S

TECHNIQUES AND STRATEGIES FOR IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT
The ability of writing well is not a choice for the young learners; it is a medium for interpreting academic excellence and also a basic necessity for achieving success in the civic life and global economy. Though the definition of language literacy consists of all the four language skills (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing Skills), poor writing skills in the students at the high school level might cause a severe literacy crisis. However, reading and writing are two complementary skills which move in parallel and they should go hand in hand at the elementary level of language learning. Many students who are in the high school level seem to be good in reading but they have severe difficulty in writing. Writing skills is different from reading skills. Reading can forman intellectual vision of thoughts written by someone else while writing is the ability to formulate one's thoughts, arrange them in a sequential manner and create a record of them using the exact structure of language. Reaching highest English language proficiency level is a challenging goal for the students in the high school standards. The objective is really a tough task especially in the domain of writing. For the students who belong to a country where English is treated as a second language, exposure to the language is limited because the common people communicate only in their mother tongue. Besides, the beginner learnershave limited scope of vocabulary; they find difficulty in writing coherent and cohesive contents and also are unable to apply correct grammatical structure. The role of language teachers is very crucial in this scenario for transforming the learners to better writers. The language teachers who teach English as a second language face many challenges when they teach writing skills in the elementary level classrooms. This paper sheds light to the innovative techniques and strategies that can be incorporated in the language classrooms in order to make the learners the best writers.By understanding these

challenges of teaching writing skills and by using these pioneering strategies, the language teachers can be better equipped to deal their adolescent learners more easily.

Introduction

One of the most important means of assessing students is their writing skills whereas most of the students from the non native English countries experience a great challenge with academic writings. Some of the teaching and learning strategies are aimed to help the non-native students improve their academic skills for achieving success in the tertiary level education scenario. Some students find difficulty in writing longer paragraphs and assignments even in their mother tongue. Paragraph writing is the primary way of presenting information in the fundamental education system. A typical paragraph can be written only after analyzing various sources, collecting information and arranging in a coherent form. Students have to pass through various academic expectations in the schools and a variety of written assignments should be done by them. These assignments include preparing reports, taking notes, case studies, writing project work and so on. Another challenge for students in the writing area is organizing the information. Different patterns of writing might be incorporated in the academic writing like comparison and contrast or argument and discussion. Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by the language learners from non native speaking countriesis the style of writing. Finding the style which balances between the ideas of the writer and the conventional voice is really a big challenge.

There are some perplexing scenarios where the students are confused with the requirements in writing from one subject to the other. Although different subjects require different types of assignments the students can follow the same process in every assignment. By adopting the steady writing strategies in all subject areas, teachers can make the writing easier and release the stress associated with the skills and also they can help the students build confidence in writing. The process of writing involves certain processes like generating ideas, developing and organizing ideas and revising and editing. Generating ideas is the process of finding some additional facts about the topic rather what the students know about the topic in general. The students should have the skill of collecting known facts about the topic and to check whether their writing on the topic is purposeful. Students should have the skills of organizing the information that they have learned about the topic into a well structured output. A good writer should know how to create a strong and focused introduction to their writing which includes catchy points that catches reader's interest, how to interlink ideas in coherent paragraphs that contains the information that support main idea and also how to end with a strong conclusion. After completing a rough draft, students need to assess their own writings individually or by peer assessment for the content, clarity and style. The errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation can be found out by this assessment method and through this technique the students will attain the responsibility for the accuracy of their work.

Literature Review

The researches that were done on the language learners in the high school level show that students who learn English as a second language score lower in writing than any other language skills. Researchers have found various grounds for this problem and they have found many techniques to rectify this problem too. The prime reason for this scenario is that how the learners feel themselves as writers. This has become more prominent in the high school level students because they believe that writing in English is not that simple as they handle with the other language skills. According to Thomas,

"The feeling of incompetency leads to self-doubt and anxiety in writing and can hinder   the process of achieving writing proficiency" (Thomas, 1993).

