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Article · October 2016

DOI: 10.20547/jess0421604201

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ESL Learners' Writing Skills: Problems, Factors and Suggestions

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Abstract: Writing is an important skill for language production. However, it is considered a difficult skill, particularly in English as a second language (ESL) contexts where students face many challenges in writing. Therefore, the present study was conducted with an aim to investigate problems in Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing and factors that hinder their writing skills. It also aimed at obtaining suggestions on how to improve Pakistani ESL learners' writing skills. For this purpose, focus groups of Pakistani English language teachers' and undergraduate ESL learners were conducted. Writing samples were also collected from 30 ESL undergraduate learners to find the major problems in their writing. The interviews and essays were analyzed using **thematic content analysis**. The findings reveal that the major problems in Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing are **insufficient linguistic proficiency** (including command over grammar, syntax and vocabulary), **writing anxiety, lack of ideas, reliance on L1 and weak structure organization**. These challenges are influenced by various factors including untrained teachers, ineffective teaching methods and examination system, **lack of reading and writing practice, large classrooms, low motivation and lack of ideas**. The study also sheds light on the remedial measures such as increased reading, **conscious and incidental vocabulary teaching, writing practice, trained teachers, reforms in the examination system, and writing competitions**.

Keywords: Writing skills; Writing in ESL context; Pakistani ESL learners' Writing skills; Writing problems.

1 Introduction

Writing is a significant skill in language production. Its significance increases when it comes to writing in English language which is extensively used for global mediation of knowledge (Mahboob, 2014; Mansoor, 2005; Marlina & Giri, 2014; Rahman, 2002). Hyland (2003) believes that performance in language development is subject to improvement in writing skills. A text of an effective ESL writer must be cohesive, logical, clearly structured, interesting and properly organized with a wide range of vocabulary and mastery of conventions in mechanics (Jacobs & L, 1981; Hall, 1988). However, writing is often considered merely a part of teaching and learning grammar and syntax, which resultantly underestimates the nature and importance of writing, and affects its growth. Therefore, the development of

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this skill draws considerable attention for its learning and teaching from the very early phase of language education. Nunan (1989) argues that writing is an extremely difficult cognitive activity which requires the learner to have control over various factors. These factors vary from academic background and personal interest of the writer to various psychological, linguistic and cognitive phenomena (Dar & Khan, 2015; Haider, 2012; ?, ?).

In Pakistan, the writing skills of the students are alarmingly weak and substandard. Although, English language users in Pakistan have exponentially increased to 49% in 2003 from 2% in 1961 (Dar & Khan, 2015), they still face issues in English language, particularly in writing. These issues generally arise from incompetence in syntax, coherence, idea expansion, content selection, topic sentence, rhetorical conventions, mechanics, organization, lack of vocabulary, inappropriate use of vocabulary. However, further research is required to explore and examine the factors that adversely affect writing skills of the students, because issues in writing can be more efficiently addressed if the factors that generate them are identified (Hyland, 2003). This study intends to investigate problems in students' writing, the factors that generate these problems, and finally, suggestions of the participants on how to improve learners' English language writing skills.

Previous studies have attempted to categorize these factors into some broad domains, for example, teachers' incompetence (Haider, 2012; Mansoor, 2005; Harmer, 2008), students' lack of interest (Byrne, 1991; Harmer, 2008) methodological inappropriacy (Ahmad, Khan, Munir, et al., 2013; Javed, Juan, & Nazli, 2013; Siddiqui, 2007). However, there is still a need of further research that could explore the origin of these factors and their subsequent conversion into permanent writing problems of students' written discourses. The current study, along with teachers' and students' perceptions, explores and examines the students' opinions and their written texts to identify their writing problems and the factors that generate these issues coupled by suggestions from the respondents on the improvement of ESL learners' writing skills. It will bring the latent psychological and cognitive factors into light for further enquiry and suitable solution.

