A Case Study of Communicative Language Learning in Teaching Writing in a Rural School Environment

Mohammed Z. M. Qaddoura *1, Rajeh Bati Almasradi2

1,2 Universiti Teknologi Malaysia

* Corresponding author: m90.qaddoura@gmail.com

Abstract

The case study was done at a rural school in Simpang Renggam, Johor. The study aims to identify the effects of using communicative language learning (CLL) on students’ writing skills. CLL is one of the methods commonly used by teachers to teach English at school. This is due to its non-threatening way between the teacher as a counselor and the students as clients. The researchers interviewed the teacher and from the interview, CLL is commonly used. Thus, the researchers also analyzed five essays from each student and identify if they manage to write throughout the whole year of learning using CLL. The results are discussed in the latter section of the paper.

Keywords: Communicative Language Learning; English Writing; Rural Schools

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the four skills in teaching and learning a second language. According to Chitravelu, Sithamparan, and Teh (2005), it is a system for interactive communication using evident signs or graphic symbols on a flat surface such as paper, cloth or even stone slabs. It is also known that written language is simply the graphic representation of spoken language, and that written presentation is much like oral, but the only difference is the graphic signals (Brown, 2001). In teaching of writing, the focus can be on the product or the process itself (Harmer, 2002). There are also many purposes of writing that can be used in daily lives which are as follow (Chitravelu, Sithamparan & Teh, 2005):

1. To get things completed
2. To notify
3. To convince
4. To keep a relationship
5. To document occurrences, events, etc.
6. To record feelings, experiences, observations, etc.

There are many methods that can be utilized in classroom to teach writing. One of them is the Community Language Learning. This method is a classic example that applies the humanistic approach but is still in use today (Brown, 2001; Larsen-Freeman, & Anderson, 2011). Through this method, in order for any learning to take place, students first needed to interact in a social relationship in which students and teachers joined together to assist learning in the context of valuing each individual in the group (Brown, 2001). Students lowered their anxiety while learning the second language through a supportive community in which the teacher’s presence is not perceived as a threat, but a true counselor who centers his/her attention on the clients (students) and their needs (Brown, 2001).

Communicative Language Learning (CLL) is an affectively based method in acquiring a second language (Brown, 2001). This means that students learn the language in a non-threatening manner where the teacher is the counselor and the students are the clients (Brown, 2001). Brown (2001) also stated that since teacher is the counselor, he/she can increase students’ motivation to learn the language and helps them to move forward from needing help to becoming independent. Curran (1972, as cited in Brown, 2001) listed the principles of CLL and some of them are:

1. In learning the L2, the L1 can be used as a “bridge”, and the teacher can translate in chunks to help students.
2. Students have to be made aware of the activities planned as they feel more secure this way.
3. Interaction among students is encouraged so it is not wrong for the teacher to stand at the back of the room. With this, the threat is reduced, and the students’ learning is facilitated.
4. Students are invited to share their feelings.
5. Sharing about their experience allows learners to know one another and to build community.
6. Learning at the beginning is facilitated if students attend to one task at a time.
7. The teacher encourages student initiative and independence.
8. Students should be granted quiet reflection time in order to learn.
9. Students learn to listen; to discriminate against the similarities and differences among the language forms.
10. Learning tends not to take place when the material is too new or, conversely, too familiar. It is best to learn something new but related to their prior knowledge.
11. In the beginning stages, the ‘syllabus’ is generated mainly by the students.
From the principles listed, it can be seen that CLL is a very “friendly” method and students should be given the courage to initiate and make learning more motivating (Brown, 2001). Thus, learning English using CLL could probably be one of the best ways for teachers.

**Writing Skill**

Teaching writing in Malaysia is the main focus. The teacher needs to know various stages in the development of writing skill, which is the main issues that concern teachers of writing to make informed choices (Chitravelu, Sithamparan & Teh, 2005). To illustrate, writing develops from words to phrases, sentences, paragraphs, and essays. The ultimate goal of writing in Malaysia is to write a composition. The students’ proficiency in writing is also determined by this. As such, many students were demotivated about writing in thinking that writing is a difficult skill to be mastered.

In essay writing, there are five types of writing in general. These are narration, description, exposition, persuasion, and argumentation. Primary school essay writing focuses on narration. According to Geyser (2007), the main purpose of writing is to attempt to describe a personal experience or happening in the form of a story. The process writing approach is adopted as the students are introduced to the process of writing essays such as planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. According to Harmer (2011), we need to encourage the students to plan, draft and edit to help them to become better writers both in exams and in their post-class English lives. By the end of Year 6, students are required to be able to write a variety of texts using suitable language, style, and form with appropriate spelling, punctuation, and grammar (Ministry of Education, 2015). It is hoped that the students would acquire basic writing skills and build writing habits.

