
The impact of implementing strategies to teach writing skills in higher education

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Abstract

The English language has a crucial part in Ecuadorian students who daily have to deal with the four basic language skills in their English lessons, however, among the four skills, writing is considered as the most problematic to fulfill. Learners from higher education have shared their opinions and suggestions on how they are able to master this productive skill in their lessons and writing tasks. This study shows the pros and cons of how writing in EFL has been taught and learned by a group of learners whose English levels vary from basic to intermediate. Furthermore, some of the difficulties this group of learners had to face during the COVID-19 pandemic while learning English and applying new technological tools in their lessons made their learning more arduous, especially during their writing classes.

Keywords: *Ecuadorian learners, writing skill, education, EFL, college students*

1. Introduction

Even though writing is considered a tough skill to master in the English language, it also requires time and strategies in order to be used accurately. Most learners agree that educators should apply better techniques in their lessons so that they are able to build up great approaches to the skill. According to Cambridge University (2001) written expression and comprehension demand important methodological processes, especially when using digital resources. The use of technological tools during lessons may call the students' attention by giving them the chance to fulfill their knowledge interactively and efficiently.

Nevertheless, the finding of new tech platforms is not simple for teachers particularly when their only purpose is to help their students to improve their writing skills in or out of the classroom. As Boud stated (2010) it is necessary for the teacher to establish goals that students can achieve, so that students are able to evaluate themselves if they are making progress in the learning process. Additionally, Cole (2015) mentioned that ESL students are least qualified when acquiring this skill since English is not their mother tongue; therefore, it is more confusing for them to write with meaning.

In contrast, some learners refer to writing as the most useful English skill, especially in higher education as learners happen to write mostly in class or when doing assignments. Fairjna et al. (2021) point out that students apply writing strategies when needed even though they have not been taught to use them. A great number of EFL learners with low writing skills proficiency also indicate that the best way to build their abilities in order to improve their writing is to translate everything they read since comprehension is not a simple task to accomplish.

Although the number of limitations towards writing varies according to knowledge and proficiency, educators emphasize that learners find highly tedious the use of the correct punctuation when writing not only long texts but also statements by omitting basic connectors and transition words. As Han (2017) indicated that facing vocabulary and order of words frustrate apprentices when writing short paragraphs or phrases.

2. State of the Art

During the past few decades, many writing issues have been addressed, and many strategies have been developed to improve writing skills in English language learners. As stated by (Graham et al, 2012) The main purpose of teaching a Language focused on Grammar instruction, As writing is one of the productive skills, it is more difficult for students to master it. Many authors have discussed the importance of implementing formal grammar instruction and applying it to the writing process.

In the '80s researchers such as Weiner, E. S. (1980) enunciated that it was important for teachers to diagnose the proficiency of pupils in the

given skill, and to measure their skills individually. The evaluation of the ELLs must contain several categories such as semantic, syntactic, and orthographic means, but some criteria can be added or eliminated following the individual needs of the students.

Additionally, it was mentioned that the personal interests of students do affect their engagement in the writing activities proposed by teachers. Considerably, It must be taken into consideration at the moment of implementing strategies to enhance the acquisition of writing skills in an academic context. (Brookes & Grundy, 1990)

Nevertheless during the 1990s, improvements and upgrades were made. Teachers noticed that students were producing writing outcomes even before mastering their oral production skills. But, there was a disagreement in the error correction process of writing activities. Traditional teachers mention it was necessary to correct all the mistakes, in the structure, and spelling of the students. Kepner, C. G. (1991) L2 teachers started to notice that written feedback was more effective for students' autonomy and also helped them improve their own error correction process.

2.1 Literature Review

“Writing in English is becoming increasingly important in today’s world, particularly in education and business areas.”(Hundarenko, et al.,2019, p.6). Ecuadorian institutions require students to have a certain level of English to graduate from universities due to the opportunities they would have in the professional field if they manage the language. Marleni (2019) states that “Writing goes beyond school purposes. Businesses require candidates who can write and communicate effectively”. However, Tamayo (2020) in its fifth edition also shows that the level of English in Ecuadorian education ranks in the 90 positions out of 112 countries. Some researchers have found that the lowest knowledge of English in Ecuador is due to the lack of professionals in the field imparting the subject. Academic writing must be part of the curriculum at Ecuadorian universities because it will not only give the students the opportunity to acquire new English, it will allow the learners to be professionally qualified to apply for any international job vacancy in this globalized world.

