

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The writing skill is one of the production integrated skills through which people interact with others. However, it is "more rule-bound and therefore more error-prone" (Bowen and Madsen 1985, p. 252). Furthermore, teaching the writing skill for second or foreign language learners can be particularly challenging (Palmer, 1985). Very often, second or foreign language speakers feel inadequate in the face of the writing task.

#### **1.1. Background Information of Teaching and Learning English in Myanmar**

It is essential to know some background information related to this study, such as the history of teaching and learning English in Myanmar. Furthermore, one needs to be aware of what is understood by target language (English or L2) writing in a Myanmar EFL setting, how L1 writing is taught in the school system and what problems Myanmar learners face when they write. These points are discussed in the following sections.

##### **1.1.1. History of teaching and learning English in Myanmar**

Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) was under British Colonial Rule for more than one hundred years (1825-1941, 1945-1948). During that time, English was

the medium of instruction in all institutions. It was believed that it was more prestigious for students to study in private schools run by missionaries because this was the only place where one could study with English-speaking teachers. This practice continued until 1962.

At that time, the Revolutionary Council took over power from the government and since then, all the mission schools were nationalized and the native-speaking teachers were forced to go home. The system of teaching English at the elementary level (kindergarten to grade four) also halted.

During the early 1970s, the political leaders of the Union of Myanmar realized that there was again need for English teaching because of Myanmar students' failure in their further study overseas. The Government then changed the English curriculum so that English was taught from kindergarten to tertiary level for five hours a week. Therefore, people who were born after the 1970s are said to be more fortunate than those who were born in the 1960s are inasmuch as they were exposed to English five years earlier.

However, frequent demonstrations by the Democracy Movement in Myanmar have affected the educational system of Myanmar. Most of the universities and institutes (including the Institute of Education) have been closed. Only the University of Distance Education is open regularly. Therefore, although any graduate has a chance to apply for the profession of primary school teacher, due to above situation, it is the graduates from that university who can easily get jobs in the teaching profession. Once they are appointed as primary teachers, they teach all the classroom subjects, including English. These teachers used to have to take refresher courses; however, recently such opportunities have become scarce.

At the middle school and high school levels, around 50 percent of the English teachers do not have adequate training or experience in teaching English. They have virtually been forced by circumstances to teach English. Such teachers are not English majors and were teaching other subjects, but due to the scarcity of English teachers, they were asked to teach to do the job. Thus, the quality of English teaching has become poorer and poorer.

Since 1998, the Education Ministry has launched a system which is widely used in Europe and other Western countries, that is the "Continuous Assessment Program" (CAP). Despite the fact that this program is very encouraging and appropriate for the students in those countries, due to the classroom size, lack of well-qualified English teachers, and the need for a teachers' training program, the teaching and learning of English still does not meet the needs of Myanmar EFL learners.

The Grammar-translation approach is still influential; but, after the introduction of the CAP, the role of understanding grammar has become less important and rote learning has stepped into its place. Today, Myanmar learners are learning their subjects by rote, without considering meaning.

#### **1.1.2. Writing in English**

In the Union of Myanmar, English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), five hours a week in government educational institutions (from kindergarten to the high school level) as one of the compulsory subjects. In most of the classrooms, the classroom area is not big enough to do language activities, and the number of students is so large that the teacher cannot give individual attention to any of them. Moreover, the classroom is always teacher-centered and the curriculum is test-oriented. Learners

never get a chance to interact with each other in pair work, group work or in whole-class work.

The primary level includes five years (from kindergarten to grade 4): the middle school level, four years (from grade 5 to grade 8) and high school level two years (from grade 9 to grade 10). In the very first year of primary level, writing in English means how to write the letters in the alphabet (upper case and lower case) and numbers, focusing on handwriting. During the junior primary years (grade 1 and grade 2), children are expected to write with correct spelling, grammar and punctuation. When they come to the senior primary years (grade 3 to grade 4), they are encouraged to write short paragraphs (four or five sentences) on some specific descriptive topics such as "Myself," "My Family" or "My Teacher" and similar topics with outlines given by their teachers.

Throughout the middle school level, learners are taught some vocabulary, different kinds of tenses (simple present tense, simple past tense, present continuous tense, past continuous tense, present perfect tense), grammatically complicated sentence constructions, and some cohesive devices. They are also assigned to write longer descriptions on more or less similar topics that they have written about in the primary years. In such writing tasks, the teachers usually ask the students to answer short questions and arrange their answers into paragraphs.

Following the grammar-translation approach (see p. 10), teachers believe that they are responsible for teaching and explaining grammatical rules by way of translation, thereby controlling their learners' writing. They do not give their learners any opportunity to express their own ideas and experiences in their writing, and they do

not explain either the purpose of writing on those topics or the social function that these topics serve.

### **1.1.3. Writing in Myanmar (Burmese Language)**

The Myanmar language (Burmese) is used as the language in every day life all over the country. It is also taught as one of the compulsory subjects throughout a student's schooling. In the primary level, every subject, except English, such as Mathematics and Social Science, is taught in the Myanmar language, focusing on handwriting, correct spelling and punctuation. The students are also made to write descriptive essays on similar topics to those written in English (L2).

