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Students' Weaknesses in Writing English at the Undergraduate Level

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Abstract

Writing English is one of the important skills which learners have to learn at all levels of education. Effective learning of writing involves primarily three stages such as pre-writing, free-writing, and re-writing. Every stage is important for learners and learners are required to write essays, assignments or any kinds of compositions in English at the undergraduate level. The researcher's experiences show that the students at undergraduate level studying different subjects including English literature perform poorly in writing. This study tried to explore the current status of English writing, and the challenges students face during writing. Mixed-method approach was employed to collect data from 40 undergraduate students and four teachers from different departments of Govt. Edward College, Pabna. Data were collected using a writing test, a questionnaire for the students, and semi-structured interviews with randomly selected four teachers from four departments. Collected data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively and the findings were placed under the themes of the research questions. The major findings indicated that the students had weaknesses in grammar, vocabulary, and tenses; and the challenges they faced included brainstorming and maintaining coherence in writing.
Keyword: English writing, undergraduate level, weakness, composition, challenge

1. Introduction

It is difficult to acquire knowledge and skills for students learning English as an additional language and it is more difficult for Bangladeshi learners (Abbad, 1988; Khan, 1999; Rabaab'ah, 2005; Zughoul & Taminian, 1984). Many researchers state that writing is one of the most difficult skills and learners at all levels face difficultly to acquire it properly (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989; Kurk & Atay, 2007; Latif, 2007).Hughley et al. (1983) state three stages which include pre-writing, free-writing, and re-writing Pre-writing means a stage of writing where the writer thinks how to start writing. In free-writing stage, the writer writes freely and in re-writing she/he writes any composition and edits and checks it again and again. Every stage of writing is very important for learners and they are required to learn how to write essays, assignments or any compositions in English. This study includes the learners of the undergraduate level of Government Edward College of Bangladesh who face problems in writing.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The purpose of the study was to explore the status of students' writing and to identify the challenges students faced in writing. In fact, Salem (2007) and Khan (1999) state that second or foreign language learners, especially Bangladeshi learners, feel weakness in writing English because of their limited stock of vocabulary, idioms, grammatical rules, mechanical process, cohesiveness, organizational knowledge, cultural knowledge and content based knowledge. Most of the students feel intimidated when they are required to write on a certain topic. Most of the students do not know how to start, how to develop their ideas and how to edit and conclude their writing.

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Therefore, the current study tried to explore the status of students' writing and challenges students studying at undergraduate level in Government Edward College, Pabna faced in writing English.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The objectives for this study are to:
   a. examine students' present level of writing proficiency
   b. explore the barriers students face during free writing

1.3 Research Questions

This study tried to find answers to the following questions:
   a) What is the current status of English writing skill at undergraduate level at Govt Edward College, Pabna?
   b) What are the barriers that students face in writing English?

2. Review of Literature

A vast body of literature is available on the weaknesses of students in writing English in the global contexts although little work has been done in Bangladesh. Weigle (2002) discusses in long details the ability to write anything effectively in the global situation and explains that instruction in writing is playing an increasing role in both second and foreign language education. In the second or foreign language contexts, learners need to acquire the ability to write effectively in order to adjust to the global situation. At the university level in particular, writing is not just regarded as a standard system of communication but also as an essential tool for learning. But due to the lack of writing ability students do not possess the appropriate skills of writing. In this regard, Weigle (2002) describes some models of writing and due to the absence of these models writing development seems to be hampered.Hayes and Flower (1980) describe the process of writing in terms of the task environment i.e. writing assignment, producing text, learner's long term memory, knowledge of topic, knowledge of audience, writing plans, and a number of cognitive processes which include planning, translating and revising is important. The important insight of Hayes-Flower model for writing is a recursive process but not a linear process. According to Hayes and Flower (1980), students think less of themselves as writers if writing ability is seen as an inherent and relatively unchangeable talent. So, the cognitive processes in the Hayes model are text interpretation, reflection, and text production. In order to utilize this knowledge students need grammatical, linguistic and cultural knowledge.

It is noted that much of language knowledge is contained in the Hayes model under 'task schema' and 'genre knowledge'. Linguistic or grammatical knowledge, discourse knowledge, and sociolinguistic knowledge are essential for overcoming the weaknesses of writing. So, the Hayes model is significant for learners to overcome the weaknesses of written English.Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) advocate a distinction between knowledge telling and knowledge transforming. Knowledge telling is a kind of writing that Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) call 'natural' or 'unproblematic'. It can be done by any fluent speaker of a language who has a grasp of the writing system. The writing of most children and adolescents refers to this category. On the other hand, the practice of writing creates new knowledge and may change the writer's view of communication. This process of knowledge is regarded as knowledge transformation and it involves problem analysis and goal setting which lead to problem solving activities. This model provides an explanation of the differences between skilled and unskilled writers. Skilled writers use writing strategies but unskilled writers use these rarely. This model has its limitations; e.g. the model does not provide an explanation of how one makes the transition from knowledge telling to knowledge transformation. In spite of it, this model is significant because it highlights important issues in setting tasks for writing assessment.

