

Improving Students' Paragraph Writing Skill through Task-Based Approach

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to improve students' paragraph writing skill through task-based approach teaching methodology. To this end, the researcher made a quantitative research design to investigate the issue. To collect the necessary data for the study, experiment was employed as the main data collecting tool. Then, the data was analyzed using quantitative approaches. Accordingly, the researcher used different tables which show the students' pre-test and post-test results and changed into percentage. The study revealed that the students' paragraph writing skill can develop by using task-based approach teaching methodology.

Keywords: Task based; Paragraph; Unity; Coherence

Introduction

Writing is one of the four basic skills in English language. Smith and Hopfield argue that writing is the most demanding of others language skills. Therefore, writing is very important for academic success at university and work place. Therefore, students have to have the skills of how to create a basic unit of writing at different level.

In addition, writing is a developmental process that can be observed and encouraged. It takes time for students to achieve competency as they move through characteristic stages from scribbling to conventional spelling. Zamel points out that the process of writing is a non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning. To this effect, students will be asked to revise their drafts on the basis of their teacher comments as well as peers' comments because revision is a process in which ideas get re-organized and re-formulated. Writing success can be achieved when writing is viewed as a recursive process that includes forming intentions, composing drafting publication and response.

Langan and Gunning agreed that writing is an important when they stated both more practice and use than talk. In addition, some scholars have stated different views on writing [1,2]. For instance, Pearsall and Cunningham and Emmons advocated that writing is definitely requiring hard work. However, Ramie's and Alamirew G/ Mariam, reveal the existence of problems of writing or yet it remains the most difficult skill lacked a considerable concern in the teaching of the language achievement [3-5].

In other words, writing is an activity which should be done with great care and should be thought to communicate with a reader effectively. These imply that writing is a difficult skill which needs to be thoroughly practiced. The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill. According to Grebe and Kaplan [6] writing is a technology assist of skills which must be practiced through experience.

Writing daily and working recursively through the stages of writing will increase students' skill as writers. To this end teachers' dedication, commitment, relationship with individual students, their skills in motivating pupils and managing classrooms becomes resolutely important. The teacher role in teaching of writing is not the assessment of students writing but that of a coach, a facilitator and a supporter.

The Problem

In Ethiopian schools, English language has been taught as a foreign

language and has been serving as a medium of instruction. Writing skill which is one of the four major language skills has been given emphasis based on the prescribed syllabus design by Ministry of Education. The emphasis has been described or shown by the time or period allotment given to each language skill and linguistic item. Comparatively, the writing tasks cover many of the periods.

On the other hand, regardless of the fact that the skill is taught and practiced in secondary and tertiary levels, the investigator has come to observe that many students often face difficulty towards expressing their ideas, opinions and feelings appropriately in written forms.

Moreover, EFL teachers teaching basic writing skills course to freshman students at Ambo University complain that their students are weak in writing an effective paragraph. This problem is clearly observed in other courses which require assignments and examinations in written English. There is also a consensus among teachers that paragraph writing skills remain poor even if students are instructed how to write it. The method of instruction is partly responsible for students' success or failure in writing and teachers need to try adopting active learning techniques.

As an action teaching the researcher agreed to conduct this action research on one of freshman basic writing skills classrooms at Ambo University considering its significance to improve paragraph writing skills of students.

It is admitted that creating a Task based writing classroom can be a rewarding opportunity but it is not without its challenges and dilemmas. EFL teachers commonly experience less interactive task groups in basic writing skills classrooms. This is true especially when a teacher seeks feedback from group activities in classrooms. Our action research team assumed that the challenges and complexity of managing tasks in writing classrooms can be minimized and paragraph

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writing skills of our students can be improved through the adoption of task based active learning techniques and strategies.

Hence, the purpose of this study was investigating the extent that task-based strategies improve EFL learners' paragraph writing skills among Ambo University 1st Year Linguistics Students.

The main purpose of this study is to examine the effect of task based writing on the improvement of students' paragraph writing skills. More specifically, the study has the following objectives:

- Helping students to write a well unified paragraph.
- Assisting them to put ideas in a coherent way.
- Enabling the students to connect ideas by using transitional words and conjunctions.

