



Improving English Writing Skills of Undergraduates of the Faculty of Management Studies using Task-Based Teaching Method

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Abstract

Once being a British colony, Sri Lankans give a cyclopean value to English and it is given a priority in Sri Lankan education (as a second language) from primary to university level. Yet most of Sri Lankans are not confident in using English for communication purposes. Specially, when writing is taken into consideration, even many of the undergraduates make numerous errors in writing in English. Therefore, the present study is focused on "Improving English Writing Skills of Undergraduates using Task-Based Teaching Method". Since the newest trend in the field of teaching English as a second language concerns more about communication skills and writing is a main method of communication, the present study has also been conducted bearing this purpose in mind. The research was conducted using 50 second year undergraduates of Faculty of Management Studies of Rajarata University of Sri Lanka as the sample. The main objectives of the study were to find out the difficulties faced by the undergraduates when writing in English and to reduce those difficulties in writing by using a new method in teaching; Task- Based Teaching Method.

Keywords: *English, Task-Based Teaching, undergraduates, writing*

1. Introduction

"Language is the expression of human personality in words, whether written or spoken. It is the universal medium alike for conveying the common facts and feelings of everyday life and the philosophers' searchings after truth, and all that lies between" (Wrenn, 2004). Living in this world without knowing or using any kind of language is almost impossible since it is required for everything starting from the act of thinking. There are hundreds of languages in the world; every language is important and unique in their own ways. When considering the significance of languages, certain languages carry much importance than the others due to various reasons.

Among those languages which bear much importance, English language is in the first row. English is spoken or used by a large number of people all over the world for historical, political and economic reasons. English is being used as the first language in many countries and also it is being used as the second language in large number of countries. Most of the countries which do not belong to the above categories use English as a foreign language. So, basically English holds a much value as an international language.

After the British colonization English Language plays an enormous role in Sri Lankan society. Being a second language in Sri Lanka, English is given a cyclopean value in Sri Lankan education: from school to the university level. Since the students should be given a vast knowledge about the language, English is included in the school curriculum and also General English is a subject that all the undergraduates should follow during their university period. On the other hand, English should be given much importance in Sri Lanka since it has been considered as a link language in Sri Lanka according to 13th Amendment of Sri Lankan constitution. Because of all those reasons mentioned above, teaching English as a second language in Sri Lanka is a most concerned topic in Sri Lankan education system.

Although English is being taught in Sri Lanka even from the primary level, and English is given much importance in almost every field in Sri Lanka, it is an unavoidable fact that most of the Sri Lankan students and undergraduates find it difficult to communicate in English due to various reasons. When the term 'communication' is taken into consideration, it has two main parts namely, speaking and writing. This paper mainly focuses on the latter; writing in English. Although it is identified that most of the students in Sri Lanka face mistakes and errors, and by that difficulties in writing in English, the methods of teaching English in Sri Lanka seem to fail in solving this problem in an effective manner. Though the school curriculum of English and English syllabus of universities have been changed in order to cater today's needs, most of the times the methods of teaching English in Sri Lanka are still stagnating as many teachers, instructors and lecturers in English may still be using out-of-date teaching methods which are proved to be unproductive.

There are several methods such as direct method, grammar translation method, audio lingual method, and communicative approach to teach English as a second language. Task- Based Teaching method is one of the newest methods in this field. A task is "an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process" (Ellis, 2003). According to this method English teachers can use tasks which are designed to improve English language skills of their students, and refrain from the traditional teaching methods that make students bored and demotivate in learning English. The significance of this particular teaching method is that this is strictly student- centered and the teacher or the lecturer has to shift his or her role to a facilitator who guides the learners according to the task they were given. Further this method blends almost all the positive aspects of the teaching methods mentioned above and presents a more productive result. The most important factor of Task- Based Teaching method is that, it makes the learners actively participate in learning the language rather than limit themselves to taking down notes of whatever their teacher says. As the method is somewhat new to Sri Lanka, it would be interesting to see whether the difficulties,

faced by undergraduates, in writing in English can be minimized by using Task- Based Teaching method, and by that improve their writing skills in English. Therefore, the research problem of the present study is; Can the difficulties in writing be minimized by applying Task- Based Teaching Method?

2. Statement of the Problem

Sinhala and Tamil are the first languages for most of the Sri Lankans and so for most of the undergraduates in Sri Lanka. Both of these languages are inflectional languages whereas English is a derivational one. Because of the structural differences of these languages most of the undergraduates find it very much difficult to write in English since they make a lot mistakes in their writing. Although most of the lecturers and instructors in English use various methods in teaching English as a second language, the difficulties face by undergraduates when writing in English have not been reduced noticeably. Because of these not-so- productive methods undergraduates face many complications when they finally have to make interactions using English. Thus, their writings in English, specially, are not much comprehensive and successful.

