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ETHIOPIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY ENTRANTS' WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE: THE CASE OF HAWASSA UNIVERSITY ENTRANTS

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ABSTRACT

This study was intended to examine the Ethiopian public university entrants' writing skills in English language with reference to Hawassa University entrants. Specifically, the research was meant to examine the entrants' writing abilities to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. To this end, 245 students enrolled at Hawassa University in 2014/15 were made to take part in the study. As to the selection of the study participants, firstly, one department/program was selected randomly from each of the seven colleges and the Institute of Technology by drawing lots. Then, convenient sampling technique was used to include the participants of the departments/programs chosen; only those students who attended the class during the test administration took part. The participants were asked to write an argumentative essay of five paragraphs. In order to determine the students' writing abilities on each of the five aspects of writing, the cut-off points suggested by Heaton (1990) were employed. The study found that the students are very poor on each of the aspects of writing. Lastly, recommendations have been made accordingly.

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INTRODUCTION

In Ethiopian education, the English language has played different roles at different regimes. Geremew (1999), by quoting Tesfaye and Taylor (1976), says that after the Ethio-Italy war, English became the medium of instruction for the majority of subjects from Grade 3 onwards. However, that role was taken by Amharic for Grades 3-6 as of 1963/4 to the downfall of the military government in 1991. The education policy of the present government has also stated that medium of instruction for Grades 1-6 should be mother tongue. The use of English as a subject as well as a medium of instruction is not uniform across the country. In some regional states it is taught as a subject at all levels starting from Grade 1, whereas in other regional states it is started from Grade 3. Again, in some regions it serves as a medium of instruction from Grade 3, whereas in others it starts from Grade 5 and Grade 8.

As to the English language instruction at elementary and junior levels (Grades 1-8), all regional states use a centralized document with a decentralized textbook preparation. The textbooks tried to adopt the integrated skills approach although the instruction focuses mainly on grammar accuracy. The children at these levels, especially in Grades 7 and 8, are asked to read short texts of different types and answer comprehension questions, write correct sentences and short paragraphs, speak on given issues, listen and take notes to answer comprehension questions and perform some other tasks, and practice some exercises to increase their vocabulary size. In the current English textbooks for the secondary schools (Grades 9-12), the lessons seem to be more comprehensive, cyclical, integrated, and contextualized than ever before. Writing has got an important place in the textbooks, as is the case with the other skills, grammar as well as vocabulary. The writing lessons included a range of controlled, guided and free writing tasks.

Students of all departments of our universities, normally in their undergraduate first year studies, are requested to take the English language courses such as *College English-I*, *College English-II*, *Sophomore English*, *Communicative English Skills-I*, *Communicative English Skills-II*, *Basic Writing Skills*, *Advanced Writing-I*, *Advanced Writing-II*, and/or *Report Writing*. It is, thus, mainly writing that has been offered to the students.

Writing has a vital role in academic institutions especially in higher education. "Student writing is at the center of teaching and learning in higher education, fulfilling a range of purposes according to the various contexts in which it occurs." (Coffin et al., 2003, p. 2). The purposes, according to these scholars, include assessment, learning, and entering particular disciplinary communities whose communication norms are the main means through which academics transmit and evaluate ideas. In higher education, it is mainly writing that is used as a means to assess students. Instructors ask students to write paragraphs or essays in or outside classrooms and also make students take written examinations and write laboratory reports in order to evaluate students' achievement of course objectives. Thus, students' success usually depends on their writing skills. "As a general rule, the further you progress in your education, the more writing you will be expected to do. Advanced courses in a discipline require more writing than introductory ones. Junior and senior courses, as you concentrate on a major, involve more writing than freshman and sophomore courses. Similarly, graduate and professional studies require more writing than undergraduate coursework" (McWhorter, 1996, pp. 357-358).

Moreover, writing at tertiary education is used to facilitate learning. Instructors encourage students to facilitate their learning by writing diaries, questions, problems, and suggestions on the process of teaching/learning and then sharing these with someone else (instructors, peers, or others). This may increase their reasoning and critique skills and, thus, improves their learning. Furthermore, "for students, writing in the academic world is not only a learning task but also part of their larger academic socialization. It teaches the students how to talk about subject-specific matters and how to produce the distinction between every day and academic knowledge. It makes them members of discourse communities and allows them to communicate with their colleagues" (Kruse, 2003, p. 23).

