

ASSESSING THE COMPOSING COMPETENCY OF ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS ENHANCED THROUGH INCREASED SELF-CONFIDENCE DURING PORTFOLIO BASED LEARNING

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Abstract- Writing being a language skill hard to acquire, but essential for academic success, identifying the learner attitudes towards it is important. This study is devoted to investigate the possibility of developing the writing process through portfolio based learning to raise learners' self-esteem during a fifty-hour writing course. Ninety-six first year undergraduates of the Faculty of Technology, Wayamba University participated in this. The learners produced ten paragraphs of different structures and revised the first drafts on a computer based on the teacher feedback which comprised of both direct corrections and indirect clues. The brainstorming exercises, paragraph outlines and first and second drafts were placed in a portfolio, and the learners were asked to reflect on the process and feedback every time they attempted the next paragraph. The same questionnaire designed to identify the learner attitudes towards writing was administered both prior to and after the treatment to measure whether there was an improvement. The Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was applied on six questions that focused on writing skills such as the ability to generate ideas, organize ideas, support them with appropriate and interesting examples, write fast and accomplish a task within a given time. The p value of 0.00 ($P < 0.05$) revealed that there was a statistically significant improvement in composing competency in their perception. Moreover, the learners' thoughts on portfolio writing were extremely positive, and could be coded as 'interesting, skill enhancing, confidence building, beneficial, and supportive for future purposes, proving the self-directed approach to portfolio writing to be quite productive.

Keywords- Direct Feedback, Indirect Feedback, Composing Competency

I. INTRODUCTION

Since writing is a language skill essential for academic success, any barriers to it such as lack of knowledge or guidance and poor attitudes towards the process need to be dealt with urgently and appropriately. Zamel, 1982 states the "Lack of writing competence results more from lack of composing competence than from lack of linguistic competence". Most language learners perceive writing as a difficult skill (Kert & Atay, 1997, Latif, 2007), and teachers have encountered learners who do not even attempt writing questions at the examinations. Their attitude to skill of writing seems to affect on their performance, and Grahaw Berninger, & Fan, 2007 state that "Writing attitude influences writing achievement." Writing is a process in which the learners should be guided through and provided feedback with, during the whole period of the exercise. The traditional approach of evaluating the end product is out of place, and a method that measures a diversity of skills, knowledge, processes and strategies should replace it. Portfolio based learning fills this need since the process of writing is supported and monitored throughout the time. It requires the learners to reflect on their work based on both direct and indirect feedback provided by the teacher. The direct feedback involves correcting errors, providing rules, examples and

overall comments whereas the indirect method involves underlining errors, providing clues and overall comments.

Direct feedback is beneficial for beginners and in dealing with complex organizational and structural patterns (Hairston, 1986). On the other hand, Indirect feedback cognitively engages the learners to focus on errors, identify rules and to retain them in the long term memory (Ferris, 2003). As the research conducted so far have proven both methods to possess their own merits, it was a combined approach that included both direct and indirect feedback that was used in the research.

Moreover, the approaches to writing in a learner centred classroom should reflect practices that help learners gradually emerge as good writers, and in such a context the teacher's role should be that of a facilitator. In addition to teaching, evaluating writing should also display the same learner centred approach in which the process is placed emphasis over the final product. In this climate, the portfolio writing helps incorporate teaching and testing in an effective blend while creating an autonomous classroom.

The existing literature reveals that the effective use of error feedback in developing the composing competency of second language learners is still a relatively unexplored area in Sri Lankan university context. Since almost all the students have pursued either Sinhala or Tamil medium education, writing in English and specifically writing fast and organizing the material in an appropriate format are difficult tasks for them. The interviews conducted with the students show that their experience with regard to teacher feedback on writing in English almost always limited only to direct feedback and receiving grades over the first drafts which were blindly considered as final drafts. Writing, revising and rewriting are alien concepts for them, and presumably this is a major reason why most learners have not been able to emerge as good writers. Moreover, the large language population in English classes also challenges the teachers to seek appropriate methodologies to address the issue of poor writing skills of the undergraduates as teacher correction alone places practical problems. Portfolio writing on the other hand has not been a very welcome idea in all second language learning contexts, so identifying learner views on this is also important.

