Abstract

It is a fact that many non-native international students, who want to pursue their education in US universities, are required to take a composition course in their first year. Moreover, some universities encourage these students to register for the non-native (ESL) sections of English 101 (Composition). Teachers in these classes are challenged to prepare students for academic writing because the students have different social, cultural, and academic backgrounds. Researchers and coursebook writers have advocated many methods for teaching writing and reading to this group of students. The current study explored some of the challenges that first-year international students face in developing their writing and reading practices in composition classes. The researcher interviewed three international students who were enrolled in an ESL composition course at a public university in Minnesota, US. The results suggest that ESL students’ performance in composition classes for non-native speakers is heavily affected by the students’ background knowledge, use of English, and familiarity with new writing genres. Possible solutions for these problems are presented.

Introduction

It is a fact that many non-native international students who want to pursue their education in US universities are required to take a composition course in their first year. Moreover, some universities encourage these students to register for the non-native (ESL) sections of English 101 (Composition). Teachers in these classes are challenged to prepare students for academic writing because the students have different social, cultural, and academic backgrounds. Researchers and coursebook writers have advocated many methods for teaching writing and reading to this group of students. The current study explores some of the challenges that first-year international students face in developing their writing and reading practices in composition classes.
Statement of the problem

Common sense indicates that in any teaching context, if a teacher knows his or her students’ problems and takes steps to solve those problems, the efficacy of his or her instruction will be higher. In fact, those who teach non-native composition classes need to know what problems this group of students has in order to help more. However, there is a paucity of research about the challenges that first-year international students face in developing their writing and reading practices in composition classes. Therefore, this study explores some of the challenges that first-year international students face in developing their writing and reading practices in composition classes as well as the factors behind these challenges. Thus, the study questions are:

1) What are some of the challenges that first-year international students face in developing their writing and reading practices in composition classes?

2) What are the main reasons of the non-native students’ challenges with reading and writing practices in Composition classes?

Methodology

This study attempts to gain an understanding about the problems of non-native first year international students regarding writing and reading practices in Composition 101 classes. In order to find out the problems and factors behind those problems semi-controlled interviews were conducted with non-native international students in a Composition 101 class.

Sampling

To conduct the interviews the researcher contacted non-native international students who enrolled in a non-native composition course in a state university in
Minnesota, US. To select the non-native students, a purposive sampling approach was employed (based on Cohen et al., 2000). This approach selects participants on the basis of the researcher’s determination of the individuals’ “typicality” (Nunan, 1992, p.142). Participation was completely voluntary. The researcher visited the class and asked for volunteers to participate in an interview (Appendix A). Volunteers were given a consent form to sign which indicated their willingness take a part in the study.

**Procedures**

Initially the researcher’s intention was to record the interviews in order to listen again and transcribe the data, but when this intention was shared with the participants, all of them mentioned that they would be nervous if the interview was recorded. Therefore, the researcher changed the plan plan and instead of recording the researchers took notes for each of the interviewee’s answers. All the interviews were conducted in a quiet environment where the interviewee and the researcher were alone. The interview included 14 questions (see Appendix B) in total, and I wrote participants’ answers under each question. All the interviewees were given enough wait time till they got ready to give answers to the questions. All the answers were analyzed and some common patterns were created.

**Results**

The results of this study are categorized into four main parts: respondents, the effect of background knowledge, language use, and common problems. Each category provides specific data that gives insight into possible answers of the survey question.
Respondents

The researchers got four volunteers in total but one of them did not come to the interview, so only three participants were interviewed in different times individually. In this study these participants will be mentioned as ‘Participant A, B, or C’ to ensure confidentiality of their information. Table 1.1 summarizes the interview respondents by country and some key characteristics.

Table 1.1 Interview respondents by country and key sampling characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>First Language</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Duration in US</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>Nepali</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>2 Months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>2 Months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Ivory Coast</td>
<td>French</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>8 Months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As displayed in Table 1.1, each of the respondents was from different countries: China, Nepal, and Ivory Coast. They spoke different languages: Chinese, Nepali, and French. Their ages were between 19 and 21. Two of them had been in US for two months and one of them for 8 months, but it was the first semester of studying in US for all them. Two of them were at their first year in college but one of them was a senior exchange student.

The Effect of Background Knowledge

The results indicated that the educational background of the respondents were slightly different in terms of the years of formal English education and the settings for
this education. Table 1.2 summarizes respondents’ educational backgrounds in terms of years, setting, and courses.

