STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING WRITING SKILLS IN SECOND LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT: *The writing skills are very important for the students with regard to assessment and evaluation of the students' level of understanding in different subjects. These skills are also significant in case of awarding grades. The grades are critically important for admissions to different degree program and for getting an employment. This study is based on the review of literature to explore difficulties faced by students in writing, especially in the second language. According to the researchers, writing is a reflective activity and requires thinking, ideas, relevant knowledge and vocabulary. The writing in second language becomes even more difficult task for the students. Writing is more difficult than speaking because the former is more formal than the latter, and also due to the fact that people speak more than writing in their routine life. Moreover, spoken language occurs in natural environment; whereas, writing takes place in artificial environment. Writing requires learning vocabulary and grammar. It has also been found that good writers are also the good readers. The literature shows that teachers use different approaches to teach writing skills to their students. Students' learning of the writing skills also depends on the teachers' approaches to teach the writing skills. The approaches to teach the writing skills involve a product approach, a process approach, an eclectic approach and a genre approach.*

Key words: writing skills; writing in a second language; teachers' approaches to teach writing skills Introduction

What is writing?

A large number of researchers have attempted to define writing. The definition put forth by Chakraverty and Gautum [1] is that writing involves cognition. It demands a lot of time for thinking and reflecting on a topic. It requires the writer to analyze and classify any background knowledge. After this difficult process the writers need an appropriate language to express these ideas into a cohesive and coherent discourse. (p.1). Nunan [2] also pointed out that "writing is an extremely complex, cognitive skill for everyone because in this activity the writer has to show control of some variables simultaneously" (p.36). Accordingly, Widdowson [3] while defining writing also supported that writing is the use of th visual medium to show the graphological and grammatical system of the language; it means writing is the production of sentences as examples of usages.

Thus, in order to compose correctly, it is essential that the students overcome the complexity by learning the graphic system of language, its grammatical structures and vocabulary related to the topic under-writing. Another definition of writing is put forth by a researcher [4] who argues that writing is neither a mechanical task, nor a simple matter of jotting a speech down on a piece of paper. It is an exploration in the use of the graphic potential of a language- a creative process- an act of discovery.

Writing cannot be defined as the production of symbols rather it is the arrangement of these symbols in such a way as they become words and words to form sentences and sentences to formulate passages and essays. Accordingly Harmer [5] defined writing as follows: "Writing is a process- that is, the stages the writer undergoes to write something in its final form… This process has four main elements which are planning, drafting, editing and final draft"(p.4).

This definition of writing is strongly advocated by Richards and Schmudt [6] who supported that "writing is viewed as a result of complex processes of planning, drafting, reviewing and revising" (p.529). There is no doubt that writing is the result of various procedures. It involves some activities like setting the goals, generating information, selecting appropriate language and vocabulary, making a draft, reading and reviewing, then revising and editing. Hence it is a complex process (p. 302)[7].

Recent researchers' definitions included the social aspect in writing. Shokrpour & Fallahzadeh [8] define writing not only a cognitive activity, but also a complex social act. It is the reflection of writer's expertise in the communicative skills. It is very difficult to develop and learn, especially in learning English writing as a second language. Lately another scholar [9] defined writing as a very complex effort which requires mastery on three aspects, namely cognitive psychological perspective, a socio-cultural perspective and a linguistic aspect.

Research Method

Review of literature related to difficulties in writing, faced by the students, has been carried out to identify the problems. The review also included writing skills and its relation with learning other skills such as speaking and reading. Literature on writing in second language, and role of the first language in relation to learning the writing skills in the second language is also part of the review. Additionally, the review included the approaches to teach writing skills to the students.

Nature of writing

Writing skill is one of the four integrated skills. Its nature has been undermined in English language teaching. It has often been considered equal to teaching grammar and sentence structures [10]. Different surveys proved that language composition is difficult and a complex process. Harmer [5] pointed out that a number of reasons exist why students find language production difficult. Nunan [2] agreed that learning speaking English is easier than writing skill.

Other than complexity, writing is a very active process which allows writers to play upon words and ideas. This idea is advocated by Zamel [11] who held writing as a "meaning making purposeful and exploratory process" (p. 473). It can be considered as a process of discovery of the way to compose a piece of writing. Grabe & Kaplan [12] think of

writing as a "technology" and this technology must be learnt after a continuous practice (p.6).

Language transfer is another aspect through which nature of writing can be determined. According to a scholar [13], writers transfer writing abilities and strategies from their first language to their second language. In this regard Jones and Tetroe's study as cited in [13] reported that "weaker writers' failure to use writing strategies in English was based on their failure to use these strategies in their first language". Contrary to this viewpoint is the opinion put forth by Blanchard & Root [14] who argued that writing was like the art of driving a car. If one knows the art of driving, one may know the driving rules of that country, but if he is to drive in another country one may not know all the rules. Same is the case with languages. The conventions of language may change from one to another.

