

Employing Drilling Technique in Teaching English Writing Skills to a Group of Rural Malaysian Students

Suyansah Swanto (Corresponding author)

School of Education and social Development, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400

Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

E-mail: shahswanto@hotmail.com

Wardatul Akmam Din

Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning, Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 88400

Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia

E-mail: wardadin@ums.edu.my

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Abstract

In this research, the researcher has focused on the use of drilling technique or repetition drill (Freeman, 2000: 48) in a mixed gender rural Malaysian classrooms for both control and treatment group. Besides that, it was used among limited proficiency students and their level are very poor whereby they cannot write even in using the simplest of English. It is a technique that allows and helped the students in writing because they are exposed to lessons that are drill-and-practice based on hierarchical skill sequence with few extended writing opportunities. This study also examines the students' level of confidence after using the drilling technique. It is hoped that incorporating this technique in the classroom can help to improve students' writing especially for the descriptive writing part, which make the time and effort in carrying out this study and using this technique worthwhile.

Keywords: second language writing, drilling, limited proficiency

1. Introduction

Many students of English consider writing the most difficult language skills to master. Teachers too, face difficulties in developing their students' capability in writing. Teacher normally set aside a class of two or three periods for writing task because it took some time to produce essays. Normally a topic is written on the whiteboard, and the teacher spends a few minutes telling the students he or she wants them to write concerning the topic. The teacher then instructs the students to start writing and to hand in the finished product at the end of the lesson or the following day. The composition is then marked, and the teacher corrects errors. He or she then returns the books, makes a few remarks to the students concerning their performance, instructs them to do corrections and proceed to give them a new written assignment (Raimes, 1987: 1-6).

There are many language learning strategies or techniques that can accommodated in the classrooms' teaching and learning sessions. In this research, the researcher has focused on the use of drilling technique or repetition drill (Freeman, 2000: 48) in a mixed gender classrooms for both control and treatment group. Besides that, it was used among limited proficiency students and their level are very poor whereby they cannot write even in using the simplest of English. It is a technique that allows and helped the students in writing because they are exposed to the technique. Researcher, (Gomez, Parker & Alecio, 1996: 211-212) have considered 'structured writing' traditionally referred to drill and practice, involving copying sentences, paragraph, or essays, and correcting without actually writing. Lessons are drill-and-practice based on hierarchical skill sequence with few extended writing opportunities. This approach has been noted in extended classroom observations. In their research they found out that:

The Structured Writing (SW) classes engaged in daily structured writing, during the same time period as the Free Writing (FW) group. In the Structured Writing (SW) classes, the teacher assigned topics, and students wrote intensively, in nine minutes of concentrated writing time. Students were instructed to work alone and quietly during the concentrate writing time. The teacher, who focused on avoiding those errors on their next writing sample, subjected writing samples to error corrections. No dialogue was established between the teacher and students, and writing as a social process was not emphasized or encouraged. Instead, guidelines for the Structured Writing (SW) treatment reflected writing as an individual skill growth process. (p.219)

Language learning strategies, such as the drilling technique will be able to help the limited learners in writing. At least by doing the drill and practice it will enable the students to write essays given by the teachers because they are familiar with the formats especially in terms of descriptive essays. This type of essays is one of the easiest topics to do by the learners because they will describe the person, place or things with the adjectives they have learned to be used in their descriptive essays. It has become essential for learners at all schooling levels to write

and understand their written texts or what they have written. Actually most teachers have implemented this technique without realizing it they are using this technique in their teaching and learning process. According to Blasingame & Bushman (2005), McHugh (1997), Tompkins (2005) as cited in Wilder & Mongillo (2007: 478): Basically without realizing it, most of the language teachers are using this drilling technique or this strategy to help their low proficiency students in passing their English papers. They have used this technique in years of teaching the students but did not know the specific terms to describe it. Usually the English language teachers would use this technique in teaching writing because in most of the time and throughout the years the low proficiency students had to be drilled to make sure that they would be able to write a few sentences during their examinations.

This research is carried out with the intention to investigate the effectiveness in the use of drilling technique on students' writing ability besides to find out more about Form 4 learners' learning strategy. It is hoped that this technique would encourage teachers to motivate their students to write by using this technique. This study also examines the students' level of confidence after using the drilling technique. It is hoped that incorporating this technique in the classroom can help to improve students' writing especially for the descriptive writing part which make the time and effort in carrying out this study and using this technique worthwhile.