Task-based Approach in Teaching Writing

The idea of getting learners to acquire English through Task-Based Strategies, which refers to Task-Based Instruction (TBI) was developed in India by Prabhu in the 1980s. His approach was a reaction both against the traditional form of English as a foreign language (EFL) used in India and against the type of communicative language teaching which was practiced there. Prabhu's project, in India, is mostly calling attention to the cognitive processes entailed by tasks. He talks about tasks involving 'some processes of thought'. However, according to Nunan, task-based instruction is a way of designing teaching syllabuses which consists of a set of communicative tasks, and a way to involve learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language [7].

Moreover, Communicative language teaching (CLT) came up with a perception of language learning which regards language as 'more than simply a system of rules' [7-9]. Brown defines the principles of CLT as follows:

1. Classroom goals focus on all of the components of communicative competence and they are not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.
2. Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learners to accomplish those purposes.
3. Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use.
4. In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts.

Generally, the 1970s saw a world-wide shift towards teaching methods that emphasized communication as the fundamental reason for language teaching [10,11]. Later on, communication came to be seen more in terms of processes that people use to carry out specific tasks. Willis believes that Task-based Instruction (TBI) is a logical development of Communicative Language Teaching and it grows out of more general notion of CLT. Thus, some syllabuses were designed around the processes or tasks that students use in the classroom [12,13]. To start with, this style meant redefining what the student had to learn in terms of communicative competence rather than linguistic competence.

Research Design

Experimental research design sounds more appropriate for the topic in focus. Quantitative analysis was employed for analysing the data obtained from pre and post-tests.

Data collection tools

To evaluate the effectiveness of task based learning in supporting teaching of writing, the researcher developed a pre-test to assess students' level in the two groups at the beginning of the course, and to indicate that any significant differences at the end of the course in favour of the experimental group are due to adopting blended learning [14,15]. Another tool was the unified post-test which was developed by the researchers in accordance with a writing rubric containing the following domains of evaluation: unity, cohesion, ordering, coherence, and the use of conjunctions.

As for the validity of the post test, the three instructors participated in designing an outline of a paragraph and students were instructed develop it into a complete paragraph. The instructors agreed on the validity of the post-test since it measured the skills focused up on in the study [16]. The nature of the post-test was comparable to that of the pretest. One of the researchers was the instructor of the experimental and control groups and the scorer of the pre-test and post-test paragraphs.

Procedures of the Study

In order to gather data for this study, the students were first stratified into two groups based on their preliminary test results and sex groups to control the impacts of other factors. Then, the groups were assigned to experimental and controlled group.

The data were gathered from all the students using test. The preliminary test was administered to all the students to gather the baseline data. After collecting the baseline data, a series of weekly lessons (3 weeks) was implemented for the experimental group by using task based learning. Finally, a post test was given for both groups to see whether the intervention helped the learners to achieve better results than its counterpart.

Results of the Study

To investigate the effectiveness of adopting task based learning in teaching writing in English as a foreign language in higher education and to answer the first question, the researchers calculated the differences in students' achievement scores in the post tests between the two groups as follows:

The result of the Preliminary Test

The results of the data collected during the preliminary phase of the action research demonstrate that the problem needs immediate solution. Below is the performance of the control group on preliminary test out of 10 (Tables 1 and 2).

As can be seen from the above tables, the average performance of both the control and experimental group on the preliminary test is almost the same, i.e., 3.65 and 3.85 consecutively [17]. The range is 7 for the control and the experimental group. In both cases, the majority of the students scored below 5 on the test. Furthermore, no one scored 9 or 10 from both groups on the pretest (Table 3).

Proposed Action

On the basis of the preliminary test analysis made so far, the

No	Paragraph Elements	Scores								Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	Unity	2	3	2	2	-	3	1	-	13
2	Putting details in Sequence	3	2	3	1	2	2	-	-	13
3	Logical Ordering of Ideas	-	3	3	5	-	1	-	1	13
4	Using Cohesive devices	3	-	5	1	2	-	2	-	13
5	Using Conjunctions	2	-	3	4	1	1	1	1	13

Table 1: Control group scores on preliminary test.

No	Paragraph Elements	Scores								Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	Unity	-	3	2	3	2	2	1	-	13
2	Putting details in Sequence	2	1	4	2	1	2	1	-	13
3	Logical Ordering of Ideas	1	3	2	3	1	2	-	1	13
4	Using Cohesive devices	-	2	3	1	5	1	1	-	13
5	Using Conjunctions	-	3	5	2	3	-	-	-	13

Table 2: Experimental group performance on pre-test.