Therefore, students are expected to join universities with at least good writing skills so that they would succeed in their studies. However, the researcher's experience in offering the aforementioned English language courses to entrants enrolled at Hawassa University shows that the writing ability of the vast majority of the students is below the level expected of them. The researcher's colleagues at the same university have also complained about the entrants' writing ability in English. Moreover, at conferences and forums held on issues related to English language teaching in general and writing skills teaching in particular, many instructors from other universities of the nation have also reflected that students enrolled at their respective universities too seem to have difficulties in writing intelligibly and effectively. However, as far as the researcher's knowledge is concerned, the case has not been confirmed through scientific examination. That is to say, nobody has conducted a study intended to examine the entrants' actual writing skills in English. Thus, this research is meant to

examine Ethiopian public university entrants' writing skills in English language in the case of Hawassa University entrants so that appropriate interventions can be taken accordingly at secondary schools level in order to help the students possess the writing skills expected of them before they join universities. To be precise, the research is intended to examine the entrants' writing abilities to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Approach

This research was intended to examine Ethiopian public university entrants' writing abilities in English to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics with reference to Hawassa University entrants. To this end, the participants were asked to write an argumentative essay of five paragraphs. The results of the test were analyzed by using percentages and a table, and thus the study employed a quantitative approach.

Description of Study Setting and Selection of Participants

There are over 33 public universities in Ethiopia. Students who pass the Higher Education Entrance Examination are eligible to join the universities. Accordingly, every year, the universities admit a huge number of students allocated by the Ministry of Education from all over the country and assign them into various fields of studies. According to the existing placement policy, the student population does not vary from one university to another in terms of demography, English language ability, gender, age, learning styles, affective factors, and family, educational, academic, and social background. The researcher purposefully chose Hawassa University to which he is a member of staff, for he felt that conducting the study here would minimize the social, financial and time constraints that might hamper the results of the study. Hawassa University is one of the public universities and found in the South Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State of Ethiopia. It is a comprehensive university engaged in the provision of all-round education, research, training and community services. The university has seven colleges and one institute, namely College of Agriculture, College of Business & Economics, College of Forestry & Natural Resources, College of Law & Governance, College of Medicine & Health Sciences, College of Natural & Computational Sciences, College of Social Sciences & Humanities, and Institute of Technology.

Every year, the university admits a huge number of students allocated by the Ministry of Education from all over the country and assigns them into the colleges and the institute. As to the selection of the study participants, firstly, one department/program was selected randomly from each college and the institute by drawing lots. These include Horticulture & Plant Sciences, Hotel Management, Natural Resources Economics Policy, Governance & Development Studies, Public Health Officers, Statistics, Anthropology, and Electromechanical Engineering. The researcher employed a simple random sampling because it allows every department/program to have equal chance of being selected, and thus it is possible to be confident that the departments/programs included would represent the remaining

departments/programs of the colleges and the institute. Then, a total of 245 entrants that is, 49, 27, 10, 31, 38, 24, 38, and 28 students were included from the aforementioned departments/programs respectively. The participants were between 18-21 years old. Convenient sampling technique was used to include the participants; only those students who attended the class during the test administration took part in the study.

Preparation and Administration of the Writing Skills Test

The participants were asked to write an argumentative essay of five paragraphs (an introductory paragraph, two body paragraphs and a concluding paragraph) to argue for or against CHAT CHEWING. The test was intended to measure the participants' writing abilities to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. The students were given 90 minutes to complete the essay. Prior to administering the test, constructive comments were obtained from the researcher's most senior colleagues concerning the topic of the essay, instruction, and time allotted. As far as the administration of the test is concerned in the case of each department/program, a conducive environment was chosen and the testees were made to sit properly so that each testee would demonstrate her/his own writing performance. Moreover, before the testees were asked to write the essay, they had received a brief explanation about the research objective.

Scoring of the Essay

The essay of each testee was corrected by two randomly selected English language instructors at Hawassa University who had received training on how to correct the papers. Analytic approach was chosen to mark the essay. This approach is preferred for being the most effective approach to achieve reliability. The rating scale used was the one provided by Heaton (1990). Heaton (1990, p. 146) describes the scale in this way: "The following rating scale is the result of considerable and careful research conducted in the scoring of compositions in the United States." According to this scholar, an academic essay should be marked out of 100 (Content = 30, Organization = 20, Grammar = 25, Vocabulary = 20, Mechanics = 5).

In order to take the students' average scores on each of the aspects of writing, the following procedures were applied. Firstly, Pearson r was conducted on SPSS version 20 to see the correlations of the scores given by the instructors. To determine the strength of a correlation, the cut-off points suggested by Cohen (1988), as cited in Greasley (2008), were applied. "As a general guideline, a value ranging from 0.1 to 0.4 would be classed as a weak correlation, and anything above 0.5 would be regarded as a strong correlation.... A value approaching zero indicates the absence of any relationship between two variables, in other words no correlation" (Greasley, 2008, p. 80). Then, the students' average scores were taken since Pearson r computed showed that the correlations are significant at the .01 level (2-tailed); there were strong positive correlations between the scores given by the instructors.

