

Learning Writing with New Perspective- Variations in Students' Perceptions and Past Instructional Practices: An Activity Theory Oriented Case Study

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Abstract

The recent social turn in second language acquisition (SLA) and the call for a sociocultural theory of writing have increasingly highlighted the importance of historicity and context in writing and the need for a sociocultural approach to writing research. Thus, the main goal of the paper, which was drawn on Cultural Historical Activity Theory of writing, was to investigate the importance of past experiences, perceptions, and attitudes when intervening with a new approach to improve the writing skills of students. It is a case study conducted on fifteen second-year undergraduate EFL students enrolled in a writing course in an English Language Department at Dire Dawa University. The study gathered data using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Consequently, it yielded data from interviews, questionnaires, classroom observations, researcher's diary, and students' autobiography of learning to write. Results showed that students' past history of learning appears to have influenced their learning in the university. There was a propensity for interrelationships between participant's past history of studying and their motives, strategies of learning, goal setting and ways of mobilising both internal and external resources, and the way they viewed the cultural tools used in the course.

Keywords: Activity theory, historicity, perception, collaboration, process approach.

Introduction

Currently, there has been a considerable amount of research showing great concern about the low standards of English language learning among Ethiopian learners (Abiy, 2013; Alamirew, 2005; Haregwain, 2008; Stoddart, 1986). Some researchers indicated that Ethiopian students do not seem to be able to attain reasonable language literacy even after going through 12 years of learning English language at primary and secondary levels (Stoddart, 1986). One of the many reasons for the continued poor performance of students in English in Ethiopia is assumed to be the dominant use of traditional approaches to language teaching due to the influence of the long established behaviourist approach and the examination system. Examination-based assessments occur at all educational levels in Ethiopia, and typically such assessments emphasis grammar, vocabulary and reading (Lakachew, 2003; Surafel, 2002). Both teachers and students believe that success in examinations through English medium means that students have achieved the goals of learning English (Surafel, 2002).

On the other hand, process approach writing advocates that fluent writers develop only in social settings. Such settings encourage students to find their voice, engage in prewriting, drafting, and revising text that serves a personally meaningful purpose and to respond to and receive comments from their peers or other intended audience (Calkins, 1986; Murray, 1979). This means, as opposed to cognitive writing, in the process approach, writing is looked at as cognitive, social and dynamic one because during the process of writing students may discover an idea which is new to them and they have never thought of before. Zamel (1983), argued that writers discover and formulate ideas as they go through the process of writing. Thus, a genuine writing task should place a learner in situations that require authentic use of language to communicate. According to Vygotsky (1978), the development of literacy in all of its forms occurs when there is social and verbal interaction between and among students and

that of the teacher around authentic tasks (Englert & Palincsar, 1991). This theoretical perspective is reflected in the field of writing instruction that directly influenced the development of process-writing.

The process writing goes with the idea of Vygotsky (1978), in that the potential for cognitive development is limited to Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Vygotsky (1978), the ZPD is a region of activities that individuals can navigate with the help of more capable peers, adults, or artifacts. In Vygotsky's (1978) view, peer interaction, scaffolding, and modeling are important ways to facilitate individual cognitive growth and knowledge acquisition. ZPD can be composed of different levels of individual expertise (students and teachers), and can also include artifacts such as books, computer tools, and scientific equipment. According to Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, individuals learn through collaborative efforts with others and what they learn eventually becomes part of their independent knowledge.

Background of the study

Many scholars' studies in Ethiopia revealed that English language teachers in Ethiopian high schools often ignore the existing writing activities in the current ELT textbooks. For instance, Italo (1999, p. 9) states, "There seems to be a general tendency amongst language teachers (in Ethiopia) to relegate writing to homework or avoid it altogether." Likewise, Alamirew (2005, p ii) reports, "Writing is not effectively taught in the high schools. The teachers do not teach writing properly, that is, they do not give attention to the teaching of writing." As a result, students are failing the subject especially in the writing section which is perceived as the lowest skilled area for students (Italo, 1999) Thus, this study aims to investigate the influence of past classroom instructional practices, perceptions, and attitudes of EFL students on writing using theoretical models and ideas from Sociocultural Activity Theory (SCAT) research and collaborative process approach writing principles.

