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Abstract- This study investigated first year civil Engineering students' attitude towards Basic writing Skills course. The study used descriptive design and both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The participants of the study were 60 first year Civil Engineering students of Hawassa University. The main data collection instruments used in this study was questionnaire and unstructured interview. The results of the study indicated that first year Civil Engineering students have positive attitude towards the contents and topics provided in the writing course, and the teaching approach applied in the writing class. The study also confirmed that among the four major language skills, writing is the second difficult skill. Majority of the respondents prefer to practice writing outside the classroom. The study found out that there are six basic difficulties shared by the participants. The most frequent difficulty is vocabulary followed by grammar and fear of negative comments. The remaining ones, lack of motivation to write, insufficient time and teacher's role are reported to be the least problematic.

Keywords: writing skills, students' attitude, writing difficulties, writing contents, writing tasks.

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Abstract- This study investigated first year civil Engineering students' attitude towards Basic writing Skills course. The study used descriptive design and both qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The participants of the study were 60 first year Civil Engineering students of Hawassa University. The main data collection instruments used in this study was questionnaire and unstructured interview. The results of the study indicated that first year Civil Engineering students have positive attitude towards the contents and topics provided in the writing course, and the teaching approach applied in the writing class. The study also confirmed that among the four major language skills, writing is the second difficult skill. Majority of the respondents prefer to practice writing outside the classroom. The study found out that there are six basic difficulties shared by the participants. The most frequent difficulty is vocabulary followed by grammar and fear of negative comments. The remaining ones, lack of motivation to write, insufficient time and teacher's role are reported to be the least problematic.

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I. Introduction

Writing is considered the most important language skill that students require for their personal development and academic success (Mukulu et al. 2006).Similarly, Rao (2007) points out that writing strengthens students' learning, thinking and reflecting on the English language in their academics. In supporting the above claim, Ahmed (2010) notes that competence in writing helps students perform well in their academic programmes.

Today education not only demands passing marks for the given papers but it also demand good skills and learning ability. At university level there are many forms of academic writing such as assignments, essays exams, coursework, senior essays, lab or field reports etc. This clearly tells us that students need academic help at their every single stage of educational life.

As far as English is used as a medium of instruction in all higher institutions in Ethiopia, writing plays a pivotal role for students' academic success. According to Key 2000; Shanahan, 2004; Sperling & Freedman, 2001, in Huy (2015), writing plays two distinctbut complementary roles. First, it is a skill draws on the use of strategies (such as planning, evaluating, and revising text) to accomplish a variety of goal, such as writing a report or expressing an opinion with the support of evidence. Second, writing is a mean of extending and deepening student's knowledge; it acts as a tool for learning subject matter.

This indicates that university students are expected to become competent in writing. As writing is one of the most difficult skills, teachers at university are expected to apply various techniques to help students learn and practice writing. Moreover, teachers should also help students develop positive attitude towards the course writing. This is because students' attitude towards the course may affect their academic achievement in one way or another.

According to Dernoun (2015), attitude is an important factor that plays a large part in students' literacy learning. Attitude affects motivation to learn and write and influences how students approach the task of writing. Attitudes are based on self-efficacy beliefs, and that is important to understand as well. Negative attitudes can make writing even more challenging. This shows that studying the attitude of students towards the writing course is important for guiding writing instruction. Specifically this study tries to answer the following two research questions.

1. What is the attitude of students towards writing skills?
2. What are the main factors that affect students to write correctly?

II. Review of Related Literature

a) What is Academic Writing?

Writing is defined by various scholars in various ways. Thus, it is helpful to state some of the definitions given by different scholars. Hyland (2003) defines writing as "marks on a page or a screen, a coherent arrangement of words, clauses, and sentences, structured according to a system of rules". Similarly, according to Crystal (1995) writing is a way of

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communication which uses a system of visual marks made on some kind of surface.

Academic writing is unlike any other form of writing, is an essential requirement that university students are expected to develop the proper skill, technique and style for their academic success. Developing good academic writing skills has many rewards beyond completing the course or scoring good grades. It helps students to develop the skill of thinking critically and objectively while clearly conveying complex ideas in a well-structured, concise format.

b) The Role of Writing in English Language Teaching

As writing is one of the most important skills, it requires a continuing process of discovering how to find the most effective language for communicating one's thoughts and feelings. In other words, people usually write in order to communicate facts, feelings, attitudes, and ideas clearly and effectively. In fact, writing is a complex process that allows writers to explore thoughts and ideas, and make them visible and concrete. It is also a powerful instrument of thinking because it provides students with a way of gaining control over their thoughts (Cotton, 2001). Writing enhances language acquisition as learners experiment with words, sentences, and larger chunks of writing to communicate their ideas and to reinforce the grammar and vocabulary they are learning in the class.

