RESEARCH ARTICLE

Students’ Belief about Autonomous Learning of Writing vs. their Writing Performance: Hawassa University Students in Focus

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Abstract
This study was intended to examine the correlation between students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. To this end, the selected Year-I students of Hawassa University were made to fill in a five-point scale questionnaire intended to explore their belief about autonomous learning of writing, and to take a writing test. The correlations were examined through Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r). To determine the strength of a correlation, the cut-off points suggested by Cohen were applied. Moreover, coefficient of determination was computed to see the extent to which the students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing predicts their writing performance. Thus, this research employed a quantitative methods design. Pearson r demonstrated that there was a strong positive correlation between the students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance on each of the aspects of writing (r-values ≥ .845, p-value = .000). The coefficient of determination also revealed that the students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing predicts their writing performance at above 71%. Based on the findings, recommendations have been made.

Key Words: Belief; autonomous learning; writing; correlation; writing performance

Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study
Hawassa University is a public university found in the South Nations, Nationalities and Peoples’ Regional State of Ethiopia and is a comprehensive university engaged in the provision of all-round education, research, training and community service. The university has over 64 first degree programs, 43 second degree programs and 4 PhD programs in various schools/colleges. Students of all the departments of Hawassa University, as is the case with students of other universities across the nation, particularly in the undergraduate studies, take English language courses such as Communicative English Skills-I, Communicative English Skills-II, Sophomore English, Basic Writing Skills, Advanced Writing-I, Advanced Writing-II and/or Report Writing.

The main objective of offering the English language courses to the students is to help them improve their proficiency as English is a medium of instruction and nearly all the teaching/learning and reference materials are written in it (Hailemichael, 1993; Gebremedhin, 1986). The written as well as oral communications and meetings within the university, usually, and communications with foreign learning institutions, always, are carried out in English. Moreover, formal as well as informal notices of the university usually appear in English. A great deal of information exchange, thus, takes place mainly in writing. It is also mainly writing that has been offered to the undergraduate program students of all the schools/colleges of the university.

Though the importance of writing in Ethiopian academic context has been felt and acknowledged, the researcher’s experience in teaching and advising at Hawassa University shows that the writing performance of the majority of students is deteriorating alarmingly. This is particularly noticeable in tests/examinations, assignments and senior essay/thesis papers. At conferences and workshops conducted on issues related to English language teaching in general and writing skills teaching in particular, many instructors from other universities of the nation have also reflected that their students too seem to have difficulties in writing intelligibly and effectively. Italo’s (1999) study, which corresponds with Geremew’s (1999) findings, can be taken as an evidence to this problem in which he concludes that the freshman program students at Addis Ababa University seem to have serious problems in writing in English.
1.2 Objectives of the Study
A vast body of research literature on the topic has confirmed that students’ language performance in general and writing skills in particular will be improved when they take on more responsibility for their own learning (Bloom, 2008; Hoskins and Fredriksson, 2008; Ze-Sheng, 2008; Chamot, et al., 2007; Pinkman, 2005; Wenden, 1991; Holec, 1981). “Once learners take responsibility for their learning, they will be more able to capitalize on learning environments both in and out of the classroom, hopefully making them life-long and efficient learners” (Pinkman, 2005: 12).

According to Holec (1981), one’s ability to take charge of one’s own learning is called learner autonomy. This includes checking if one makes progress, stimulating one’s own interest to practice, deciding procedures he/she must follow, choosing tasks for practice, deciding aspects he/she must focus on, and choosing important materials he/she must exploit. According to Little (2003), this process covers several variables; it requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management.

To this effect, students need to have a better belief about autonomous learning of writing. Belief can be defined as perception one holds on something. “Beliefs represent the knowledge or information we have about the world…” (Gross, 2005: 406). Chauble and Chauble, 2007; Albery et al., 2008; Hogg and Vaughan, 2002; Dandapani, 2004 discuss that belief cannot be directly observed; it can only be inferred from responses made by the learner. Belief is a result of education, perception and inspiration; it is not an inborn trait. Belief influences a learner’s behavior. Students will strive to build a better belief about autonomous learning of writing if they know that there is a strong positive correlation between their belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance. Instructors will also strive to help students develop a better belief about autonomous learning of writing if they know that there is a strong positive correlation between students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and students’ writing performance. As far as the researcher’s knowledge is concerned, however, nobody has so far conducted a research to examine the correlation between students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance in Ethiopian context. “Current literature on learner autonomy suggests that the perception and practice of autonomous learning change according to specific cultural and educational contexts” (Yıldırım, 2008: 65). Thus, this study is intended to examine the correlation between students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance.

