




Academic Writing Challenges of Foreign Language Learners in Pakistan

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>Article history: Submitted 13.09.2021 Accepted 12.11.2021 Published 30.12.2021</p> <hr/> <p>Volume No. 8 Issue No. II ISSN (Online) 2414-8512 ISSN (Print) 2311-293X DOI:</p>	<p><i>This descriptive qualitative research sought to explore as what would be the best writing approach adopted to teach academic writing skill to the undergraduate university students to identify and minimize the identified problems. In this regard, the focus group discussions provided the relevant, firsthand data to improve upon the existing challenges as these discussions voiced students' challenges. The aim of the study was to strengthen the academic writing skill of university students by knowing the deficient areas and to minimize the challenges in the highlighted areas by employing an appropriate writing approach to enable the students to write effectively for communication purposes. For this purpose, thirty undergraduate students were selected and involved in focus group discussions to highlight the problematic area in the field of academic writing. Thematic analysis helped to understand the problems faced by the students and suggestions were made on the basis of the study's findings. The study revealed the students' inability to use appropriate vocabulary. These students lacked the skill to express themselves in their own words, and often their written work would look patchy. English being the foreign language to the students hampered their ability to think in the target language. The present study contributed to understand the problems and suggested process approach of writing to be adopted by the faculty to overcome the academic writing related problems.</i></p>
<p>Keywords: Process Approach, Product Approach, Genre Approach, Academic Writing</p>	

Introduction

In order to be proficient in English as foreign language, teaching and learning material should promote the adequate practice of all the language skills necessary to acquire the desired proficiency (Mumtaz, 2021). It is assumed that students upon entering universities would be well-versed in oral and written communication skills. However, it was observed by the researcher while teaching B.Ed (Hon.) students' academic writing course, that majority of the students lacked the mentioned skill.

In the absence of the aforementioned practice students at varied levels face countless difficulties (Kellog, 2008). It had become apparent to the researcher that the undergraduate students entering different programs at the university of Education lack the necessary writing skills needed to become successful communicators both during their studies and after graduation. Teaching both at undergraduate and post graduate level provides the firsthand knowledge to the researcher about the challenges these students face. This experience provided a broad perspective on an issue that crosses all disciplines and educational levels. There is a significant need for students at all levels not only to be good written communicators, but also to understand the importance of good writing skills. Students who do not possess the skills necessary to effectively communicate in a written format that will enable them to become successful upon graduation predominated the rest of them.

Hyland (2003) stated that despite sizeable research into the writing process, linguists were unable to suggest a comprehensive idea or approach to help learners to write better. This study looked in to popular writing approaches to find out as which approach could be of practical help to Pakistani language learners to overcome the challenges at hand.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to identify the difficulties faced by the undergraduate university students and to suggest a writing approach to be adopted to teach the required writing skill to minimize learners' difficulties.

During the researcher's professional career as an English language teacher, she experienced learners' lack of writing skill and failure to express themselves in the written mode of the target language. There are multiple factors contributing to this failure (Bartlett, 2003; Odell & Swersey, 2003), however, this paper intends to identify as which writing approach would best suit the purpose to help learners to acquire the writing skill. Writing skill must be addressed to adequately prepare students for jobs that involve more than minimal levels of responsibility.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the basic academic writing challenges faced by the under- graduate students.
2. To suggest solution to the academic writing challenges faced by undergraduate students.

Research Questions

Based on the research objectives, the present study intended to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What are the basic academic writing problems faced by the under- graduate students?
2. What is the best writing approach to teach academic writing skill to the under- graduate students?

Significance of the study

Considering the importance of writing skill in higher education, the present study aimed at educating the students to learn English as a foreign language and to play their role with responsibility to write effectively to be globally ready. This study highlighted the fact that learning writing is as important a skill as speaking, reading and listening are. This study would bridge the gap between writing skills learned at school and writing skills required at the university level, resulting improvement in students' writing performances.

Review of the Literature

Literature review presents an over view of some of the common approaches implemented to teach the writing skill to the learners of English as a foreign language. These approaches have certain advantages and utility in playing their role to enable the language learners to improve their written performance at varied levels.

Considering the challenges faced by local university students, the literature recommends implementing the academic writing approach, which also corresponds with the voices of the students.

