

PROGRESSION OF WRITING IN TEACHING AND LEARNING FOR SECONDARY AND HIGHER SECONDARY EDUCATION: BANGLADESH CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Effective writing is a very important sector for the English language learners. For the learners of Bangladesh context, it is much more significant because here the learners are generally evaluated through their writing skill. But it is an inevitable fact that in most of our English language classes the learners are engaged in activities like writing paragraphs, formal and informal letters, essays, dialogues etc. They are often pressurized from writing from their creative faculty and making correct sentences. Most of the time, the learners find it unpleasant and difficult. So, the language teachers need to find out ways to make the writing classes interesting as well as effective for their learners. This work aims at finding out the strategies to be skilled in teaching and learning process of writing in Bangladeshi schools and colleges. The observation method and the conceptual analysis method were helpful for the research study.

Keywords: *Effectiveness of Writing, Error Analysis and Correction, Suggested Writing Activities, Recommendations*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man; and writing an exact man”- is truly a wise saying of Francis Bacon. Writing is certainly one of the very imperative skills of a second language learner. But in the context like ours in Bangladesh the efficiency of writing skill is very poor. Most of the language learners are yet to develop this skill in the proper manner. The condition is not being developed because the learners have been trained up with inept strategies in their first twelve years of education till higher secondary level. Teachers’ training programs are proved to be hopeless

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and fruitless in this regard. Many of our students cannot even write a few correct sentences at a stretch in the higher study programs. As a result the learners remain ignorant about writing a letter, paragraph, job application or a letter to editors in English. Moreover, some learners are afraid of the foreign language like English. This fear results in redundancy problem vehemently.

At present, to improve the writing skills of the learners in our country is a crying need. The learners should also be aware of the fact that writing is the most important skill for communication. So, a proper guidance from the teachers and a sincere and dedicated attempt from the learners both are essential. But the greater endeavor should be started from the teachers who are guiding the learners. Instead of giving a topic on the board and asking learners to write on it, teachers can help them to develop a number of important skills which play significant roles in improving writing.

1.1. Objectives of the Study

This article aims at helping the trainees as well as the trainers dealing with the newest strategies to be skilled in teaching and learning process of writing in the educational institutions in the present context of Bangladesh.

1.2. Background of the Study

Before preparing this paper the researchers have gone through the book *The Practice of English Language Teaching* of J. Harmer and the book *Teaching English Writing* of A. Pincas, which have prearranged the primary ideas, how to calisthenics the writing task in a second language and how to develop its strategies.

To get a picture of the writing progression in the secondary and higher secondary education, we must think about how we were taught for the writing skill in our school and college days. To proceed further in this issue, we need to focus on the actual happenings in most of the writing classes in our context. Being university teachers, we can now realize whether those classes were effective or not. To discuss the issue, some questions frequently arise in mind:

1. What were the key features of those classes?
2. Which writing skills were focused in those classes?
3. Were those skills taught properly?
4. What kinds of activities were done to develop writing?
5. How much attention was given on grammar and correction?
6. What was the teacher's role in the class?
7. Did I feel any pressure while writing?
8. Were those classes interesting or boring?
9. How was feedback given?
10. Were those classes effective?
11. Did I express my creativity while writing?
12. What were the limitations of those classes?

A close investigation of these questions will surely clarify the issue about the writing skill development for Bangladeshi learners. From our own recollection, we can easily remember those

classes where the most common writing activities were paragraphs, essays, letters and answers to questions. Our teachers used to give us topics on different issues. We tried to memorize or copy from notes or from any other sources. We used to do the monotonous kind of practice in almost every class. But we were never taught about the writing process, sentence formation, Organization, structure, Coherence or Cohesive devices. In these ways, our creative faculties were not being touched or nurtured. After writing on any topic, we were anxious about the grammatical correctness. If we ask ourselves whether we enjoyed those classes or learnt how to write on our own, the answer will definitely be ‘no’. Now, being university teachers, we see our students find it difficult to write on their own. So, it is an undeniable fact that our writing classes should be different from the traditional classes. We should try to make the things interesting and effective for our learners. As Harmer writes,

“ although there is no magical way of ensuring that our students will be engaged with the topics we offer them, It is nevertheless important to try and find the type of tasks and the topic material which will involve the members of our classes (2003: 253).”

2. METHODOLOGY

The most helpful methods for the research work were observation method and conceptual analysis method as mentioned in the abstract. In this manuscript, the researchers have showed their own suggestions and recommendations regarding the topic after finding out the true picture of teaching and learning methods of writing in Bangladeshi schools and colleges.

3. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

3.1. Questionnaires for the Effectiveness of Writing Classes

In order to make our writing classes more effective, we, the language teachers, should always bear in mind the questionnaires, also propounded by Raimes (1983:12-23). To solve the problem, it is therefore necessary to focus on these questions:

1. What are the urgencies of our learners to develop the writing skill?
2. How can writing help our learners to learn English better?
3. What do our learners need to develop writing as a skill?
4. How can we teach the writing process?
5. How can we make our writing classes interesting and motivating?
6. How can we make them effective?
7. Which activities/tasks can we use to develop writing?
8. How are the learners going to work (On their own, in pair, in group, with hints)?
9. How much time should we give our learners for their writing activities?
10. What can we do to deal with errors? / How can we give feedback?

3.2. Clarification of the Obscurities of our Language Teachers

Now the language teachers teaching English as a second language not only should know these questions but also should know the remedies or answers to these questions. Raimes did not only

mention the questions but also suggested the various approaches. Now a detailed analyses of the views of Raimes (1983:6-11) will surely clarify the obscurities of the language teachers, attempting to adopt different approaches to writing.

3.2.1. Topic-wise free hand approach

According to Raimes, this approach stresses three features, “grammar, syntax or structure, and mechanics (1983:6)”. It emphasizes correctness rather than eloquence and originality. Here students work on materials given to them and do exactly what they were told. They usually start with sentence exercises. Then they are given paragraphs which they copy. It is believed that these free hand writing activities help students to write a lot and to avoid errors. Later, when learners acquire a certain level of competence, they are encouraged to work on their own.

3.2.2. Extensive Practice

This approach stresses ‘quantity’ of writing rather than ‘quality’. There is very little error correction and importance is given on what the learners write and how fluent they are. Here students do not worry about forms. It is believed that “once ideas are down on page, grammatical accuracy, organization, and the rest will gradually follow (Raimes, 1983:7).”

3.2.3. Argumentative or reason based writing

This approach emphasizes the intention of a piece of writing and ‘the audience’ for it (1983:7). It is believed that writers produce their best when writing is considered as a “Communicative or argumentative act” and writers write for a reason and a real person. Raimes (1983) states that if learners know why they are writing and who will read their works it motivates them and encourage them to think.

3.2.4. Re-arrange approach

This approach emphasizes copying paragraphs, studying the forms of model paragraphs and imitating them. Learners are also given detached sentences and asked to put them into rearrange or paragraph order. It is believed that in this way they will learn about the organization process and structure.

3.2.5. The newest approach

In the process approach, the students do not write on a given topic in a limited time and hand in the written work to the teacher for correction. Rather, they prove, inspect, analyze topic as they write; show the drafts to the teacher and each other. Teachers who use this approach give the students enough time, and a detailed feedback. Learners become conscious about what they are writing and how they are doing it.

Among all these processes, the teachers in schools & colleges only follow the topic wise free hand writing approach or sometimes the re-arrange approach. The other approaches are not usually used mainly because most of them are not aware of these or because of the limitations or the insufficient technical support. Let us now find out how writers write or what we can do to teach the writing skill.

4. SUGGESTED WRITING ACTIVITIES FOR LEARNERS

John Langan in his book “English Skills with Readings” suggests the writing skills as pre-writing, writing a first draft, Revising, Editing and Review activities. White and Arndt (1991:5) also believe that writing is actually a process of “re-writing”. In their model, they have included the stages like drafting, reviewing, focusing, generating ideas, and evaluation. Moreover, Vocabulary, structure, spelling, organization, linking expression, punctuation, Paragraphing, style of language, presentation and coherence are some of the general skills which the learners require to develop in their writing.

These can be developed through a number of different types of writing tasks. Instead of engaging our learners in writing just essays and paragraphs all the time we can use the following tasks to create interest and variety as suggested by Pincas (1982), Harmer (2003), and Ur (2003).

4.1. Writing response to a poem, film, and story

These can be used because they can be interesting and motivating. These activities can also help in developing reading and listening skills.

4.2. Narrating incidents

These can be an interesting task and help to develop narrative strategy. Teachers can use pictures or newspapers and magazines for this kind of activity.

4.3. Personal stories

Learners can also be asked to write about their own experiences such as a happy, sad, or frightening incident of their life.

4.4. Describing people and places

Learners can describe people they know- such as- parents, friends, teachers, or a well-known figure. They can also describe places they have visited or seen. They can help in developing descriptive strategy.

4.5. Answering a letter

This can be a motivating task if there is an audience and purpose. Learners can write letters of complaint, job applications, or they can write letters to each other.

4.6. Writing summaries or paraphrases

These are useful activities as they teach learners to be precise and careful in their choice of words and sentences.

4.7. Writing poems or stories

These can be fun and motivating tasks for imaginative learners and may be done once in three months.

4.8. Diary writing

This can be useful because this can be done outside classroom and it can help learners to write on their own.

4.9. Parallel writing

According to Harmer “The concept of parallel writing is central to the teaching of connected discourse since it suggests that students should have a model from which to work. In other words, students will first see a piece of writing and then use it as a basis for their own work (1991:111).” Harmer states that the model that the learners work with can help them to develop their abilities and write on their own.

4.10. Ordering

This activity can be used to teach cohesion, coherence and structure.