In Kasper &Petrello's words,

"It is not the task of writing that is deemed so intimidating, but more so the feedback and   assessment   of   that   writing   by   instructors   and/or peers."(Kasper&Petrello, 1998).

As   per   the   researches   done   before   1970's,   it   was   considered   as   writing instruction is focused only on grammar rules (Pour Mohammadi, ZainolAbidin& Cheong Lai, 2012). But today the researches show that less concentration should be given to the conventional rules of writing rather more concentration should be given on expression of ideas and it is more important to create an environment that encourages students to take risk in their writing.(Shaughnessy, 1998).

When a student focus on the grammar rules he might focus more on his mistakes but he/she should feel free to express his/her thoughts more spontaneously while writing. This will help to decrease the frustration of students and it will obviously increase the level of actual writing. Moreover, if the creative ideas are expressed without the hindrance of concerns of grammatical rules, the students of English as a second language can progress in their writing skills. According to MacGowanGilhooly,

"Only after students have learned to express themselves, they can move forward to   correction of grammatical errors. By then there will be higher pass rate among the L2   learners" (Gilhooly, 1991).

This   approach   of   overlooking   grammar   rules   first   and   giving   more concentration on the expression of ideas is called as *Fluency First Approach* by MacGowan-Gilhooly. In addition to this *Fluency First Approach*, the feedback given by the teachers to the students can also play a vital role in reducing the anxiety and frustration in students when they are trained to become perfect writers. In Mary Beaven's words,

"Teachers who used to share their experiences, discussed the thoughts of students and   rendered their feedback were most successful in decreasing students' nervousness and thus making them more confident"(Beaven, 1997).

The earlier researches show that the feedback given by the teachers and the experiences shared by them can reduce the anxiety level in the students and it will increase the confidence level in the students. This type of student teacher interaction should also include opportunities for students to ask questions regarding the writing process or the product itself(Hyland,2000).

Techniques for Teaching Writing Skills
Preparing the students to Write Effectively

Teachers of English Language can assist the students who learn English as a second language by activating their prior knowledge before they start the process of writing. By giving an opportunity to the students to think about the things which they already know can help them to incorporate the new information into the existing structure of information. Various steps can be taken in order to improve their thinking skills which activate their long term memory. These steps include graphic organizers, cooperative learning, and group discussions. In the genre of persuasive writing the graphic organizers act as visual tools for the students to draw the ideas what they know already about the given subject. The information expressed by the students can be assessed by the teachers and the teachers can suggest whether they need further information to write. The other strategies like read aloud, cooperative learning and group discussion can be integrated with this graphic organizer in order to provide additional information. Group discussions help the students to gather more information from their peer learners. Cooperative learning is an effective strategy which helps the students of English Language to gather new information from the peer learners of native speaking countries. The students can collect information from internet, books or by interacting with native speakers so that they can get new ideas before writing and they can also develop their language skills through peer led conversations.

One of the effective strategies in preparing the language learners is vocabulary preview. Previewing vocabulary is a tool that can be used before attempting writing about any genre of language.

"Second Language writers have a vastly different linguistic base than native English   speakers who can instinctively manipulate the language"(Pour Mohammadi, Zainol   Abidin& Cheong Lai, 2012).

Hence, vocabulary is the area which creates the need of providing both definitional and contextual information by the teachers of English Language. It creates a huge obstacle for English learners especially those who learn English as a foreign language. Without previewing vocabulary the students of English will not be able to move fast in delivering the ideas on the topic which they want to write about.

Strategy of Scaffolding

Scaffolding is an effective technique that the English language teachers can build upon the strength of their students. Vygotsky says,

"They should be contextual, social and temporary frameworks used to support successful learning with a specific academic domain such as writing" (Vygotsky, 1987).