Process Approach

Language skills are best learned when learners have their own inherent motives (Brown, 2001); they are busy experimenting and creating their compositions. One of the popular methods used to teach writing skill, is the process approach; which requires the learners to plan, draft, and revise their written scripts. Learners are encouraged to write for real audience and purposes (Graham, 2011). It is an approach where language learners focus on the process by which they produce their written products rather than on the products themselves. Students learn that writing doesn't just happen; it is planned and it evolves, taking shape as it develops.

Since the 1980s, the process approach has been accepted and applied to EFL and ESL writing classes because of its effectiveness' the process approach, in contrast to product approach, stresses the process that writers go through in composing texts (Nunan, 1991). Holmes (2004) recommends the use of a process-oriented approach to facilitate the planning and production stages of writing for adult students of English as a second or foreign language.

Process approach of writing offers a motivating and collaborative atmosphere for students to compose their work. Besides, this approach focuses primarily on the learners' needs, interests, problems, ages, motivation, and so on, which makes the student the center of the process.

Product Approach

Unlike process approach, product approach to writing compels the writer to concentrate on the finished text, or the product of writing, rather than on the steps and stages involved to arrive at that product. Students are not required to generate and brainstorm ideas as thoroughly as they do in process writing. Product approach focuses more on the development of students writing output that is based on their knowledge about the language structures through imitation as inputs are provided solely by the teachers (Ramos,et.al. 2019).

This approach is classified in to four steps; to expose the learners to a model text, providing the students with controlled practice, giving learners time to organize their ideas, and finally, leading them to the final product. In this approach what is emphasized is raising students' awareness, especially in grammatical structures. The learners are expected to compose well-knitted and error free script (Pasand & Haghi,2013).

According to Murray (1980), the teachers who employ product approach to teach writing skill to their learners actually curb down learners creativity, learners prefer using the same form and structure over and over again.Product-based evaluation does not improve writing skills (Murray, 1972).

Genre Approach

Genre approach in writing is relatively new in teaching and learning English. This approach follows a typical writing style, particular audience, and a specific purpose. How it is written and how it is analyzed, it is extremely different form conventional perspective about writing (Dirgeyasa, 2016).The purpose of genre writing is not only to enable the learner to write, but also the learner writes to pursue a certain goal.

Genre approach to teaching and learning writing skill seems to be relevant for those students who possess low competencies and low motivation. It gradually guides the students to write independently by following simple steps. Resultantly, the learners finally learn to write in an autonomous way (Dirgeyasa, 2016).

Academic Writing

Academic writing answers the question and demonstrates an understanding of the subject. It is coherent, written in a logical order, and brings together related points and material. Moreover, it demonstrates knowledge of the subject area, supports opinions and arguments with evidence, and is referenced accurately. It is formal in tone and style: uses appropriate language and tenses, and is clear, concise and balanced (Jonsson, 2006).Academic writing is direct and literal, and it follows logical sequence (Lindsay, 2018). Students need to keep focused on writing as clearly as they can – instead many students try so hard to the word academic that their work comes across as confusing and unnatural.

Methodology

To address the key research objectives, this study used qualitative method and combined primary and secondary sources to collect data. Focus group discussions were the tool used in the research study. Focus group discussions were able to provide insightful information to address the research questions.

Validity of the research tool was achieved with the help of pilot testing; a group of 10 undergraduate students were selected for the purpose and involved in a discussion, which further helped the discussion questions to be more precise and well-focused.

Population

According to Fraenkel and Warren (2002), population refers to the complete set of individuals sharing some common characteristics in which the researcher is interested. The under graduate students of one selected campus of the University of Education, Pakistan, constituted the populationof the present study.

Sample

Literature shows that in qualitative studies there is no fixed sample size, it is rather the saturation of data which decides the sample size (Kumar, 2011).Keeping this in view, 30 under graduate students from the University of Education were selected by using random sampling technique, since the selection process was based on probability and random selection, the end smaller sample was more likely to be representative of the total population.The simple random sampling ensured that each member of the population had an equal chance for the selection or the chance of getting a response which can be more than equal to the chance depending on the data analysis justification.

Data Collection

The primary data were obtained from the original source of information; 30 under graduate, third semester students of Education department were engaged in two 90 minutes sessions with the researcher. InFocus group discussion with the selected students, the researcher was able to elicit some of the most relevant information. Desk review of the relevant literature helped furnishing the secondary data.

