STUDENTS' BELIEF ON WRITING ENGAGEMENT BARRIERS IN TERTIARY LEVEL

Bayu H. Wicaksono[1]

Abstract: This paper presents findings about English department students beliefs regarding the barriers they face in engaging with writing skill at University of Muhammadiyah Malang. The participants were 20 from third semester majoring English language education. The students represented engaged writers and reluctant writers from the English Language Education Department. Results suggest that interest in a topic and the perceived relevance of the task to the students is the main factor influencing engagement. Other findings suggest that reluctant writers are more likely to be influenced by lecturer, self-belief, and knowledge and skill factors than engaged writers, who are more likely to want choice and control over their writing. some gender differences also appeared; in particular girls appeared to be more aware of the influence of self-belief factors on engagement, and reluctant girls were particularly influenced by lecturer factors. This study informs English lecturers of factors that are important in improving the engagement of students in writing course.

Keywords: *writing, barriers, tertiary level.*

[1]Bayu Hendro Wicaksono, M.Ed., Ph.D is a lecturer at English Department of the University of Muhammadiyah Malang, Indonesia. (**bayuhw@yahoo.com; bayu.wicaksono@umm.ac.id**)

Introduction

The purpose of the study reported here was to explore student beliefs and thought about the writing class they were enrolled as one of the courses to achieve *sarjana* degree and how they felt about it. In particular, study focused on the potential barriers to engaging with writing that the students identified, and on what lecturers of English could do to improve engagement. It was expected that students would be able to clearly describe what they found de-motivating about writing course they were enrolled in the department. The result from these focus discussion give some clear indications of what is needed to improve student engagement on writing.

In this article the term 'engagement' is used because it is a useful meta-construct for discussing complex tasks such as writing (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Engagement has three dimensions: behavioral, emotional and cognitive, and all three are relevant when discussing engagement with writing skill. Students need to be more than just behaviorally involved in a course to be 'engaged'. Rather, it is the quality of thought and purpose that they bring to their involvement that is crucial to being 'engaged'. While there has been a significant amount of comment on how to improve student engagement in writing, particularly by advocate of the 'process' approach to teaching writing (Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006;), little of this work actually refers to the growing research into motivation (Hidi & Boscolo, 2007;). Although we now seem to have a good understanding of the processes involved in writing, we have a lot to learn about how to develop motivation to write (Bruning & Horn, 2000). In an activity as complex as writing, issues of engagement assume great importance as it is necessary for developing writers to persist and practice skills to become proficient for their future pathways.

Recent reports into students' writing highlight that the writing performance of adolescents is of concern. In the English Language Education Department, University of Muhammadiyah Malang, for example, reports on teaching learning process analysis of writing achievement of students from first year to fourth year concludes that the writing skills of many English department students are no better than that of expected by the department, reaching the level of good writing skill (IELTS writing score of 5 and TOEFL 525). The results are of concern because students need to be able to express their thought and knowledge effectively in writing if they are to participate actively in society as future English teacher. In fact, they are attending one of the departments at University level and have learned linguistics knowledge on English. If they are reluctant to write at school, students may find themselves unable to engage fully with society that requires proficiency in many written genres. English lecturers of UMM know that as many students progress through the

study their English proficiency is out of expectation. It is the purpose of this study to help lecturers understand what turns students on or off writing so that we can improve their engagement with this essential skill.

Method

Participants were 20 (12 girls and 8 boys) year 2 students. Focus groups were formed with students on the basis of their level of reluctance to write. Two focus group were formed, each of ten students. This provided enough variety of responses and experiences to keep new ideas flowing, but was small enough that every person could feel heard (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1997). All students in the groups had completed a questionnaire designed specifically for this study that measured their level of engagement with writing prior to involvement in the focus groups.

The questionnaire was administered to the second year students during a writing skill class. The students in the group reflected differences in levels of engagement with writing skill, coming from either the top or bottom quartile of scores from the questionnaire administered in the class. The focus groups began with the researcher (as the facilitator) describing the purpose of the group and briefly stating the kinds of questions or topics that would be covered in the 50-minute discussions. The students were asked to respond to a range of guiding questions about what types of writing they liked or disliked and what helped or hindered their engagement with writing in classroom situations.

During the 50 minute discussions the students spontaneously clarified and elaborated on each other's comments and clearly felt able to agree or disagree with one another. To ensure the actual words and behaviors of the participants in the research were recorded accurately, the focus group sessions were audio-taped (Morgan, 1977). the researcher facilitated each of the groups to ensure consistency of approach in the discussions. All of the audio-tapes were later transcribed verbatim.

