topic so that what is taught is evident in students writing.
- It is highly recommended that teachers of ESL spend sufficient time on delivery of writing process and bring out the written pieces as a work of art rather than compiling it in a portfolio and seldom referring to those pieces in the future.
- A clear set of assessment rubrics is a mandate across the 8th grade for assessing students writing rather than having individual rubrics to assess the pieces.
- Above all, students themselves need to imbibe a reading culture to acquaint themselves more with the language and vocabulary.

Concerning this study further research should be conducted for a longer period of time so as to highlight the writing practices of the students and also to study teachers teaching writing and how are they assessing the writing of students. Given the findings of this study, further in-depth study is also recommended to be undertaken to make better writers of our students.

Conclusion

It is found that many significant aspects of writing were found to be challenges. Grammar, syntax, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, word form and word order, spoken expressions, contracted forms, cohesion, repetition of ideas and L1 influence were all the challenges and to make it precise and comprehensive. As per the research question, eleven challenges were identified by the researcher of which grammar was the predominant challenge. The specificity of grammar as a challenge was particularly looked into subject verb agreement forming the fundamentals of tenses.

When the research hypothesis was drawn earlier in this research, the researcher made a presumption that from among many challenges, Vocabulary as a challenge would top the list in writing challenges faced by 8th grade students. However, as any scientific endeavor would reveal in the end, the researcher found 11 writing challenges with tenses as the major challenge for students of ESL (English as Second Language).

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