



A Study of the Perception of Undergraduates about the Role of Formative Assessment in the Improvement of English Writing Skill

Muhammad Ilyas Mahmood, Mubashra Mobeen and Muhammad Ahmad Hashmi

Department of English, University of Okara, Okara, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT This study aims to investigate the deficiencies of undergraduate students' writing skill and the role of formative assessment in the improvement of their academic writing. Plus, this study aims to analyze the impact of written feedback by teachers to improve the writing skill. Sample of the study involves 200 undergraduate students (Grade-14) including 100 females and 100 males studying at public and private colleges in a district in the central Punjab (Pakistan). The data for this study were collected through a questionnaire. It explored the students' responses, and the impact of written feedback on the development of writing skill. Techniques, adopted in formative assessment, were also viewed. The main outcome of this study was that the different strategies had the positive impact on academic writing. Different technique such as assignment writing and proper feedback, teacher's guidance and classroom activities are helpful in developing writing.

INTRODUCTION

"Writing is basic tool of civilization. Without it, the world as we know it could not exist" (Fromkin et al. 2002: 508). Writing is an essential element of expression. It has key importance in record processing of the everyday aspects of life. But learning how to write well is the key aspect of the whole process (Full Education 2017). It has even greater importance for the students. For, they have to produce assignments, essays, letters, stories, answers in examinations etc. Gewertz (2011) is of the opinion that clear, coherent and logical writing helps the expansion of students' access to higher education, provides them with the skill for success at workplace and increases the possibility of active participation as the citizens of a literate society. According to David (2009), a good writing skill is essential for academic and professional success. Similarly, Bangor (2013) says that students' learning achievements depends on the foundation of writing. Persky et al. (2003) are of the view that the students, who are deficient in writing skill, fail to fulfill classroom needs. Thus, realizing the importance of writing skill at college level, it can be said that writing is a need for the other needs.

Writing skill in English is even more important in this age because English has become the most widely used language in the world. It is popularly known as a global language or lingua franca with more than 350 million L1 and 430 L2 speakers around the world (Wil 2015) and is being recognized and used not only in offices but also being used as the medium of instruction in schools, colleges and universities (Parr 2014) and even such countries as Netherlands and Sweden, which are not using English as an official language, are using it as a medium of instruction in their educational institutions (Naved 2015).

As mentioned earlier, writing skill has much significance in education but unfortunately the development of this skill is badly neglected in the world (Ariana 2010; Harder 2006; Kellogg and Whiteford 2009; Lewin 2003) in general and particularly in Pakistan (Fareedet al. 2016; Haider 2012). Pakistani students, even after learning English right from the start of their academic careers, commit all types of errors in their writing at school level (Jabeen et al. 2015), at college level (Mehmood et al. 2017) and at university level (Ahmad et al. 2018).

There can be various ways that can help the improvement of academic writing of the students but the way suggested by Toria (2007) seems more befitting, that is, an integrated system of

assessment plays a vital role in the improvement of the writing skill. In this regard, formative assessment has a special role. It helps students improve their faults in learning in the light of teachers' feedback (Ferris and Roberts 2001; Khan 2000; Jan and Ways 2009). According to Koller (2005) and William (2010), formative assessment facilitates in better teaching and learning process by invigorating intrinsic motivation, self-esteem and academic self-concepts. Similarly, Gewertz (2011) says that formative assessment can improve students' writing skill with the help of regular feedback and encouragement from the teacher. Constructive formative feedback during the writing process, says Bouzidi (2012) helps the students develop their written production. Reising (2010) regards writing as a learned behavior which, according to him, can be developed. Reising adds further that when the teachers try to improve students' writing skill, their effort results in the gains of both, that is, the students and the teachers. Liu (2013) says that the application of formative assessment benefits in the advancement of the students' ability of writing.

Significance of the Study

This study would help the learners improve their academic writing and get good scores in the exam. It will also invite teachers' attention towards the provision of timely feedback to their students for desirable results. It will give an insight of students' needs to the teachers. The study might be of interest of the future researchers and thus, it will pave the way for a writing focused teaching process. The study intends to find the answers of the following questions:

- a) Can students' academic writing skill be improved with the help of formative assessment?
- b) What is the perception of the students about the improvement of academic writing skill with the help of formative assessment?

A limitation of the study is that the number of samples is very small and is taken from a small number of public and private colleges. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized. For this purpose a large scale study with a bigger sample is required.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted on 200 students at different public and private colleges from a district in the central Punjab (Pakistan). For this purpose, 100 male and 100 female undergraduates were selected through a simple random sampling technique. All the participants were studying in Grade-14 of the academic year 2017/2018. These participants belonged to rural and urban areas of Okara District located in the central Punjab (Pakistan) and were native speakers of Punjabi and Urdu languages. Along with these languages they also use English as a second/foreign language. They live in a Punjabi-Urdu speaking community and all of them have completed the 13 years of education through English as a medium of instruction. All of these participants are almost homogeneous in terms of their educational, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. They speak Punjabi and Urdu at home, school, college and university with parents, siblings, class fellows and playmates. All of these participants have been studying English as a compulsory subject right from the beginning of their academic career and the medium of instruction at this level is also English.