Even though there is a broad and general agreement among educators as Amiran and Mann (1982, p.3), discuss the importance of learning to write it is also disturbing to discover that "most researchers and educators agree that, with rare exceptions, students do not and cannot write well." A good example of learning to write is demonstrated by Neill (1982), who surveyed and examined 425 school districts in the United States of America (US). Neill (1982) found that 90% of the respondents rated student writing to be a problem either a serious problem (40%) or a minor problem (50%). These writing issues usually overwhelm second language (L2) writers, particularly lower proficiency L2 writers, sometimes to the point of a complete breakdown in the writing process (Bereiter & Scardimalia, 1987).

Thus, the writing of coherent, fluent, extended writing piece is most likely the most difficult thing to English as a second language and English as foreign Language contexts. Moreover, all evidences from teachers' day-to-day classroom interactions, from research findings, as well as from writing scholars indicate that EFL students do not write as well as is expected of them in the grade level they are currently studying (Hillocks, 1986; Ping, 2000). The reasons for students' inability to write well, to meet teachers' expectations, are many and varied. However, according to Smit (1991), the most obvious reason that students do not write well is that they do not receive a great deal of instruction, practice, and feedback in writing.

This paper also argues that one of the most serious hindrances for the students' poor performance of writing is the traditional teacher centered approach to the teaching of writing that focuses on the product of writing. According to this approach, the teaching of writing focuses on "one-shot correct writing for the purpose of language practice" (Cheung, 1999, p. 65) and a "one-shot effort by the teacher to evaluate the students' attempts" (Pennington & Cheung, 1995, p. 20). In that case there is little or no opportunity for the students to add any thoughts or ideas of their own and to receive a great deal of instruction, practice, and feedback in writing.

Most secondary schools in Ethiopia have a teacher-centered, examination-oriented teaching culture (Surafel, 2002; Abiy, 2005) and a product oriented approach is used in the teaching of writing (Abiy, 2005). As a result, most students do not know how to undertake free writing, nor do they possess the strategies for composing texts independently. Furthermore, most do not enjoy writing and there is a lack of confidence in writing on their own (Haregwain, 2008). Thus, the processes are totally new approaches for many of the students who enter tertiary education from high school.

The major finding from the research on teaching writing is that student achievement is higher when the teaching approach emphasizes writing as a process rather than writing as a product (Holdzkom, et al. 1982; Hillocks, 1986; Amiran & Mann, 1982). Therefore, it is necessary to improve the writing performance of students thus, teachers need to focus on the practical as well as social aspects of writing

and teach writing more often and more effectively so that students can get the practice they need (McCormick, 1989). This is principally because sociocultural theorists, such as Pea (1993, p. 47), states “the mind rarely works alone” and writing, as a learning activity, is one that lends itself to the co-construction of texts by students working together.

Thus, collaborative problem-solving, brainstorming, shared planning, multiple drafts, peer feedback, revision, have all been suggested as relevant activities within a cycle of process writing (Zamel, 1983). Consequently, many educators are encouraging and are positive towards the process approach writing and think that the students will benefit greatly from this approach (Raimes, 1983; White & Arndt, 1991). On the other hand, this theoretical change will not contribute to changes in classroom practices and student learning on a large scale without concurrent attention to students’ perceptions, interpretations of their practices, and learning cultures (Holmes, 1992).

Problem Statement

The researcher found two problems that led to this study. The first problem involved a mismatch between current writing practices in the EFL context and the desire to prepare able learners that use writing in the world of education and work. The second problem stemmed from the lack of empirical research related to the Activity Theory (AT) perspective and collaborative process approach of writing at the university level in Ethiopia. In this study, attention is paid to students’ perceptions and past practices of learning to write due to an accumulating body of evidence that suggests students’ perceptions about the nature of writing and how it is learned influence the extent to which they value and use new instructional models (Palincsar, Stevens, & Gavalek, 1989).