No	Assessment focus	Average Scores	
		Control group	Experimental group
		1	Unity
2	Coherence	3.23	3.69
3	Ordering	3.77	3.85
4	Transition	3.54	4.23
5	Conjunctions	4.08	3.38

Table 3: Average score of both groups.

following actions have been proposed to be implemented to improve students' paragraph writing skills by specifically focusing on the three qualities of paragraph: unity, coherence, and cohesion.

1. Awareness creation on the importance of writing skills.
2. Motivating students to perform better on writing tasks.
3. Promoting peer assessment on writing tasks.
4. Designing tasks which relate to students' real life, for example,
5. Describing about themselves,
6. Writing about campus and dormitory life, etc.

Implementation of Action

The researcher scored thoroughly the performance of students on the preliminary test. Accordingly, the needs and background of the students have been identified and the following actions were taken to bring improvement in three major areas or qualities of paragraph writing. Therefore, the teacher conducted three months lessons to implement the proposed actions [18]. To this end, some varied activities which have real connections to students' life were designed. Students were organized into individual and small groups and were given shared objectives. Besides, objectives of the writing tasks were clearly communicated to the students. They were encouraged to make outline on the given topics in groups before they move on to write paragraphs of their own individually. The students were explicitly told the areas they need to pay attention to (unity, coherence, and cohesion) in their individual work. After students finished their writing tasks, specific criteria against which they would assess their performance were set by the instructors and students took sufficient time to read and give constructive comments for each other. With regard to assessment, the Association for Achievement and Improvement through Assessment (AAIA) 2006 recommends that students should be fully involved in

assessment process so that they understood how to improve and become independent learners. This was done by the assumption that the primary objectives of such an assessment support learning. On the basis of the peer comments and the insightful feedback from the instructor, students were given enough time to improve or even rewrite their paragraphs. Finally, students were asked to make a comparison of their own works among their group members and recommend one best paragraph from their group for appraisal [19]. Students who performed better from each group got privileges and appreciations from the students and instructor. This created a sense of interdependence and a sort of writing completion among students. This process continued for three consecutive months and the instructor wanted to see that if students have shown some improvement on the writing areas in focus. To this effect, they carefully prepared a writing test and administered to the target students. To minimize biases and subjectivity, which are the inevitable drawbacks of writing tests, key answers and checklists were set in advance and scoring was made objective as much as possible. The table below demonstrates the results obtained from both control and experimental group on post intervention test (Tables 4-6).

Evaluation of Action/Outcome

After intervention, the average performance of the experimental group on post test showed a slight improvement when compared to the mean score on pretest, i.e. 4.26 for post-test and 3.85 for pretest. However, the mean score of the controlled group showed insignificant change. In other words, the discrepancy between the preliminary and post-test for control group was 0.10 (3.75 mean for post-test and 3.65 pre-test). A considerable difference was noticed between the average performance of the control and experimental group on post-test (3.75 mean for pre-test and 4.26 for post-test respectively). The difference is equal to 0.51.

No	Paragraph Elements	Scores								Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	Unity	-	1	3	2	-	3	3	-	13
2	Putting details in Sequence	1	2	1	2	1	2	-	1	13
3	Logical Ordering of Ideas	-	3	1	4	2	1	-	1	13
4	Using Cohesive devices	1	1	2	1	3	1	3	-	13
5	Using Conjunctions	-	2	4	3	2	-	1	-	13

Table 4: Students' performance on post test (control group).

No	Paragraph Elements	Scores								Total
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	
1	Unity	-	1	3	2	-	4	3	-	13
2	Putting details in Sequence	1	2	1	2	1	3	-	1	13
3	Logical Ordering of Ideas	-	3	1	4	2	2	-	1	13
4	Using Cohesive devices	1	1	2	1	3	2	3	-	13
5	Using Conjunctions	-	2	4	4	2	-	1	-	13

Table 5: Students' performance on post test (experimental group).

No	Assessment focus	Average Scores	
		Control group	Experimental group
1	Unity	4.46	4.92
2	Coherence	3.15	3.62
3	Ordering	3.62	4.23
4	Transition	4.23	4.77
5	Conjunctions	3.31	3.77

Table 6: Average score of both groups (post- test).

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