3. Objectives of the Study

There are two objectives in the present study. The first one is to find out the difficulties face by undergraduates when they write in English. This was taken as an objective in the present study since it is very common among the undergraduates that they face many difficulties in writing in English such as grammatical, vocabulary, spelling, mother tongue interference etc. Therefore it is very much needed to identify these difficulties if someone wants to find a remedy. The second objective is to reduce those difficulties in writing in English using a new method in teaching namely, the Task- Based Teaching method. The researcher has strictly focused on this method since she has noticed that the other methods that are commonly used in teaching English as a second language have failed to minimize these difficulties of the undergraduates. Hence, in the present study, it is hypothesized that errors made by undergraduates when they write in English can be minimized by applying Task- Based Teaching method.

4. Literature Review

According to Syiem (2012), “the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practice in formal instructional settings or other environments. Further, the students’ skill in writing in a second language is faced with several challenges. There can be many social as well as cognitive reasons for this, such as a negative attitude towards the target language, cultural distance between them and the target language, and lack of motivation. Students are even ignorant of the basic rules and structural patterns which they are supposed to have learnt at the school level. Some EFL teachers may be perplexed by such problems in their writing classes and are unable to find an efficient way to awaken students’ imagination and set their minds working. As a result, students feel that using the English language amidst all their doubts and uncertainties is a cumbrous affair”(Syiem, 2012)

When considering the performance of English Language of Sri Lankan students Premawathi says, “The Department of Examinations (2012) states that the GCE O/L certificate of results provides multifaceted avenues not only for local and foreign higher education but also for certain medium level job opportunities. However, the percentage

of the national level weak passes in relation to English Language is fifty seven.... Furthermore, student performance is evaluated mainly through their writing skill although there are other three skills, listening, speaking and reading. Therefore, the writing skill plays a major role in the examinations and the poor English result shows poor performance in writing” (Premawathi, 2013). Hence, it proves that the English writing skills of most of the Sri Lankan students are not up to the standard as it is expected.

As an experiment to minimize the difficulties faced by students in writing in English Task Based Teaching Method can be used. The most effective method to teach English language and develop its communication skills at present is said to be the Task- Based Learning method. When teaching a new language, the teacher should be able to attract the students’ attention to the lesson because if the students lose their interest of the language whatever important lesson would be taught by the teacher would be in vain. So, for making the students engage in the lesson and actively making them participate can be done by assigning a task. That particular task should be challenging to the learners. So it is better to lead them to complete the task within small groups with time allocation.

“Brophy (1991) reviewed literature describing teacher communications about tasks that help to create a classroom environment in which tasks may be perceived as valuable and offered suggestions for motivating students to learn that include modeling outside learning (e.g. reporting on learning through newspapers), communicating the assumption that students are eager learners who recognize the value of learning; minimizing performance anxiety; including curiosity or dissonance about the topic; making abstract content more personal, concrete or familiar; and modeling task-related thinking and problem solving.”(Brophy cited in Cooper, 1991)

A task according to Ellis (2003, pp 9-10) has the following six features:

- I. “A task is a work plan”.
- II. “A task involves a primary focus on meaning”.
- III. “A task involves real- world processes of language use”.
- IV. “A task can involve any of the four language use”.
- V. “A task engages cognitive processes”.
- VI. “A task has a clearly defined communicative outcome”

Task- Based writing is one of the most important and inseparable part of Task- Based teaching. According to Tilfarioglu and Basaran (2007), Task- Based writing is a good way of integrating the four skills and can enhance effective language learning. The tasks are usually multi-faceted; they are done to improve the learners’ writing skill, and are expected to help to improve other skills as well.

5. Research Methodology

The deductive approach has been used to carry out the present research. Under that, the researcher has used an experimental strategy and applied an intervention to see whether the method she has used can solve the above said research problem. Second year undergraduates, who are following the course namely Tourism and Hospitality Management, of the Faculty of Management Studies, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka

were selected as the research sample of the study to gather primary data. There are 50 second year undergraduates who are following this particular course. Hence the sample was limited to 50 subjects.

A test paper consists of an essay which should have 250 words, is given to the selected sample of undergraduates as a pre-test to identify the difficulties they face when they write in English and to identify their level of English communication by giving marks to their writing. The marking criteria is as follows; grammaticality-10, accuracy- 10, vocabulary-10, organization-10, coherence-10. After calculating the marks they got for each category, the average mark of the each category was found out. This is to see from which category they have scored high and from which category, they have scored low. Finally, the total average mark of all the average marks is needed to find out to make sure for which level the sample belongs to. The levels and the dividing criteria are; beginners' level: 29 and below, intermediate level: 30-39, advanced level: 40-50.