According to Jonassen (2000, p. 108), a key belief of AT is that “activity is a historically developed phenomenon.” In other words, it is not enough to simply describe a phenomenon alone. Thus, one must also understand its history or how that phenomenon has emerged and developed over time (Cole & Engestrom, 1993; Lantolf & Appel, 1994). This is very important as the individual brings the remainders of past experiences in to the classroom that may promote or hinder the present classroom interaction. Thus, research regarding teaching and learning in higher education by understanding students’ past experiences may provide insight into this phenomenon, and this study attempts to develop this new line of research trend that is the concept of historicity in AT.

Therefore, acknowledging the importance of historicity, the researcher referred things back and described the case study contexts. These descriptions portray the language learning and writing history of the students under study preceding the AT perspective collaborative process approach learning to write. There is strong evidence that learners’ individual differences, i.e., learner’s beliefs, affective states, personality, learning styles, and motivation are in fact substantially grounded in social values and in past experiences (Cohen & Dornyei, 2002). Therefore, students’ attitudes in the classroom can be explained by focusing on their socio-cultural-historical make-up, which is fully articulated in the socio-cultural framework of AT (Lantolf, 2000; Wertsch, 1985).

Students come to university’s writing programme with different levels of language proficiency, different learning styles, different assumptions and views about writing and the writing course. Therefore, it is extremely important to understand what the students were bringing with them and enact to the programme in order to be able to respond appropriately to such demands when structuring and executing the new programme. Thus, learners’ differing perceptions, preferences and expectations have emerged as a significant focus for this investigation. Hence, the main objective of the present study was to investigate students’ present writing practices, perceptions and attitudes of writing. Thus, this study aims to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the current writing practices of students?
2. What are students’ perceptions and attitudes towards learning to write?
3. How do the language learners view their past experiences of writing?
4. How these current writing practices and perceptions support or limit students’ learning to write?

Research methods

Subjects and their background information

This research is an ethnographic case study and the participants included in this study were 15 second year students of Dire Dawa University, who were enrolled in the Intermediate Writing course at the Department of English. The participants were all English writing course takers in the second semester of 2015 and consisted of 14 males and one female, and were in their early twenties. All spoke Amharic as it is the 'working' language of the country that is used in varying degrees. Most students came from Oromia region, which is the largest regional state in the country, and were native speakers of "Afan Oromo language" and some spoke Amharic as their first language while one student spoke "Wolayitii Language" and another "Somali language". ("Afan Oromo", "Wolayitii" and "Somali" are among the locality languages in Ethiopia). As outlined in Table 1, students had different academic past histories particularly in learning English. Prior to their university studies, they had learned English as a compulsory foreign language on average forty minutes for five days every week in each academic semester since grade one for approximately twelve years. It was also used as a medium of instruction; however, the use of English as a medium of instruction span varied as they received school education in different regions.

Table 1: *Summary of students' background information*

Participants' pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Region	National Matriculation Test result	Number of years using English as a medium	Perceived English proficiency	Town	Rural
NA	F	21	Amhara	77	4	Very good	✓	
AO	M	21	Oromia	76	4	good		✓
ZO	M	24	Oromia	63	4	basic	✓	
ARO	M	20	Oromia	57	4	good		✓
ESNN	M	22	SNNP	59	8	fair		✓
MO	M	21	Oromia	73	4	basic		✓
KO	M	22	Oromia	64	4	basic		✓
MAO	M	23	Oromia	67	6	good		✓
GO	M	21	Oromia	54	4	basic		✓
SO	M	21	Oromia	53	4	basic		✓
MS	M	20	Somali	65	6	basic	✓	
BO	M	23	Oromia	55	4	Basic		✓
FO	M	21	Oromia	56	4	fair		✓
HO	M	22	Oromia	61	4	Basic		✓
MUO	M	22	Oromia	57	4	Basic	✓	