However, unlike L2 writing in the middle school level (from grade 5 to grade 7), learners are expected to write on topics about special occasions such as "Independence Day," "Water Festival" or "Summer Holidays" and the like.

In the last year of middle school level (grade 8), Myanmar rhetoric is introduced. At the high school level (grade 9 and grade 10), four different kinds of essays are taught. They are descriptive essays, (e.g., "A Market Scene"), retelling past experience, (e.g., "The Day I Can Never Forget"), explaining a proverb or a saying, (e.g., "No Pain, No Gain") or an occasion, (e.g., "The Traditional Boat Festival") and cause and effect essays, (e.g., "Smoking is Harmful to Health").

## **1.2. Rationale and Statement of the Problem**

The traditional approach viewed writing as copying or creating sentences from word lists. However, the view has nowadays changed and writing is defined by Hudelson (1980) as the creativity of original text using the individual's intellectual and linguistic resource. Therefore, as the language teaching and learning has shifted the

focus to pragmatic use, learners need to use their writing skills to communicate with others by expressing their ideas, expressions, thoughts and feelings (Finchiaro, 1987).

According to Cope and Kalantzis (1994), in native speaking schools, "children's first writings are usually recounts" (p.10). However, for Myanmar learners, due to the influence of the grammar-translation method, the examination-oriented curriculum and the teacher-centered classroom, students never have an opportunity to express their own ideas, feelings and experiences in L2, even in oral form, in the classroom throughout their primary years.

Even though the students learned some advanced level vocabulary, correct usage of tenses, use of irregular verbs and how to write complex sentences in their middle school level, they have never been given a chance to apply this knowledge. They have not experienced writing a coherent paragraph with meaningful content.

In view of the above conditions of the Myanmar students' learning English, the learner participants, particularly, the Myanmar Grade 7 participants, need to be able to use their language skills in their own language to express their past experiences with meaningful content through the use of personal recount writing.

In this study, the researcher will therefore investigate the following problems:

1. What is the capability of the research participants in terms of writing a paragraph in English before they are given instruction in any specific form of writing?
2. Will the learners manifest improvement in their English writing after they are given instruction on writing a personal recount through the genre-based approach (GBA)?

### 1.3. Objectives of the Study

In light of the research problems cited in the foregoing section, this research project purports to achieve the following objectives:

1. To introduce the GBA approach to the Myanmar EFL middle school learners in writing personal recount genre;
2. To discern and analyze the development of the participants' abilities to write with meaningful content by comparing their pre-instruction writing with their post-instruction writing; and
3. To identify and analyze the errors (both global errors and local errors) in their pre- and post-instruction texts in order to gain a clearer insight into errors that hinder communication.

### 1.4. Scope of the Study

This study focuses specifically on seven Myanmar students who have just passed grade 6 and would be ready to attend grade 7 in the academic school year 2000-2001 (from June to February) at State High School, No.1, Sanchaung, Yangon. The volunteer participants were of the same age (12 years old). They are all interested in writing paragraphs, both in L1 and L2. The participants had learned some vocabulary, sentence construction, correct usage of tenses, and had written five descriptive essays in grade 6 (see Appendix M, p. 127-8).

This study will compare the way learners recount personal experiences, particularly focusing on meaningful content before they were given instruction in their writing and after they are taught to write personal recounts, using the GBA.

## 1.5. Definition of Terms

1. **Adequacy and appropriateness of vocabulary for purpose:** an important component of the meaningful content and appropriate choice of vocabulary such as participants, verbs, detailed information for personal recount were considered in this study.
2. **Coherence:** the relationship that links the meanings of utterances in a discourse. These links may be based on the speakers' or writers' shared knowledge. In other words, it refers to the sense a message makes.
3. **Cohesion:** the grammatical or lexical relationships between the different elements of a text. This may be the relationship between different sentences or between parts of a sentence. In this study, conjunction and personal referent were counted.
4. **Continuous Assessment Program (CAP):** a language assessment program in which students are assessed regularly throughout the program rather than being given a single assessment at the end. The purpose is to give a more accurate picture of student achievement.
5. **Contrastive Analysis (CA):** the study of the comparison of the linguistic systems of two languages.
6. **Discourse Analysis (DA):** the study of how sentences in spoken and written language form larger meaningful units such as paragraphs, conversations, interviews, etc.
7. **Error Analysis (EA):** the study and analysis of the errors made by second or foreign language learners. The main purposes is to identify strategies which learners use in language learning, to identify the causes of learners' errors, and to obtain



information on common difficulties in language learning. The information that is gathered is then used as an aid in the preparation of teaching materials.

(A). **Global error**: the error in the use of a major element of sentence structures, which makes a sentence or utterance difficult or impossible to understand.

(B). **Local error**: an error in the use of an element of sentence structure that does not cause problems for comprehension.