This study first aims at identifying the attitudes the learners have over writing skill by focusing on a few essential sub-skills that the learners should have at their disposal for a successful production. Secondly, it aims at building learner confidence or the composing competency through a well taught writing course based on portfolio writing. Next, this course gradually leads to develop their writing competency by means of effective error feedback techniques that are employed to assist learners to revise their writings. Further, the portfolio assessment targets at providing the learner with more time to focus on their work outside the classroom and to refer to the sources like grammar books, dictionaries and more competent peers in an effort to improve their language. Finally, the outcomes of the intervention are measured to see whether any attitudinal change had taken place towards composing competency or whether any improvement had occurred in the same in the learners' own perception.

Research problem:

Poor writing skills of undergraduates badly affect their academic success and the language teacher is confronted with the challenge to motivate them to write and develop competency by using appropriate methodologies.

Objectives:

- I. To identify the learner attitudes towards the composing competency of writing before the intervention.
- II. To identify the learner attitudes towards composing competency of writing after the intervention.
- III. To identify the perceptions of learners over the effectiveness of portfolio based learning to develop the composing competency of the undergraduates.

II. METHODOLOGY AND EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

This research is of quasi-experimental design. Ninety-six first year undergraduates studying at the second semester of Faculty of Technology, Wayamba University of Sri Lanka participated in this. They received a fifty-hour writing course, the content of which covered introduction to paragraph structure, nine patterns of

paragraph and some grammar and punctuation rules. The learners were required to produce ten paragraphs of different structures and to revise the first draft of each on a computer in an effort to produce an improved second version. The revising was done individually based on the teacher feedback which comprised of both direct explanations and indirect clues, outside the class hours. The revised second drafts too received teacher comments as to whether the corrections had correctly been made. The brainstorming strategies, paragraph outlines and the two drafts for each paragraph structure accounting to twenty pieces of writing were placed in a portfolio. At the end of the course, the learners were asked to include a page giving their thoughts over the experience. The same questionnaire, which was designed based on Liker's seven-point scale that focused on identifying the learner perceptions on their ability to write, was administered prior to and after the course to observe whether any attitudinal change over writing had occurred.

The rationale for choosing this methodology was that unlike the pre-test and post-test design that evaluates the end product alone, an attitudinal questionnaire and the participants' spontaneous thoughts over the process and the experience were perceived as more effective tools to measure the developments in composing competency of the learners.

III. RESULTS

Six questions from the questionnaire that were based on identifying learner views over basic writing skills such as the ability to generate ideas easily, organize ideas easily, write interesting & appropriate responses, support the main points with the examples, write fast or fluently, and finish a writing task within an allocated time frame (Table 1) were analysed by using Wilcoxon Signed Rank test.

As observed from the statistical analysis above (Table 2), since the P value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected, and in the perception of the students, the writing skill or the composing competency has proven to have improved after intervention, at 5% significance level; thereby, achieving the first and second objectives of the research.

Taking the third objective into account, the thoughts of the participants were extremely positive and they could be coded as 'interesting, skill enhancing, confidence

Table 1: The questions that were used to identify the attitudes of learners over their writing competencies

Question No:	Question
1	I can easily generate ideas for my writing.
2	I can easily organize ideas for my writing.
3	I can write interesting and appropriate responses.
4	I can write fast on a given topic.
5	I can easily find examples to support my ideas.
6	I can fulfil a writing task without difficulty within a given time.

H₀ : Writing competency of the students has not been improved

H₁ : Writing competency of the students has been improved

Table 2: Results of the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test: Difference

Test for statistics	N for test	Wilcoxon	P value
Difference	96	4656.0	0.000

building, beneficial, and supportive for future purposes as in table 03.

