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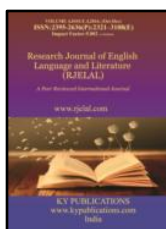
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## INTERACTIVE LEARNING THROUGH SHARED WRITING: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF ITS VALIDITY ON INDIAN LEARNERS AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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### ABSTRACT

Students, who are exposed to the English language for almost 12-13 years of their school life, still face difficulties in forming simple sentences and structure patterns of the language. English as a language is often taught to them from an academic point of view, whereas components that enable competence are often neglected. Learners are also being reluctantly submissive to the teacher instruction that often reflects a monotonous approach. This triggered the leading language learning experts to direct research that contributes to more of a learner centered approach writing. Focus shifted from "Teaching to write" to "Making learners aware of how to write". "Shared Writing", similar to Interactive learning, lets students participate along with the teacher, in the teaching-learning process. In this kind of an interactive learning the student attentively reads and listens to what is being said, and in response, also engages in a lot of written and spoken communication. The teacher monitors responses of each student and further enables their comprehension where they go wrong. The primary purpose of this method is to form a pathway connecting listening, reading, speaking and writing (the four major skills of a language). This paper attempts to study the effectiveness and feasibility of this interactive method, for tertiary level Indian learners.

### INTRODUCTION

The English language has attained the status of 'Global Language', and this in turn has rendered it as the common source of communication. It is used in a diverse range of contexts- business, social, academic, personal and so on. In such a state, it becomes indispensable to possess knowledge on this universally accepted language. To learn any language, it is important to master the four language skills – Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking; to aid better proficiency. The discipline of English language teaching gained its popularity owing to this growing demand for learning the language.

The field of English language teaching has evolved along with time, broadening its horizons to suit the requirements of the learner. Approaches have made a groundbreaking shift from merely learning the language to achieving natural competence in it. Gone are the times when rote learning methods were considered as the ideal way to learn language and its structures. In this fast evolving digital world, new and unique rationale and approaches are formulated to help learners master language skills. Writing skills, in a language, is considered crucial because it demonstrates various conventions of the language such as vocabulary, organization of concepts, sentence structures,

grammar, spelling, and so on. It is essential for a learner to master this skill to foster effective conceptualization of ideas and its transition. To learn this skill better, it is important that the learner is aware and understands the process of writing and its component parts. Writing skills have been 'taught' to learners for a really long time, through:

1. Explaining various forms of writing
2. Teaching grammatical structures
3. Memorizing sentence patterns

Though these practices allows learner to write, it does not guarantee proficiency. There is more to expertise in writing skills, such as, mastery of text organization, transition of existing and acquired knowledge, reasoning skills, and so on. Adept writers are created only by practicing the art of writing through 'writing' and understanding the forms and functions of writing, than anamnesis of mere rules. One such method concocted to attain effective link between the four major language skills is the "Shared Writing".

Educational Consultant Sushree Mishra explains

Shared writing is an instructional approach to teach writing to students by writing with them. The idea is to teach writing through writing. The process of writing is demonstrated by the teacher through a 'write aloud' process. The teacher acts as a scribe while the students contribute ideas. In other words, the pen is always in the teacher's hand. (Web)

The paper discusses findings obtained from a classroom research on 'Shared Writing', administered on a class of tertiary learners. The paper also aims to attempt a study on the validity of Shared writing in improvising writing skills.

#### **RESEARCH OBJECTIVE**

1. To identify problematic areas in writing
2. To examine the status of 'writing' in English beyond academic sense
3. To study the impact of Shared Writing practice in tertiary learners.
4. Attempt an analysis of the learning outcome achieved
5. To analyze limitations and problems faced by the learner/teacher during the activity

6. To verify if there has been any improvement in learner's writing skills (post activity)

#### **METHODOLOGY**

This, being, observational study majorly employed qualitative assessment for data collection and analysis. This included

1. Class observation
2. Interviews with learners and teachers
3. Assessments

Quantitative assessment in the form of questionnaires was also recorded. This tool was used to understand the impact of shared writing, both, before and after the activity.