1.3 Research Hypotheses
The following null and alternative hypotheses were formulated about the correlation.
Null Hypothesis (Ho): There is no correlation between students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics;
Alternative Hypothesis (Ha): There is correlation between students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics.

1.4 Significance of the Study
It is hoped that the findings of this study have the following importance. In the first place, it adds value to our knowledge that there is a strong positive correlation between students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. Moreover, this study may serve as a springboard for future researchers interested to conduct similar studies on the other macro-language skills, grammar or vocabulary.

2. Review of Related Literature
2.1 Writing Tasks
2.1.1 Controlled Writing
Controlled writing asks students to carry out writing activities that are completely controlled by the instructor. Some of the typical controlled writing tasks include copying correct sentences, filling in blanks by choosing correct responses among given alternatives, matching beginning and endings of sentences, and sequencing jumbled words (Baker and Westrup, 2000; Atkins et al., 1996; Gomez and Gomez, 1996). Controlled writing focuses on accuracy.

2.1.2 Guided Writing
Guided writing, unlike controlled writing, asks students to accomplish tasks by writing appropriate responses of their own; students are not usually made to repeat something or choose responses among given alternatives or match something. “Here, the students are given guidance, e.g. some content by way of ideas, notes etc, but in the exercises they have some choice and far more opportunity to make mistakes” (Atkins et al.,
1996:116). Guided writing involves tasks such as filling in gap-fill sentences, changing sentences, completing sentences, and writing parallel sentences (Westwood, 2008; Baker and Westrup, 2000; Atkins et al., 1996). Guided writing also focuses on accuracy; however, here, there is a greater tolerance of errors than in controlled writing.

2.1.3 Free Writing

Free writing normally asks students to produce paragraphs or essays on their own/given topics without being controlled by the instructor; students decide about what to write, how much to write, how to organize, the pace, and the writing conventions (Zemach and Rumisek, 2005; Feldman, 2000; Baker and Westrup, 2000; Atkins et al., 1996; Gomez and Gomez, 1996). The main role of the instructor is to give a little support to guide students how to come up with effective paragraphs/essays. The typical tasks of the free writing include writing creative texts, diaries, dialogues, a new version of a story, and rewriting the ending of a book. Free writing considers that the process of writing is much more important than the product of writing.

2.2 Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is defined in various ways by different researchers and theorists. Holec (1981), one of the earliest advocates of autonomy in language teaching defines it as the “ability to take care of one’s own learning” (p. 47). The concept of autonomy is explained by Littlewood (1996) as “learners’ ability and willingness to make choices independently” (p. 97). He goes on to elaborate by suggesting that ability depends on possessing both knowledge about the alternatives from which choices have to be made and necessary skills for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and confidence to take on more responsibility for the choices required. The point is emphasized by Littlewood (1996) who argues, “Students’ willingness to act independently depends on the level of their motivation and confidence; students’ ability to act independently depends on the level of their knowledge and skills” (p. 98). The implication of this approach is that it gives learners an opportunity to select and implement appropriate learning strategies in order to allow them to learn at their own pace. It also gives students an opportunity to play a considerable role in setting the goals of learning, in organizing the learning process, and fulfilling it. Thus, the learning and teaching of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) may be considered less than efficient if it is not based on learner-centred approaches and learner autonomy, as suggested by contemporary researchers.

Autonomy and autonomous learning are not synonyms with ‘self-instruction’, ‘self-access’, ‘self-study’, ‘out-of-class learning’ or ‘distance learning’. These terms basically describe various ways and degrees of learning by oneself, whereas autonomy refers to the abilities and attitudes (or whatever we think the capacity to control one’s own learning consists of). The point is, then, that learning in isolation is not the same as having the capacity to direct one’s own learning. These two concepts, however, do not have to exist completely independently, as the ability to be able to work in isolation can play a role in autonomous learning.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 60 students (46 males, 14 females). They were between 18 – 21 years old. All of them completed Grade 12 and are currently in their Year-I program at Hawassa University, Ethiopia.