Data Analysis and Findings of the Study

In the present study the collected data were interpreted with the help of thematic analysis. Focus group discussion helped the researcher develop themes which were duly coded, analyzed and interpreted. Following were the major themes which emerged during the focus group discussions. Following are the major themes which emerged from the discussions.

1. Can write good academic paragraph

Eighty percent of the undergraduate students were not very well aware of *academic writing*. These students only had a vague idea about the mechanics of *academic writing*. The remaining 20% of the students could explain the explanation or the definition of the term, however, they were not very sure about the application of the term. *Having learners write sentences or essays about their opinions and summarizing textbook contents were less focused during EFL lessons at high schools.*

2. Can write a clear topic sentence that identifies the topic

A vast majority of the students, 60%, claimed, *"We know what a topic sentence is, and if we focus, we can come up with something relevant"*. The remaining 40% students clearly showed signs as if they were a little uneasy, *"it is difficult for us to sum up the entire paragraph within one sentence, we would like to take a lot of time for that"*. Out of these 40% students, some expressed, *"in early grades if we would get practice of summary writing, then we would have tried and succeeded"*.

3. Can logically organize ideas when writing

Seventy percent students declared, *"yes, writing in a sequence is easy for us, as we know how a story begins, develops and concludes"*. 20% asserted that they can try, while remaining 10% were not really sure as if they could actually organize their own ideas logically. Students were quite interactive as they proved their point by supplying examples.

4. Can logically support and develop main point within a paragraph

Eighty percent of the students were of the opinion, *"writing in small chunks and pieces makes it easier for us to keep going, elaborating one point after the other, however, if it is a long script it would be difficult for us to handle it, we may lose the track of what was written earlier in the essay"*. Remaining 20% of the students remained neutral, not directly participating in the discussion. Some students commented, *if they know how to write an effective topic sentence, the rest is easy as they can knit around it to elaborate their idea.*

5. Can use appropriate vocabulary when write

"This is the area where we are mostly confused as what vocabulary item would fit in to the script and simultaneously would be meaningful", 70% of the students asserted that they found vocabulary most challenging. 20% asserted. *"It takes us a lot of time to decide which word to select and which to drop, especially when we were writing descriptive writing"*. For 10%, *"we don't really get in to this debate, whatever limited vocabulary we have we apply it at the time of writing"*. As long as these 10% were able to express themselves in the target language, they were not very keen on expanding their word bank.

6. Can use appropriate word form

Ninety percent students laid claim to the fact, *"oh, yes, we can very easily do that, as we have been doing its practice since early grades, we were involved in lots of grammar activities which directly or indirectly involved verb forms"*. Changing verbs according to the tenses was a piece of cake for these undergraduate students, and they were really proud of it when explaining it. 10% students were of the opinion that it depends on what task they were given, they were still not very sure.

7. Can use a variety of structures when writing

These university students were not familiar with variety of structures, 50% declared, *"as we are not familiar with it so we are unable to use them in our writing"*. Remaining 50% participated keenly in the discussion and contributed their knowledge about the writing structures. Students were found to be practicing with some fixed structures repetitively.

8. Can use correct spellings, capitalization, and punctuation

For spelling accuracy, 60% declared that it is not a problem for them. Whereas, 40% found writing accurate spelling very challenging. For capitalization, 100% claimed, *"it is not the least difficult for us, we know it very well, however, about punctuation, our knowledge and practice is limited, so we stick to using commas, question marks, exclamation marks, and full stops"*, *"also, we do not need to know all of the punctuation marks, marks are not allotted according to correct punctuation"*. 50% of the students were using a limited range of the punctuation marks while the remaining 50% it not think it important to know all of them. It was evident that in the previous years at school, students had practiced with a very basic and limited punctuation mark while writing.

9. Can write a clear thesis statement

Although some of the students were not familiar with thesis statement, when it was explained to them, 100% stated that they were capable of writing a clear thesis statement summing up the entire written text. *“Most probably, we will write that in the concluding paragraph to make it a wholesome essay that is a recommended way to conclude any writing”*. Students quoted several examples of the thesis statements and how they would fit them in to a written piece of work. Being the focal point of any essay, students clearly conveyed that they can manage it.

10. Can write in own words

This was the area where 90% of the students faced problems. Many of them claimed that, *“we are not trained to write in our own words, mostly, we paraphrase, and some admitted to copy and paste. 10 % professed, “since we think in our first language and then translate our thoughts in to the English language, therefore, it not only takes a lot of time for writing anything but sometimes we fail to translate some words, adding to our misery, but we manage to come up with something in the written form”*. Translating written text in one’s own words require originality and the students were deficient in this skill.