The transcripts generated from the audio-tapes were read through carefully once by the researcher, notes were made summarizing significant or noteworthy comments and identifying themes that emerged during these first readings. The participant responses were divided up to units of meaning (i.e., quotes on particular topics) and these were then grouped into larger categories. These categories were initially based on the discussion prompts put to the groups but were amended to reflect the broad themes that emerged in the comments. Finally, each student response was analysed and coded. The unit of analysis used in the coding was the expression of a 'complete idea' (comment). This meant it was possible for the response to contain more than one idea and thus result in more than one coding category.

Results

From the complete ideas (comments) from across the groups were coded and placed into one of six themes. The six themes were interest/relevance factors, environmental factors, lecturer factors, choice or control factors, self-belief factors and knowledge or English skill factors.

Group commonalities

Results show that interest in a topic, or its perceived relevance is the predominant factor that the students attribute to engagement with writing tasks. This was a common finding across both the engaged and reluctant groups. The other common finding between the groups was the influence of environmental factors.

Interest/Relevance Factors

The most significant themes to come through the focus group discussions was the importance of interest in a topic and the perceived relevance that the students felt about the writing tasks they were asked to do. In total, comments related to this theme (whether positive or negative) accounted for 36% of all the comments the students made. In each group, this area was by far the most commented on by the students. This suggests that for these students, who are comfortable in their ability to write and who enjoy writing overall, their interest in a topic and its perceived relevance to them is by far the most significant factor influencing their engagement. Students were also concerned about how often they were given topics to write about they perceived of as having no relevance to their own lives or goals, or where they could not even see the need for doing the writing task.

Environmental factors

After interest/relevance the next largest category for overall comments being made was the influence of environmental factors on student engagement with writing. The environmental factors included working at home or university, working alone or collaboratively, the classroom atmosphere and also the medium that was used to do the writing and the time given to writing tasks. Both groups of writers appear to find the same environmental factors enhance or hinder engagement with writing. For example, all groups commented on the fact that they usually preferred to work on computers rather than handwriting for their writing tasks. The reasons for this ranged from finding it physically easier to type than to handwrite through to preferring the end look of what they had produced on the computer. It was also noted that disruptive or distracting students in classes hinder engagement. This theme was important in all groups but there were a few points of difference between the engaged and reluctant writers.

Group differences

The most striking differences that emerged between the two groups of students were in the frequency of comments made about the importance of lecturer support and the influence choice and control factors had on levels of engagement. Reluctant girls made the most comments about the effects of lecturer influences on their engagement with writing, and the reluctant groups expressed more negative beliefs about themselves as writers. The analysis shows that there were some differences in the frequencies of comments made between the 'engaged' and 'reluctant' groups.

Lecturer factors

The most significant area of difference between engaged and reluctant students was the contrast in the number of comments made on the influence of lecturer factors. The following comments from students in the reluctant writer groups highlight lecturer behaviors that the students felt would affect their engagement with their work.

Student 1:   *Some lecturers just explain it, to the point where they think that they've done enough explaining... and then they look at us like we should know by now.*

Student 9:   *Lecturers are good when they're not, like, too strict but when they will help you and listen to you.*

Student 14:   *Explain things properly. Instead of just making us writing it down and we don't know what to do.*

Student 15:   *The way they teach it. Lecturers need to explain things better.*

Choice and control factors

The result suggested that engaged students were likely to be more aware that being able to adapt or mould tasks to suit their particular interests, or strengths in terms of writing genre, were important in motivating them to do their best with the writing.

Student 3:   *[You should] have choice about your topics and what to write about.*

Student 6:   *If you give people topics that they are interested in or motivated about that helps.*

Student 11:   *[I like creative writing because] it gives you the freedom to do what you want.*

Student 17:   *[I don't like] formal writing and essays where you've got like, I don't know, a rigid way of doing it.*

The students also expressed the fact that they experienced very few opportunities to choose any of their own writing tasks. This latter group disliked writing so much, however, that the ability to choose between different types of writing tasks made little difference to their overall engagement, because any task that involved writing was regarded in the same negative light.

Self-belief factors

The results inform that reluctant students may be more aware that belief in themselves as writers plays a potentially important part in determining levels of motivation or engagement with writing tasks. It is also possible that for girls self-belief issues may be more important in terms of how much they will engage with writing tasks than for boys.

Groups made only passing comments about how a sense of failure might stop (other) students from wanting to

write, another group spoke personally about how experiencing failure, or believing that they would fail, was an important factor in hindering their engagement with writing.