Literature Review

Writing is the most challenging area in learning second language. It is based on appropriate and strategic use of language with structural accuracy and communicative potential (Dar & Khan, 2015; Hyland, 2003; Mahboob, 2014). Kellogg (2001) opines that writing is a cognitive process that tests memory, thinking ability and verbal command to successfully express the ideas; because proficient composition of a text indicates successful learning of a second language (Geiser & Studley, 2002; Hyland, 2003; McCutchen, 1984; Nickerson, Perkins, & Smith, 2014). Therefore, learning how to write has gained considerable importance for the last two decades due to two factors: its use as a tool for effective communication of ideas, and the extensive research work carried out in this area to examine various issues faced by L2 writers (Dar & Khan, 2015; Graham & Perin, 2007; Haider, 2012; Hyland, 2003).

Student writers face various writing problems at different stages of their learning. Generally, these problems can be classified into linguistic, psychological, cognitive and pedagogical categories (Haider, 2012; Hyland, 2003). They struggle with the structural components

of English; because an inappropriate structure complicates the content and comprehension of the text, which a reader deciphers through involvement of a mental process (Quintero, 2008; Nik, Hamzah, & Rafidee, 2010). Similarly, an incoherent text fails to communicate ideas which causes lack of confidence in learners even if they have mastered syntactic, lexical and grammatical command over text composition (Rico, 2014). Students' lack of confidence is also caused by a teaching strategy which does not conform to students' learning styles and cultural backgrounds (Ahmad et al., 2013). It is argued that poor writing skills originate from two factors: the teacher and the learner. Teachers lack appropriate pedagogic approach to teach writing, including providing prompt and effective feedback to students, and most crucially, teachers' lack of ability to motivate students. On the other hand, students face numerous challenges: effects of L1 transfer lack of reading, motivation, and practice. In Pakistan, student writers encounter psychological, cognitive, social and linguistic problems while converting ideas into text (Bilal, Tariq, Din, Latif, & Anjum, 2013; Dar & Khan, 2015; Haider, 2012; Mahboob & Talaat, 2008).

Numerous factors that affect students' writing skills have been identified in literature. These are associated with the motivation of learners who are generally unclear about the purpose and significance of their text in their L2 learning. Similarly, social media, inconsistent feedback from teachers, learners' lack of analytical and evaluative approach, and large and unmanageable class sizes also negatively impact the structural and communicative accuracy of the students' texts (Pineteh, 2013). Most of the students find it very challenging to obtain sufficient and relevant source information, paraphrase or summarise information, and use an appropriate academic writing style (Gonye, Mareva, Dudu, & Sib, 2012; Kalikokha, 2008). It is caused by delayed essay writing instruction, large classes, students' negative attitude towards their academic English course, L1 transfer, and lack of dialogue between students and teachers about the constructive steps that need to be taken to address these problems. In Pakistan, insufficient time for teaching writing, improper A/V aids, overcrowded classrooms, traditional pedagogy and students' weak academic backgrounds have been reported to be some of the factors affecting students' writing skills (Bilal et al., 2013; Butt & Rasul, 2012). Similarly, outdated textbooks that neither promote the importance of a writing skill, nor give any opportunities, too consequently fail to invoke an audience (Haider, 2012). Another body of research critiques incompetent teachers who instead of promoting creative skills urge students for rote learning and exam-oriented language production (Mansoor, 2005; Rahman, 2002; Siddiqui, 2007).

Students' writing ability can be improved by fostering their interest, motivation and enjoyment for writing, through technology (Graham & Perin, 2007). Similarly, some metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies could also be used for enabling the students to know and practically exercise the writing process (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Further, the teachers can adapt their pedagogic approaches and can mutually design such tasks that could motivate and encourage students by giving them liberty of choosing topics of their interest (Pineteh, 2013; Quintero, 2008). It will reshape their writing patterns, presumably, through extended practice and by involving physical and cognitive skills which give the writer control over the expression of linguistic and domain-specific knowledge (Kellogg & Raulerson, 2007). In addition, it will be convenient for language and content teachers to monitor their students from broad perspectives (Nik, Sani, Kamaruzaman, Hasbollah,

et al., 2010). Most importantly, it is necessary that attitudes towards writing and dealing with its issues are changed. Teachers must employ strategies to elicit ideas from students to be penned down on a piece of paper to promote their verbal ability. Moreover, instant and critical feedback needs to be given on their output, so that their confidence is elevated (Haider, 2012).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the writing problems, factors that hamper writing development, and suggestions to improve writing skills of Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners. The research was carried out to answer the following research questions:

- What are the major problems in Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing skills at undergraduate level?
- What are the factors that affect Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing skills at undergraduate level?
- How can Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing skills be improved?