3.2 Research Design

This study was intended to examine the correlation between students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. To this end, the participants were made to fill in a five-point scale questionnaire intended to explore their belief about autonomous learning of writing, and to take a writing test. The correlations were examined through Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r). Moreover, coefficient of determination was computed to see the extent to which the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing is related to their writing performance. Thus, this research employed a quantitative-methods design.

3.3 Preparation of Instruments of Data Collection

3.3.1 Preparation of Writing Test

A writing test was prepared by the researcher. The test was intended to measure the participants’ writing skills with regard to discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. The participants were asked to complete sentences by writing appropriate subjects and predicates of their own and rewrite sentences by correcting errors, complete paragraphs by writing appropriate topic sentences, concluding sentences and relevant details, rearrange jumbled sentences in logical orders and complete paragraphs by writing appropriate cohesive devices, complete essays by writing appropriate thesis statements and concluding paragraphs, identify parts of an essay: introduction, body and conclusion, rearrange jumbled paragraphs in logical orders and write argumentative essays. To validate the test, comments were obtained from the researcher’s most senior colleagues.
3.3.2 Preparation of Questionnaire

A questionnaire intended to obtain data on the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing was adapted from Spratt et al. (2002) in the form of a five-point scale: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree and strongly disagree. The questionnaire included a cover page which discusses the purpose of the questionnaire and asks the participants to read the items carefully and respond honestly and frankly. The researcher’s most senior colleagues were requested to comment on the questionnaire regarding its validity. Cronbach’s alpha was computed on SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) version 20 to examine the reliability of the items of the questionnaire. The computation showed that the items were reliable at above 0.78. Cronbach’s alpha was chosen because the questionnaire has a five-point scale.

3.4 Selection of Study Setting and Departments

The researcher purposefully chose Hawassa University to which he is a member of staff. From the existing departments of the university, Mathematics and Management were randomly selected by drawing lots. The researcher used a simple random sampling because it allows a department to have equal chance of being selected; the probability of a department being selected is unaffected by the selection of another department. Thus, it is possible to be confident that the departments chosen represent all the departments of the university.

3.5 Administration of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire intended to collect data on the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing was administered. Careful attempts were made to make the environment conducive to fill in the questionnaire.

3.6 Administration and Scoring of the Test

The writing test meant to measure the participants’ writing skills with regard to discussing relevant contents, organizing contents appropriately and using accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics was administered. Careful attempts were made to make the environment conducive for taking the test. The test paper of each participant was corrected by two randomly selected English language instructors of the university who had received training on how to correct the test papers. Analytic approach was chosen to mark the compositions. This approach is preferred for being the most effective approach to achieve reliability. The rating scale used was the one provided by Heaton (1990). Heaton (1990: 146) describes the scale in this way: “The following rating scale is the result of considerable and careful research conducted in the scoring of compositions in the United States.”

3.7 Methods of Data Analysis

In order to find the participants’ scores on the questionnaire, the researcher applied the procedures used by prominent social science researchers of these days. First, for the questionnaire, values 1 to 5 were given for strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree, and strongly agree respectively so that the minimum score a participant would score is the number of the items of the questionnaire multiplied by 1, and the maximum score a participant would score is the number of the items of the questionnaire multiplied by 5.

In order to take the participants’ average scores on each of the aspects of writing, the following procedures were applied. First, Pearson r was conducted on SPSS version 20 to see the correlations of the scores given by the instructors. To determine the strength of a correlation, the cut-off points suggested by Cohen (1988), as cited in Greasley (2008), were applied. “As a general guideline, a value ranging from 0.1 to 0.4 would be classed as a weak correlation, and anything above 0.5 would be regarded as a strong correlation... A value approaching zero indicates the absence of any relationship between two variables, in other words no correlation” (Greasley, 2008:80). Then, the participants’ average scores were taken since Pearson r computed showed that the correlations are significant at the .01 level (2-tailed); there were strong positive correlations between the scores given by the instructors.

Lastly, Pearson’s r correlation coefficient was computed on SPSS version 20 to examine the correlation between the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance. To determine the strength of a correlation, the cut-off points suggested by Cohen (1988), as cited in Greasley (2008), were employed. Coefficient of determination was also computed to examine the extent to which the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing predicts their writing performance. In relation to this idea, Greasley (2008:82) says, “It is referred to as the coefficient of determination (r²), and provides a measure of the degree to which one variable ‘predicts’ the other by simply squaring the correlation value. You can then simply multiply this by 100 to give a percentage value.”