11. Can effectively brainstorm before writing

Ninety five percent of the students involved in the focus group discussions were positive about brainstorming and collecting ideas for their write ups. They were very confident and showcased their talent to gather ideas in these discussions, *“ If we do not brainstorm , how else we would generate ideas, these ideas are our leads connecting us to the main action which is being developed by using this technique”*. Only 5% of the students replied in the negative, *“although, we can outline the essay, however, we fail to collect adequate content required for writing a 500 worded essay”*. Furthermore, if writing prompts were there, this may be of great support to the struggling students.

12. Can write under time restraint

Fifty percent of the students professed, *“Yes, we.....somehow, do manage to write under time restraint, but it is difficult some times to say it all within the given time”*. While the remaining 50% were of the opinion that *although they try but fail to accomplish the task, sometimes, they miss to write certain facts about the given topic. Unless they take special care as not to ignore this factor, they may make a successful attempt*. Time management was considered a challenging aspect by the students.

Ethical Consideration

The purpose of the study was explained to the study participants. The students were told that the information they provided was kept confidential and that their identities would not be revealed in association with the information they provided.

Discussion

This study intended to provide the readers; university students, and the teaching faculty, an insight in to different writing approaches, and which of these writing approaches would reduce the difficulties of the foreign language learners in the local context. The study offered a kind of reinforcement, and a new understanding toward process, product and genre approach.

Tricia (2003) also suggested that the problems experienced by students in writing effectively are attributable, which is related majorly to the processes which underlie proficient composing, planning and revisions of their work. In another study Cho and Schunn (2007) reported that attention given to writing practice can solve major writing problems. The present study and Kellogg (2008) both suggested to train writing skills by allowing students to learn by observing and learn by doing. For Applebee (1986) process approach is a way to train students to think and organize their ideas that facilitates students’ written performance (Barnett, 1992).

The findings of the present study revealed that undergraduate students of the University of Education could assemble their ideas in a coherent way in to their written work; they could also brainstorm these ideas to come up with the relevant content. However, they need adequate practice to improve on their existing vocabulary to express themselves more effectively to the readers. Different dynamics of the academic writing including punctuation, spellings, and to be able to rephrase the ideas in to their own words need to be practiced and strengthened. Efforts could be made to give these students practice to write under time restraint, to be able to summarize without copying and pasting, and above everything else to be creative and original in their ideas. Teaching these students to maintain a unity of thought within their written work; where each paragraph would flow in to the next effortlessly and seamlessly. What these students create would not be patchy and awkwardly wrapped up work. Students should be able to express them with minimum L1 interference.

Academic writing is more than using correct tenses and verb forms; it is also, about maintaining formal

tone and style. The research findings clearly suggest that process approach of writing would best fit in to the local context to teach the undergraduate students the skill of academic writing to minimize the problems faced by these students. As this approach would allow the students to experiment and create their compositions. Process approach is one of the popular methods used to teach writing skill; which requires the learners to plan, draft, and revise their written scripts. Learners are encouraged to write for real audience and purposes, they acquire the writing skill gradually and step by step without over burdening them.

Recommendations and Conclusion

After having identified and discussed the issues which these undergraduate students faced, it would be a welcoming idea to engage the students to rewrite or rephrase a written text in a multiple correct ways; to teach them as how to reconstruct by using different sentence structure, and writing from passive to active or vice versa.

The present study recommended process approach to be adopted while teaching the young brains as how to synchronize their ideas in to a well written script. Each English language course taught over a period of 4 years to complete their degree; should make room for these practices to be incorporated in to the course of study.

Taking baby steps to engage the students in constructing meaningful short and coherent script would help to pave the way to experiment with the longer scripts that is precisely the reason why this study suggested to implement the process approach of writing as this approach will allow the faculty to gradually build on what these students know already. Furthermore, English language teachers would lead them to write precisely, concisely, and avoid repetitions. Students can be trained to process their thoughts and learn how to bring them on to the paper. Students would learn to present their ideas with logical valid reasoning. A sincere effort should be made to train these students to be able to write well-structured paragraphs and clear topic sentences which would enable a reader to follow their line of thinking without difficulty.

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