Writing skill improvement seems to be one problem that students face at universities because of the weakness in the knowledge they have at their institutions. Another reason is that they did not get enough feedback from their instructors because the educators focus more on the structural part than the content. Fidan(2019) made a study in which he showed the advantages when the teachers focus more on the message rather than on the linguistic errors while checking pieces of writing, he also states the importance of giving feedback to the students instead of making corrections based on their mistakes. (as cited in [Tomak](#), 2022, p. 326). It may give the opportunity to reflect on their teaching practices and use correct strategies when teaching writing. Not only to teach their lessons but also to correct the assignments. Moreover, the students would improve the skill mentioned before, if they realized how to correct the mistakes they made. According to Dunn (2014) skilled writers tend to think of new ideas while they are in the process of writing. (as cited in Al-Sawalha, 2014, p.43). It means that the learners would improve the organization of their ideas while writing since they would be exposed to thinking and generate new ideas in the target language.

Nowadays, many educators still do not find the correct strategy to teach writing to their students. McNamara (2012) said, “Successful writing cannot be defined simply through a single set of predefined features”. (as cited in Cheung, 2016, p.3). While teaching reading, teachers must not only focus on patterns or grammatical rules, but they must also focus on the whole process from writing easy compositions to complex essays. The use of outlines could be beneficial when helping the learners to create pieces of writing. According to Hussain (2017) writing is a complex, recursive, and creative process, but the use of outlines could be beneficial, especially for second language writers. However, according to Cole (2015) “Students and teachers can participate in shared writing where the students have significant input in the topic, sentence usage, etc.” When students are involved in the learning process while learning how to write could be beneficial. According to Rogers (1983) Student-centered learning is an approach in which learners choose not only what to study but also how and why that topic might be of interest (as cited in TEAL, 2010, p.1). Moreover, they are immersed in the language which allows them to be active participants during the learning process. This approach is beneficial while teaching writing because when students help to correct paragraphs, they would be acquiring new

knowledge and would try not to make the same mistakes they are correcting while they have to write something.

Nowadays, in educational institutions, it seems that many professors use strategies that are based on teachers' centered. In addition, while teaching writing, the approach mentioned before gives the students fewer opportunities to work cooperatively and learn from each other's mistakes. "When some teacher controls the instructional process, the content is delivered to the entire class and the teacher tends to emphasize factual knowledge". (Yi, Yeon 2009). There are some studies that highlight the importance of implementing technology as part of the writing process due to the exposure that the students have to it. (Ravai et al., 2016) stated that using techniques such as questioning or free writing on social media with students would be beneficial due to some websites correct the students' mistakes while they are writing giving them passive feedback, and it would allow them to improve their writing skills if they pay attention and correct the errors that appear during the writing process. There are many factors that can affect the students' writing skills, but there are more strategies that teachers can use in order to make them succeed in that field.

3. Analysis

The participants of this study were 50 students. In the whole group, 29 described their level of English proficiency as intermediate, and 21 mentioned their level as basic. All of them are from the highlands in Ecuador (Tungurahua and Bolivar). They are still studying in college. Their socio-economic background is medium class. Spanish is the mother language of all of them, but they have studied English at some point at college. They all agree that writing requires time and effort since punctuation marks tend to become tedious when using them while writing a long or short paragraph. However, the 20 percent of students emphasized writing as a practical skill to put into practice as much as possible in order to be mastered with time. On the other hand, 12 learners described their lack of comprehension when writing because of their low English level. Finally, the students concluded that teachers should be responsible for their students' low writing proficiency, therefore, educators should implement new writing techniques in their lessons to call their attention.

3.2 Instrument

The instrument designed to collect this information was a survey sent to the learners, and it showed all this relevant information about their perception of writing.

3.3 Discussion

It could be noticed that the English learning background differs from one student to another a majority of students mention they have had a good learning experience, but it is very difficult for them to produce in the target language, thinking that speaking and writing are one of the most difficult skills they still need to work on, additionally, it can be said that the modality they learned English can influence their proficiency level. Furthermore, during online classes is more difficult to learn a language properly.

Nevertheless one of the most relevant findings is the perception the students have about this skill and even though most of the participants of this research agree on the importance of the strategies their teachers had used; 80 percent of the students mention that Writing is one of the most difficult skills to master.

4. Conclusion

Taking into consideration that writing is pondered by students as one of the most important skills to develop specially for educational purposes. Finding the correct strategy to introduce not only the grammatical features needed to produce written texts, but also to support the students during the process by giving them the necessary tools and information.

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