This free writing exercise of sharing the thoughts over the experience of portfolio writing comprises of some valuable data that matches with the research objectives and stretches even beyond them. A major complaint made about writing classes is the boring factor, and irrespective of the fact that they had engaged in a full writing course of 50 contact hours continuously, the learners found it to be quite interesting (A2, A2, A5, A6, A7). The data also do not include any instances that the learners perceived writing to be a difficult task, and instead stated that they 'feel better' after expressing themselves on paper (A4). The thoughts coded under the theme 'skill-enhancing' provide

evidence over the contribution the course made to remove their unnecessary fear over writing in a second language. The methodology employed has also proven to be an effective way to address grammar (B1, B2, B3), mechanics of writing (B4) and the technical skills like typing (b6). Moreover, there are positive thoughts expressed over the independent and autonomous approach that the

course offered into self-correction and revising (D4), its cognitive engagement of the learner to focus on their writings closely (D6) and its potential to develop oneself into a good writer (D5). Finally, the confidence gained in writing has made the participants feel secure at perceived future circumstances such as examinations (E1, E3), work(E2) and life(E4).

Table 3: Sample thoughts of the participants over portfolio writing

Code	Thoughts
A: Interesting	A1: "I have not only good writing skills also lovely experience in paragraph writing." A2: "Interesting programme." A3: "Interesting because every paragraph had a new thing. It was enjoyable to write different paragraphs." A4: "When I write a paragraph I feel better" A5: "Actually this is my favourite assignment in the university" A6: "I liked it very much because it was not stress for me." A7: "The way the lecturer taught the lesson was very attractive." A8: "Portfolio is the best method for writing paragraph structures."
B: Skill-enhancing	B1: "Through making mistakes and correcting we have improved our language." B2: "Improved our English knowledge, grammar and creative ideas. Therefore improved our thinking ability." B3: "It gave us a good knowledge on grammar, spelling & vocabulary." B4: "I got lot of things by writing portfolio as I know how to make a paragraph plan and how to use punctuation marks properly." B5: "I improved my knowledge about sentence patterns." B6: "We improved typing by using typing software."
C: Confidence building	C1: "I feel this portfolio developed my confidence as a writer." C2: "At the beginning I was not good in English paragraph writing. Now I have the confidence of writing paragraphs accurately" C3: "Now I have the ability of writing paragraphs by organizing the details in the right manner" C4: "Writing paragraphs have taught me the easy ways to write a paragraph." C5: "I read and understood the lecturer's comments and I wrote the next paragraph better than the earlier one" C6: "When we write, advice given by the teacher was a strength to us. When teacher marking our paragraphs, sometimes she wrote the errors directly, sometimes underline the errors gave chance to understand what wrong we have done. It was a very good way to develop our confidence."

Code	Thoughts
D: Beneficial	<p>D1: "This portfolio shows off what I have learnt from the course, and how much I have improved. It shows I have made incredible progress this semester"</p> <p>D2: "The lecturer's comments were very helpful in developing English writing skills."</p> <p>D3: "If his course was a normal one, we will not participate it actively. Under portfolio concept, we got the best use"</p> <p>D4: "We have the responsibility to give the written paragraph to the lecturer, correct it, type those and get a print out for the portfolio within set time. I think it is a good concept."</p> <p>D5: "Without this course module, I couldn't have been able to write good paragraphs"</p>
E: Supportive for other future purposes	<p>D6: "It aided my understanding of certain aspects of writing that I had never understood before"</p> <p>E1: "Writing paragraphs have taught us easy way to write paragraphs. So, now we can easily write answers for the examinations"</p> <p>E2: "In day today life, we have to write some notes, letters, and articles. For that we need clear knowledge about different paragraph types"</p> <p>E3: "This was a big contribution for academic activities"</p> <p>E4: "I could measure my day today progress in writing. I may write anything more accurately in future"</p> <p>E5: "In future we can use this knowledge of paragraph structures to write research reports"</p>