Purposes of writing

According to Coffin et al., [15] students compose writing for a number of reasons such as to be assessed, to develop their critical thinking skills, to help their understanding and memory, to broaden their learning beyond the classroom, to enhance their communicative skills, and to be prepared as future professionals in different fields of knowledge. In Pakistani context BS honour students mostly write for summative assessment purposes. Although students have to take mid-term tests yet its weightage is limited to 25% which does not allow teachers to assess students' essay-writing ability comprehensively.

Rationale behind writing

In our everyday life we speak more than writing. In terms of frequency, Mc Donough & Shaw [16] supported the view that most people talk and listen more than they actually write. It shows that people write less in the real world, they have even fewer chances to do so in a second language. But this does not mean that the writing has a very insignificant role. People do writing because of its wide range of variety. Harmer [5], in this regard, stated that writing is used for a wide variety of purposes so it is produced in various forms.

While commenting upon the reasons for writing, Raimes [17] draws our attention to some significant ones. Firstly, through writing learners can use new and unseen structures or words no matter if these are right or wrong. Secondly, writing provides a sense of involvement in the new language to the learners. They can express their ideas, use their eyes and so they feel themselves associated with the new language. Thirdly, writing is done because it provides chances of cognition. The learners find out new ways and techniques to write and express themselves. They also learn the ways to get appropriate words or structures while writing. This means that the educational purpose of writing is to make the learners expert in expressing, ordering and communicating their ideas effectively.

However, this is not the ultimate purpose of writing. According to Hedge [18] the aim of successful writing is not only producing clear and correct sentences but also to write accurately and creatively. The teachers' purpose is to make writing process creative and stimulating so that the students feel at ease with writing. Their aim is to enlighten the relationship of writing with other skills [19].

Writing and speaking skills

Although writing and speaking skills are productive skills yet they are different. O'Grady et al., [20] argued that both the skills have differences. Spoken language is acquired in a natural environment while writing is taught and learnt in an artificial classroom environment. Contrary to it is the viewpoint of Robins [21] who said that both the skills are two ways of linguistic communication. A similar point was stated by Brown and Yule [22] who stated that "the written language is burdened with heavy vocabulary, grammatical structures, connectors, syntax etc. whereas spoken language is simpler and less elaborated (p.28).

While commenting on the differences between writing and speaking Raimes [23] claimed that speaking is extempore and unplanned whereas writing is well-planned and requires people to take time before composing any piece of writing. Another difference is of formality. Writing is formal and compact while speaking is not formal. It is repetitive and includes a lot of pauses, use of phrases, etc. As far as connectors are concerned, in speaking, they are simple such as 'and', 'but' etc. while in writing complex connectors are used. Writing also includes the problems of punctuation and capitalization while speaking manifests no such problems.

Nunan [2] referred to writing as "de-contextualized" while speaking is "contextualized". It means while writing the writer is normally away from the person he is addressing to. He has to infer the reader's knowledge and level of understanding and then add or omit certain points in his text. On the other hand, in speaking this is not the case. In speaking the speakers are very close to their listeners so they have no chance to alter their spoken words.

Harris [24] has given a detailed description of the differences between speech and writing. He categorized these differences into "situation, grammatical choices and lexical density". Harmer [5] commented upon these differences in terms of their forms in the process that writers and speakers go through to produce language. He enumerated almost six differences, namely time and space, participants, notion of process etc.

Writing and reading skills

Writing is productive while reading is a receptive skill. Although both are different, yet they are interrelated and have the same objective i.e. learning. Both the skills are linked with language and communication of ideas. Hyland [25] rightly said "writing together with reading, is a central aspect of literacy" (p.53). It means to be a literate person, it requires proficiency in both the skills. The results of the research by Charge & Taylor, [26]; Eisterhold, [27]; as cited in Sadek, p.200 [28]) show that a strong connection exists between these two skills.

Explaining the nature of connection between reading and writing skills Eisterhold [27], as cited in Sadek, p.233 [28]) concluded that reading serves as input for writing. He said that better writers tend to be better readers and vice versa. This viewpoint had already been mentioned by (Stotsky, [29], as cited in Kroll, p.88 [30]).

Theory and research in writing

Knowing the theoretical background of writing is of great value to understand the basic beliefs and practices related to writing. As Ferris & Hedgcock [31] persuaded us to look at theory, not as abstract and distant from the challenges novice

and expert teachers encounter, but as an enormous practical value. The researches of Cumming, [32]; Leki, 2000 [33]; Matsuda, [34], [35]; and Raimes, [36] gave views into the different ways writing theory and practice originated and reached its current position.