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results of Pearson’s r Correlation Coefficient

The following tables demonstrate the results of Pearson’s r correlation coefficient computed to examine the correlation between the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance to
discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics.

**Table 1: Correlation of PBALW* and their Writing Performance on Content**

PBALW* = Participants’ Belief about Autonomous Learning of Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PBALW</th>
<th>Writing Performance on Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>0.869***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Correlation of PBALW and their Writing Performance on Organization**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PBALW</th>
<th>Writing Performance on Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>0.856***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

****: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 1 above depicts the correlation of the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance on content. The table shows that the r-value is 0.869***. Thus, the r-value is closer to 1.000. The p-value is 0.000, and the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This indicates that there is a strong positive correlation between the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance on content. That is, as the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing increases, their performance to discuss relevant contents in their writing increases as well. The coefficient of determination computed indicates that the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing predicts their writing performance with regard to discussing relevant contents at 75.5161%.

Table 2 above shows the correlation of the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance on organization. In the table, it is indicated that the r-value is 0.856***, which is closer to 1.000; the p-value is 0.000, and thus the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This shows that there is a strong positive correlation between the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their ability to organize contents appropriately. In other words, as participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing increases, their writing performance with regard to organizing contents appropriately gets improved accordingly. The coefficient of determination carried out reveals that the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing predicts their writing performance regarding organizing contents in logical orders at 73.2736%.
**Table 3: Correlation of PBALW and their Writing Performance on Grammar**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PBALW</th>
<th>Writing Performance on Grammar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PBALW</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Performance on Grammar</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.937**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 above demonstrates the correlation of the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance on grammar. As indicated in the table, the r-value is .937**. Thus, the r-value is closer to 1.000, and the p-value is .000. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This tells us that there is a strong positive correlation between the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their performance to write grammatically accurate sentences. That is to say, as the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing increases, their writing performance to produce grammatically accurate sentences increases too. The coefficient of determination conducted shows that the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing predicts their writing performance with regard to using accurate grammar at 87.7969%.

**Table 4: Correlation of PBALW and their Writing Performance on Vocabulary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PBALW</th>
<th>Writing Performance on Vocabulary</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PBALW</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Performance on Vocabulary</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.922**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
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</table>

**: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 above demonstrates the correlation of the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance on vocabulary. The table depicts that the r-value is .922**. Thus, the r-value is closer to 1.000. The p-value is .000, and the correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This shows that there is a strong positive correlation between the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their performance to choose appropriate vocabulary. That is to say, as the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing increases, their performance to come up with appropriate vocabulary increases too. The coefficient of determination computed indicates that the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing predicts their writing performance to choose appropriate vocabulary at 85.0084%.

**Table 5: Correlation of PBALW and their Writing Performance on Mechanics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PBALW</th>
<th>Writing Performance on Mechanics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PBALW</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Performance on Mechanics</td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
<td>.845**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Table 5 above reveals the correlation of the participants' belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance on mechanics. As shown in the table, the r-value is .845**. It is closer to 1.000, and the p-value is .000. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). This indicates that there is a strong positive correlation between the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their performance to correctly spell, capitalize and punctuate. The coefficient of determination conducted shows that the participants’ belief about autonomous learning of writing predicts their writing performance with regard to correctly spelling, capitalizing and punctuating at 71.4025%.

4.2 Major Findings of the Study

Pearson’s r correlation coefficient computed to examine the correlation between the students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance on each aspect of writing (content, organization, grammar, vocabulary and mechanics) revealed that there is a strong positive correlation (r-values ≥ .845, p-value = .000). As the students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing increases, their writing performance to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics increases as well. The coefficient of determination indicated that the students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing predicts their writing performance at above 71%.

5. Conclusions

Based on the findings, this study concludes that there is a strong positive correlation between students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing and their writing performance to discuss relevant contents, organize contents appropriately and use accurate grammar, appropriate vocabulary and correct mechanics. That is, as students’ belief about autonomous learning of writing increases, their writing performance on each of these aspects of writing increases too.

6. Recommendations

The following recommendations have been made based on the conclusions of this study.
- Students need to develop a better belief about autonomous learning of writing so that they will take on more responsibility for their own learning of writing and thus improve their writing performance, and instructors also need to encourage students to this end;
- Interested researchers can conduct similar studies on the other macro-language skills, grammar or vocabulary.

References


