

INVESTIGATING THE PROBLEMS FACED BY THE TEACHERS IN DEVELOPING ENGLISH WRITING SKILLS

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English writing skills involves developing linguistic and communicative competence of the learner which is quite a challenging task. Many factors hinder the process of teaching and learning these skills. Most of the students of public sector institutes do not perform well in English writing tasks and ultimately face average or poor results in academics. The purpose of this study is to highlight the problems which hinder the teachers in developing English writing skills. Government sector institutes of district Sargodha are the focus of this study. These institutes contain students from both rural and urban areas. The Population of this study comprises 9 English language teachers. The data has been collected through the tool of structured interviews. The collected data has been analyzed descriptively. This study is not only to point out the problematic factors but also suggest some remedial measures to improve the situation. The research findings and suggestions would facilitate the teachers and the concerning authorities to improve the ELT situation in public sector institutes.

Keywords: Writing skills, teachers' problems, government institutes, remedial measures

INTRODUCTION

Developing English writing skills has been considered a difficult task, especially in public sector institutes of Pakistan, where the students come from rural as well as urban areas. This investigation is an attempt to find out the major problems of ESL teachers in developing English writing skills. Moreover, this study will help the concerning authorities to facilitate the process of developing English writing skills from both the teachers and the learners perspective.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since 1980s, a great deal of theoretical works have been done on the nature of L2 writing and learning. According to Cumming (2003), it is almost impossible to apply any specific theory to teaching writing skills. Straub (2000) is of the view that the writing skills cannot be taught but only learned (as cited in Hyland, 2003).

Origination of the Art of Writing

The actual manifestation of any language is only by means of writing. Our present 'alphabetic writing' emerged in about 3000 years ago by the Greeks who also used the 'vowel' and 'consonant' sounds. Later, this alphabetic writing was taken by the Western Europe (Parker, Riley 1997 and Yule 2010)

Developmental Stages of the English Writing Skills

Jones, McGinley, Siddiqui & Waseem (2006) illustrate the three developmental stages of the writing skills. These include simple 'orthography', 'orthography to write' and 'practice grammatical structures' and the final stage deals with the use of orthography as a means of communication.

Writing Skills in Pakistani Academia

Researchers like Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and Silva, Leki, and Carso (1997) put forward that the ESL writing skills in Asian countries are based on production of the content learned by rote. They term this sort of L2 writing skills as 'knowledge telling'. This mere 'knowledge telling' stage is ultimately transformed into mature writing, which they term as 'knowledge transforming' (as cited in Hyland, 2003)

In his research findings, Imran (2011) highlights that most of the ESL learners do not feel at ease when they go through the different phases of development of English writing skills especially when they work with grammatical structures, spellings, punctuation and lexical items. It was due to the 'traditional approach' of teaching and learning that these learners commit a lot of mistakes and errors in their written works.

Ahmed (2007) has identified that short timing of English period and the overcrowded classrooms affect the efficacy of teaching and learning of English writing skills. Moreover, the learners are also provided with readymade helping material to qualify their exams and even sometimes, most of the teachers themselves do the writing exercises on black/white boards.

Major Issues Involved in Writing Skills

Conventional Issues

Harmer (2001 & 2007) describes conventional issues related to English writing skills. These issues are related to the use of lexical items, punctuation, text format, spellings and syntax. A lot of practice can enable the learners overcome these issues.

Primary Issues

Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill and Pincas (2003) point out the following four kinds of problems related to developing English writing skills. These include: "(i) Mechanical problems with the script of English; (ii) Problems of accuracy of English grammar and lexis; (iii) Problems relating the style of writing to the demands of a particular situation; (iv) Problems of developing ease and comfort in expressing what needs to be said." (p. 116). These problematic areas can be overcome through effective planning and guided writing.