Ferris & Hedgcock [31] threw light on the point that L2 writing lacks a conclusive theory and research that could be used as a base. It is a fact that there is a huge corpus of research of L2 writing, yet it lacks a coherent and consistent undertaking of "how people actually learn to compose in a second language" (p.57) [37]. Ferris & Hedgcock (2004) [31] comes up with five categories of these theories and researches.

Firstly, discursive or traditional form of theory emerged in 1960s. It linked writing approaches to the audio-lingual method in second language teaching. In this method the focus is on mimicry, memorization of set phrases. Repetitive drills are frequently used. Writing is learnt through reinforcement of oral patterns [38]. In this period the focus was on controlled composition where students were asked to copy short written pieces of composition [39] & [40]. Secondly, expressionism and cognitivism theory came around 1976. According to Cumming[32]; Manchon, [41]; Ransdell & Barbier, [42] the focus of writing is the scrutiny of the cognitive strategies and meta-cognitive process that the writers use while they plan, draft, revise and edit their compositions.

Thirdly, in 1980s theory of disciplinary content and discursive practices shifted the focus of writing on content. Students of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses were helped with language of their thinking processes and the structures or shape of content [43]. Fourthly, in the same decade theory of social constructionism came in partial reaction to the approaches of discursive practices. In this approach the focus shifted from writer centered approaches to reader and discourse-based frameworks for writing English as a second language. This writing approach asks students for anticipating, satisfying and even challenging the demands of readers in writing process (Flower, [44]: Flower, Long & Higgins, [45]: Pennycook, [46]; Hyland, [25]).

Finally, the theory of socio-political issues and critical pedagogy got popularity in 1990. The theory of social constructionism was charged that it ignored the effects of writing in and outside academic settings which paved the way for the focus theory in which the focus shifted from readers to socio-political issues [48].

Approaches to teach writing skills
Following are some of the approaches which are used by teachers to teach writing skills to the students:

Product approach
In the history of pedagogic reforms one of the oldest approaches is the product approach which focuses on finished written products of the students. The distinguished feature of this approach is its attention on accuracy. As said by Nunan [2] "the teacher who adopts this approach makes sure that the end product is grammatically correct". To add to this Mc Donough & Shaw [16] argued that product approach can be considered as a traditional way to teach writing. Its main focus is on corrections and reinforcement of grammar.

Moreover, this approach makes the teacher judge the finished products of the students. Error detection also falls in this approach. Teachers find out the errors committed by the students and try to eliminate them (pp. 20-22)[48].

Process approach
When the product approach could not provide fruitful results to composition writing more attention was given to the process of writing. Resultantly, this led to a shift towards what is called the process approach which considers writing as a complex, cognitive, recursive and evolving process. Six stages of writing process are: determining the topic, taking account of readers, editing, proof reading and revising [49]. In the words of Zeng [50] process sees writing as a complicated cognitive process and it has multiple stages like pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing. But some drawbacks have also been attached to this approach. It does not focus on the variety and differentiation of the process of writing, specifically social context [51].

Genre approach
The genre approach is considered one of the important approaches of writing. A genre is a text which may be in the form of spoken or written. It has a particular purpose in a particular context and is written under some proper conventions. The basic spirit behind this approach is that the writers do not compose for pleasure but in different contexts, for different purposes and in different ways [52]. Nevertheless, this approach is not free of drawbacks. According to Paltridge [53] mixing of textual and socio-cultural knowledge makes the identification of the exact knowledge a tough target.

Eclectic approach
The eclectic or process genre approach is getting very popular because of its effectiveness in teaching writing skills. This approach is the blend of genre and process approach [54]. This approach is helpful for both the teachers and the students to learn writing skills. It provides students a chance to develop their creativity. It also assists them in understanding the characteristics of target genre[55]. It can be argued that the knowledge of form and language at the same time helps students to know how a particular form functions in a proper context. It can be very beneficial in enhancing learners' proficiency.

However, there is a general disagreement over the issue that there exists a single approach which can enhance writing proficiency of the students. Different approaches suit to different contexts.

CONCLUSION
This study was based on review of literature. The literature regarding the writing difficulties and the factors behind them has been reviewed in detail. The relevant literature has provided an insight into the difficulties students face in writing and the reasons behind those problems.

The writing is more formal than speaking. Another thing is that writing takes place in an artificial environment, and speaking occurs in a more natural environment. The literature shows that good writers are also the good readers. Writing requires knowledge, ideas, vocabulary and grammar. It grows over time with practice. Writing in second language is even greater challenge. There are conflicting views on the role of

first language in learning the second language. It helps in learning the second language, according to some studies, and a hindrance in learning the second language, according to some other studies. The literature also shows that learning to write is influenced by teachers' approaches to teach the writing skills.

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