Selecting interview subjects

Among the fifteen respondents five were chosen for interviews. Interview informants were selected on the bases of Patton's "maximum variation sampling" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p. 200), where the researcher allows for the maximum variation in subjects' region, sex, grades and perceived English proficiency. Based on a previously completed questionnaire, the researcher tabulated the background information on the survey subjects. Then, interviewees were selected to ensure they would represent all the variations within the group, as outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: *Summary of selected interview participants' background information*

Participants' pseudonyms	Gender	Age	Region	National Matriculation Test grade	Number of years using English as a medium	Perceived English proficiency	Town	Rural
NA	F	21	Amhara	77	4	Very good	✓	
AO	M	21	Oromia	76	4	good		✓
MS	M	20	Somali	65	6	basic	✓	
SO	M	21	Oromia	53	4	basic		✓
ESNN	M	22	SNNP	59	8	fair		✓

Instruments and procedures

Data reported in this paper came from a variety of sources though the principal data was qualitative. Data collection was solicited by conducting a questionnaire, interviews, observation, and students' autobiography of learning to write. To understand each students' background, their learning to write experiences, attitudes and perception towards learning to write, and how they rated the importance of English, students were asked to self-rate their language proficiency on a five-point scale and asked about the extent to which they enjoyed English in order to learn before any intervention (Copies of complete literacy autobiographies and questionnaires may be obtained from the author). This process was used so the researcher could gather detailed information from participants about their past practices and attitudes towards learning English and particularly of that of writing. However, the researcher also distributed written questionnaires and collected documents and statistical data that could be triangulated with results of the descriptive data to determine whether or not the researcher had the correct impressions.

Data analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative techniques were employed for the purpose of analysing the data. Qualitative data analysis technique, such as data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification was used to examine the data collected. This was achieved through interviews, classroom observation and autobiography of learning to write (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). A framework was created to categorise the data into themes, and through data reduction it was condensed and coded to summarise and find themes. The coding included students' perception about the importance of English particularly of writing, past experience of learning to write and attitudes towards writing. The researcher identified all emerging themes and categorized the data in a more organized manner to interpret the data to build connections and explained conclusions.

The interpretation of the qualitative data was supported by the quantitative data obtained. The main quantitative data were obtained via five scale Likert questionnaire to compare and contrast the students' perceptions and attitudes about writing. The SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 20.0) program was used to obtain descriptive statistics in the form of percentage from the quantitative data collected via the questionnaire.

Results

The Learners' English backgrounds

To describe the students' backgrounds, the data from the questionnaires revealed that: (a) all of the students (100 %) have received 12 years of EFL instruction before their university level education and 73% used it as a medium of instruction for four years; (b) before first-year writing course, the focus of the instruction was mostly on grammar and reading (80%). The remaining parts like speaking, listening and writing were less emphasised; (c) (86%) of the students consider their language proficiency as fair and few as good language learners compared to native speakers; (d) the most frequent reason for learning English by many of the students (80%) is the need for future career and few of them learn it for it is requirement to be taken as a language as part of the curriculum.

The Learners' Experiences of taking writing course

The major findings from analysis of questionnaires and interviews was that all the students began the course with little previous experience with English writing and as far as they were concerned, they were weak in English writing skills. The English language education in their early grades more focused on grammar, vocabulary and reading, not necessarily focused on English basic skills like speaking, listening and writing. The important point that can be considered from the descriptions of these students' linguistic experiences is that the students were learning writing with teacher dominated classroom experiences this means that they didn't receive the practical implementation of this skill. These were linguistic experiences that helped shape the students' current activities in the learning of English language writing skills setting. This previous exposure to English writing was based entirely on learning English as a subject in elementary grades and use of it as a medium of instruction in high schools.