After giving the pre-test to the sample, Task- Based Teaching method was applied for the course of teaching. They were exposed to Task- Based Teaching method during three months in between the pre- test and the post- test. While they were practicing these tasks in the classroom, they were not permitted to use their first language at all.

After the sample was subjected to the special method of Task- Based Teaching to improve their writing skills, it was given a post- test in writing to check whether the sample has improved their writing ability. They were given the same topic which was given for their pre-test to write an essay of 250 words. Their essays were marked under the same criteria applied to the pre- test and based on the marks they got for the post test; they were divided into different levels as did for the pre- test. After dividing the students into levels based on the marks scored for the post- test, the number of the students in each level was compared with the number of the students in each level which was divided based on the pre- test.

6. Results and Discussion

The pre-test on writing which was an essay on the topic "Sri Lankan Tourism Industry" consisted of 250 words was marked under the criteria mentioned above. When analyzing the marks they got based on the criteria used for marking, it was found out there are visible changes in the marks of the students when comparing the criteria. The average of the marks scored by all the 50 students in each criterion was needed to be found out to see for which criteria they have scored high and for which criteria they have scored less.

Table 01: Average of the marks of the pre-test on writing for each criterion

Criteria	Average
Grammaticality	4.8
Accuracy	7.32
Vocabulary	5.16
Organization	7.78
Coherence	5.34
Total	30.4

(Survey data: 2015)

Although, the total of the average of the marks scored for every marking criteria of the pre-test on writing is 30.4 which can be included in the intermediate level, it is the beginning margin of the intermediate level. Further, the students have scored high from

organization and accuracy criteria and less from coherence, vocabulary and grammaticality. Although, the subjects have scored high from organization and accuracy, when it comes to language proficiency, the most important ones are grammar, vocabulary and coherence. The lesser average out of those 05 criteria is the grammaticality and then vocabulary and coherence regularly. They are more important than organization and accuracy considering the skill of using a language. Hence, it is definite that the level of their writing in English is not up to a satisfactory level although the total mark of the averages is marginally in the intermediate level.

After applying the Task- Based Teaching method for three months, the sample was given a post-test on writing which is the same given for the pre-test under same conditions. When analyzing the marks they got for the post- test on writing, the researcher focused on each marking category separately and took the average mark of the each category as did in the pre-test.

Table 02: Average of the marks of the post-test on writing for each criterion

Criteria	Average
Grammaticality	5.36
Accuracy	7.40
Vocabulary	6.42
Organization	7.82
Coherence	5.50
<i>Total</i>	<i>32.5</i>

(Survey data: 2015)

In the post- test on writing, the undergraduates have scored much on organization and then on accuracy. The average mark for vocabulary is 6.42. The next criterion for which they have scored most is the coherence and the average mark of the grammaticality holds the last place among the other criteria.

Since the average marks of pre-test and post- test on writing is there, it is very much needed to compare the average marks of pre-test with the average marks of the post-test on writing to see whether the sample has improved their writing or they have remained in the same place and if they have improved their writing skill, it would be interesting to check from which criteria they have improved the most.

Table 03: Differences between the average marks of the marking criteria scored for the pre-test and post- test on writing

Criteria	Average marks	
	Pre-test on writing	Post-test on writing
Grammaticality	4.80	5.36
Accuracy	7.32	7.40
Vocabulary	5.16	6.42
Organization	7.78	7.82
Coherence	5.34	5.50

(Survey data: 2015)

When observing the average mark of the each making category, it is evident that the students have scored from every marking category in the post- test compared to the pre-test. Much improvement from vocabulary and grammaticality can be seen. When

comparing the total average marks of the pre-test and post- test on writing, the following results could be found out.