One can understand that writing is one of the challenging skills. The reason could be writers are expected to balance important issues like content, organization and punctuation to convey their messages. In order to master this skill, writers should get opportunities to practice the skill continuously. Since writing is one of the difficult skills, English teachers are expected to create conducive environment for students to practice. As a result, students can produce various written works for different audiences.

c) Writing Difficulties

University students are expected to practice writing to be successful in their academic studies. They need writing skill to write assignments, laboratory reports, essay exams, project works and senior essays. To support this, Chou (2011) conducted a study on the students' perspectives toward academic writing and the researcher finds out that they consider academic writing of importance since it is a starting point for publishing their work and a way to let other people know their interests. If students' writing skill is poor, their academic success may be affected in one or another way.

d) Why attitude matters?

According to Rajecki (1982)attitude is defined as the way in which a person thinks (cognitive component) feels (affective component) and intends to behave behavioral component towards something. It is the summation of the three components that is emphasized for determining the overall attitude and not a particular component.

The attitude of students towards language learning specifically learning writing skills is essential to help them to be successful. The reason is that once attitude towards something may affect his/her success in one way or another. As to Oller, Hudson, &Liu 1977; Chihara & Oller 1978; Oller, Baca,& Vigil 1978) in Brown (2000), studies conducted found out that positive attitude towards self, the native language group, and the target language group enhanced proficiency. Thus, studying student's attitude towards writing course essential as it is emphasized in this study.

III. Research Design and Methodology

a) Research Design

The main objective of the study is to investigate the attitude of students towards Basic Writing course which they have been studying in the second semester of the year 2017. In order to achieve this objective, a descriptive design is used. Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches have been adopted. Data collected through close ended questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively whereas data collected through open ended questionnaire and unstructured interview was analyzed qualitatively.

b) Sampling size and technique

This study is conducted in the second semester of academic year of 2017 at Hawassa University. The total population of this study was 120 first year students who were enrolled in Civil Engineering department after they have completed the pre-engineering courses for a semester. Out of 120 students, 60 (50%) of them were selected as a sample to fill the questionnaire using simple random sampling technique. All of first year Ethiopian public universities students have to take the course Basic Writing Skills (EnLa 1012); the learning period is 5 ECTS(3 hours for lecture and 2 hours for tutorial) per week.

c) Instrument of data collection

Questionnaire was used as data collecting instrument. A questionnaires defined by Forcese and Richer (1973) is a form of securing answers to questions. They further explain that they are forms which the respondent fills in by himself/herself. A survey method uses questionnaires as data collecting instruments. Questionnaires elicit good data and save time and they have the ability toreach a number of respondents (Forcese and Richer, 1973:85). For this study, both open-ended and close-ended questionnaire were used to gather the data. The questionnaires were adapted from Hanane (2015) and Huy (2015).

The second data collection instrument used in this study was unstructured interview. This instrument

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was used to strengthen the data collected through questionnaire.

IV. Data Analysis and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to investigate Hawassa University Civil Engineering students' attitude towards Basic writing skills. In this section, the data gathered through questionnaire and unstructured interview is presented and discussed based on the specific objectives designed at the beginning of the study.

Table 1: Students attitude towards Basic writing Skills

No.	Item	Respondents	Interesting (A)	Less interesting (B)	Very interesting (C)	Total
1	In your opinion, the content of the course Basic Writing skill is:	F	42	3	15	60
		%	70	5	25	100

Table above1 illustrates what the participants think about the course basic writing skills. It can be clearly seen that the majority of them believe that the writing course is interesting and very interesting. Only 5% of the respondents reported that it is less interesting. From this we can deduce that students have positive attitude towards the course Basic writing skills. In the first item of the un-structured interview question, our out of five respondents reported that the course is interesting. Most of them indicated that the contents of the writing course are interesting.

Table 2: Students' Evaluation of their Level in Writing

No.	Item	Respondents	Excellent (A)	Good (B)	Low (C)	Total
2	How do you evaluate your level in writing?	F	7	46	7	60
		%	11.7	76.6	11.7	100

Table 2 indicates that 76.6 of the students evaluate their writing level as good whereas equal number of students (11.7%) of them evaluated their writing level excellent and low. This implies that only small number (11.7%) of them have low level in writing whereas most of them are satisfied with their writing level. In the second question of the interview, five students were asked to reflect about their writing level. Three out of five believed that they have very good writing performance whereas two of them think that they have low writing performance. This interview result confirms the questionnaire result.

Table 3: Students response on priorities given to writing Skills

No.	Item	Respondents	Listening (A)	Reading (B)	Speaking (C)	Writing (D)	Total
3	Rank the following skills in terms of difficulty according to you.	F	9	5	30	16	60
		%	15	8.3	50	26.7	100

According to table 3 above, writing is the second difficult skill next to speaking. The third difficult skill is listening followed by reading. This shows that teachers should give due attention to students' writing difficulties skill. Out of the five interviewees, only two of them ranked writing as the second difficult skill. The remaining three ranked writing the third difficult skill. This data contradicts with the questionnaire result.