The challenges faced in the teaching of writing can be seen from two perspectives which are the students’ problems and teachers’ problems. The students find writing difficult because they do not have sufficient vocabulary to express their ideas (Asep, Titin, Ade, Dian & Supriani, 2014). The students might be creative to think in their mother tongue but they could not put the idea in the target language. Besides, the students also face grammar problems that add on to their initial problem (Asep, Titin, Ade, Dian & Supriani, 2014). As such, they are lacking in the motivation in writing. This is further supported by Banda (2009) that students’ lack of proficiency in English is a source of irritation and frustration for them. Students’ motivation in writing is a great issue as it would also influence their attitude in learning writing. To illustrate, students keep making the same mistakes because they do not pay attention to the convention in writing although they use it a few times. Therefore, writing is a great challenge for students.

From the teachers’ perspective, there are some issues in teaching writing. Asep, Titin, Ade, Dian, and Supriani (2014) found that it is hard to motivate the students in writing. This issue becomes more demanding in the classroom due to the level of differences of the students. For example, the students with good English proficiency would find that writing in simple sentences is boring but students with average English proficiency find writing is difficult at all levels. Research done by Oxford University Press ELT (2015) indicated that teachers have difficulty to find enough class time for writing. There are six periods that are equivalent to 180 minutes per week in teaching English. As a result, teachers have to cover all the English skills with enough class time for writing.

In rural schools, the teaching of writing is challenging. For one, there is little use in the immediate present, which is the school period. As a result, teachers have to cover all the English skills with six periods. According to Oxford University Press ELT (2015) indicated that students have difficulty to find enough class time for writing. There are six periods that are equivalent to 180 minutes per week in teaching English. As a result, teachers have to cover all the English skills with enough class time for writing.

**Research Methodology**

The participants for this case study were 3 primary school students and 1 primary school teacher. The 3 students were in their sixth year of formal education in a rural primary Tamil school located in Simpang Renggam, Johor. Meanwhile, the teacher selected is a University Malaya graduate with a Bachelor in Education major in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). She had 5 years of experience teaching English Language in primary school. The participants were from a Tamil primary school in Simpang Renggam which contained 25 students and 11 teachers as a whole.

The first data collection method for this case study research was a semi-structured interview. The researchers interviewed one English teacher from a primary Tamil school. Five questions were prepared in relation to the first research question which was “How do teachers approach students when teaching writing using Community Language Learning?” The questions were:

1. How do you teach English essay writing in class?
2. What types of activities do you use to teach writing in class?
3. How frequently do you use mother tongue in class? Why?
4. Do you face any difficulty in using CLL in the English writing class?
5. How do pupils respond in class?

The researchers recorded the interview and transcribed them to make it easier to analyze the answers. During the semi-structured interview, the questions asked were prompted with some explanations to help the teacher to answer the questions. Also, the researchers had asked additional questions to gain in-depth information about the research issue. Therefore, the interview helped to gain more understanding of the exact method and the ways that the teacher conducted writing lesson in the classroom which brings to the result of the students’ writing skills.

The second data collection method that was used in the case study was document analysis. In this method, the researchers had taken 5 guided essays from students’ exercise books as writing samples. Guided essay writing is one of the components found in Paper 2 of the latest UPSR English Language examination format. Students were provided with pictures and words as guidance and they were required to write an essay between 80-100 words. Their writing samples were analyzed based on UPSR Paper 2 marking scheme which was the guideline in marking essay. The descriptors of the marking scheme is shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Mark Distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>80-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>60-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
<td>0-49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1. Descriptors of Marking Scheme for UPSR Paper 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Mark Distribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>80-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
<td>60-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>50-59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
<td>0-49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the literature, the research questions are:

1. How does a teacher approach students when teaching writing using Community Language Learning?
2. Does using CLL in a formal classroom environment improve students’ writing skills?
The writing samples collected were marked by 2 of the researchers exactly based on the rubric above and later the average marks were taken. Then, based on the marks, the researchers categorized them into respective bands in the form of a table and graph to analyze the marks. Based on the marks and bands, the researchers also extracted a few evidence from the writing samples to support the marks and band they were given.