Figure 1: Over- all average marks comparison of pre-test and post-test on writing

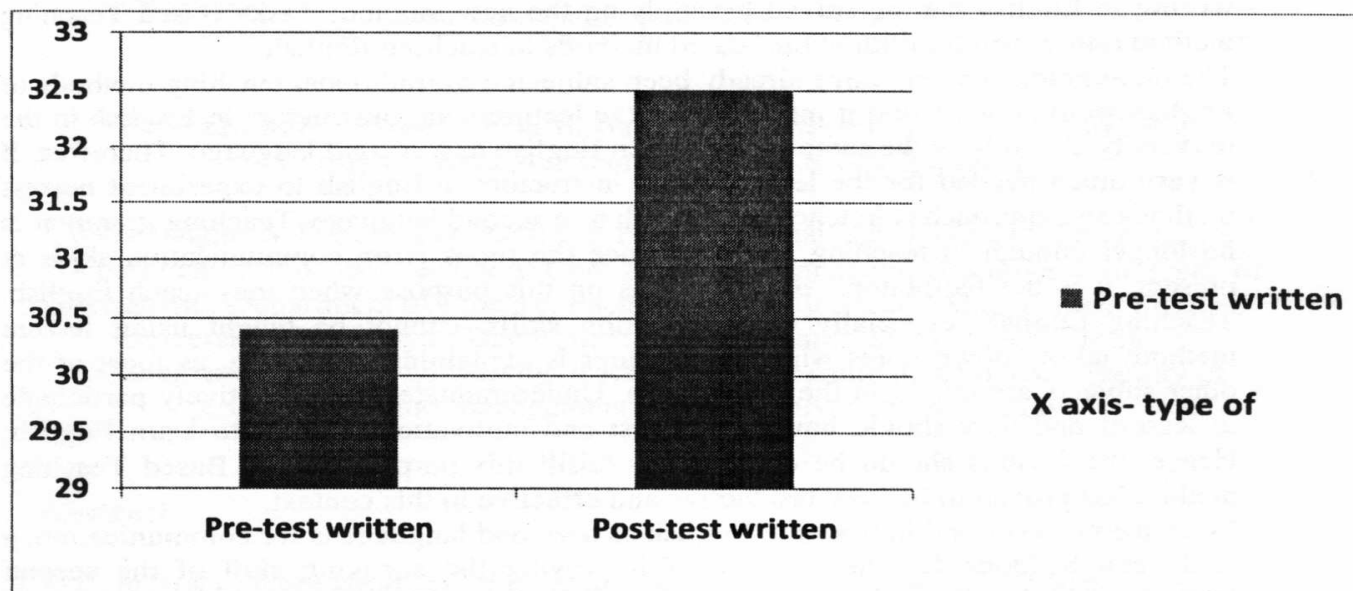


Table 04: Average marks of the pre- test and post- test on writing

Type of test	Average marks
Pre-test on writing	30.4
Post-test on writing	32.5

(Survey data: 2015)

The total average mark of the criteria is 32.5 for the post- test on writing. At the time of the pre-test, the average mark of writing was 30.4 and the beginning of the intermediate level is 30. So the students' writing skill was marginally at the intermediate level. Yet, they have improved their writing skill at the time they sat for the post- test although the average mark is still in the intermediate level.

7. Conclusion

There are various methods and approaches to teach English as a second language. Some of them are accepted by the scholars and some were rejected. The study "Improving English Writing Skills of Undergraduates" has followed Task- Based Teaching method specially for improving English writing skills of undergraduates as it is the effective trend of teaching English as a second language.

The analysis of pre-test in writing made it apparent that most of the undergraduates were marginally in the intermediate level and the most prominent factors like grammar, vocabulary and coherence were not up to the expected level. The analysis of the post-test

on writing shows many improvements of the sample. A satisfactory improvement is seen in the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Hence, it is very much apparent that the Task- Based Teaching method which was conducted for three months have a positive impact on improving English communication skills of the undergraduates. Therefore, it is evident that the problems faced by the undergraduates in writing in English can be solved by applying the new method; Task- Based Teaching method rather than traditional out- dated methods in teaching English.

The undergraduates who have already been subjected to traditional teaching methods of English would not be find it interesting if the lecturers and instructors in English in the university also follow the same path to teach English as a second language. Therefore, it is very much needed for the lecturers and instructors in English to experiment newest methods and approaches in teaching English as a second language. Teaching grammar is no longer enough in teaching English. Since the focus is on communication skills at present, it is the facilitators' duty to stress on this purpose when they teach English. Teaching English, especially communication skills, cannot be taught using lecture method; taking down notes while the lecturer is explaining the lesson, as most of the other subjects are taught in the universities. Undergraduates should actively participate in lessons and they should have an interest and motivation in them to learn English. Hence, the lessons should be designed to fulfill this purpose. Task- Based Teaching method has proven to be very productive and effective in this context.

Since the newest trend in teaching English as a second language is for communication, a study can be done for the purpose of improving the speaking skill of the second language learners as it seems that most of the people find it very difficult to speak confidently in English. The researcher can use modern English dramas and English TV series to conduct the study. In addition, as most of the second language learners have a difficulty in absorbing the language grammar patterns in English, a study can be done to find out the solutions for this problem.

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