To answer these questions, data were collected through four focus group interviews with undergraduate ESL learners and English language teachers. A focus group collects data through interviews with a group of four to six people. It is advantageous when the respondents are similar and their interaction yields the best information (Creswell, 2012). Eleven students and ten English language teachers were selected as the sample of the focus group interviews. The ESL learners' groups comprised of 18% male and 82% female participants whereas the teachers' group consisted of 50% male and 50% female respondents. The respondents' consent was obtained prior to the interviews; they were also assured of complete confidentiality. The interview questions were carefully designed and checked for self and expert validity as (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2013) states that validity is an important requirement and a touchstone for both qualitative and quantitative research. The questions were piloted on a similar group before the actual data collection. Besides ensuring that an instrument works well with respondents, piloting also helps in verifying the clarity of questions, and removing ambiguous language (Cohen et al., 2013). In addition to the focus group interviews, writing samples (descriptive, narrative and argumentative essays) of 30 undergraduate ESL learners from four public and private sector universities were also collected. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data since thematic analysis identifies the emerging themes and patterns in the qualitative data. The researcher immerses in the data and recognizes the relationship between 'codes, concepts and themes' (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Findings

Findings of this study have been categorized into following three major areas: problems in Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners' writing, factors responsible of these writing problems and suggestions to improve ESL learners' writing skills. The findings of the writing samples analysis is also discussed under writing problems section.

Problems in ESL Learners' Writing

The students and teachers delineated several problems in the writing of undergraduate ESL learners. They agreed that ESL learners lack knowledge of appropriate vocabulary: *'I cannot come up with the words like how to express my (thoughts).'*' (FS3). *'They don't know the appropriate use of words.'* (FT2). Learners also have difficulties in grammar and syntax. They make mistakes in subject-verb agreement, pronouns, tenses, articles, prepositions and basic sentence structures. *'The major problem is with the uses of tenses and articles and preposition.'* (FT5). *'I always have issues with sentence structure.'* (FS2). Additionally, lack of ideas affect learners' writing skills. *'Until and unless students have information with them, they will not be able to pour any idea through their pen onto the page.'* (MT3). Organized writing is also a challenge to learners as their writing lacks coherence, consolidation of knowledge and use of formal transitional and cohesive devices. *'(Students) do not organize'* (MT5). *'Most of them are not able to consolidate their knowledge. When you ask them to write about themselves, they (cannot).'*' (FT1). *'Writing is different from speech, (students') writing is actually speech put on the page.'* (MT4).

Findings from Written Samples

The analysis of ESL learners writing samples revealed a total of 1217 problems in grammar, syntax, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation, word form and word order, spoken expressions, contracted forms, cohesion, repetition of ideas and L1 influence. (See Table 1)

The highest number of errors was made in grammar. Grammatical errors included errors of different word classes, subject-verb agreement, and forms of singular and plural, for example, *'these applications gives a proper protocol to communicate others'*, *'these channels provide numerous number of information'*, *'every day the situation goes bad to bad'* and *'their personality impress by everyone'*.

Grammar was followed by syntax. Syntactical errors show learners' lack of command over structure of a sentence. They wrote sentences like, *'I am going in weekend and more enjoy our family and see previous struggle.'* The third highest number of errors belonged to vocabulary, for example, *'Using the connection between the student and teacher, this (psychological) error from our society can evaporate'*.

Spelling and punctuation errors were also found in abundance. Some spelling errors were *'invention'* (invention), *'individually'* (individually) and *'fascility'* (facility), whereas punctuation errors included capitalization, use of comma and apostrophe, as in the following examples: *'I see more school students.'*; *'In this Era we cannot even imagine'*; and *'I*

had with my friends family and cousin.’