Table 4: Students 'view towards the writing tasks

No.	Item	Respondents	Difficult (A)	Medium (B)	Easy (C)	Total
4	How do you find the writing tasks of the course Basic writing skills?	F	6	44	10	60
		%	10	73.3	16.7	100

According to table4, many students (73.3%) think that the writing tasks in the course basic writing skills are medium whereas, 16.7% of them feel that the writing tasks are easy. However, only 10% of them think that the tasks are difficult. This implies that the tasks in the writing course are not difficult to the students. In item 4, of the unstructured interview, the majority of the respondents feel that the writing tasks included in the course material are not difficult. When they were asked to justify this, they indicated that most of the tasks are related to the writing tasks they had been practicing during their preparatory classes. Few of them think that the writing tasks are difficult to them.

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Table 5: Meaning of writing to students

No.	Item	Respondents	A way to express my self (A)	A way to communicate with people (B)	A way to express personal experiences (C)	A way to get marks (D)	Total
5	What does writing mean to you?	F	18	24	15	3	60
		%	30	40	25	5	100

As it can be seen from the above table, 40% of the students reported that they consider the writing as a way to communicate with people, 30% and 25% of them claimed writing as a way to express themselves and a way to express personal experiences respectively. Only, 5% of the students noted writing as a way to get marks. This clearly tells us that students believe in the main purposes of writing. In item 5 of the unstructured interview, the students were asked what does writing mean to them. For this item, almost all of the students reported that writing is a way to all the expressions mentioned, but none of them considered writing as a way to get marks.

Table 6: Students' attitude towards the time of studying writing in class

No.	Item	Respondents	It is too long (A)	It is too short (B)	It is enough for practicing writing skill (C)	It is not enough for practicing writing skill (D)	Total
6	What do you think about the time of learning Basic writing skills?	F	2	5	39	14	60
		%	3.3	8.3	65	23.3	100

As to the question whether the time allowed to write a composition is enough or not 65% of them claimed that the time of learning the course (3 hours lecture and 2 hours tutorial) is enough; however, 23.3% of the students think that the time is not enough for practicing writing skill; the remaining 8.3% and 3.3% claimed that the time is too short and too long respectfully. All interview students agreed that the time allocated for the course is enough. Two of them said, "If we use the allocated time properly, it is more than enough". Both the questionnaire and interview result shows that the 5 ECTS allotted for the course is sufficient.

Table 7: Extent of Basic writing skills teacher's help when student write

No.	Item	Respondents	Never (A)	Sometimes (B)	Always (C)	Total
7	Does your Basic writing teacher help you when you write?	F	0	15	45	60
		%	0	25	75	100

According to table 7 above, 75% of the students confirmed that their writing course teacher help them always when they are writing and 25% of them said their writing teacher help them sometimes when they are writing. Majority of the interviewed students indicated that their Basic writing instructor was giving appropriate support or feedback during the semester. However, two of them added that they would have got a better support than they had if the class size was smaller than the assigned number. This indicates that students are getting appropriate support expected from their writing teacher.

Table 8: Students' writing practice in/outside the classroom

No.	Item	Respondents	In class (A)	Outside the class (B)	Total
8	Where do you prefer to like writing?	F	16	44	60
		%	26.7	73.3	100

As it can be seen from the above table, 75.3% of the students prefer to write outside their classrooms, but 26.7% of them like to write in class. Four of the interviewed students replied that they prefer to write outside the classroom. When they were asked why, they said pointed out that they less anxious outside the classroom than writing in classrooms. However, two of them said that they prefer to write in their classrooms

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that outside their classrooms. These two students were asked the reason why they prefer to write inside their classrooms. They said that they concentrate more while they were writing in their classrooms than writing outside classrooms. From this we can deduce that majority of the students prefer to write outside their classroom which is encouraging to have writing habit even outside the classroom.

Table 9: Students feelings about writing

No.	Item	Respondents	Yes (A)	No (B)	Total
9	Do you feel relax when expressing your thoughts in writing?	F	52	8	60
		%	86.7	13.3	100

As seen in Table 9, 86.7% of the students feel relaxed when they are expressing their thoughts in writing; however, only 13.3% of them are not feeling relaxed while expressing their thoughts in writing. This implies that majority of the students are not anxious while expressing their thoughts in writing. The interview result also supports this data.