#### **RESEARCH STRATEGY**

The research strategy can be classified in to three phases:

- Pre-writing - refers to collection of writing samples from the learners and assessing their writing skills in terms of language, coherence and structure. Informal interview unstructured questionnaire, to examine student's knowledge and exposure to writing, was also conducted.
- While-writing -includes an observation of learner response, composition of the text, involvement of learners, and role of the teacher.
- Post-writing - analyses the sample in terms of learning outcomes

#### **SAMPLING**

This research employed the 'non-probability' sampling technique to choose sample population. The sample size for research was 25 students, whose educational background was Science. They were learners for whom exposure to the English language was purely academic.

#### **PURPOSE OF STUDY**

Observation points out that Indian learner who is exposed to English as a second language for almost 12-13 years of their school life (from Kindergarten to Grade 12), still face complexities in forming syntactical sentences in the language. Many face obstacles to even draft grammatically correct sentences. English as a second language is often taught to them from an academic point of view, whereas components and language skills that enable

competence are often not given importance. Teaching English to Indian students are not an easy task. Since their exposure to the language is mainly academic, using it for communication purposes leaves most of them perplexed. But, this isn't the case with all Indian learners. Learners who have had a good exposure to the language from the preschool years; or learners whose social background involves usage of the language in their everyday lives do not face much hindrance. First generation learners, and learners who have not had an effective exposure to language through effective means, struggle with the language throughout their life. Learners who are introduced to the new language become submissive to the teacher's instruction, which in most cases follow a monotonous approach. Though students are good in doing grammar exercises in isolation by recalling relevant rules, they lack fluency and organization when it comes to writing sentences on their own. Due to insufficient exposure and rote learning methods, many Indian learners still lack confidence when it comes to writing. The fear of grammatical errors overwhelms their confidence to converse and write in English.

This triggered the idea of leading language learning to more of a learner centered approach. This reflection also kindled the concept that a learner learns the forms and functions of writing effectively as they actively observe and participate in class.

#### **MODELS OF WRITING**

Mostly, learners face problems when attempting to map their ideas and thoughts. This, in turn, emerges as a major complexity in writing that further hinders other strategic considerations such as organizing ideas, choosing the right vocabulary, generating relevant content, writing grammatically correct sentences, use of punctuations and so on.

There are various models approaches to writing that concentrates on eliminating such staggering problems faced by learner while acquiring writing proficiency. One such notable model was the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing, proposed by Linda Flower and John. R. Hayes, which was developed on evidence of 'Think-aloud protocols'. According to Flower and Hayes,

"Writers are constantly planning (pre-writing) and revising (re-writing) as they compose (write)" (p.367). They also stressed that "people do not march through these processes in a simple 1, 2,3 order"

Flower and Hayes also proposed that "writers create a hierarchical network of goals" which might include high-level goals such as 'write an introduction' as well as 'local working goals' like 'explain things simply' (p.377)... These goals may also shift as the process of writing proceeds. For example, "as they compose, [writers] continually return "pop" back up to their higher-level goals. And these higher level goals give direction and coherence to their next move"(p.379).

In their approach Flower and Hayes propose three strategies to writing:

1. State and Develop – which involves planning a piece, setting goals and drafting outlines of the composition
2. Explore and Consolidate – involves considering the nature of written piece, setting a clear definition of what needs to be achieved and organizing concepts in order to achieve the same
3. Write and regenerate – involves the author to analyse and review the written piece in terms of writing goals, and improvise through revision.

'Cognitive model' envisions writing process as a cognitive process of the mind. According to Flower and Hayes 'Major units of analysis are mental processes arranged in a hierarchy that can occur at any time in the writing process. (367-369)

One such approaches that focuses on writing as a cognitive process than a mere activity to be mastered is, the 'Shared Writing'.

"Shared Writing" similar to Interactive learning, lets the student participate along with the teacher, in learning.