Data Collection

The data for this study have been obtained from 100 female and 100 male students enrolled at public and private colleges through a questionnaire. The statements in the said questionnaire focused the role of formative assessment in the improvement of students' academic writing. The said questionnaire consisted of 30 items which covered different aspects of the problem.

All of the participants were asked to provide responses to the given statements. They were given proper time. They were given basic information about the questionnaire. Difficult terms/words were explained to them. They were also told how to fill in the required places on the questionnaire. The participants knew that their responses were going to become the part of the study.

After getting the responses filled in by the participant, the sheets were collected back from them. All the responses were carefully counted and recorded in a table. Then, the results were

analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). In this way, the study utilized quantitative technique. The analysis of the responses by 200 students, enrolled in different public and private colleges in Okara district, (Pakistan), involves following process;

1. Getting the responses from the participants
2. Counting and recording the responses separately
3. Arranging the responses in a tabular form

4. Describing the findings

RESULTS

The results, given in Table 1, show that majority of the male students (that is 3.67%) take part in the classroom activities which is higher than females that is 3.4 percent. Here males seem to have a lead over females. Again male students appear to have a lead over the female ones participating in

Table 1: Group statistics

<i>Group statistics</i>						
<i>Statements</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. deviation</i>	<i>Std. error mean</i>	
I take part in all classroom activities.	Male	100	3.67	1.092	.109	
	Female	100	3.47	1.267	.127	
I participate in essay writing activities.	Male	100	3.67	1.074	.107	
	Female	100	3.59	1.006	.101	
I can write the summary of given topics as well as an essay with minute detailed.	Male	100	3.48	1.382	.138	
	Female	100	3.87	.981	.098	
My writing skill is improved through these activities.	Male	100	3.98	1.035	.103	
	Female	100	4.40	.778	.078	
Classroom written activities make thinking more critical.	Male	100	4.29	.880	.088	
	Female	100	4.44	.756	.076	
The practice of essay writing in class makes me an efficient writer.	Male	100	4.58	.606	.061	
	Female	100	4.17	1.064	.106	
I usually received proper instructions about writing an assignment.	Male	100	4.16	.775	.077	
	Female	100	4.12	1.008	.101	
My writing skills are developed by my assignments.	Male	100	4.42	.669	.067	
	Female	100	4.26	.981	.098	
I learn more through formal written assignments.	Male	100	4.18	.947	.095	
	Female	100	3.83	1.092	.109	
Writing assignments improved my vocabulary.	Male	100	4.54	.501	.050	
	Female	100	4.37	.861	.086	
Writing assignments increased my writing speed.	Male	100	4.72	.514	.051	
	Female	100	4.62	.814	.081	
I usually have small assessment as they improve my writing.	Male	100	4.40	.778	.078	
	Female	100	4.55	.783	.078	
Classroom discussion helps in writing skill improvement.	Male	100	4.11	.994	.099	
	Female	100	3.98	1.063	.106	
After discussion I can write summary of new ideas and arguments.	Male	100	3.62	1.071	.107	
	Female	100	3.82	1.158	.116	
Teachers' feedback in English writing helps me.	Male	100	4.43	.685	.069	
	Female	100	4.28	.996	.100	
Daily assignments improved my writing skills.	Male	100	4.41	.842	.084	
	Female	100	4.34	.913	.091	
Weekly tests are helpful in improving my writing.	Male	100	4.45	.770	.077	
	Female	100	4.35	1.038	.104	
Continuous assessment prepares me better for next assignment.	Male	100	4.43	.728	.073	
	Female	100	4.35	.833	.083	
Prompt feedback helps me in improving my writing.	Male	100	4.03	1.087	.109	
	Female	100	3.97	1.193	.119	
Formative assessment encourages me to write more.	Male	100	3.97	1.141	.114	
	Female	100	4.08	1.261	.126	

essay writing activities. The mean score of males is 3.67 as compared to females' that is 3.59. The next statement that is "I can write the summary of given topics as well as essay with minute details" shows different results that is here majority of the females (that is 3.87% as compared to males that is 3.48%) are of the view that they can not only write the summary on given topics, but they can also write essays if provided with the minute details. So far as the improvement of writing skill through different classroom activities is concerned, majority of the students that is 3.98 percent males and 4.40 percent females think that their writing skill gets improved with the help of classroom activities. However, here females appear to benefit more from classroom activities as compared to males. Similarly, majority of the students (4.29% males and 4.44% females) think that classroom activities written activities in the classroom make their thinking critical. Moreover, 4.58 percent males and 4.17 percent females consider that essay writing in the class makes them efficient writers. In the same way, 4.16 percent males and 4.12 percent females say that they receive proper instructions to write an assignment. It is interesting to mention here that 4.42 percent males and 4.26 percent females have confessed that assignments help them develop their writing skill. In addition, 4.18 percent males and 3.83 percent females are of the view that they learn through formal written assignments. In the same way, 4.54 percent male and 4.37 percent female students agree that writing assignments improve their vocabulary. Additionally, 4.72 percent males and 4.67 percent females think that assignment writing improves their writing speed. These results (given in the Table 1) indicate that classroom activities like assignment writing, giving instructions about assignment writing, summary writing, essay writing are significantly important for the improvement of writing skill, development of critical thinking, improvement of vocabulary and writing skills of the learners at undergraduation level.