Issues at Intermediate Level

Students at advanced level or intermediate level feel difficulties in developing coherent sentences and knitting them in a larger text. At this stage, students also face problems in developing formal or informal piece of writing. Writing skills also accompany many other skills which facilitate the learners to construct their writing (Clementson, 2005).

Factors Involved in Developing Writing Skills

Influence of L1 on L2 Learning

Silva (1993) suggests that second language is usually different from the first language 'strategically, rhetorically and linguistically' (p.669). She points out that the written assignments of the L2 learners are syntactically and semantically loose. Usually paragraphs

lack coherence and all this is due to the difference of L2 from L1. According to Hyland (2003), this difference also affects the thinking faculty of the learners.

Effects of Multicultural, Multilingual and Psychological Factors

Anees and Raazia (2007) point out some social and psychological factors which affect L2 writing skills. Social factors include social status, family background etc and psychological factors include motivational level, age etc. Lantolf (1999) mentions effects of multicultural and multilingual background on the learners' writing skills. Lave and Wenger (1991) also emphasize that the entire teaching process must be compatible with social set up and cultural background, which they termed as 'situated cognition' (as cited in Hyland, 2003).

Hanson (2009) describes that teaching becomes more productive if the learners are provided stress free environment. Dr. Robert Sylwester (1995) supporting the issue also says that mind works at its best when the environment is secure, and disciplined (as cited in Hanson, 2009).

Effects of Grammar Teaching on English Writing Skills

Clark (2003) opines that learners must be taught writing process. This enables the learners to write in any situation. According the traditional approach, teaching grammar plays pivotal role in the process of writing skills but the latest researches have proved that the grammar teaching has no significant influence in the development of these skills.

Braddock & Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer (1963) summarize their findings of many years long research as "...the teaching of formal [traditional] grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing." (p. 37-38, as cited in Clark, 2003)

Many researchers like Bateman and Zidonis (1996), Barham, Lamb and Wyllie (1976) have worked on the influence of grammar teaching on English writing skill. They all conclude that the classes where English grammar is taught, students lose their interest and they take English writing skills as a very hard task and such classes become 'boring, useless and repetitive'. Hillocks (1986) suggests that usage and 'mechanics' of the writing skills must be carefully handled with appropriate planning (as cited in Clark, 2003).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Following research questions will be particularly addressed.

- i. What problems do the teachers face about the learners in developing linguistic and communicative competence?
- ii. What major problems do the teachers face about the physical context of ELT class?
- iii. What is the major focus of the students and the teachers during ELT class?

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

- i. To highlight the growth areas of the learners due to which they lag behind in English writing tasks.
- ii. To describe the effects of academic background on the learning of English Writing skills.
- iii. To investigate the issues related to classroom environment, which affect the process of teaching English writing skills.

- iv. To highlight the pedagogical dynamics of an ELT classroom.
- v. To suggest remedial measures to improve the linguistic and communicative competence of the learners.

Significance

Students with poor English writing skills may lag behind in their academic and professional career. This study is a step to point out the hindering elements, which affect the teaching and the learning process of English writing skills. The prime focus of this study is to highlight the major problematic areas regarding context and the learners due to which the teachers feel inconvenience in developing English writing skills. Hopefully, the findings of this research will be helpful to the administrative authorities to enhance the ELT conditions of public institutes.

PROCEDURE

In order to diagnose the problems in developing English writing skills, an open ended questionnaire will be filled in by the ESL teachers. Later the collected data will be analyzed descriptively and graphically wherever it is possible.

Population

The population of this study would comprise the ESL teachers of different public sector institutes of district Sargodha.

Sample

The sample of this study was consisted of 9 ESL teachers of public sector institutes. Three teachers were selected from one institute and two teachers were selected from each institute situated in the vicinity of Sargodha.