Teachers can design the steps, modeling it and then can give the students the opportunity to use the steps by their own. This strategy should be designed with the attitude of discharging it eventually after a student has accomplished his prearranged point in his writing that is controlled by the teacher. Baradaran&Sarfarazi found that students who had the opportunity to receive scaffolding principles outperformed the ones who did not experience scaffolding thus having a significant impact on the ESL students' academic writing. Scaffolding is the technique which facilitates background knowledge and the students can draft the writing as per the expectation of the topic. The drafting can be done by the instructor to facilitate the students and then the instructor and the student can contribute their shared writing in which students can have their inputs like title for the writing and usage of hints etc. Then they are given opportunity to collaborate all the points to get the complete output of the writing. The ultimate objective of scaffolding process is to make the students ready for their independent writing having completed all these steps.

The scaffolding technique can be utilized among the students with less involvement of teachers and making the student more active in the process. Students can complete the writing task by collaborating the peer team and by facilitating the opportunity for pair or group assignments. According to Storch it is said that,

"Pair work allows learners to combine their linguistic resources in order to create new knowledge about language, which leads them to more successful writing experiences"(Storch, 2007).

Technology Integration

The methods of teaching reading and writing in a second language have been changed significantly with the integration of technology in the classrooms. It has developed a form of behavioral to a constructive learning approach. The arrival of computers and other technological devices led to the rapid development of teaching methods. Consequently, the pressure on teachers to keep up with such development and to raise standards in their classrooms is ever present(Feiler& Logan, 2007). The technology helps the students to express their ideas with more confidence and without any worries of handwriting and spelling errors. This technique will allow the learners to receive the instant feedback from their instructors and it also hones the learners' vocabulary skills. The online discussion forums support communication among the learners and also with their teachers which can improve their speaking skills apart from the writing skills. The major advantage of this technique is that while writing on the computer or other devices, immediate alert will be given to the grammatical and spelling errors so that the learners can make corrections with no time. However, in a rich technology, English language learners can become better readers and writers of English(Ismail, Al-Awidi&Almekhlafi, 2012).

Additional Strategies for Developing Academic Writing

In addition to the archetypal strategies explained above that have been given long standing significance in teaching writing skills, other emerging strategies include collaborative learning and autonomous learning.

Collaborative Learning

When a variety of tasks are presented to the learner in which some can be accomplished but some others cannot be, the learning strategy is known as collaborative learning. The tasks are given to the learners so that they can accomplish them only by peer view exchange and group participation. The level of success can be increased by using this technique as it encourages learning through communications and interactions with others. The research says,

"Individual are able to achieve higher levels of learning and retain more information   when they work in a group rather than individually" (Gokhale, 1995).

This type of learning helps to sharpen the critical thinking ability of the learners.

Autonomous Learning

The ability of taking charge of one's own learning can be termed as autonomous learning. The concept of this type of learning was referred by Holec(1981) and according to Hurd,   "Independence, autonomy and the ability to control learning experience have an   important role to play in the language education"(Hurd, 1981).

Learner autonomy is considered as short term goal as leaning the language in a short span or as long term goal in making the learners autonomous learners. Both of the objectives can be the part of teachers 'and learners' views towards English language teaching or English language learning respectively.

Conclusion

Writing skill is the most significant productive skill among four language skills and there are so many challenges in achieving the skill. The teachers of English language face numerous challenges relating to teach writing in English for the students who learn English as a second language. English as an additional language was hampered, in the school level standards because of scarcity of study materials, lack of planning and lack of trained instructors. The study shows that there is a dire need of using various strategies for improving the writing skills of the learners. Students should me motivated to understand this need and to play an important role in developing their language skills.

Techniques and strategies help the students to practice opportunities of paraphrasing, sequencing synthesizing and hence empowering them to develop their writing skills. These strategies give students a more holistic package of academic writing skills that make them to be confident and convinced. The collaborative learning helps the learners to develop their interpersonal skills whereas autonomous learning is indeed lifelong learning which is essential for

facing challenges of traditional face to face learning methods. The study not only suggests the new techniques and strategies of teaching writing skills but also suggests the need for empowering the learners as well as teachers to become better writers.

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