8. **Error Charting**: a technique that is suggested by Klassen (1991) to chart errors in students' essays. Each time a student makes an error, a tick is marked in that box. This technique is useful both for students and teachers. The student can see his own errors and the teacher can predict what stage his student has reached by analyzing the errors. Moreover, the teacher can analyze the errors of the whole class and can pinpoint the special problems of the students.

9. **Functional Approach**: the approach which looks at how language enables us to do things: to share information, to inquire, to express attitudes, to entertain, to argue, to get our needs met, to reflect, to construct ideas, to order our experiences, and to make sense of the world. The heart of this approach is an emphasis on meaning.

10. **Genre-Based Approach (GBA) to teaching writing**: the approach that is based on genre theories and it is defined as "a goal-oriented, staged, purposeful social process" of teaching writing (Christie, Martin, and Rothery, 1980).

(A). **Genres**: In this study, the researcher applied the definition developed by two theorists. Martin (1984) defines genres as "a staged, goal-oriented purposeful activity in which the speaker/ writer engages as a member of the culture." According to Swales (1990), genres are a class of communicative events, the members of which

share some set of communicative purposes. For both of them, it is communicative purpose that brings any genre into being.

(B). **Recount:** a kind of genre which has three types of recounts: personal recount, factual recount, and imaginative recount. Its general purpose is to retell past experience. Even in a personal recount, there are three different styles of writing and they are slightly different in language features. They are a formal written style, oral anecdote style and diary entry writing.

(C). **Material verb:** the verbs that show action (doing and happening). For example, walk, go, climb.

(D). **Specific participant:** in this study, the specific participants used are first person pronouns (I or We).

(E). **Schematic structure:** this term refers to the organization of the Personal Recount. It consists of orientation, event, and reorientation or personal comment.

(F). **Language feature:** this term refers to the linguistic features involved in this Personal Recount. They are specific participants, simple past tense, material verbs (action verbs), and linking words to do with time (next, then, later).

(G). **Linking word to do with time:** time clues which connect the two clauses. in this study, time clues such as next, after that, then, later, were counted.

11. **Grammar Translation Method:** a conventional method of foreign or second language teaching which makes use of translation and grammar study as the main teaching and learning activities.

12. **Meaningful Content:** the content in which successful communication exists between the speaker and the listener (for speaking) or between the writer and the reader (for writing). In this study, relevance and adequacy of content, compositional

organization, cohesion, adequacy and appropriateness of vocabulary for purpose, and syntax were considered as the components of meaningful content.

13. **Needs Analysis (NA):** the process of determining the needs for which a learner or a group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities.

14. **Process-oriented approach:** This approach was developed by Murray (1982) and Graves (1983). It provides what the writer does when he/she writes (planning, revising, editing). It focuses on the learner's ideas and experiences, small group activities and teacher and students' conferencing.

15. **Product-based approach:** This approach came into existence in mid 1960s and used a controlled composition model. It was primarily concerned with the complete product (patterns of organization, spelling, grammar), and its focus was more on accuracy of mechanics and structure.

16. **Qualitative research:** research that uses procedures that make use of qualitative data, such as observations, interviews.

17. **Syntax:** the study of how words combine to form sentences and the rules that govern the formation of sentences. In this study, particularly for meaningful content, word order was counted.

18. **Traditional Approach to teaching writing:** the approach that focuses more on form (grammatical structure) than meaning and looks more at the final product.

19. **TEEP Attribute Writing Scales:** The criteria designed for assessing writing for the Test in English for Educational Purposes (see Appendix F, pp.102-3).

## 1.6. Significance of the study

The study of personal recount writing of a group of Myanmar grade 7 students will be beneficial for the Myanmar EFL learners, for the English teachers in teaching paragraph writing, and for the educators and researchers who are interested in the adaptability of GBA in the local setting.

Specifically, this research will benefit the learners in that:

- (a) They will gain confidence in constructing their own texts in L2 (English) through retelling their experiences. It is hoped that the newly found confidence will stimulate learners to write regularly in English.
- (b) They will not only appreciate their own written texts, but also those of their peers.
- (c) They can learn collaboratively in group work, which will be mutually beneficial in constructing their texts.

This research is also beneficial to middle school English teachers in Myanmar in that:

- (a). Through this study, they will see the differences in the way Myanmar learners express their past experiences in their pre-instruction and post- instruction writing through personal recount.
- (b) The teachers would realize the importance of making students write with meaningful content and can thereby give learners more opportunities to write discourses.
- (c) The teachers can gain insight into the positive influence of L1 discourse skills on L2 acquisition and performance.
- (d) Through the students' post instruction written texts and post-writing questionnaires, the teachers can determine if recount genre, particularly, personal

recount with formal style is appropriate to introduce at this level; moreover, the teacher will discover whether it is appropriate to teach the other genres to the EFL Myanmar learners.

Finally, this present study will also be beneficial for the educators, theorists and researchers who are still exploring the adaptability of the Genre-Based Approach in the EFL secondary and elementary setting.

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