Table 1
Reliability and Validity Values

Writing Problem	Frequency of Occurrence
Grammar	551
Syntax	171
Vocabulary	157
Spelling	113
Punctuation	95
Verb Form and Word Order	55
Spoken Expressions	61
Others	14
Total	1217

Learners also used incorrect word forms like (psychological) disorderness, energetic drinks and ‘I was feeling such a greatness’. Similarly, the order of words was also found to be inappropriate causing difficulty in expression of meaning. They wrote: ‘That was probably my unforgettable day of life’, and ‘after completing the long 2 hours journey.’

As pointed out by the respondents, the use of spoken and informal style of writing was also observed. Spoken expressions like ‘lets talk about television first’ and ‘now if we talk about life without them’ were used by learners in their writing. Moreover, the learners used the contracted form mostly in their negative sentences using don’t, won’t, and can’t.

Another set of errors belonged to cohesion, repetition of ideas and influence of Urdu. Although they did not occur as frequently as other problems, they also need to be addressed. Repetition of ideas indicates lack the ideas whereas lack of cohesion and rare use of transitional devices lead to lack of unity and coherence. The influence of Urdu was also evident in sentences like, ‘Chain of tears comes outside’ and ‘Increase the hateness in their hearts’ which reflects student’s thinking process in Urdu.

Factors Responsible of ESL Learners’ Writing Problems

The data revealed that there are various factors at play hindering the development of undergraduate ESL learners’ writing skills. First of all, writing is not given much importance in our society. It is considered as a secondary skill to speaking. Consequently, the culture of reading and writing does not flourish at academic and social level and these skills remain ignored. ‘(Students) have never been given the idea that they need to be good writers. Writing does not get maximum of instruction’ (MT4). ‘Writing is one of the skills which is least liked in our society’ (MT2). Similarly, the examination system does not encourage learners’ creative writing. Instead, it encourages memorization and plagiarism. ‘Our examination system does not encourage our students to be analytical or critical. We give them twenty minutes for writing 200 words essay, so we encourage them to memorize’ (MT2). Writing anxiety is also considered to be a hindrance in learners’ production of well-organized text. ‘There is so much tension that give mental difficulty’ (FS8). ‘They must be facing debilitate anxiety because of which they may not be able to write’ (MT3). Similarly, reliance on Urdu for processing thoughts and ideas also results in weak writing. ‘They think in Urdu and then they try to translate into English’ (FT4).

Untrained teachers and ineffective teaching method are also influential in developing learners' writing skill, absence of which affects writing adversely: '(Institutes) are not having trained teachers who can develop the (writing) skill' (FT4). 'The teaching style is outdated' (FS6). Exposure to receptive skills and writing practice are also required to develop one's writing skill. The amount of these provided to learners inside and outside the classrooms is not enough to master the skill. 'Receptive skills are not considered very important for the writing' (FT1). '(Students) do not practice. If practice starts (at school), then they will have developed (writing) sufficiently to meet the requirements of a university' (MT3). Large classrooms and lengthy courses are also potential factors; our classrooms fail to provide conducive environment to learners resulting in poor writing skill development. 'Writing always needs peaceful environment, our classrooms are not peaceful.' (MT4). 'The course outline is not good enough. They are outdated' (FS6). Lack of motivation on the learner as well as teachers' part was also put forth as a potential challenge faced by learners. 'Teachers expect the students to write very well but the teacher never motivates them to write by themselves' (FT2). Additionally, lack of ideas and concentration was also discussed as factors resulting in writing problems. 'Because we don't (have) the actual knowledge of the topic' (FS1). 'I think lack of concentration also affects our writing' (FS7).

Suggestions to Improve ESL Learners' Writing Skills

To improve undergraduate learners' writing skills, the respondents suggested several remedies. To begin with, reading was suggested in order to develop better writing and to enrich vocabulary. The conscious teaching of vocabulary was also emphasized: 'We can do some good reading so that we can get good vocabulary, and improve our writing' (FS7). '(Students) should be taught words, either through incidental vocabulary learning or intentional vocabulary learning' (MT3). Developing a writing culture and providing opportunities for writing practice were also suggested. For respondents, importance should be given to writing as it is given to speaking skill: 'By making students write daily for fifteen or twenty minutes we can improve their writing skills' (MT3). 'From early classes, we need to inculcate at least the culture of writing as we do with the speaking part' (FT3). A change is also required in the examination system. According to respondents, it should not promote memorization and plagiarism. 'Our education system shouldn't be about rote learning' (FS2).