1.1 Latest Studies Done On The Adoption Of Drilling Method

Drilling Technique (DT) can be defined as a technique that has been used in a foreign classroom for many years. It was a key feature of audio lingual approaches to language teaching which placed emphasis on repeating structural patterns through oral practice. There are many types of drilling techniques such as repetition drills. For example, it can vary the drill in terms of who repeats whether the whole class, half the class, boys only, girls only, or individuals. Drilling is not a new or a fashionable classroom technique, but, used appropriately in the classroom, it can be of great value to our learners. Tica said only drill language that will benefit from being drilled, for example, if it causes pronunciation problems or if it is a useful chunk of language to be memorized (Tica, 2004: 1-3).

Ibnu Khaldun says that this threefold repetitive method is the most effective method of teaching. In a major review of research on what teachers can do to influence student achievement, Brophy drew this conclusion on the relationship between drill and practice and creative performance:

Development of basic knowledge and skills to the necessary levels of automatic and errorless performance requires a great deal of drill and practice. . . . Drill and practice activities should not be slighted as "low-level." Carried out properly, they appear to be just as essential to complex and creative intellectual performance as they are to the performance of a virtuoso violinist (Brophy, 1986).

However, according to Ibnu Khaldun (1958) he believes that merely memorizing a language does not ensure proficiency and fluency. He argues that all languages are habits similar to crafts and they can be acquired like any other habit. Acquiring a language therefore requires constant practice and understanding. The more a student uses a language the higher is his level of proficiency. He sees the significance of using authoritative texts written in a language in which a student wishes to learn. Since language is a habit similar to the crafts, it can be acquired only from repeated action. In the beginning when an action is done first or once, it contributes an attribute to the essence. With repetition it becomes a condition, which is an attribute that is not firmly established. After more repetition it becomes a habit, that is, a firmly established attribute. This is also the case with language. With repetition, a student can gain proficiency in it (Syed Agil, 2007).

Repetition and drill have become swear words in education. Today this form of learning is considered to be "out of style," "ghastly boring" and even "mindless." Drill and practice, teachers are told, produces only rote memorization and dulls creativity. "Having to spend long periods of time on repetitive tasks is a sign that learning is not taking place that this is not a productive learning situation (Bartoli, 1989).

Some say that drill and practice of basic skills does not contribute to the achievement of literacy or higher-order thinking skills and that class time can be better spent in activities that are more enjoyable and will contribute to a deeper understanding.

Kohn contended, "a growing facility with words and numbers derives from the process of finding answers to their own questions." In other words, it is unnecessary to provide students with drill and practice on basic academic tool skills. Instead, teachers need only to encourage children to ask and to solve questions they may have. In the process of constructing their own meanings from these activities, the students will become fluent readers and skilled calculators (Kohn, 1998).

Research has also shown that repetition is important in the "wiring" of a person's brain, for example; the forming of connections or synapses between the brain cells. Without these connections, the brain cells are as useless as batteries standing in a row next to a flashlight. Only when the batteries and flashlight are connected, can they make a shining light (Heward, 2003).

'Structured writing' traditionally referred to drill and practice, involving copying sentences without actually writing (Hammond, 1983). The classroom instruction for ESL students may follow this approach. Lessons are

drill and practice based on hierarchical skill sequences, with few extended writing opportunities. This approach has been noted in extended classroom observations. In non-ESL classrooms, a more contemporary form of structured writing has emerged. The focus on actual writing has replaced drill and practice of sub-skills. Structured writing typically receives micro-level error feedback; individual errors in usage; mechanics; sentence structure; and/or paragraph structure are marked (Applebee, 1984; Hudelson, 1984; Zamel, 1987 as cited in Gomez and et.al.,1996).

As Heward points out, drill and practice can be conducted in ways that render it pointless and a waste of time. Research has shown, however, that when properly conducted, drill and practice is a consistently effective teaching method. For example, a recent meta-analysis of 85 academic intervention studies with students with learning disabilities found that regardless of the practical or theoretical orientation of the study, the largest effect sizes were obtained by interventions that included systematic drill, repetition, practice, and review (Swanson & Sachse-Lee, 2000).

Research in the approaches to studying of students in Asian cultures revealed a prevalent reliance on memorization, which is generally not evident in students in the west. But research has shown that this memorization frequently accompanied with attempts to reach understanding. Kember & Gow (1990) found a narrow approach in which students in Hong Kong worked systematically through a material section-by-section attempting to understand each new concept and then committing it to memory before proceeding to the next. It has subsequently reported observations of memorization occurring in conjunction with understanding.