Student 2:	*I hate knowing how dumb I am. Like, being in a low class I just feel like shit and don't want to do any work.*
Student 4:	*People just think I know I'm not going to do well so what's the point of trying.*
Student 12:	*If you think you're going to do badly people think they're just not going to do well so it's stops them trying.*
Student 14:	*I worry about the lecturer marking it all the time.*
Student 15:	*I was never any good at writing at school.*
Students 20:	*Yeah. I used to write quite a lot at Intermediate, 'cos it was easy and now the standards got too hard and it's just really boring*

Knowledge, skill and learning factors

The analyses suggests that for reluctant writers much of their reluctance may arise from a feeling that they do not know what to do for a task or how to approach a task and that they don't know what to write about in terms of content. Many of the reluctant writers in this study mentioned being required to write about topics about which they had no background knowledge and that this had a negative impact on how motivated they were to attempt the task.

Discussion

The students in this study were able to make some very clear statements about what aspects of writing tasks improved their engagement. Overwhelmingly, interest in and perceived relevance of the tasks they were asked to write about were the main factors that made students more or less engaged. Interest in a topic is thought to have positive influences on a student's writing because it links what students know about a topic with what they value. For example, high levels of topic knowledge, interest and discourse knowledge have all been found to have positive impacts on the quality of narrative writing in ninth grade and undergraduate students (Shell, Bruning, & Colvin, 1995). This was supported by the results of this study where many of the reasons students gave to explain why they preferred some topics or types of writing over others had to do with their topic knowledge or knowledge of how to write in that style of writing. This seems particularly important with the most reluctant writers who often lack both the skills in how to write in particular styles, as well as lacking topic knowledge to have anything to actually write about. The implication for teaching is that we should be careful to give students the opportunity to write on topics they are knowledgeable about and to teach them the topic and discourse knowledge they need to be able to do the task.

Although Bruning & Horn (2000) have noted that there is still not a lot of empirical evidence about the importance of providing students with 'authentic' tasks,

this study strongly supports the conclusion that students need to see the links between the work required of them and the real world or the personal goals they have set for themselves. Providing students with real audiences or purposes to direct their writing helps build an awareness of audience in them as writers, and helps connect with their personal interests and goals. If we only give students writing tasks that have no real context or a purpose that makes no connections with what the student values or perceives as being important we cannot blame them for having little interest in trying to communicate their knowledge and ideas. One of the issues in undergraduate level that may affect lecturers' ability to give authentic writing tasks is the pressure exerted by the society expectation. These privilege a small number of writing tasks and also decrease the authenticity by setting very short and controlled time constraints on the production of the writing, and often only have the artificial audience of the 'assessor'. The effect of these qualifications on student writing and motivation needs to be further examined. The results of this study support previous research that shows that engagement is also influenced by students' perceptions of lecturer warmth and interest in them and their work (Wentzel, 1997). This was especially evident in the results of the reluctant group. The reasons behind this result need further investigation, but it is possible that reluctant group is more affected by perceptions of

lecturer support because they may share the stereotypical view that group should be able to write better than other and that they should enjoy it more (Pajares, 2003). Rather than attributing their reluctance to write as something that they are able to control and manage themselves, the reluctant girls in this study appear to place more responsibility for their engagement at the feet of the lecturers than other groups of students.

The present study also supports previous research that self-perception and belief is an important factor influencing levels of engagement with a task (Klassen, 2002; Pajares & Valiante, 2006). People's beliefs about their abilities in particular domains are known to be important in motivating them to do what they can to achieve. One area that needs future research, however, is the suggestion in this study that girls seemed more aware of the effect of self-belief on engagement.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to find out what students felt helped or hindered their engagement with writing skill class. This study supports the findings of prior research identifying four conditions that are required to enhance the motivation to write. Namely, (1) Nurture students' functional beliefs about writing. (2) Foster student engagement through authentic writing goals and contexts. (3) Provide a supportive context for writing. (4) Create a positive

emotional environment in which to write (Bruning & Horn, 2000). In addition, this study suggests that lecturer of English can improve the engagement of their students in writing tasks by: (a) allowing students choice in their tasks wherever possible; (b) explaining the purpose and relevance of each task; (c) allowing students chances to collaborate on tasks; (c) being open to negotiation about deadlines, task expectations etc so that students perceive them as realistic; (d) ensuring students have understood all of the components in the task; (e) ensuring students have been taught the knowledge and skills or strategies needed to complete the task successfully and (f) giving feedback that is constructive and detailed.

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