IV. DISCUSSION

Since all six questions of the questionnaire given in table 1 aimed at the single objective of identifying whether the learners' attitude towards composing competency underwent a positive change, the Wilcoxon signed test was applied on the average rank of the whole six items instead of analysing each question separately. Obviously, there was an upward movement with regard to each writing competency or skill, and this growth was remarkable for the first four questions compared to the last two as observed from the average figures of the raw data. The practise that the learners gained over skills such as generating ideas, producing a clear topic sentence with a dominant impression, supporting it with points, organizing those in an outline and filling the outline with relevant and interesting examples seem to have given

them a great confidence into writing. Yet, they seem to need longer a time to gain competency over writing fast and finishing a task within a given time frame. Overall, the results of Wilcoxon signed test prove that portfolio based writing that require the learner to plan, write, revise and rewrite is an effective strategy to develop the composing competency of second language learners at the Sri Lankan university context.

The thoughts on portfolio writing were the last page of each portfolio which reflected the participants' feelings and observations over the experience. All the students had found the experience to be a treasure, and they had made a genuine effort to explain how and why. Since similar ideas were found in many portfolios, one statement that represented each idea was included in the table 3 under the six codes. First, many participants stated that writing

for the portfolio was interesting as it was a novel and an enjoyable experience (A1, A3, A4) to them. They further stated that it involved an attractive methodology (A7, A8) and some valuable content (A3). They had also liked it since the exercise was not stressful (A6) probably because they could write, rewrite, revise and type the paragraphs leisurely outside the class hours. Further, they said that it was their favourite assignment at the university (A5).

Second, the participants noted that the course helped improve their composing competency since it focused on the process of writing than the final product. The students' thoughts show that they had learnt the important steps of writing such as planning (B4), drafting and revising (B1), punctuating (B4), proofreading for spelling (B3), grammar (B1, B2), and sentence variety (B5), and editing the draft with more refined vocabulary (B3) while they were guided through this process. As stated further, portfolio writing had also improved their thinking capacity (B2) and creativity (B2) during the brainstorming exercises.

Third, the portfolio based writing as a learner centred approach to teaching, has built up the learner confidence (C1). The participants observed a great transformation in them as writers from the beginning to the end of the course (C2) because by the end they knew how to do it 'in the right manner' (C3). Writing was once difficult a skill for them, yet through the right techniques, it had been transformed into easy a task (C4). Moreover, being able to understand the teacher feedback, particularly the more challenging type of indirect feedback, and being able to revise the first drafts accordingly had given them great confidence (C5, C6).

Portfolio writing has also brought benefits quite obvious to the learners. As per their perception, the portfolios provide evidence as to how much progress in writing they have made (D1). The concept of placing their writings in a portfolio seem to have motivated them to do it well (D3) and by a deadline (D4). Most importantly, they had felt intensely that they were able to understand certain new aspect of writing that they had never thought of before (D6) and were able to become good writers due to this course module (D5, D6).

Finally, the participants also commented that the portfolio based writing was supportive in other future

purposes such as better performance at examinations and other academic activities (E1, E3), writing more accurate documents required in day today life, and producing effective research papers (E5). This reveals the fact that they were ready to apply what they gained beyond the classroom.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The research findings supported by both quantitative and qualitative data prove that the self-directed approach to portfolio writing has transformed the attitude to writing in a considerable way while uplifting the students' self-esteem simultaneously. The success of this methodology can be accounted to the constant practice the students gained in basic writing skills while planning, writing and revising and the effectiveness of the teacher feedback provided promptly. It has motivated the students to work outside the classroom hours to focus on language, to reflect on the teacher comments and the process of writing and to perceive language as a pleasurable experience for them. So, portfolio writing is a very productive method to develop the writing skills of the undergraduates of Sri Lankan university context.

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