Kember (1996) described the intermediate position closer to deep end of the spectrum as arising from students who have a preference for seeking understanding but recognize that their examination normally require them to produce material. Therefore they try to understand the concepts and then make sure the material is learnt so that they can get a good grade in the examination. As for the intermediate position towards the surface, he described it as arising because students, who initially have the intention to memorise, but discover that they have to be selective, as the memory load increases as they progress through school.

Watkins (1996) reports interviews with Hong Kong secondary school students interpreted the continuum in terms of four stages beginning with reproduction by rote learning, and ultimately moving to understanding materials before committing it to memory. In the light of these research studies, memorizing in the Asian context should not necessary be viewed negatively, as there is great likelihood that it can lead to understanding of underlying concepts, and ultimately to the achievement of higher grades in examination.

Drill and practice ideologies have taken the fore front in many instructional plans due to the perceived efficiency and effectiveness of the processes (Swanson & Sachse-Lee, 2000). Especially with the onslaught of high stakes testing in the classroom, teachers often feel that direct instruction of skills is the only way to ensure that students are to achieve academically (Case, 2002; Gulek, 2003). The research, however, downplays the effectiveness of rote learning and suggests a more meaningful, conceptual understanding in order to promote problem solving and increase knowledge generalization. In addition, teachers who as students learned using drill and practice may find it difficult to break free of this more rigid paradigm.

The converse of conceptual learning is rote memorization and drill and practice techniques (Snowman & Biehler, 2003), which tend to emphasize a skill acquisition approach. "Skill learning" is the term used to define learning a set of steps or memorization of a procedure in order to accomplish a task (Mayer, 2002). Though there is acceptance of drill and practice methods for some domains, the consensus of many professionals in their classroom and at the university level is that learning must entail conceptual understanding for it to be meaningful and for it to facilitate problem solving (Stingler & Stevenson, 1994; Fuys & Liebov, 1997; Carlson, 1995). Convincing teacher candidates, that meaningful learning is vital and that conceptual understanding is essential for all lessons is part of almost every Educational Psychology text. The difficulty lies, however, in training teacher candidates to develop lessons that promote conceptual understanding versus ones that promote purely routine skills training.

In many instances throughout the course, techniques such as real life examples, discovery learning and imagery helped to develop the candidate's understanding of the concepts at hand. However, when specifically dealing with the concept of concepts candidates regressed to old habits of rote memorization. That is, they were able to define the term "concept", list examples and even recall theories, but when it came to higher level thinking skills application, analysis, synthesis, etc. they were unable to utilize previous learning (Sigler, 2006).

This study of working memory demonstrates how teacher candidates, when given a lesson that focuses on the development of their conceptual understanding, are able to see ways to incorporate conceptual understanding in their own lesson plans. With equal importance, however, this study demonstrated the need for the discovery approach, a conceptually based lesson for the teacher candidates themselves. Without the realization of their own roots of conceptual learning, the candidates slip too easily into a purely skills approach. With this method candidates were able to gain the realization that they know what they know, not from exacting drill and practice, but through constructing their own knowledge based on meaningful learning and conceptual understanding (Siegel & Ryan, 1989).

One suggestion is that working memory provides a resource for the individual to integrate knowledge from long-term memory with information in temporary storage (Swan and Saez, 2003; Swenze and Frankenberger, 2004). A child with weak working memory capacities is therefore limited in their ability to perform this operation in important classroom-based activities. A related suggestion is that poor working memory skills result in pervasive learning difficulties because this system acts as a bottleneck for learning in many of the individual learning episodes required to increment the acquisition of knowledge (Gathercole, 2003). Because low working memory children often fail to meet working memory demands of individual learning episodes, the incremental process of acquiring skill and knowledge over the school years is disrupted.

One effective strategy for improving the child's memory for the task is frequent repetition of instructions. For tasks that take place over an extended period of time, reminding the child of crucial information for that particular phase of the task rather than repetition of the original instruction is likely to be most useful. Finally, one of the best ways to ensure that the child has not forgotten crucial information is to ask them to repeat it (Alloway, 2006).

Working memory, our ability to process and remember information, is linked to a range of cognitive activities from reasoning tasks to verbal comprehension¹. There is also extensive evidence of the relationship between working memory and learning outcomes². However, some researchers suggest that working memory is simply a proxy for IQ and does not make a unique contribution to learning outcomes³⁻⁴. Our results demonstrate that working memory is not a proxy for IQ, but rather represents a dissociable cognitive skill with unique links to learning outcomes. Critically, we find that working memory at the start of formal education is a more powerful predictor of subsequent academic success than IQ. This result has important implications for education, particularly with respect to developing intervention and training. It appears that we should target our efforts in developing working memory skills in order to see gains in learning (Alloway, 2006).