Findings

Interview Analysis

Through the interview session, the researchers acquired these findings. For the first question, “How do you teach English essay writing in class?”, the interviewee responded that she usually began with guided writing before leading them towards independent writing. This was in line with the CLL principle in which the teacher would provide guidance until the students are confident (Harmer, 2002). She also gave out model essays whereby students were required to discuss the sentences used. From the response, it can be concluded that she guided her students first before letting them explore on their own. She also let them discover the knowledge on their own through examples.

For the second question on the types of activities she used to teach writing in class, the respondent said that she used gap-fill, sentence chain, timelines, dictation, sequencing, graphic organizers, and writing with prompts. She practiced many useful approaches to teach writing in the second language. Also based on her previous response, this was done through guided practices first.

Next, the researchers asked how frequent she uses mother tongue in class and the reason. She responded that she used minimal mother tongue unless the words are abstract and cannot be explained through pictures or actions. This was to avoid the students being too ignorant of the usage of the target language. She believed that only with constant practice can they master the language. This showed that she would explain vocabulary mostly in English unless the words are abstract and cannot be explained through pictures or actions.

However, for teaching writing, she mentioned that using CLL was helpful. The teacher said that since it focuses on grammatical and communicative aspects, it is really convenient teaching using this method. This means that using the mother tongue might help students understand the need for the question and the situations are given can be really helpful to pupils to learn together. This was parallel with one of the CLL principles in which the native language is the bridge to develop the students from familiar to the unfamiliar (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). So, using CLL to teach writing helps students to reduce anxiety while learning and encourage students to develop ideas better before writing. To illustrate, students might find it difficult to develop ideas in the target language directly, so they expressed their ideas in mother tongue before generating more ideas in English. Then, the teacher would translate it into the target language. Through this technique, the students could develop their writing skills by learning the vocabulary and sentence structures to express their ideas in writing. This could achieve the objective of learning writing to describe personal experience as aforementioned.

Students were excited to learn writing through CLL even when some of them did not use grammatically correct sentences. Yet, the main aim is to expose the students to writing in a fun and meaningful manner.

Document Analysis

The students’ levels in writing skills through Community Language Learning are shown from the result obtained from the students’ writing samples. The results are divided into two categories which are based on the band and also based on their average marks. The overall result of students’ level in writing skills based on their band and marks can be seen in Graph 1 and Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sample 1</th>
<th>Sample 2</th>
<th>Sample 3</th>
<th>Sample 4</th>
<th>Sample 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student 1</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Weak Band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 2</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Good Band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 3</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Weak Band</td>
<td>Excellent Band</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student 4</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Satisfactory Band</td>
<td>Excellent Band</td>
<td>Good Band</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Graph 1. Results of Writing Sample (Marks)

| Super Excellent Band: 23-25 marks |
| Excellent Band: 18-22 marks |
| Good Band: 12-17 marks |
| Satisfactory Band: 5-11 marks |
| Weak Band: 0-4 marks |

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the students had scored Satisfactory Band where their marks are from the range of 11-5 marks. Student 1 had scored Satisfactory Band for 4 writing samples and 1 Weak Band, Student 2 had scored Satisfactory Band in all 5 writing samples given and Student 3 had scored 2 Satisfactory Band, 1 Weak Band, 1 Excellent Band, and 2 Good Band respectively. From the graph, all students had an average of 5 to 11 marks in their writing samples.

Based on the finding, it can be concluded that the students’ level of writing skills through Community Language Learning is at an average level where the students had scored Satisfactory Band in most of the writing samples. From the findings, it was found that the students had written their sentences in paragraphs either in 1 paragraph or 3 paragraphs. Besides that, the students had made many errors, especially in grammar and sentence structures. The students had used mostly simple sentence structures in their essay writing which can only enable them to be in Satisfactory Band and below. The evidence is as follow:

They were planted the wild plant in the pot. They watered the plant every day. They took care of it. They were hardworking to rare the plant.

From this evidence, it can be seen that the students encountered difficulties in explaining their ideas in complex or compound sentence types. The suggested answer based on the student’s sample is “They had planted the wild plant in the pot and they took care of it by watering it every day.” They had constructed simple sentences and this had brought their level down to a lower band. Using a variety of sentences such as compound and complex sentence structures is one of the main requirements in achieving higher band in essay writing.

Next, the students made many grammatical errors in their writing samples. Another error found is the incorrect usage of Subject-Verb Agreement which is shown in the evidence below.

From the evidence above, it can be seen that the students encountered difficulties in explaining their ideas in complex or compound sentence types. The suggested answer based on the student’s sample is “They had planted the wild plant in the pot and they took care of it by watering it every day.” They had constructed simple sentences and this had brought their level down to a lower band. Using a variety of sentences such as compound and complex sentence structures is one of the main requirements in achieving higher band in essay writing.

