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2016-09-01

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Center for Pedagogy (CP) Established under the Sub-project Titled “Pedagogical Development at Undergraduate and Master’s Level” (CP3357), Independent Univeristy, Bangladesh (IUB)

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The Problems Students Face in Developing Writing Skill: A Study at Tertiary Level in Bangladesh

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The paper explores the problems that students generally face in academic writing at the Higher Secondary level. The focus is mainly on the present condition of their writing skill in English and the reasons behind their inability to write properly. For this, data and information have been collected from students and teachers of different colleges through questionnaire. Moreover, some conventional and new topics have been also provided for writing compositions for the purpose of finding out the common errors they make in their writing which helped to get an overall idea about their writing capability. The data reveals that most of the students are not in the habit of practicing free-hand writing; instead they are mainly dependent on guidebooks for memorizing answers and the teachers also lack proper training to instruct them to develop their writing skill in a systematic way. Lack of proper guidelines and practice, lack of skilled teachers, conventional question patterns and evaluation - all are mainly responsible for the poor performance in writing of the students. The recommendations finally may help to take proper initiatives with a view to developing their writing skill.

Keywords: *Writing skill, strategies of writing skill, systematic implication.*

Introduction

Although various attempts have been taken by the government to develop the basic language skills of the students, the writing skill is not up to the standard till date and because of the poor performance in writing, a considerable number of students fail in English in the exam every year. However, this poor performance has two types of effects on them:

A. Short term effect
B. Long term effect

Short time effect shows their inability to get good marks in the exams if the questions seem uncommon to them. This make them suffer a lot in the long run where they cannot do well in the field of competition after finishing their student life.

Objectives of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to mark the problems that are an impediment to the progress of writing of the students at the higher secondary level. For an effective solution, the first and most important task is to find out the root of the problems and identify how serious the problems are. Basically, the study emphasizes on the root of the problems with a view to finding out a reasonable solution to these problems. Ultimately it aims at providing with suggestions for developing the skill.

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Literature Review

Several researchers argue that the problem of student writing is also exacerbated by teaching staff members who are at times under-qualified, underprepared and inefficient (Engstrom 2008:17; Moutlana 2007; Niven 2005). In addition, Engstrom (2008:17) contends that institutions that are serious about supporting the academic success and persistence of underprepared students must prepare the teachers, not just the students, about what these students need to learn and succeed. Rivers mentions that to be able to write in the foreign language, the student must be trained systematically through five stages of development. The stages are: Copying, reproduction, recombination, guided writing and composition. For a successful writing, David Nunan (2003) mentions the following conditions;

a. Mastering the mechanics of letter formation
b. Mastering the obeying conventions of spelling and punctuation
c. Using the grammatical system to convey one's intended meaning
d. Organizing meaning at the level of paragraph and the complete text to reflect new/given information and topic/comment structures
e. Polishing and revising one's initial efforts
f. Selecting an appropriate style for one's audience (1989:37)

In relation to Bangladesh, the scenario of majority of the EFL classrooms seem to focus on appropriate academic writing only which should focus not only on the students but also on the untrained teachers. Here at tertiary level is same. If the learners take the English language as an academic subject rather than a language, they will be concerned only with passing the exam for getting an academic degree. Among the different language skills, the students feel writing skill to be the most difficult in real practice and in the examination. It is mostly assigned as homework in teaching-learning activities and the answer made by the teacher is supposed to be final and correct. The students depend mostly on teacher's notes; guide books, general books where very few consult the reference resources. In this context, the only solution lies in the continuous pursuit of knowledge and skills. If the learners have the skills and habit of learning independently, they will be able to face the challenges.

Approaches to Writing Skill

There are mainly two approaches to writing skill which are the Product and Process Approach.

The Product Approach

The main assumptions and features of the product approach in second language teaching are:

a. Learners have specific writing needs, either for institutional writing or personal writing
b. The goal of a writing program is to teach students to be able to produce the kinds of written texts they will most frequently encounter in educational, institutional, and/or personal contexts.
c. The rhetorical patterns and grammatical rules used in different kinds of texts are presented in model compositions, which are constructed to display the rules that learners should use in their own writing

d. Correct sentence structure is an essential component of writing; and grammatical skills receive considerable emphasis
e. Errors in writing are avoided by providing learners with models to follow or by guiding and controlling what learners write to prevent them from making errors
f. The mechanics of writing are also taught: handwriting, captitalization, punctuation, and spelling

The Process Approach

A product approach concentrates on ends rather than means. By focusing on the form and structure of writing rather than on how-writers create writing that has form and structure, the composing processes of good writers are ignored.

Methodology

Design and Sampling

To conduct the research, 200 students along with 2 teachers from English department have been randomly selected for the survey. In case of the English teachers, the interviews were in both formal and informal situations.

Instruments

For data collection, separate questionnaires were used as instruments. Besides, the written scripts on different topics also gave an overall idea about the writing ability of the students.

Findings and Discussion

Testing of Writing Skill

The common mistakes that were from the questionnaire have been in subject-verb-agreement, using correct parts of speech, right form of verbs, punctuation, spelling, article, etc. Table-1 reveals the responses:

Table-1

Areas of Mistake and Students' Responses

Areas of Mistake	Samples	Percentage of the Students
Subject-verb-agreement	One of the boys were crossing the road	52%
Parts of speech	They success in doing the work	58%
Countable and uncountable nouns	He gave me an advice. The informations were false	78%
Appropriate prepositions	His greed resulted to misery	89%
Punctuation	I on behalf of the students	69%
Right form of verbs	The hare asked the tortoise where he is going	74%
Article	An unique idea grew in his mind	43%
Spelling	Maintanence, comittee	92%
Conditionals	If he worked hard, he will do well in the exam	58%

Responses of the Students through Open-ended Questions

Some open-ended questions were prepared for the students to analyze their opinions regarding their writing problems. Analyzing the answers, it is found that majority opine that while writing, they cannot produce grammatically correct sentences because of their grammatical weaknesses. Moreover, because of their excessive dependence on memorizing answers, they cannot express their own thoughts and feelings properly in their own way.

Responses of the Teachers through Open-ended Questions

The findings reveal the following lacking:

a. Fragile foundation of the students
b. Lack of Practice
c. Untoward apprehension about English
d. Excessive dependence on guidebooks
e. Memorizing compositions
f. Dependence on private tutors and coaching centre
g. Conventional question papers
h. Large size of classrooms
i. Scarcity of expert English teachers
j. Poor socio-economic condition
k. Lack of Motivation

Recommendations and Conclusion

If the following recommendations come into being, the writing skill of the students is believed to be developed gradually. The majority concerns are related with the earlier stages where proper motivation can be built with sincere foundation.

a. Proper care and motivation at the early stages
b. Learner-friendly teaching-learning environment
c. Proper monitoring
d. Continuous training of the assigned teachers
e. Recruitment of specialized teachers
f. Prohibition of guidebooks and coaching centres
g. Reformation of prevailing testing system at junior levels
h. Good payment of the teachers to motivate them
i. Arrangement of different writing competitions on different occasions

Teachers assign writing as homework giving it less preference and mostly focus on transformation practices in the class but the examination is highly based on testing writing proficiency. Due to wash back effect, they performed poorly in the examination and so could not achieve handsome marks. Since it is a common problem, teachers need to focus on writing in the class along with other skills as a form of action research. To ensure the maximum output from the students, the stated problems should be taken into consideration and proper steps should be taken to remove the drawbacks as soon as possible.

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