



THE AGA KHAN UNIVERSITY

eCommons@AKU

Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

Institute for Educational Development

September 2007

Mind your English

Sadia Hanif

Aga Khan University, Institute for Educational Development, Karachi

Follow this and additional works at: http://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_ied_pdck

Recommended Citation

Hanif, S. (2007). Mind your English. *Dawn*.

Available at: http://ecommons.aku.edu/pakistan_ied_pdck/60

Mind your English

By Sadia Hanif

Are the increasing number of English language schools providing quality education, asks



The growing demand for English in urban and rural areas of Pakistan is giving rise to so-called 'English medium' schools. However, these schools are not much different from the public schools as they lack in resources, deliver poor quality education and appoint untrained teachers. In such schools the medium of instructions is 'officially' English, but bilingual discourse is also commonly used. They give little or no emphasis to the development of language skills, therefore, the four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) remain underdeveloped. Among these skills, writing is the most ignored one because teachers face a number of issues in developing this skills, as a result; its acquisition becomes difficult and complex for second language (L2) learners.

Research indicates, in creating a written text, to communicate the message, a L2 learner has to focus on content, audience, purpose, writing process, organization, mechanics, grammar, word choice and syntax (Raimes, 1983). In this struggle, the teachers focus on correctness of the grammatical structures and hamper the thought process which results in an under developed writing skills when the students embark to higher education (Hussain & Husain, 2004).

To understand the perceptions of the teachers regarding the challenges they face in developing writing skills of their students, a study was conducted with 150 teachers (both primary and secondary) of English medium schools in middle and low socio-economic areas of Karachi. A questionnaire was administrated to teachers (100 females and 50 males). The first section of the questionnaire focused on questions like, academic and professional qualification, working experience, age and salary range, etc. The second section asked questions related to the challenges the teachers come across while teaching writing skills. A focused group interview (five teachers) was also conducted to further understand the challenges the teachers faced. The paper reports the findings of the study and explores an approach which would fit in the existing

practices of teaching L2 writing, to help the teachers to improve the writing skills of their students. Furthermore, the paper indicates some perceived challenges which may occur in the course of implementing the process approach.

The data shows that the most significant context related challenge is the exam oriented school culture. After every two months teachers take class tests and give students marks and identify them as low or high achievers. Students' weaknesses are not addressed which results in poor writing skills. Teachers' focus is on completing of the syllabus and preparing students for exams. Thus, this seems that the objective of the teachers is to develop the skills of solving exam papers, rather than developing writing skills. In this regard, one primary class teacher said, "First the students write the paragraph in the class, then they learn it; therefore, it becomes easy for the students to write it in the exams".

Moreover, the data indicates that few teachers get some in-service training and they want to apply the learnt strategies to improve the writing skills of their students, but the exam oriented culture does not allow them to move from the syllabus. Furthermore, students' needs seem not to be considered as well as students have limited objectives of learning English which is to pass the exams.

Lack of students' interest was also reported by most of the teachers. Mistakes of spellings and grammar are considered another hurdle in the development of writing skills. The teachers believe that learning grammar rules and spelling is the first step to develop students' writing skills. A senior English teacher who had 10 years of English language teaching experience said, "Sentence making exercises help students write compositions with correct sentences." This seems that teachers pay more attention to organisation and mechanics and less attention on the meaning which the students want to convey through their writing.

In addition, the findings show that teaching of writing is limited to paragraph/composition writing and students are not given real world tasks to write. Along with this, writing classes do not facilitate other genres such as, report writing. However, the students are given few worksheets to do re-arranging, matching and vocabulary exercises.

With the above mentioned challenges, I felt that there is a need to change the current approach of teaching writing. I realised that along with the organisational features there is also a need to develop skills like, brainstorming, clustering, outlining, composing and revising. Therefore, instead of teaching what to write in a paragraph/composition, teachers need to focus their teaching practices on preparing the students on how to generate ideas and to pen down their thoughts. At present, students' need is to write for the real and purposeful communication such as, writing labels, invitation cards, shopping lists, telephone messages, recipes, letters etc. Students need to be exposed to different genres and communicative tasks to acquire the writing skills. Thus, advocating for a new approach of teaching writing, I suggest that process approach if implemented in EFL/ESL context would help the learners to develop their writing skills.

I support the claim that a process approach is suitable for EFL/ESL context. Highlighting the importance of process approach, Hedge (1988), Raimes (1992) and White & Arndt (1991) share some core features of process writing and identify four elements: process, purpose, context and

audience, to guide the learners to shape their writing. Moreover, Kroll (2002) found that systematic pre-writing practices help the learners in organizing and planning their writing. Rao (2007) also argues that the brainstorming strategy as a whole, can stimulate students' thinking and enables them to create ideas and organise raw materials in a logical order. He further elaborates that brainstorming is a necessary stage at which students activate prior knowledge and skills to apply to the writing task, and find out what information they already obtain and what they still need.

Other than this, Byrne (1988) and Khan (2000) found that feedback is the most integral part of the process writing which serves as an initial stimulus for the students to revise their written work. In addition, Flower (1994) argues on the social cognitive dimension of writing and elaborates that process writing is an integration of cognition and social factors which helps the learners to discuss, take feedback from their peers and revise their drafts. In short, after a brief review of the research literature, I feel that process approach if implemented in Pakistani schools may help the learners to improve their writing skills.

After reviewing the literature and reflecting over the challenges faced by teachers in developing writing skills of the students, I realised that the process approach would develop students' interest in writing in two ways. First, the students get an opportunity to select a topic of their own choice which would give them a feeling of ownership. Second, the communicative writing tasks would allow the students to write for a purpose and a context, sharing their own life experiences (Murtaza, 2000).

Moreover, the data identifies that the students always face problem to start writing or to generate ideas. The process of writing would facilitate the students to generate ideas through a number of techniques such as, brainstorming, clustering, classical invention and mind transportation (Bashiruddin, 1997). The techniques will help the students to generate ideas in their group or collectively as a class with the teacher. The pre-writing stage will enhance the students' divergent ways of thinking by listening to the ideas of others.

The cyclic process of writing will help the students to become autonomous learners by gathering information, generating ideas, preparing outline and writing a draft (Hyland, 2003). Students will discover their strengths and weaknesses in the process of revising their work and through the peers' and teachers' feedback. Correcting their work and of others will help the students to understand the errors they make while writing. The feedback not only helps the students to improve their grammatical structure and organisational patterns of the writing but also helps them think critically on the questions raised in the teacher's feedback. Thus, due to a number of advantages, I think process approach is suitable for the contexts which face similar challenges (which are mentioned in this study) in developing the writing skills of the students; however, care needs to be taken by the teachers in its implementation

In implementing the process approach, teachers may come across some challenges; for example, due to teachers' authority over correction and feedback, students may find difficulty in accepting their peers' feedback. The students may think that their peers do not have the expertise of giving feedback. Second, over correction done by peers may discourage students from writing or accepting their feedback. To solve this challenge, there is a need to train the students in giving

feedback. Moreover, due to teachers own believes, thinking and expertise, implementation of writing process may become difficulty; therefore, to help the teachers to implement the process approach in their classes, there is a need to organise some training session so that the teachers will use the process approach effectively.

In short, in my opinion, to meet the needs of the learners and help them to pen down their thoughts and enhance their creativity, the process approach seems to be a suitable approach to develop the writing skills of both the primary and the secondary school students.