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3. Research Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method design to collect data. The present level of proficiency and the barriers students faced were studied through students' written test, questionnaire survey and through semi-structured interviews with teachers. The status was identified from the students' written work which was given at the beginning of the study. Students were asked to write a paragraph on Learning English Writing in the Classroom. A questionnaire contacting 12 multiple choice questions covering areas such as writing techniques, medium of written instruction and examination, level of English written proficiency needed for the courses, present level of written proficiency, requirement of writing essays, assignments and compositions in English, carefulness of punctuation, grammatical knowledge, practice, educational background, vocabulary, idioms and mechanical process were provided to the students for the survey, and teachers were interviewed with a semi-structured interview schedule

Data were collected from 40 students from four departments including English and one teacher was selected from each department. The student participants were randomly selected so that there could be a good mixture of academically weaker and stronger students. The following table shows the departments and the number of participants selected from each department.

Departments	Number of participants	Number of teachers
Department of English	10	01
Department of Sociology	10	01
Department of Accounting	10	01
Department of Physics	10	01
Total	40	04

Student participants have been chosen from other departments as they have to study a compulsory paper in English and they have to learn English writing alongside other skills of English. Collected quantitative data were analysed statistically using percentage and the qualitative data were first transcribed, coded, and then categorized based on the themes of the research questions. The composition written by students was studied to find the kinds of mistakes they committed. Then the findings have been presented under the main themes of the research questions.

4. Findings and Discussions

The major findings that emerged included students have low level of English writing skill and the major challenges they faced included brainstorming and the mechanics of writing.

4.1 Students' Level of Writing

Students' weaknesses in writing English have emerged from their writing, from the questionnaire survey, and from the interviews with the teachers. It was also revealed that the students are weak in grammar and in the mechanics of writing. It was revealed from the paragraph written by the students that none of the 40 students' English writing skill was improved enough that reflect the standard of the National University of Bangladesh. It is observed that many students cannot use tenses, number, right forms of verbs, preposition, and punctuation properly. Around 50% students had many spelling mistakes which should not have been in large number as all the students have studied English as a compulsory subject for long 12/13 years or more. This echoes the findings of Salem (2007) and Khan (1999) where they mentioned that students had weaknesses in vocabulary, grammar, tenses, and organization of writing. In answer to questions of the questionnaire, 37 out of 40 participants (92.5%) have confessed that they are weak in grammar; 39 out of 40 participants (98%) have confessed that they have a small stock of words and they cannot write sentences correctly and logically.

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Teachers in the interview have also claimed that students have weaknesses in grammar, tenses, number (singular and plural), punctuation, preposition, sentence construction, and spelling. Moreover, many students cannot maintain the sequence of writing; they put they sentences in a haphazard way. One of the teachers alleged in the interview, "At this level, students should have been able to write correct English logically but it never happens in reality. Only 3 to 5 per cent students can write correct English and their sentences are coherent". Another teacher has claimed that the students are not that motivated to practise writing and the teachers also do not have much time to provide feedback to a large number of students in the department. The researcher's 25 years of teaching experiences show that the teachers of undergraduate level never provide feedback on students' written work; they just mark the students' assignments and written examination scripts. Students are not also found to be trying to improve their English writing skill. Actually the culture of recurrent feedback on students' writing is absent from the colleges. This might be a reason for students' low level of achievement in writing.

4.2 Major Challenges Encountered

50% of the participants who take part in the questionnaire survey have confessed that it is challenging for them to brainstorm on a topic; they do not find many pieces of information to start the writing because they were not engaged in brainstorming in the previous levels of education. The students allege that in schools and colleges, teachers used to tell us to memorize compositions which included paragraphs, essays, letters, completing a story, etc. Therefore, when at the undergraduate level, some teachers tell the students to brainstorm on a topic, the students cannot engage themselves in brainstorming and cannot contribute by providing some important words or ideas about the topic. Brainstorming seems to be a tough activity for the students as this is a new concept to them.

Then whatever they write, that is not always logical. The teachers have alleged in the interview that although students have to engage in free writing, many students memorize form other reference books or guidebooks which is not really free writing. "It is a common culture of the students to memorize compositions from different sources. Although the syllabus keeps some provision for free writing, the way students do it cannot be not free writing at all", claims a teacher. Although some students try to write on their own, their writing contains a lot of errors and mistakes which should have been corrected in secondary schools through recurrent feedback and edits. Then comes the question of coherence. "Coherence is found in those writings which have been memorized by the students but those which were coined by students themselves lack coherence", claims another teacher.

Although 70% students (28 out of 40) have claimed that they like freehand writing, in reality that is not reflected in their writing. In the write-ups which students wrote for the researcher, it is found that students could not go into the depth of the topic and the organization of the writing was weaker. It is also noticed that only a small number of students are able to write logically; although their isolated sentences are better in structure and wording, they are not well-connected with one another.

Moreover, it is revealed from the students' writings that they usually use simple words that include the simple or easy level of vocabulary; and students have usually used simple sentences but only a few of them used complex sentences. They usually commit mistakes in grammatical rules e.g. sentence construction, proper use of tense, articles, verbs, and so on. The mechanical process used by them is not adequate. It might be because students do not invest much time on writing and do not receive repeated feedback from the teachers or the peers.

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5. Conclusions

It revealed that the undergraduate students are weaker in English writing, and the major challenges they face include brainstorming and organization of writing. A number of conclusions may be reached from the study about how to get rid of the situation. Teachers' instructional strategy should be participatory and there should be ample opportunities for students to receive recurrent feedback from the teachers and peers. Students should be encouraged to engage in writing to achieve the desired standard.

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