Table 1.2 Educational backgrounds of participants in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Educational Setting</th>
<th>Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant A</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Elementary School, Middle School, and High School</td>
<td>Reading, Writing, and Other subjects (CBT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant B</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Middle School, High School, and University</td>
<td>Reading and Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant C</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Middle School and High School</td>
<td>Reading and Writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the Table 1.2 demonstrated, although the exposure time is different for each of the respondents, all of them had formal education in English. It appears that they took courses both in writing and reading skills in their countries. However, all the participants mentioned that they saw big differences in terms of teaching techniques and instructors’ expectations in US when they compare them to their previous experiences. Participant A said “all I learned in my reading courses was to read a text in class and answer questions about it, but sometimes we were writing summary too”, and Participant B said “writing was boring, the instructor was giving lectures and we were taking notes. Then, we were given a topic and followed certain patterns to write about it.” The situation was similar for the other participants too. All the participants stated that using certain patterns or an outline restricted them to generate ideas. On the other hand, since in their composition class in US they are not given certain patterns or an outline it is hard for them to start the paper and use their creativity. Without exception all of them stated that the concept of
different written genres such as an analysis, a critique or a research paper is new to them since they used to write only one page essays based on a topic, and usually in memoir or summary genres.

In terms of reading, all of them emphasized that they used to have simple and short reading assignments but the situation in US is different since the texts are longer and include many unknown words. However, participant A stated that he has no problem with reading since he used to read a lot of English novels and took a private course to prepare for high-stakes standardized tests such as: Test of English as Foreign Language (TOEFL) and American College Testing (ACT).

Furthermore, all the participants mentioned that they had never written more than one draft and never got revising feedback from their teachers in their previous courses. They said they had only one draft, and usually it was written in the class and had been graded by the teacher without his or her revision. Participant B put it in this way “Back home I used to write the assignment at once but here it is a long process. But I still try to write my assignment at once which makes the task slow and difficult for me because I want to make it perfect.” Moreover, they emphasized that they did not have any assignment sheet which explains the details of the assignment to them.

Language Use

All the participants stated that they use their first language more than English in America as they live with friends or siblings who speak the same language. They emphasized that their English usage is restricted to classes or simple daily conversations with librarians on campus and clerks while shopping. Participant C said that “I think one of the reasons of my reading and writing problems is the lack of English oral practice”.
Kucer (2005) indicates this fact when she says “…written language builds on and extends spoken language” (p. 66). In addition, all of them acknowledged that they do not involve in any reading and writing tasks out of classes except reading magazines and newspapers.

**Common Problems**

With regard to participants’ common problems with reading, participants B and C mentioned that the most difficult thing for them so far had been the vocabulary knowledge. However, in writing, understanding the genres which they are not familiar had been the hardest thing for the entire participants. Participants B and C stated that since they do not know a lot of words, they look them up at dictionary and that makes their reading slow and boring.

In terms of writing, the common problems mentioned by the participants were (a) understanding the concept of genres and the instructor’s expectations for each genre (the assignment sheets), (b) generating ideas, (c) using academic language, especially word choice, and (d) using various structures.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

The study explored that non-native students who come to American universities have certain problems in their writing and reading practices in their composition course. Participants’ responses in the interviews once more indicated that background knowledge and past experiences of reading and writing have tremendous effect on learners’ current practices. Additionally, the results displayed that understanding new concepts in writing and reading takes time and within this duration non-native international students need great help from their instructors. Therefore, those who teach this group of students should be aware of what their students bring to the class with them. To find out this, a possible
technique may be doing survey at the beginning of the semester to learn about students’ background knowledge and diagnose the factors that may influence their learning.

Furthermore, the findings indicated that the common problems of non-native first year international students regarding reading and writing practices in composition courses are (a) difficult and long texts, (b) new genres of writing, and (c) comprehending academic registers of English. Hence, these constraints of students should be taken into consideration in the planning of non-native composition classes.

First, instructors should be aware of the students’ reading problems and choose the coursebook accordingly. The language of the coursebook should not be very hard and the chapters should not be very long; the coursebooks which put the information and present it in small pieces may be preferred. The amount of reading assignments should be reasonable starting from less going up gradually so that students can adjust to the new process. Instructors might also consider teaching different reading strategies in English which most of this group of learners are not familiar with. It is important to teach reading strategies because “…strategies allow the reader to build a deep structure from the surface structure of written discourse” (Kucer, 2005, p. 131).