5. STEPS OF FINDINGS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNERS’ SKILLS

These activities can make learners aware of different type of writing styles, help to develop their vocabularies, and knowledge of structures as well. While using these activities teachers need to use the teaching time carefully and properly. In order to do that the teachers can divide the writing classes into three steps. Let us now find what teachers can do in these three steps.

5.1. Step-01

In this step, teachers can help learners to generate ideas. We can activate our learners’ prior knowledge with pre-writing activities such as brainstorming that is, producing words, phrases, ideas, outlines, as quickly as possible, just as they come about, without paying attention to appropriateness, order or accuracy. Brainstorming can be done in a class or group, or individually. Teachers need to remember that this first piece of writing is not usually corrected or marked. We can give our students a time limit for this step: usually five to ten minutes can be given for this stage.

5.2. Step-02

At this step, teachers can assist the learners to extend their ideas. Learners can be asked to develop their ideas into short sentences or notes. At this stage, they can judge the quality and usefulness of ideas. They can identify important ideas or interesting thoughts. After developing the ideas and thoughts the learners can write their first draft either in pair or in groups.

5.3. Step-03

After the draft has been done, the teachers can make comments. We need to remember that it is better to give more comments on ideas and organization than grammar and spelling. At this point we can also use peer feedback. After they have received feedback, learners, then, can begin the process of revising the work. After they have written the final draft they should read for mistakes

in spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc. Following Riddell (2003) here we would like to give an example of how teachers can teach letter writing through these stages. We have chosen a job application letter because this is commonly taught to first year students. We taught it to learners in the following manner in their first year classes and found it effective.

5.4. Steps for Writing a Job Application

L. Sue Baugh in his “*Handbook for practical letter writing*” also shows many examples regarding the above mentioned three steps. In writing a job application while doing this activity, teachers can follow the following steps:

5.6. First Step: (About 15 minutes)

At the beginning, Teachers can engage learners in a discussion on different types of jobs and the job advertisements today. Then learners may work in groups and think about reasons for applying in those jobs. This first step, as L. Sue Baugh mentioned, involves answering the four key questions of letter/application writing; What is my purpose? Who is my audience? What should the application/letter cover? What action or response do the learners want? After sharing all the pertinent information, the learners can be prepared for writing.

5.7. Second Step: (About 30 minutes)

In this Step, Teachers may ask the learners to prepare their first draft. They can also be given a sample to read. In this stage they should be made worried about phrasing, grammar, spelling or organization. Learners, thus, can work individually or in pairs or groups and start writing a letter of job application.

5.8. Third Step: (About 45 minutes)

In this stage, teachers can instruct learners to read over their first draft and organize their application so that it flows logically from point to point. Learners, then, can write the final drafts and submit those to teachers. Teachers can check the final works and choose the best letter and it can be read out for the whole class; or, teachers can select some good works, read those for the whole class and ask learners to select the best letter. They can also point at major problems from some weaker students. This process may seem time consuming but in most of our private and public universities, the duration of a class is usually ninety minutes and if teachers can make the proper use of time, the learners definitely can be benefitted and learn the necessary skills.

6. ERROR ANALYSIS & CORRECTION

It is an urgent necessity to analyze the types of error our learners make in their writings. For error analysis and correction, we have to give our students enough time. We can try to find out what the students need to work on next? Or what are they having problem with? We can try to find out whether the errors are the results of carelessness, or lack of knowledge, or misunderstanding of rules? We can give students time and opportunity to correct error before we do. We can try to find

out if they can do it. In writing we can only identify and point out the major errors, which interfere with communication so much that we cannot find out what the student is trying to convey. We can design a system for indicating some or all of the errors in students' work and explain the system to the students. But we need to ask ourselves the most important question, 'Should we focus on quantity or quality?'

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

As the teachers, we should not ignore the writing skill or teach just for the sake of teaching. We all know the limitations of our schools and colleges. We lack many trained teachers; we have large classrooms, lack of logistic supports, short duration of classes (only 40-45 minutes), lack of technological support, etc. So, it is somewhat difficult for them to follow the above-mentioned processes in those classes. But in the university levels, we have smaller class size and longer duration (90 minutes) of each class. So, we can give more time to our learners. We should teach them the appropriateness in writing. With weaker students, we need to be extra careful and provide guided writing activities. We should offer those interesting topics and writing assignments to be completed in pairs or in groups in order to reduce pressure on the individual learners. And finally, we shouldn't be very critical in their initial works and should support the learners by making encouraging comments.

8. CONCLUSION

Thus, the language teachers may find out the ways to make their writing classes effective with the recommendations stated above. The researcher hopes that the processes or strategies mentioned in my article may be of great help to the trainers and the trainees as well. Unlike the traditional patterns, we must introduce the new patterns, with a view to making our learners as truly competent and skilled. These innovative strategies taken by the language teachers will surely help the learners to write more efficiently which may result in adeptness of the learners.

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