Codes of the Population

In order to maintain the anonymity, the teachers would be assigned the following codes:

Teachers' Codes:

T - 01	T - 02	T - 03
T - 04	T - 05	T - 06
T - 07	T - 08	T - 09

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data was collected from the selected population through structured interviews. After the data was collected, it was analyzed descriptively. Question-wise data analysis is given here under:

Q.1. What factors may disturb you while teaching English writing skills?

In response to question No.1, it has been observed that 66.66% of the population faces problems related to the students' lack of linguistic competence like poor English grammar, weak sentence structure etc. 33% of the population faces problems related to overcrowded classrooms and suffocated environment. Among them were 11% are those who face problems related to syllabus coverage and noisy context of the classroom.

Q.2. Do you have full access to the equipments/ devices which are helpful in ELT class? If yes, then please elaborate what sort of devices you use.

In response to this question, it has been found that only white boards and books are available. No other AV aids are there to facilitate the teaching learning process.

Q.3. What is the strength of students in your English class? How do you engage them in language learning activities?

Strength of the class varies. 44% of the population has about 80 students strength, 33% has students strength about 70, and 22 % has students strength ranging from 50 to 60. Almost all the teachers engage their classes through discussion and text reading.

Q.4. What are the major growth areas (weak areas) of your students concerning English writing skills?

Almost the entire population agreed that the students have poor background knowledge of grammar. Spelling mistakes and lack of creativity are also the basic growth areas of all the students.

Q.5. What teaching methodology do you usually adopt for developing English writing skills?

Only 22% use both GTM and 11% use both GTM (Grammar Translation Method) and DM (Direct Method). The rest of the population use techniques like brainstorming, writing practice and take test off and on.

Q.6. To what extent are you satisfied with your teaching methodology?

All the members of the population are satisfied with their methods and techniques which are usually employed with in the limited resources.

Q.7. How much time do you allocate for developing English writing Skills in each period?

It has been observed that 44% of the population gives 25 – 30 minutes for writing practice on daily basis where as 33% spend 15-25 minutes only. Only 11% give 40 minutes daily and 11% give not time for writing practice at all.

Q.8. Do you think that the students come with sufficient knowledge about English language from their previous classes?

The entire population is of the view that the students at intermediate level don't come with good knowledge of English language skills. Only a small number of students have some basic knowledge.

Q.9. In case of the students with poor English writing skills, how do you manage to develop their writing competence?

55% population is of the view that a lot of guided and free writing practice can enhance the writing skills of the learners. 22 % believe that by developing their base of English grammar their writing skills can be enhanced. 22 % believe that by giving extra time and repeating tests, the writing skills of the students can be improved.

Q.10. Suggest some measures to improve English writing skills of the student of the public sector institutes.

The following suggestions have been put forward:

- i. A/V aids must be provided;

- ii. Class strength should be controlled, may not exceed 30 students in each class;
- iii. A separate period for writing must be introduced or at least 15-20 minutes must be given for writing skills;
- iv. Noise and stress free classroom environment must be maintained.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Developing writing skills is a slow and gradual process. A lot many factors involve which disturb the teaching and learning process of English writing skills. Here under are the research findings highlighted by the selected population of the ESL teachers:

- i. At intermediate level, most of the students have poor English language background.
- ii. Proper A/V aids are not available to the teachers.
- iii. Classes are overcrowded.
- iv. Teachers usually follow the traditional approaches for teaching purpose and they are satisfied with their teaching approach.
- v. Teachers cannot give proper time for writing practice during class because of lengthy syllabus and overcrowded classrooms.

SUGGESTIONS

On the basis literature review, data analysis collected and finding of study, suggestions are:

- i. English writing skills may be properly taught at primary, middle and high level.
- ii. Syllabus may be designed to promote writing competence of the learners.
- iii. Teachers may be properly trained.
- iv. At college level, some extra classes may be arranged to make up deficit linguistic areas. Emphasis must be laid on sentence structure, grammar and spellings.
- v. Students may be motivated to take interest in developing writing competence.
- vi. Classroom strength must be minimized.

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