Methods of Data Analysis

Results of the test were analyzed as follows. Firstly, the students' average scores on each of the aspects of writing were

taken. Secondly, students who scored from 27 – 30, 22 – 26, 17 – 21 and ≤ 16 , who scored from 18 – 20, 14 – 17, 10 – 13 and ≤ 9 , who scored from 22 – 25, 18 – 21, 11 – 17, and ≤ 10 , who scored from 18 – 20, 14 – 17, 10 – 13 and ≤ 9 , and who scored 5, 4, 3 and 1 – 2 were counted separately and determined as excellent or very good, good or average, fair or poor and very poor respectively for content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics respectively. The aforementioned cut-off points are suggested by Heaton (1990, p. 146). Then, for each of the aspects of writing, the numbers along with their respective percentages were made to appear in a table. Lastly, these were described and discussed, and implications were drawn based on the performances of the majority of the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following table shows the results of the writing test.

Aspects of Writing	Excellent or very good	Good or average	Fair or poor	Very poor
Content	2 (0.81%)	9 (3.67%)	60 (24.48%)	174 (71.02%)
Organization	4 (1.63%)	49 (20%)	60 (24.48%)	132 (53.87%)
Grammar	3 (1.22%)	19 (7.75%)	71 (28.97%)	152 (62.04%)
Vocabulary	2 (0.81%)	23 (9.38%)	43 (17.55%)	177 (72.24%)
Mechanics	5 (2.04%)	49 (20%)	53 (21.63%)	138 (56.32%)

The above table depicts the results of the essay the students were requested to write. Accordingly, the table shows that 2 (0.81%) of the participants are excellent or very good writers and 9 (3.67%) of them are good or average writers, whereas 60 (24.48%) of the testees are fair or poor writers and the remaining 174 (71.02%) of them are very poor writers as to discussing relevant contents. As the vast majority of the participants (71.02%) confirmed, the students are very poor to come up with relevant contents in their writing.

The above table also depicts that 4 (1.63%) of the participants' ability to appropriately organize contents in their writing is rated as excellent or very good. The table shows that 49 (20%) of the testees are good or average, whereas 60 (24.48%) of them are fair or poor and the remaining 132 (53.87%) of the testees are very poor on the same aspect of writing. The performance of the majority of the testees (53.87%) implies that the students' ability to organize contents in logical order is very poor. Moreover, the above table demonstrates that 3 (1.22%) of the testees are rated as excellent or very good, whereas 19 (7.75%) of them are identified as good or average in using accurate grammar in their writing. The remaining 71 (28.97%) and 152 (62.04%) of the testees' ability on the same aspect of writing is fair or poor and very poor respectively. The vast majority of the participants (62.04%) confirmed that the students are found to be very poor as to using accurate grammar in their writing.

The above table shows that only 2 (0.81%) of the participants are excellent or very good in choosing appropriate vocabulary in their writing. The table also demonstrates that 23 (9.38%) of the participants are good or average on the same aspect of writing. It is depicted in the table that 43 (17.55%) of the testees are found to be fair or poor, whereas the remaining 177 (72.24%) of them are very poor as to using appropriate vocabulary in their writing. The performance of the vast majority of the participants (72.24%) implies that the students' writing ability with regard to using appropriate vocabulary is very poor.

Lastly, the above table depicts that only 5 (2.04%) of the testees become excellent or very good as far as their ability to use correct mechanics in their writing is concerned, whereas 49 (20%) of them are found to have a good or an average ability and 53 (21.63%) of them are rated as fair or poor in doing the same. The remaining 138 (56.32%) of the participants have a very poor ability in using correct mechanics. The results of the majority (56.32%) verify that the students' ability to correctly spell, capitalize and punctuate is very poor.

The results of the present study remind us of the difficulty of writing. Writing is the most difficult skill of the four macro-language skills (Hickey, 2010; Alsamadani, 2010; Westwood, 2008; Harmer, 1991; Hedge, 1988; Byrne, 1988; Raimes, 1982). Writing is difficult because it needs a wide range of skills. A range of things are needed simultaneously for the effective production of texts. "Competence in writing in different genres and for different purposes relies heavily on possession of adequate vocabulary, knowledge of syntactical structures, and appropriate strategies for planning, composing, reviewing and revising written language. The ability to generate ideas and organize appropriate content for writing also needs some measure of creativity and imagination....Writers also need to be able to spell the necessary words with some accuracy" (Westwood, 2008, p. 56-57).

Conclusion

This research was intended to examine Ethiopian public university entrants' writing skills in English language in the case of Hawassa University entrants. Specifically, the study was meant to examine the entrants' writing ability to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. Accordingly, the study found that the students are very poor on each of the aspects of writing as confirmed by the vast majority of the participants. This can be generalized to the English language majoring students of other universities across the nation. According to the existing placement policy, the student population does not vary from one university to another in terms of demography, English language ability, gender, age, learning styles, affective factors, and family, educational, academic, and social background.

The following recommendations have been made based on the findings of the study.

- Students should make use of every opportunity to practice writing in order to build the required writing skills before they join a university so that they would be successful in their university studies.

- Secondary schools/preparatory program English language teachers as well as concerned stakeholders should play their own role in order to help the entrants build the required writing skills before the students join universities.
- Universities should take appropriate actions, such as conduct induction forums, establish writing centers, etc. in order to improve the entrants' writing skills in English.

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