The research literature positively supports the view that the emotionality of an experience is a great predictor for the memorization of that experience. Using emotion laden slides or written passages, researchers have found significant support for the claim that emotional arousal causes the creation of vivid memories (Heuer & Reisberg 1990). These enhanced memories are probably associated with the modulation of the sympathetic nervous system and activation of the adrenergic system (Cahill, Prins, Weber & McGaugh 1994).

It appears that brain-based learning may be more than the latest educational fad. The fact that MRIs indicate the possible location where cognitive functions were taking place relative to learning encouraged special educators to view several neuroscientific findings related to the brain applicable to special education. Results suggested:

- 1) that the brain learns best through repetition;
- 2) the emotionality of an experience influences retention; and
- 3) that the plasticity of the brain allows instructors the possibility to improve student memory, attention and learning processes through mental exercises (Diaz, 1992; Winters, 1994, 1995).

It is agreed that drills can be practiced in various ways to make them not so boring and repetitive, such as changing the teacher's pace, changing the way to choose who is to repeat or to answer, or the content of the sentence (Brown & Nation, 1997). Some flashcards, props and realia activities can also be added to help with students' drilling. Brown and Nation (1997) note that drills play a useful part in a language course in helping the learners use accurate speech and in helping them quickly learn a collection of phrases and sentences so as to use the target language as soon as possible (Wen-chung, 2006:29).

Liao (1996) proposes solutions for Chinese learners' communicative incompetence in learning ESL. The core of the solutions is a five-stage teaching method (review, presentation, drill, practice, consolidation) that corresponds to the stages of information processing. During the practice stage, the learner uses communicative activities. In the consolidation stage, however, Liao, uses many drills for items students have not mastered to produce long-term effects. In this way, it is argued, the drills and memorization become less boring or mechanical since students will know their specific weaknesses and they will be more motivated to overcome their weaknesses. As Knop (2000) notes:

Communicative activities allow students to use memorized vocabulary and memorized structures for realistic personalized, meaningful exchanges... Students' motivation in memorizing basic structures and vocabulary will increase when they know that later on they will engage in conversation, actively using the language to communicate their own ideas and wishes to each other. (p20)

Memorization is the main skill in the audio-lingual method (Brown, 2000 & Clancy, 2004), but it is synonymous which include other skills such as pattern practice and drilling. Memorization of chunk of language, like formulae or social routine is used by all students of second language, especially in the early stages. Memorized language may lead learners to be able to improvise, once they have acquired enough vocabulary and sentence structures.

Osborne (1993) points out some clear advantages of memorization in language teaching. Firstly, memorization can give students a sense of success and accomplishments because it is relatively tangible and within students' control. Secondly, memorization can give some students aesthetic pleasure, especially in poems and songs.

Thirdly, some students feel secure and familiar with memorization, especially in countries like Taiwan and China, where traditional approaches like Grammar Translation are popular (Liang, 2002; Tiangco, 2005; Huang, 2001) though the students' opportunities to use English and how their learning is tested could have contributed to the phenomenon. Besides, the use of memorization is by no means absent in modern educational system. Finally, in non-language fields, memorization is still recognized as a means of providing students with a body of material to serve as a foundation for understanding.

A relatively recent, cognitively oriented approach also uses gestures, realia, and body language to promote the oral proficiency of true language beginners. Caceres and Obilinovic (2000) propose the script-based approach trying to offer a well-grounded, organized way to initiate language learners or true beginners to early oral production. The basic structure of this new script-based approach involves explicit learning, mainly deductive procedures, and extensive reference to the native language system. The structure is introduced through the use gradation or graded input and the deductive presentation of rules. They believe that drill work is important for automation to be formed and is extensively used, but it can be designed to be challenging and stimulating rather than repetitive and boring. They claim that this new methodological approach to language teaching is based on research and extensive classroom observations and experience.

There are many types of drill or drilling techniques used by these researchers in their studies. For example; backward build-up or expansion drill, Chain drill, Single-slot substitution drill, Multiple-slot substitution drill, Transformation drill, and Question-and-answer drill (Freeman, 2000: 48 – 49). In this research, the researcher used Repetition drill or known as drilling technique towards the low proficiency students in learning writing. Students are asked to repeat the teacher's model as accurately and as quickly as possible. This drill is often used to teach the lines of the dialogue (Freeman, 2000: 48).