Similarly, the importance of effective teachers cannot be denied. Therefore, it is very important that they are trained not only in effective teaching practices but also in providing positive and constructive feedback. 'Institutes should provide skillful teachers for the writing and should provide trainings, particularly for language teachers' (FT1). 'If we are going to appreciate and motivate their efforts, (it will) encourage them to write more (FT4). To motivate learners towards writing, changes in writing courses and arrangement of writing competitions were also emphasized: 'We can arrange some extra courses based on tenses, articles, and structure and some creative writing competition' (FT5).

Discussion

The major language issues in the learners' writing were of grammar and syntax. These errors included incorrect use of prepositions, articles, tenses, singular/plural, verbs, sentence structure, and the use of informal and spoken expressions. Vocabulary also poses a problem for learners as they are not aware of collocational and connotational meanings of the words. Haider (2012) also found similar problems of vocabulary in their studies. Corresponding to the finding of (Megaiab, 2014), spelling and punctuations errors were also found in abundance in writing samples. However, these errors were not highlighted as a problematic area by any of the present research participants during the interviews. ESL learners tend to spell words according to their sound, a process referred to as phonetic perception by (Al-Khairy, 2013) resulting in incorrect spelling. Similarly, learners do not possess topic-related knowledge. When students do not possess knowledge, they cannot write well.

The study revealed many diverse reasons such as, society, culture, the teaching-learning context and the learners themselves affecting the development of writing skills in one way or the other. The writing part in an exam paper usually has repeated topics encouraging the learners to memorize the ready-made essays on the recurrent topics. Ahmed (2010) also observed similar effects of examination on ESL learners' writing skills. Likewise, the class room environment is not conducive to learning; congested rooms situated at noisy locations, large number of learners, and lack of other basic facilities hinder the process of writing skill development. The teachers also fail to impart effective writing skills and strategies to the learners. On the other hand, as identified by (Nik, Sani, et al., 2010), undergraduate ESL learners are not motivated to improve their writing skills. The concentration and efforts are limited only to attempt the writing section of the exam papers. This trend further reflects in lack of interest in reading and writing practice. There can be various reasons: workload of different subjects, domestic and financial responsibilities, absence of motivational feedback, family background and simply lack of interest. The learners also rely on their first language as a backup strategy when they find difficulty in writing in English. They tend to translate words and borrow syntax of Urdu which varies from English to a great extent; this eventually results in poor writing as observed by (Myles, 2002). Effective feedback from peers and teachers can also play an important role, however, the concept of feedback is not correctly recognized in the current context. It is considered to be highlighting mistakes in writing without taking into consideration the level, needs, and proficiency of the learners. Only trained teachers can carry out these responsibilities in an effective and productive way.

These problems and challenges can be resolved by several remedial measures at individual as well as institutional level. The participants suggested teachers should increase learners' exposure to all four skills with specific emphasis on reading and writing. Al-Khairy (2013)'s findings also emphasize the need of qualified, trained and motivated teachers. Constructive feedback should be provided by the teachers to help learners, criticism on their writings should be minimized, and writing competitions should be organized to motive the learners. It was also suggested that these modifications should be implemented at secondary and intermediate levels so that learners face less difficulties in writing skills

at tertiary level.

Conclusion

The research was conducted with an aim to explore undergraduate ESL learners' writing problems, factors hampering development of their writing skills and suggestions to improve their writing skills. Hence, considering the problems, factors and suggestions this study has explored, it can be concluded that Pakistani undergraduate ESL learners face various problems in their writing but their writing skills can be improved by taking into account the reasons of these problems. The findings of the study can be generalized to the ESL learners and English language teachers at tertiary level in Karachi; however the small sample size is a limitation of this study.

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