Students' perception of importance of writing in English

The students' background survey, autobiography of learning to write and interview indicated that students had high perceptions about the importance of English writing skill for their academic study and their future career. This particular result asserted that these students were aware of their needs to improve their writing proficiency in English. The students indicated that they needed to improve their writing proficiency as they were specialising in English and they might be involved in teaching English in the future. The students also believed that English provides a great source of global information; that it provides access to other cultures, and that it represents a source of entertainment. The students also believed that ability to use English particularly of writing is important as it enables them to update themselves with world events.

Influence of those factors on students' present learning to write

Data from the questionnaires and students' autobiographies of learning to write served to identify the influence of different factors, such as students' learning backgrounds, language proficiency, and expectations of teachers' roles, on their perceptions and performance in the collaborative writing classroom. Students' prior learning experiences have contributed to their reluctance to participate in class discussions and group work activities as their experiences in the previous classes were teacher dominated. For them, composition is considered as a one-draft task. Consequently, they had concerns about being required to work with peers on response activities and to write by themselves a great deal of time in class. Students' misunderstanding of the purpose of such an activity reflected their fear and apprehension of the process.

In addition to the results obtained from the questionnaires, analyses of the classroom observation revealed that: (1) most students were still struggling with and worried about composing complete sentences; (2) they were often afraid to write, and were reluctant to share and talk about their writing in class; (3) consequently, most of them were not able to focus on writing in class, and could be easily distracted, which resulted in students getting off-task; (4) there was a total reliance on teacher for instruction and feedback, so when asked to brainstorm and provide feedback for each other; (5) they often focused on superficial issues of writing that are of little importance and contribute little to the students' English development, which resulted in the writers making only minor changes, such as mechanics and grammar, rather than larger revisions on issues, such as organization and content; (6) most of them could not use the time wisely when assigned to write in class; (7) there were instances of conflict, refusal to help peer, and over critical stances; (8) students lack willingness to critically examine and perform the writing process; (9) they also lack the motivation to work together with the wrong assumption that no one is better than the other; (10) lack of time to do the different stages of writing in a period; (11) lack of the content knowledge to organize an essay; (12) lack of motivation to writing (13) being resistant to revise each other's' work.

In addition, the data from classroom observation, interviews and students' questionnaire suggested that the English language proficiency of those students affected their performance in the writing classroom. Almost all the participants reported that their second language proficiency is not good enough to handle their writing tasks with ease. The challenge of implementing the writing relates not only to EFL proficiency, but also to the teacher and students' perceptions of their roles in the classroom (Ping, 2000). Students often perceive the role of the teacher in the L2 writing classroom to be that of sole arbiter of what is correct (Rothschild & Klingenberg, 1990; Oladejo, 1993; Sengupta, 1998). That is, the teachers' role is to deliver content; the learners' is to absorb it.

As this preliminary analysis suggests, a major challenge in EFL teaching is providing students with a 'real' reason for learning English; that is, with a reason beyond the requirements of passing examinations in compulsory subjects in their University course. The analysis also provides a summary of issues that needed to be taken into account when developing the new teaching programme i.e. AT perspective collaborative process approach writing.

In connection to the students' collaborative behavior and group interaction, it could be said that students' preferences to work collaboratively is less. Results from classroom observation suggest that interactions among students or between teacher and students were very limited. In the total of ten lessons observed there were few lessons meant for collaborative learning or learning through interaction. Most of the classes were dominated by teacher talk time (Classroom observation, the field notes,). Even, when there were class discussions students' participation was limited.

Therefore, this analysis of the experiences of the students in this course provides evidence to conclude that the students' learning in this course is a change process which is affected by a number of interacting individual and contextual factors. The above findings suggest that student learning in the undergraduate course is a historically evolving dynamic process which is mediated by a number of individual, social, historical and cultural factors. In general, students' past history of studying has an impact on their learning at the university level. There tended to be interrelationships between their past history of studying and their motives, strategies of learning, goal setting and ways of mobilising both internal and external resources, and the way they viewed the cultural tools used in the course.