2. Research Design

Research can be classified into two broad categories that is quantitative and qualitative research. In this study, the researcher is using a mixed-method design that is integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods. The purpose of mixed methods research is to build on the synergy and strengths that exists between quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to understand a phenomenon more fully than is possible using either quantitative or qualitative alone (Gay, 2003: 183-186).

According to Creswell (2005) a mixed methods design is also used when the researcher wants 'to build from one phase of research to another' (p.510). Collecting quantitative and qualitative data sequentially in phases is a popular form of mixed methods design in educational research and is called as an explanatory mixed method design (Creswell, 2005: 515)

In this study, the quantitative and qualitative data were collected sequentially in six phases as demonstrated in the following diagram and the findings are reported in the following section.

In phase 1 both treatment and control groups did a pretest on an essay topic entitle '*Describe a festival celebrated in your area*'. Both groups did not even know the background of the essay topic except from their experience of celebrating it. The teacher conduct the pretest based on their learning time that was within one hour ten minutes. The teacher brainstorm both groups regarding the essay topic, write the points on the board so that it would be easy for both groups to write their essays on their own based on some of the discussion points.

In phase 2 the control group was taught using the conventional method during their language learning. They would learn the subject around one hour ten minutes in regular basis. The treatment group was introduced with drilling technique in phase 2. They would copy for three times (copy 1 – copy 3) the similar text of a descriptive essay for three weeks. The learners would list down all the vocabularies that they felt they could not understand the meaning from the given text on the provided column. The researcher wanted to see if they have increased or decreased their level of understanding on the words or vocabularies from the original text. They were asked to produce an essay (write up 1) entitle '*Describe a wedding ceremony celebrated at your village*' after undergo drilling technique for three times. After the second phase, at phase 3 the treatment group would copy the similar text for three times (copy 4 – 6) and produce another essay (write up 2) with the same topic as in phase 1.

In phase 4, the treatment group would still do another 3 times copying the same text and list down all their difficult vocabularies on the provided column. This was to see if there was any development from phase 1. After the limited proficiency students had done three times copying, they would produce another essay (write up 3).

In phase 5, the learners did final three copies of the similar text and at this phase they would not produce any essay. The learners would have gap of 4 weeks before they did their posttest.

Finally in phase 6, the posttest was administered to both groups. The treatment group did their posttest after 4 weeks gap whereas that control group was taught using the conventional method. At the same phase, phase 6, the researcher distributed questionnaire to the treatment groups to know the effectiveness of the drilling technique after they have gone through with it for 19 weeks. This comprised of quantitative data collection using questionnaire. 20 students from the treatment group answered the questions after they have used drilling technique. Feedback obtained from the questionnaire facilitated the researcher's usage of drilling technique in

Phase 2. Besides obtaining quantitative data from the test scores, additional qualitative data were also gathered through structured interview. Consequently, 20 samples were selected from the treatment group and were interviewed to get their perceptions on the drilling technique introduced to them in the first phase of the study. The above phases described the sequential order that were carried out during the course of the study.