"Interactive writing has been described by Swartz (2001) as "a teaching method in which children and teacher negotiate what they are going to write and then share the pen to construct the message." Interactive writing is a cooperative event in which text is jointly composed and written. The

teacher uses the interactive writing session to model reading and writing strategies as he or she engages children in creating text.” (Web)

In this kind of an interactive learning, the learner’s cognitive abilities are triggered through sharing of ideas and collaborative writing process. Brainstorming together, along with the instructor, offers the learner a scaffolding to enhance his/her own thought process. Shared Writing makes the learner aware of the writing process, and enables better hierarchical and coherent organization of thoughts. The student attentively reads and listens to what is being said and in response, also engages in a lot of written and spoken communication. The teacher talks through the process of constructing the text and instructs about different writing strategies. The teacher also monitors the response of each student and further enables their comprehension where they go wrong. The primary purpose of this method is to form a pathway connecting listening, reading, speaking and writing (the four major skills of a language). This method offers a fun and enjoyable way of learning, than monotonous mind-numbing activities.

Shared writing reinforces the usage of important structures in the language such as grammar, vocabulary, punctuations and sentence structures. Regie Routman (1994) lists out various benefits of utilizing shared writing in a classroom. According to him ‘Shared Writing’ aids skills such as reading and writing, all at the same time. Since activity requires the engagement of all the students, it offers a variety of interpretations and close-reading of the text

#### STRATEGIES OF SHARED WRITING

Shared writing activity requires careful planning and execution to ensure smooth transition of ideas on to the paper. It can be conceptualized in to following steps.

**PLANNING** Shared Writing is mostly effective when the number of targeted learners is kept minimal. This enables the instructor to devote equal attention to all the learners alike, to assess them and accordingly help in their learning process. The activity is planned beforehand and the topic for the activity is discussed with learners through a brainstorming

session. Topics of learner’s interest works best in shared writing activity. For example, all learners may not be completely involved/interested if the activity is to write review for a classical poem or a novel. Instead, if the activity is to write review about a movie that they have recently seen, or write a letter of complaint about something that has angered them recently; the learner is likely to partake as they are given a chance to voice out their personal opinion. The topic could also be a fictitious one where the learner’s imaginative powers are triggered and transmitted on to the paper.

**TEACHER AS A NEEDS ANALYST** During the process of shared writing, the teacher plays crucial role as a needs analyst, considering the group learners as individuals with different learning abilities than a homogenous group of learners. The teacher acts as a scribe, writing the whole text on the board/paper/Document viewer, in view for all the learners. It is also teacher’s primary duty to ensure vocabulary development and triggering the learner’s cognitive abilities as the activity proceeds. Another crucial role of teacher, as a facilitator, is to provide scaffolding throughout the construction of the text, by prompting key words, vocabulary, spelling for difficult words and so on. The teacher also makes sure all learners participate in the discussion and construction of the text. This enables the teacher to assess the student’s capabilities and limitations and help them accordingly.

The Shared writing activity can be modified according to needs of the learners. The teacher, after assessing the kind of expertise required, decides what type of text is to be constructed, and establishes an introduction to it by discussing the purpose of writing. As the text is being constructed, the teacher writes the complete text on the board/chart. The activity requires all the learners to open up and contribute in composing the text. The teacher draws a ‘word box’ to write down new vocabulary or concepts and explains its usage in the text. The teacher also writes words that learners utter, and shows them how to create new words through existing words by adding prefixes, suffixes and synonyms. This helps in building learner’s vocabulary, and the activity itself becomes a stress-free way to learn the language. When there is

assortment of learners in the classroom offering their views and sentences, errors are also equally inevitable. Errors are not explicitly corrected by the teacher as it would be de-motivating and bring down the confidence of the learner. Error correction is achieved through constant revision of the draft, in attempts to improve quality of the constructed text. Sharan.A.Gibson describes the best strategy in shared writing.

During the writing, model processes needed by your students. Have a small whiteboard available, for example, to demonstrate to students how to say a word slowly and write sounds heard into "sound boxes" (Clay, 2006) before writing a phonetically regular word into the text for them. For older students, begin with a root word and demonstrate how to add prefixes or suffixes to a new word.(Web)

#### **WRITING**

The Composition process is a series of distinctive thought processes that writers create and arrange as they write. These processes are ranked and set within one another so that any cognitive process can be a part of another. Composition is goal-directed by the writer's growing network of objectives with their writing. Writers create these goals by generating primary and supporting objectives which embody the writer's sense of purpose. This may expand or change based on knowledge acquired during the writing process. (Flower, Hayer 366)

In this method the teacher and students collaboratively work together in achieving a specific learning goal. On deciding upon a piece of work, students are encouraged to brainstorm their ideas and opinion about the selected topic. It is essential that all points be noted, to favor improvisation and revisions. Constant revision of the constructed text, while improving the quality of written piece, also enables better organizational patterns of writing.

#### **OBSERVATION**

To make an assessment of learner's aptitude and writing skill, a pre-test was conducted. Learners were made to write a formal letter of their

choice. Though the learners looked perplexed, they handed over their written pieces by end of the hour. These were assessed in terms of organization of ideas, writing techniques, vocabulary and syntactic structures.

An informal interview was also conducted to understand their fear/dislike towards writing as an activity.

Moving on to 'Shared writing' activity in their next class, learners looked interested to be introduced to new kind of writing activity. The class was briefed about the activity and divided into 6 groups.

To make a clear analysis of the activity and its impact, observation was divided into three phases. Each shared writing session comprises of three phases:

- Pre Writing
- While writing
- Post writing

**PRE-WRITING** The learners chosen for observation were non-major English learners. To keep their interest intact, selection of topic was given to their choice. 'Letter to the editor' was chosen as the activity for Shared writing. The activity began with discussion of the chosen topic for the letter. At this point, the teacher acted as a silent facilitator, motivating students to come up with more options for topic. This instilled confidence in students and also motivated them to eagerly participate in the learning activity. Finally, the students came up with 'writing letter to the editor about rash driving in their streets'.

In the beginning of shared writing session, the teacher preoccupied the class to discuss their views on 'rash driving'. As the class engaged in a brisk conversation with the instructor and came up with inputs, the teacher made notes of important keywords and concepts to be included in the letter. She made note of this on the 'word box' that she had drawn on the board, which was accessible to all learners. They engaged in an interactive conversation about the task and how to go about it. Then, the teacher orally discussed the format of letter that they were about to write. The teacher also makes note of such salient features of the letter



on the board, which acts as a reference throughout the activity.

**WHILE-WRITING** Once the topic and task was decided, the teacher and the class interactively commenced the writing task. The groups began to write the letter, using the teacher’s instruction as scaffolding. Though the teacher encouraged students to contribute most of the text, prompting words and ideas now and then, only few students came up with inputs at the beginning. These words and ideas were immediately put up on the board for the whole class to follow. The teacher took up chief responsibility of transcribing the key words and concepts on the board. As each group came up with a new idea, the teacher discussed and included it on the board using correct syntactic structure and vocabulary. The teacher also took charge to help students revise their text continually in order to correct when they go wrong. This reinforced the importance of editing and revising in any written work. At the end of activity, teacher encouraged learners to add a few points on their own, to give them practical exposure to writing and assess their own learning outcome. The teacher, then, questioned and used prompts to help them discover how far the text had met its purpose, and how far students have met their learning goal.

**POST WRITING** Once the text had been constructed, the groups took turns and read out what they’ve written. At this point the teacher took up an active role in correcting their mistakes and also pointing out any missing components. The teacher also made sure that learners recognize the error and how to rectify it, than blindly altering it.

**POST ACTIVITY**

After the shared writing activity, an informal interview was again held to get student’s feedback about the feasibility of the approach.

**FINDINGS**

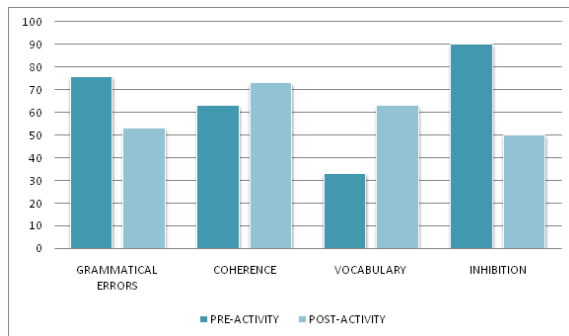
The interviews conducted before and after the shared writing activity proved to be very useful in understanding obstacles that learners faced in writing tasks. They also accepted that the shared writing practice helped them eradicate many such obstacles resulting in much better written skills.