Discussion

In the light of the aforementioned results in this paper, it can be argued that attitude and perception play significant roles in enabling learners to learn effectively. As it was stated, learners' motivation, cultural background and previous experiences are all contributive to the way learners behave toward and perceive learning strategies and their ability in maintaining higher levels of learning. It also became evident that students' beliefs and attitudes towards language learning may vary based on cultural background and previous experiences. Thus, it can be argued that positive or negative attitudes do not develop accidentally but have some reasons for their emergence. Teachers could consider the different beliefs of language learners and work accordingly also avoid homogenising students that are coming from different sociocultural contexts and history (Seyyed & Delaram, 2013).

Students' comments on teacher dominated classrooms suggest that teachers did not view themselves as a mediator of the students' understanding through their own ways of knowing and talking about writing. Instead, they may have seen themselves as the conduit of information that originated outside of them which again remains at odds with the Cultural Historical Activity Theory perspective that learning occurs during social interaction and the role of the teacher could be that of engaging in the kinds of scaffolding, and mediating role and less of a direct instructor role than is typical as recommended by Cultural Historical Activity Theory.

One thing noted here is that rote learning (product approach) which is commonly practised in Ethiopia today may not help students learn. Of course, it is possible for students to learn such principles at a low level, to be repeated back to the teacher when asked for in a familiar form. But in order to actually use principled knowledge in practical situations (such as new writing tasks), the student must have learned about how the principle is useful in similar situations (Salomon & Perkins, 1989). This will most easily occur when the teacher or other mediator, such as peers help make the connections clear between principles and situations (Salomon & Perkins, 1989).

The students' views about the nature of writing affected what they were likely to write and comment on as an important feature of their writing. Students who saw mechanics or other elements of form as the most important target of writing instruction (as done by the participants of this study) were more likely to see a piece of writing as grammar practice than an occasion to reinforce ideas that the text was written for an audience or that writing involved cognitive and social questions by the writer (Palincsar et al.1989).

Conclusion and implications

The findings of this study confirm in many ways that students have positive attitude towards the English Language and the writing course even though their perception of their own writing ability was very low, and teaching approaches and their expectations were mismatched. In such a setting, where teaching approaches and students' expectations are mismatched, both teaching and learning could be difficult and frustrating. However, it is possible to make the teaching and learning effective by constantly encouraging and reinforcing interaction and by consistently requiring students to engage in the process of writing and revising. It is also important to make the learning more relevant to students' interests and balance the program to meet students' needs, by integrating some direct instruction and grammar lessons (relate with their past experience) which the students seemed most comfortable with and interested in, into the teaching activities especially towards the beginning.

A primary goal has been to have students be as independent as possible. Yet, it was equally important that they learn to work together (i.e. the interpersonal/social aspect). To succeed in particularly any arena in life, both the ability to know to work toward one's own goals and the ability to work with others are essential. The use of AT perspective process approach to writing and peer review seems the most appropriate way, within this context, to better prepare students for these long-term goals, while at the same time, developing their language skills and abilities.

There are a number of implications that can be drawn from the past socio-historical experiences of students to the implementation of the new Programme (AT perspective collaborative process approach writing). The major implications are (1) the importance of acknowledging students past experiences, beliefs and attitudes that is students come into the classroom with some prior knowledge and experiences to be valued, so that learning becomes a kind of relationship between what the students bring to the classroom and what the teacher presents (Vygotsky, 1978); (2) the central role that interaction among themselves and with the teacher plays in learning; (3) the need to teach students appropriate collaborative and communication skills; (4) the value of understanding writing as a form of meaning making and tool of communication and self-discovery rather than grammar practice; (5) the significance of pre training and preparation of students to the process approach writing strategies to be incorporated in to EFL writing instruction so that they can participate actively and effectively in the process of writing ; (6) the significance of using different mediational tools particularly computers, peers and teachers; (7) the importance of leading students to use self-assessment strategies and to take responsibility for their own learning; and (8) the necessity that students have greater access to computers.

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