So far as the assessment of writing skill of the learners is concerned, 4.40 percent males and 4.55 percent females say that they have small assessments that help them improve their writing. Some of the activities like classroom discussion also help the learners improve their writing. It is interesting to mention here that the discussion enables the learners (3.62% males and 3.82% females) to write a summary of new ideas and arguments. Weekly

tests are helpful for 4.45 percent males and 4.35 percent females. Similarly, 4.43 percent males and 4.35 percent females think that continuous assessment prepares them better for the next assignments. In addition formative assessment, in the view of 3.97 percent males and 4.08 percent females, encourages them to write more. In the same way, teachers' feedback on learners' performance also seems considerably important for the improvement of the writing skill of the learners at undergraduation level. 4.43 percent male and 4.28 percent female students think that teacher's feedback helps them in writing and according to 4.03 percent male and 3.97 percent female students. Moreover feedback, if given promptly, helps improve the writing. These results (see Table 1) clearly show that different classroom activities, particularly formative assessment and teachers' feedback help the learners improve their writing skills.

DISCUSSION

The finding of the study indicates that daily assessment improves students' academic writing skill and that finding is similar to the finding of Huot (1996). Therefore, it can be said that there exists a positive co-relationship between formative assessment and the improvement of academic writing skill, that is, when the students are given continuous feedback through formative assessment they have a great gain in the form of improvement in their writing (Ferris and Roberts 2001; Khan 2002; Jan and Ways 2009). Another finding indicates that classrooms written activities make students thinking more critical and that finding is similar to that of Chappuis (2005). It implies that that there is a positive effect of formative assessment on learning process. Once again there appears a high co-relationship between formative assessment and improvement in academic writing skill. It means that the teachers' feedback helps the students improve their writing. This finding is similar to the findings of Black and William (1998).

The next finding shows that the classroom written activities make students' thinking more critical. It indicates that formative assessment encourages the students to write more and this finding matches with the finding of Sadler (1989). The other finding indicates that the continuous assessment prepares the students better for next

assessment and that finding is contradictory to the finding Stiggins (1999). The next finding shows that the practice of essay writing in class makes the students' thinking more critical and that finding is contradictory to that of Chappuis et al. (2012).

The next finding indicates that the prompt feedback helps the students improve their writing which is similar to the finding of Black and William (1998). Next finding shows that teacher's feedback in English writing helps the improvement of students' writing skill and that finding is similar to that of Richard's (2014). The results reveal that there are a lot of grammatical mistakes in students' writing and that finding is similar to the finding of Fengjie et al. (2016). The next finding indicates that it is a time consuming process and semester is short.

The finding show that the practice of essay writing in the class makes the learners efficient writers and that finding is similar to Heritage et al. (2013). The data revealed that writing in English language always makes me nervous and that finding is similar to that of Choi (2013). The data indicates that the students cannot express their difficulties in writing and that finding is to the findings of with Graham (2009,2010). The finding showed that there is a lack of writing practice and that finding is similar to that of Sajid and Siddiqui (2015).

The data indicates that in classroom activities, there is less focus on writing and that finding resembles with the findings of Ariana (2010), Choi (2013), Fareed et al. (2016), Haider (2012), Harder (2006), Kellogg and Whiteford (2009) and Lewin (2003). The data further indicates that the students disagree to express their difficulties in writing. Students face many difficulties in writing a comprehensive essay and summary of the lecture. Using formative assessment, learners face many difficulties due to the courses and short time period of semester. The next finding shows that students have poor educational background and that finding is contradictory to the finding of Warsi (2004).

CONCLUSION

In the light of above results and discussion it is concluded that the undergraduate students' academic writing skill can be improved with the

help of formative assessment. So far as the perception of the students about the improvement of academic writing skill with the help of formative assessment is concerned, the study results that the students have positive views about formative assessment and they think that formative assessment is helpful in the improvement of academic writing. The main outcome of this study is that the different strategies have the positive impact on academic writing. Different technique such as assignment writing and proper feedback, teacher's guidance and classroom activities are helpful in developing writing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends to organize different classroom activities such as: summary writing, essay writing, formal assignments on writing for the improvement of undergraduate level learners' writing skill. In addition, the study recommends to organize formative assessment to improve the undergraduate students' writing skill. Moreover, the study also recommends the teachers to provide timely feedback to the learners to improve their writing skill.

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