Next, the students made many grammatical errors in their writing samples. Another error found is the incorrect usage of Subject-Verb Agreement which is shown in the evidence below.
The students could not use a correct verb in the sentences which were supposed to be “Toronto knows cycle.” This shows that the students were lacking in the very basic grammar knowledge in constructing sentences.

Furthermore, the vocabulary used in the students were barely sufficient and accurate. From the finding, the student did not demonstrate sufficient vocabulary to support their ideas and make their writing interesting. Such lacking of vocabulary knowledge had made their writing failed to convey the idea and message they intended to convey. Besides that, they also used incorrect words in their sentences. This can be shown in the evidence below:

| SJK(T) Ladang Southern Malay | held a Children’s day |

From the evidence, we can see clearly that the students had used an incorrect word and the more accurate sentences will be “SJK(T) Ladang Southern Malay organized Children’s Day.”

Other than that, there were also frequent spelling and punctuation errors in the students’ writing samples. The students failed to spell various words frequently throughout their writing which can be seen from the evidence below:

| He felt relieved because he did a good deed on the day |

From the evidence, we can see that the student had spelled the word “relieved” wrongly. Frequent errors like this had made the pupils to be only in Satisfactory Band in most of their writing samples.

Regardless of these, the students also had made some positive points given by the students such as the usage of idioms, ideas well organized in the paragraph and managed to use all suggested words given. Student 3, for example, had given good writing and managed to score Excellent Band in Sample 4. This is because the students had managed to use few complex sentences and organized the ideas in a creative way. The student also had used creative words and idioms to make the writing to be more interesting. This can be shown in the evidence below:

| Enick Ravi chased the thief as fast as a cheetah |

This is a positive result of CLL as the teacher guided the students to use the creative idea. As such, the more proficient student who had background knowledge in English would be able to grasp easily what had been taught and applied it in their writing.

In conclusion, we can say that Community Language Learning is not effective for all the students and skills in the English Language. As we can see, there are many components that the teacher need to deal with during teaching writing skill thus, Community Language Learning does not cater to all the requirement needed in writing skill. However, some students managed to acquire the skill with the CLL method.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to overcome the students’ errors in their writing, it is recommended that the teacher can provide feedback to the students. This is significant to create awareness about their students’ errors as the students would never realize it without the teacher’s help. In this respect, the teacher plays the role of a feedback provider. When offering correction, according to Harmer (2002), teacher should choose what and how much to focus on based on what the students need and the requirements of the task. In essay writing, the students need to use grammatically correct sentences to gain higher score based on the marking descriptor. Thus, the teacher could point out the students’ error in Subject-Verb Agreement “know” should be “knows” in the sentence “Toronto know cycle.” Through this step, the students would notice this error in their writing and be careful about such mistakes in the future.

The students’ writing to use a variety of sentence structures could be enhanced through reinforcement writing. According to Harmer (2009), students can write sentences using recently learned grammar as writing could be an effective means of reinforcing the language learned. To illustrate, the students can edit their simple sentences based on the conjunctions taught by the teacher. The activity would be meaningful to provide scaffolding to the students to use compound sentence structure. This is especially so as the sentences were their own and closely related to them. After this exposure, the students would gradually master the method to construct different types of sentences to apply it in their writing. As a result, students could improve their writing skills.

Apart from CLL, it would be recommended to apply another method such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in teaching writing. This is because eclectic method would provide a productive experience for the students in their learning process. For instance, students can cooperate to work in groups to create creative ideas in writing. Another method that can be experimented in language learning is Tarsia learning approach. Very recently Hao and Kosnin (2019) found that incorporating Tarsia method of playfulness and collaborative learning was positively accepted by the students. With reference to Kezoui (2015), students working in groups could continually construct their own new knowledge, activate their background knowledge and exchanging information. In essay writing, the students who have different background experiences and knowledge could use them to share their ideas and contribute to the writing. Then, they could work together to construct a productive essay. Along the process, the teacher serves as a facilitator to monitor and ensure the students are on the right track. In short, CLT could be employed in teaching writing to enhance the classroom experience for students.

In conclusion, CLL is the teaching method applied by the teacher in the teaching of writing. Various guided practices such as sentence chain, dictation, and sequencing were used to provide scaffolding for the students. Although students made grammatical errors in writing, various techniques could be utilized to overcome the challenges. Also, other methods could be applied such as CLT to provide rich classroom experience for the students to enhance their experience in learning writing.

References: