

Improving Writing Skills in English as a Second Language (ESL) through Feedback, Revising and Multiple Draft Writing: An Action Research

I. Heleen Sandhya Fernando^{#1}

[#]*Faculty of Humanities and Education, CINEC Campus
Millennium Drive, IT Park, Malabe, Sri Lanka*

¹sandya.fernando@cinec.edu

Abstract - The present study was an action research which attempted to develop writing skills through feedback, revising and multiple draft writing, notions drawn from process approach to teach writing. The sample included ten teacher trainees enrolled in Diploma in Primary Teacher Training Program at a private educational institute. A pre-test and informal interviews were used for need analysis and the take-home writing assignments and students' reflective journals were used for data collection. The intervention was carried out for ten months which included ten take-home assignments which were to be revised based on peer feedback and teacher feedback which led to the production of at least three drafts before the submission of the final draft. The drafts were quantitatively analyzed using analytic rubrics. The comparison of the marks obtained for the first draft and the final draft of each of the ten assignments, the comparison of the marks obtained for the ten final drafts and the comparison of marks obtained for the pre-test and the post-test were made for the purpose of measuring the effectiveness of the intervention. There was gradual but significant improvement of the writing skill in all the writing learners. Accomplishment of the use of grammar, syntax and vocabulary were clearly shown. The development displayed in content also was satisfactory. The style of writing and organizational skills also recorded, though little, some achievement. The implication of the study is that training the writing learner in the use of revising and multiple draft writing based on feedback could be very effective in improving writing skills in ESL learners which will lead to the subsequent quality production of the students' take-home assignments.

Key words -Improving writing skills in English as a second language (ESL), Process approach to teach writing, Portfolio as a strategy to improve writing, Peer feedback and teacher feedback

I. INTRODUCTION

In Sri Lanka, with growing internationalization of higher education around the world, English is widely used as the medium of instruction at tertiary level. Majority of the students enrolled in teacher training programmes face a greater challenge due to the language shift from their first language to English as the medium of instruction.

Writing has always been a difficulty in English education and in the present context also the learners are not an exception. As stated by Richards & Renandya (2002), writing is the most difficult skill for language learners to master. Many teachers do their best but receive little effect; students hardly achieve the expected levels of mastery. Thus, the ability to write effectively

is becoming more and more important in English as a second language (ESL) education.

Pushing the learner through the cognitive processes of writing such as planning, translating, reviewing, and revising has been regarded as crucial in second language writing. Further, as stated by Weigle (2002), training the learner in the use of writing strategies is assuming an increasing role in second language education. The learner can be pushed through the cognitive processes involved in writing if he/she is trained in the use of effective writing strategies such as brainstorming, revising based on feedback, resourcing, multiple drafting.

Thus, improvement of writing skills of the English as a second language (ESL) learner remains a challenge and it needs efforts of both the writing teacher and the learner.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of the study is 'Improving writing skills in English as second language through feedback, revising and multiple draft writing' and the research objectives are as follows.

- To identify the difficulties faced by learners in English as a second language (ESL) writing
- To carry out an intervention to develop the skill of writing in English as a second language (ESL)
- To evaluate the success of the intervention and to make recommendations

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The present study reviewed comprehensive literature related to writing skills and the most relevant conceptual framework has been discussed under three sub themes: process approach to writing, portfolio as a strategy to improve writing skills and feedback as the central element in writing instruction.

A. *Process Approach to Writing*

Process writing is an approach to writing, where language learners focus on the cognitive processes by which they produce their written products rather than on the products themselves. In the end, learners surely need to and are required to complete their products, yet the writing process itself is stressed more. By focusing on the writing process, learners come to understand themselves more, and find how to work through their own writing as a creator of original ideas. Thus, process writing

emphasizes linguistic skills and the cognitive processes involved in writing, such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing rather than linguistic knowledge. (Badger & White, 2000; Brown, 2001).

B. Portfolio as a Strategy to Improve Writing

The present study was an attempt to test whether portfolio writing could be effective in getting the ESL writing learner go through the processes involved in writing: planning, reviewing, revising and multiple drafting. As defined by Barnard & Deyzel (2003), portfolio is a portable, systematic, purposeful collection of work, selected to provide information about attitude, level of development and growth during a given period. It is a powerful visual tool that provides evidence of self-assessment, personal reflections, learning, growth and development and a comprehensive and complex overview of skills. On the other hand, Yang (2003) defined portfolio as a compilation of students’ work, which documents their effort, progress and achievement in their learning, and their reflection on the materials negotiated for the portfolio.

Thus, the present study utilized portfolio as a strategy to get the writing learner go through the processes involved in writing and the push through the same was given by introducing brainstorming activities, teacher feedback and peer feedback for the initial drafts written before the final production.

C. Feedback as the Central Element in Writing Instruction

Feedback is a fundamental element of the process approach to teach writing. It can be defined as input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision. In other words, it is the comments, questions, and suggestions a reader gives a writer to produce another draft. Through feedback, the writer learns where he or she has misled or confused the reader by not supplying enough information, illogical organization, lack of development of ideas, or something like inappropriate word-choice or tense. In ESL writing class, both the teacher and peers can be the reader who provide information to the writer for revision and multiple drafting. Thus, teacher feedback and peer feedback are integrated into the intervention plan. Thus, the present study attempted to get the learner revise the text produced so far through the teacher feedback and peer feedback, thus getting the learner revise and produce several drafts before the final product. Revising can be an impossibility if feedback is not given; feedback is supposed to be crucial.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study was an action research conducted to improve the skill of writing in ESL learners. It is a form of investigation that can be used by teachers / educators to attempt to solve problems and improve professional practice in their own classrooms. According to O’Brian (2001), action research is learning by doing: a problem is identified, attempts are made to resolve it, then, see how successful their efforts are and if not satisfied, try again.

As proposed by Hopkins (1993), the essentials of the action research design include the following characteristic cycle as illustrated below.

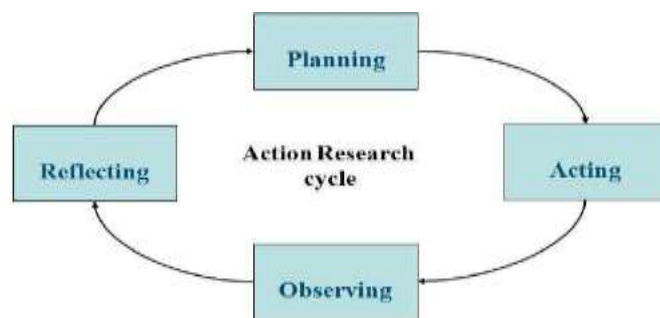


Fig. 1 - Action Research Cycle (Hopkins,1993)

In the first stage, understanding of a problem is developed and plans are made for intervention. Then, the intervention or action is carried out. During and after intervention, observations are collected in various forms. Data is reflected on and revisions are made on the initial plan; the process is repeated. Thus, action research becomes a very effective tool in the hands of the educator who strives for professionalism, who is enthusiastic to find a solution to a problem he or she has to face in the classroom.

The present study carried out the action research with a sample of ten teacher trainees enrolled in a primary teacher training program in a private educational institute in Sri Lanka. It was conducted over a period of ten months. It utilized multiple data collection instruments. For the realization of the objective 1: to identify the difficulties faced by learners in ESL writing, a pre-test and an informal interview were conducted. For the realization of the objective 2: to carry out an intervention to develop the skill of writing in ESL, the instruments utilized were the take-home writing assignments and reflective journals kept by the students. In realization of the objective 3: to evaluate the success of the intervention and to make recommendations, scores of the first draft and the final draft of each of the ten assignments were compared, the scores of the assignment one and assignment ten were compared and the scores obtained for the pre- test and post- test were compared.

The writing assignments administered during the intervention followed a systematic procedure and it can be presented as below.

TABLE 1
THE PROCEDURE ADOPTED IN ADMINISTERING WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

	Administration of Writing Assignment BRAINSTORMING SESSION Whole Class Activity	
Week 1	Submission of DRAFT ONE TR FEEDBACK Out of Class Activity	Quantitative Analysis Marks out of 10
	↓	
Week 2	Submission of DRAFT TWO SS FEEDBACK In-Class Group Activity	
	↓	
Week 3	Submission of DRAFT THREE TR FEEDBACK –Oral Feedback Out of Class Activity	
	↓	
Week 4	Submission of DRAFT FOUR (final draft) Out of Class Activity	Quantitative Analysis Marks out of 10

The intervention included ten writing assignments. The procedure adopted included a systematic process. On the administration of the writing assignment, a brainstorming session was conducted as a whole class activity with the purpose of idea generation. Students produced the first draft as an out of class activity and submitted for teacher feedback during week one and it was analyzed quantitatively. It was marked out of ten and the rubrics used were as follows: language -4 marks, content – 4 marks and organization – 2 marks. Based on teacher feedback, the students wrote the second draft during the course of week two and the student feedback session was organized as an in-class activity. During week three, students were supposed to produce draft three and teacher’s oral feedback was given with references for resourcing for the students to produce the draft four – the final draft which was quantitatively analyzed, marking it out of ten using the same rubrics used for draft one.

V. NEED ANALYSIS, MEASUREMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE INTERVENTION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The action research study conducted to improve ESL writing yielded a repertoire of information which led to the insightful understanding of the problem under study. They could be organized and presented as follows.

A. Need Analysis

The analysis of the data collected through the review of students’ writing by conducting a pretest and an informal interviews threw light into two main aspects: the major difficulties faced by learners in writing in ESL and the reasons for those difficulties.

The main difficulties faced by the ESL writing learner are as follows:

- Lack of ideas has been identified as a major difficulty faced by learners. The content presented in their writing were not adequate.
- The content presented was not organized into appropriate structure.
- Language needed improvement. The use of appropriate structure, tense form, vocabulary have been identified as areas to be improved in language.

The reasons for those difficulties as identified through the analysis of interview could be presented as follows:

- The ESL learners’ misconception about writing as a difficult skill to master could be identified as one of the major reasons for their poor performance. Due to their irrational thoughts, they tend to give up on writing tasks and their lack of perseverance has become a contributing factor for the poor performance in writing.
- The irrational thought about writing as an activity to be completed in few minutes or in one go makes writing an impossibility.
- The learners’ lack of understanding about the writing process and lack of training in the use of strategies in the process of writing have also been identified as contributing factors for poor performance.
- The learners do not possess ideas and facts necessary for pursuing the writing task and the main contributing factor becomes lack of interest in reading.
- The learners’ lack of practice in revising contributes immensely to the poor performance in writing. It becomes the major cause for lack of organization and grammar mistakes the learners commit in the production of the piece of writing.

Thus, in the light of the information gathered on difficulties the ESL writing learners face and the reasons for those difficulties, the intervention was planned and carried out incorporating some effective measures such as feedback, revising and multiple draft writing into it in order to facilitate the cognitive processes involved in writing.

B. Measurement of the Effectiveness of the Intervention

The results of the intervention carried out to improve writing skills in ESL through feedback, revising and multiple draft writing could be presented as follows:

- 1) Comparison of Marks Obtained for the First Draft (D1) and the Final Draft (D4) of the Ten Take-Home Writing Assignments (THA)

The comparison of the scores of the draft 1 and draft 4 of the take home assignments were compared as a test of the effectiveness

of the intervention which basically aimed at pushing the writing learner through reviewing, revising and multiple drafting using portfolio as a strategy.

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF MARKS OBTAINED FOR THE FIRST DRAFT (D1) AND THE FINAL DRAFT (D4) OF THE TEN TAKE-HOME WRITING ASSIGNMENTS (THA)

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	D7	D8	D9	D10	
THA1	3	5	2	4	2	4	2	4	4	4	6	2	2	2	3	5	8	2	3	3	4
THA2	3	5	2	4	2	4	4	5	4	4	6	2	3	2	3	6	8	2	3	3	4
THA3	4	6	3	5	3	5	5	6	4	4	6	2	3	2	3	6	8	2	3	3	4
THA4	4	6	3	5	3	5	5	6	4	4	6	2	3	3	3	6	8	2	3	4	4
THA5	4	6	3	5	3	5	5	5	5	7	2	3	3	4	7	9	2	4	4	4	6
THA6	4	6	3	5	3	5	5	7	5	8	3	3	3	4	7	9	4	6	4	4	7
THA7	6	7	3	5	4	5	6	7	7	7	9	2	3	3	5	7	10	4	6	4	7
THA8	6	7	3	6	3	5	6	8	7	10	3	4	3	5	8	10	4	6	6	9	9
THA9	6	8	4	6	4	6	6	8	7	10	3	4	4	6	8	10	4	6	6	9	9
THA10	7	8	4	6	4	7	6	8	8	10	3	4	4	6	9	10	4	6	6	9	9

All the ten ESL writing learners in the sample recorded improvement through multiple drafting which was reflected upon in the comparison of scores obtained for the first draft and the final draft of all the ten assignments.

2) Comparison of the Marks Obtained for Assignment One-Final Draft (THA1) and Assignment Ten -Final draft (THA10)

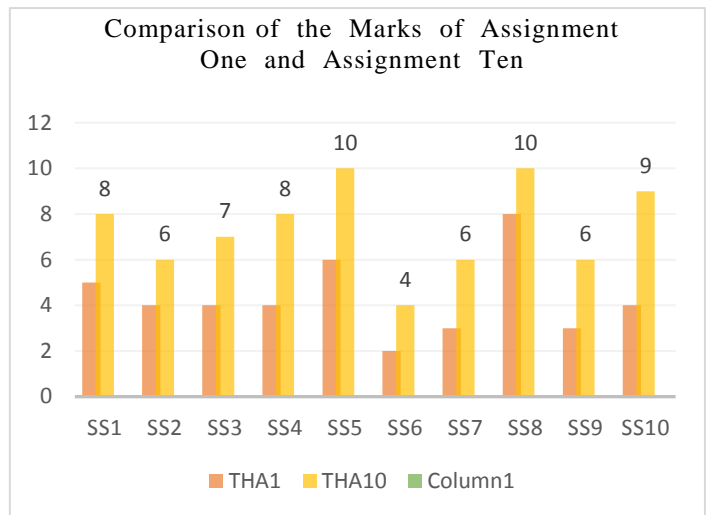


Fig. 2 - Comparison of the Marks Obtained for Assignment One-Final Draft (THA1) and Assignment Ten -Final draft (THA10)

The comparison of the scores obtained by the ESL writing learners for assignment one (THA1) and assignment ten (THA10) proved the improvement students recorded as a result of the intervention carried out to improve their writing. The scores of the assignment one stood as a test of their entry level to the study and the scores of assignments ten was a test of their exit level from the study. The steady improvement showed by all the ten teacher trainees proved the effectiveness of the intervention carried out to improve writing skills through feedback, revising and multiple drafting.

3) Comparison of the Marks Obtained for the Pre-Test and the Post-Test

The same pretest which was administered at the outset of the study was used as the post-test to be administered on completion of the intervention and the comparison of the scores of the same could stand as a test of effectiveness of the intervention. The comparison of the scores can be presented graphically as follows.

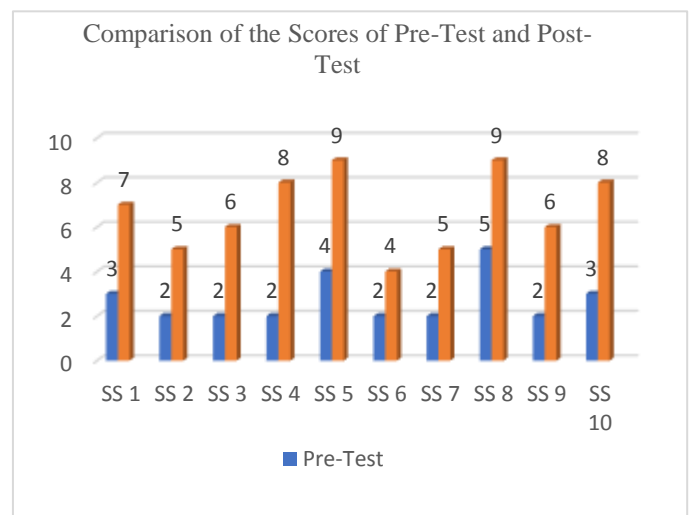


Fig. 3 - Comparison of the Marks Obtained for the Pre-Test and the Post-Test

As illustrated above, the recorded pre-test and post-test scores indicated a significant gap, thus proved the remarkable improvement in the writing skills of all the teacher trainees in the sample which in turn stood as a test of the effectiveness of the intervention made.

Pre-Test		Post-Test
Leaf	Stem	Leaf
0,0,0,0,0,0	2	
0,0	3	
0	4	
0	5	0, 0
	6	0, 0
	7	0
	8	0, 0
	9	0, 0

Fig. 4 - Comparison of the Marks Obtained for the Pre-Test and the Post-Test

The distribution of scores of the pre-test and post-test as presented in the above stem and leaf plot further explains the improvement of the writing skills recorded by the sample. The modal value of the pretest scores stands only as 20 out of 100; the post-test scores records multiple modal values of 50, 60, 80 and 90. The mean value of the pre-test is only 27; the posttest records a mean value of 63. Thus, the comparison made between the two scores proved the effectiveness of the intervention carried out to improve writing skills.

4) Analysis of Students' Reflective Journals

Reflective journals kept by the students contributed to the measurement of the effectiveness of the intervention and the reflective thoughts could be coded into the following themes as presented below.

- Idea generation through brainstorming activities in CR on assigning writing task is a motivating factor and it gives the opportunity to gather a repertoire of information on the topic which has been regarded as a very effective strategy by the students.
- Feedback from teachers and peers is guidance and it pushes the learner through the processes of writing: revising and multiple drafting.
- Writing several drafts is crucial in order to produce a good piece of writing.
- Writing differs from mastering other skills for the learner needs to be obsessed with it a lot taking adequate time for revising, resourcing and redrafting.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the intervention and its measurement of effectiveness the following recommendations could be proposed.

- Brainstorming activities facilitate idea generation in the writing class. They give a steady start to the writing task at hand. The learner becomes motivated for he / she has not been left behind for lack of ideas. Thus, brainstorming activities become crucial in ESL writing class.
- Maintaining a portfolio as a collection of their writing promotes not only good writing but also learner motivation. Since the learners themselves witness their own gradual improvement is highly motivating and the multiple drafting through reviewing and revising makes the writing learner more matured and subsequently it leads to a quality production of the writing task as it provides the learner the opportunity to correct language and organize it better. Further, it leads to shedding the misconception the writing learners hold about writing as an activity to be completed in the first attempt itself. They can be trained in effective writing in which the learner takes time to revise and produce multiple drafts.
- Feedback on the student writing both by the teacher and the peers can be regarded as very effective in getting the ESL writing learner to pursue in multiple drafting. Feedback pushes the learner through the cognitive processes of reviewing, revising and redrafting. Thus, organizing feedback sessions during the course of writing leads to greater facilitation of quality product of writing.

VII. CONCLUSION

Training the writing learner in the use of revising and multiple-draft writing based on feedback by using portfolio as a strategy could be very effective in improving writing skills in ESL learners which will lead to the subsequent quality production of the students' take-home assignments.

REFERENCES

- [1] Badger, R. & White, G. (2000). A process genre approach to teaching writing. *ELT Journal*, 54: DO:10.1093/elt/54.2.153
- [2] Bernard, S.E. & Deyzel, L. (2003). *Career portfolio- the 21st century career management tool*. South Africa: University of South Africa.
- [3] Brown, D. H. (2001). Teaching by principles: an interactive approach to language pedagogy (2nd ed.). *TESOL Quarterly*, 35: 341-342. DOI: 10.2307/3587655
- [4] Hopkins, D. (1993). *A teachers' guide to classroom research*: Open University Press.
- [5] O'Brien, R. (2001). An overview of the methodological approach of action research: theory and practice of action research. *Joao Pessoa: Universidade Federal da Paraíba. (English Version)*. <http://www.web.ca/~robrien/papers/arfinal.html>
- [6] Richards, J. C. & Renandya, W. A. (eds.) (2002): *Methodology in language teaching: an anthology of current practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [7] Steele, V. (1992). *Product and process writing: a comparison*. Rowley: Newbury House.
- [8] Weigle, S.C. 2002: *Assessing writing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. xiv, 268 pp.
- [9] Yang, N. D. (2003). *Integrating portfolios into learning strategy-based instruction for EFL college students*. *Education Full Text (Wilson)*. IRAL, 41(4), 293-317.