**OBSTACLES FACED BY LEARNERS**

OBSTACLE	PRE-ACTIVITY	POST-ACTIVITY
Ineffective transition of thoughts to paper	17	10
Fear of Grammatical mistakes	2	-
Lack of content development	6	1
Limited vocabulary	2	-
Inhibition	3	-

- The research majorly achieved positive results in terms of learning outcomes. On examining the written piece of each group and comparing it with the pre-activity text, it was evident that learners found it very useful and made their learning process an enjoyable one. There was a major difference from pre-activity to post-activity assessment. The pre-activity written pieces of individual learners consisted of many grammatical errors, incoherence and distraught arrangement of ideas. Whereas the post-activity texts displayed much better organizational skill, appropriate vocabulary, and coherence in comparison to individual works. In terms of syntactic structures and vocabulary, grammatical errors were reduced by 33% and vocabulary increased by 30%. But, more importantly, students were able to shed their inhibition to writing, which acted as a major obstacle in the learning process.

	PRE-ACTIVITY		POST-ACTIVITY	
	No. of students	Percentage	No. of Students	Percentage
Grammatical Errors	26	86	16	53
Coherence	16	53	22	73
Appropriate Vocabulary	10	33	19	63
Inhibition	27	90	15	50



- Since learners selected for the activity were students of Science major, their exposure to the English language had been only academic. Though they were really nervous for a sudden writing session, as the activity proceeded they felt at ease.
- The activity led to an interactive classroom. Learners were more interested when the topic was something that they can relate to. Since they were divided into groups, peer learning helped them shed away their inhibitions and almost every learner contributed in the activity.
- On questioning the teacher about the experience, she replied that she had never seen her class excited about writing as much as other things. She also feels that the reason was that learners decided what they wanted to write about, than forcing them with something that is purely scholarly. The topic spoke of current situations and, that, encouraged them to interact. As they interacted, they developed a keen sense of listening and speaking skills. The classroom got more interactive as the activity proceeded. Even learners who were quiet at the beginning spoke out as the sense of fear eased out. No particular student was pointed out by the teacher to answer or participate. This played a pivotal role in improving the confidence of students as they only spoke out when/what they wanted to.
- As they read what the teacher wrote on the board and put it down in their notes, they honed their reading and writing skill simultaneously. Uninterrupted interaction on the topic, and hearing a range of inputs from their peers and teacher developed their vocabulary; and continuous revision from the

teacher's end to produce quality text helped them amend and assimilate grammatical structures.

Though this approach has many advantages, certain limitations were also noted:

1. Some learners were still shy and lacked confidence to communicate in the English language due to fear of making mistakes
2. Though they grasp grammatical rules quickly, they find it hard to incorporate the same in writing their own sentences.
3. This kind of interactive way of learning caused more talking in between the peers than with the instructor. Since the activity was a group effort, it cannot be said that all the learners contributed or learnt alike.
4. As English is not their first language, there was a general ignorance among the students and they deal it as just another academic activity.
5. Some learners did not have very strong communication skill. This hindered them from voicing out their opinion even if they have something valid to contribute.

#### CONCLUSION

There is a plethora of different methods that are being devised everyday to make English learning, a smooth and efficacious process. Though there are many successful approaches such as 'shared writing', the ability and nature of learners play a very crucial role in its validity. In such a context, the teacher should be ready to explore more options for teaching that would eradicate all these glitches and experiment new methods that would educate as well as entertain students. This eases the burden of learning the language as a tedious practice, and components of language competence are instilled gradually. Shared writing, if employed the right way, can prove to be an effective and stimulating activity, through which one can master the language skills necessary to establish communicative competence.

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