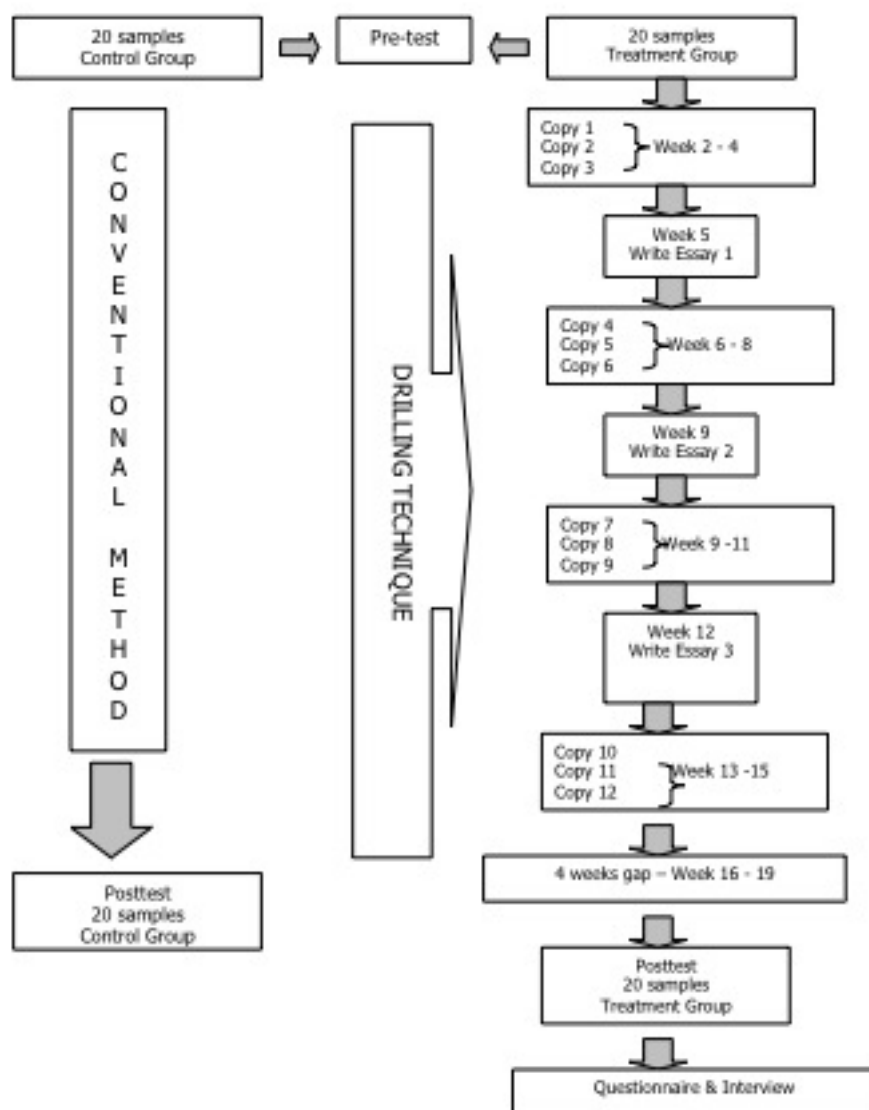


Figure 1: Research Framework

3. Findings And Discussion

The findings will be discussed based on the three research questions stated below:

RQ1 Does the use of drilling technique in teaching writing have positive effects on students' writing ability?

From the frequency counts of the questionnaire answers, it was found that the learners' responses towards their writing performance were very positive. They were able to:

- Use the language and information that they got from the drilling technique during examination;
- Improve their writing skill;
- Think and develop ideas when writing descriptive essays;
- Help the learners to get better score;
- Understand each words used in the text as they repeat the process of copying the original essay, and
- Able to write longer essay.

The comparison of the pre- and post-test scores of the control and the treatment groups also demonstrates that the treatment group obtained a higher mean than the control group. The Mann-Whitney U test also reported a

significant difference between the post-test scores of the treatment compared to the control group.

Therefore, despite the limitations of this study, these findings seem to show that the drilling technique employed could lead to improvement in the learners' writing performance.

RQ2 Does the drilling technique help the students' increase their level of confidence in their writing?

The findings from both questionnaire and interview showed that the learners were able to develop their level of confidence after being exposed to the drilling technique. At the start of the study, they had negative opinion about their English writing ability. These limited users of English have ideas on the given topic but previously they direct translate using the dictionary whenever they had to write in English. However, after being exposed to the drilling technique, they are able to develop their self-confidence and attempted to write the descriptive essays without resorting to direct translations. Even though the essays that they produce were relatively short, with longer exposure to the technique and with other genres their writing ability should be able to improve further.

RQ3 What is the learner's perception on the use of drilling technique in continuous writing?

The results of the semi-structured interview at the end of the study report that the learners like the drilling technique because it helps to develop their level of English proficiency. They also reported that the use of this learning technique helped them improve their writing skill. Similar findings were also reported by the questionnaire responses. A few of the students also reported in the interview that they felt happier after being exposed to the technique. They also reported that although the drilling activities entail a lot of copying work, they did not feel burdened or bored. They gave various reasons for favouring the technique. Some felt that the technique gave them a wealth of information that they are exposed to when copying the essays. This information was reproduced when they were asked to write on their own. The majority of the learners stated that they would continue using the technique because they feel that they still have a long way to improve their English writing skill. They commented that they believed the more exposure they get to the technique the better their English writing skill will be.

4. Conclusion

The experiment on the use of the drilling technique to teach writing skills amongst low proficiency ESL learners seems to suggest that it has a positive effect on their writing performance. In addition, it also appears to improve their level of competence and as well as the students generally feel that it helps them to improve their English writing performance.

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