In addition, although the course is writing-oriented the instructors may have students to read authentic short articles from the Internet from certain reliable sources and discuss it through synchronous or asynchronous chat in order to let them have reading practice opportunities. A study done with 15 EFL college learners in Taiwan on the effectiveness of Web texts in improving vocabulary, reading and writing skills shows that use of World Wide Web as a news information source can increase learner’s reading and writing performances. The study also indicates that students had positive perspective
about reading texts from the WEB and write response for them, because they thought it promote reading and writing (Liou, 1997). Zamel (1992) makes the importance of reading more clear when she states that “giving students the opportunity to write about what they find interesting/significant/moving/puzzling may help them realize that their understanding of complex texts evolves as they (re)read and that written reflection makes this understanding possible” (p.474).

Second, to handle the issue of comprehending new writing genres, instructors first should introduce the concept of genres in English to students and tell them why they need different types of writing in academia because “the fact that individual and cultural experiences help shape schemata means that the genre knowledge of our L2 students may be very different from our own…” (Hyland, 2004, p. 56). If the learners do not know ‘what’ and ‘how’ to write the genre that has been introduced to them, it may be risky for them since they may write something that does match the characteristics of that specific genre. Hyland (2004) mentions that “…without adequate genre knowledge, we may find it very tricky to write an unfamiliar genre…” (p. 55). To prevent this, then, instructors should start introducing the assignments starting with the one that most of them are already familiar with such as memoirs or summary. Hyland (2004) emphasizes this point when he writes “more familiar or easier topics can be presented first to engage and motivate students; to recycle vocabulary from earlier courses; or perhaps to work with known genres in new registers…” (p. 109). Additionally, for each assignment an assignment sheet should be given to students in which clear description of that specific genre, the expectations, due dates, and sources that they can get help are presented.
Finally, instructors should present a good example of the genre that they ask students to write, to let them to understand the concept.

Third, instructors should be aware of the lack of knowledge of academic registers of English writing that these type learners have, so they should give enough time to students to comprehend the rules. To do that instructors should teach the academic English rules explicitly and let them practice these rules in pair- and group-work activities through writing very short samples. The instructors should provide opportunities for collaborative learning in these classes since doing new things may put pressure on students. Hirvela (1999) points out this fact when he says “Students often learn more effectively when asked to perform various tasks in pairs, small groups, and teams than when working alone” (p. 7). Moreover, instructors can also choose either a coursebook which has chapters designed for non-native speakers or a sourcebook/writing manual where students can get information about using academic rules such as coherence, structure, word choice, citations and so on. Currently many publishing companies provide these type of sourcebooks and they can be found easily.

**Summary**

The results suggest that ESL students’ performance in composition classes for non-native speakers is heavily affected by the students’ background knowledge, use of English, and familiarity with new writing genres. Most of these problems occur because students had different experiences in their previous reading and writing courses in their countries. Therefore, the instructors should take these characteristics of this group of learners into account and plan their instruction relatively.
Limitations of the Study

This study has some possible limitations. First, the data collection tool, interview, and the time might have limited the responses of the participants. Second, the number of subjects was limited to only the international students in one class and in one university. Thus, the results might fail to represent the overall picture of the current problems of non-native international students have with reading and writing in composition courses. However, although it is a small scale research, instructors of composition classes might find the findings of the study beneficial and important to consider.

Further Research

The findings of this study shed light onto some issues that need to be further researched in non-native composition courses:

1. Non-native composition instructors’ education and their familiarity with common problems of non-native international students with reading and writing
2. What genres are the genres familiar to non-native international students?
3. What can be done to make easier transition between non-native students’ previous experiences and current practices they face with?
References


APPENDIX A

The statement that was told verbally by the researcher to students when they were asked to participate in the study

“Your participation is completely voluntary and anonymous. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study cannot be identified with you. Your identity will be known only by the researcher and will not be shared with somebody else. Except sharing your experiences as a student there are no risks and no costs associated with the interview”
APPENDIX B

Sample Interview Questions
(This was a face-to-face interview)

1. Where do you come from?
2. What is your first language?
3. How old are you?
4. How long have you been to America?
5. How often do you speak English/First language?
6. Have you had any formal education in English before you came to US? How many years? Which setting?
7. What kind of reading and writing activities do you involve out of classes? (Do you read anything for pleasure? Do you keep any journals/diaries in English?)
8. Have you been taught reading or writing/ have you ever taken reading/writing courses in English before you came to US? How many courses did you take?
9. Do you see any difference between what you learned (in terms of reading/writing skills) in your country and here?
10. What has been the most difficult thing for you in terms of reading and writing so far?
11. If you have any problems with reading (assignments) here, what kind of problems do you have?
12. If you have any problems with writing (assignments) here, what kind of problems do you have?
13. What do you think can be the reason for the problems you have in reading and writing?
14. How do you think your instructors can help you to solve these problems? What are your expectations from them?