Table 10: Amount of time students spend on writing a day

No.	Item	Respondents	Write to 30 minutes (A)	Over 30 minutes to over one hour a day (B)	Over one hour a day (C)	Not self study at home (D)	Total
10	How much time do you spend on self study at home?	F	18	12	14	16	60
		%	30	20	23.3	26.7	100

The result from table 10 above shows that majority(more than 70%) of students seem committed to study writing skills by themselves outside the classroom. Hence, 30% of the students self study writing to 30 minutes, 23% spend over one hour a day and 20% of them spend over 30 minutes to over one hour a day. However, the remaining 26.7% of the students are not spending any time for self study to practice writing. As some of them mentioned in the open-ended questionnaire, they are too busy in doing different assignments and project works of other major area courses. Similarly, the interviewed students indicated that they spend some amount of time in practicing writing.

Table 11: Writing Difficulties

No.	Item	Respondents	Yes (A)	No (B)	Total
11	Do you have some difficulties while writing?	F	30	30	60
		%	50	50	100

As it is indicated in table 11, 50% of the students said that they have difficulties while writing. Whereas the remaining 50% of them said they do not have difficulties while writing. However, three of the interviewed students claimed that they do not have serious difficulties in writing. Three of them said, "We cannot say we are completely proficient, but we can at least communicate our ideas without fear". On the other hand, they said they have some difficulties in some areas. This shows that almost equal number of the students face difficulties during writing.

Table 12: Students' difficulty area in writing

No.	Item	Respondents	Grammar (A)	Vocabulary (B)	Insufficient time (C)	Teacher's role (D)	Lack of motivation to write (E)	Fear of negative comments (F)	Total
12	If yes, do you think the writing problem is due to:	F	18	22	2	0	4	14	60
		%	30	36.7	3.3	0	6.7	23.3	100

According to participants' responses, there are six basic difficulties shared by most of first year Civil Engineering students. As it is shown in table 12, the most frequent difficulty is vocabulary followed by grammar and fear of negative comments. On the contrary, lack of motivation to write, insufficient time and teacher's role are reported to be the least problematic. The unstructured interview result was in line with the questionnaire result. This clearly tells us that students have difficulties in different areas.

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Table 13: Effectiveness of the present teaching of writing

No.	Item	Respondents	Yes (A)	No (B)	Total
13	Does the present teaching of writing help you write effectively (clear and concise writing?)	F	57	3	60
		%	95	5	100

As it can be indicated in the above table, 95% of the students are happy with the present teaching approach of writing applied by their teacher. Whereas, only 5% of them are not satisfied with the teacher's approach of teaching writing. This shows though majority of the students are satisfied with teacher approach of teaching few of them still need help to practice writing. The interview result also supports this data. Majority of the students in the interview pointed out that they are satisfied with the methodology applied by the course instructor. They said the teacher have been helping them to pass through all the process of paragraph/essay writing stages (pre-writing, drafting, proof reading…) in order to compose a certain paragraph or essay.

Table 14: Students' satisfaction with the provided topics

No.	Item	Respondents	Yes (A)	No (B)	Total
14	Are you satisfied with the topics provided in the course Basic writing skills?	F	58	2	60
		%	96.7	3.3	100

Table 14 shows that 96.7% of the students said that they are satisfied with the topics provided in the writing course. 3.3% of them reported that they are not satisfied with writing topics included in the course material or worksheet. Students who are not satisfied with the writing topics indicated that they have difficulties in finding something to say about and do not have enough vocabulary to express their thoughts. During the interview session, most of the interviewed students reported that they are satisfied with the topics provided in the course material. Only of these students said that she was not interested with the topics included in the teaching material of the course. She said, "Most of the topics are not related to Engineering; they are very general".

V. Conclusion

According to the data obtained from the questionnaire and un-structured interview, more than 90% of first year Civil Engineering students have positive attitude towards the contents provided in the Basic writing course. Similarly more than 96 % of them are satisfied with the writing topics provided in the course. When speaking about students writing proficiency, majority of them leveled their writing ability as good. With regard to the difficulty level of the major English skills, the respondents' ranked writing as the second difficult skill next to speaking, but the interview result indicated different result. On the other hand, more than 73% of them think that the writing tasks in the course basic writing skills are medium. Majority of the questionnaire and interview respondents also believe that the time given to learn the course is enough. In terms of students 'preference, majority of the students prefer to write outside their classroom. Furthermore more than 85% of the students feel relaxed when they are expressing their thoughts in writing. The data also shows that the most frequent difficulty area is vocabulary followed by grammar and fear of negative comments. However, lack of motivation to write, insufficient time and teacher's role are reported to be the least problematic. With regard to students satisfaction towards with the provided topics in the teaching material and the teaching approach applied in the writing class, majority of them are satisfied.

VI. Limitations and Future Research

The current study has investigated the attitude of first year Civil Engineering students towards the course Basic writing Skills at Hawassa University. Therefore, there should be an in-depth investigation to be carried out on the attitude of students towards Basic Writing Skills course of a larger number of different majors rather than Civil Engineering field.

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