

Relative Effectiveness Of Writing Activities In The Pakistani ESL Context

Dr. Muhammad Asif Gul^{1*}, Dr. Naeem Fatima², Dr. Humera Faraz³

^{1*}Associate Professor, National University of Pakistan, Islamabad. dr.asif.gul@nup.edu.pk

²Associate Professor, College of Flying Training, PAF Academy Asghar Khan, Risalpur. fatimabeena1@cae.nust.edu.pk

³Assistant Professor, Department of English Air University Islamabad. humera.faraz@mail.au.edu.pk

Abstract

Learning to write competently in English is crucially important in the contemporary global economy. However, majority of the Pakistani ESL learners struggle to achieve satisfactory writing proficiency and their underachievement is particularly ascribed to the dominance of GTM which fails to excite learners' cognition. Thus, Task-Based Learning (activities-based learning) offers a viable alternative. A 40-minute task-based class, 3 days a week, was run for four weeks. The sample comprised 111 students of Intermediate Level. The researcher-created videos on eight prevalent writing activities uploaded on his YouTube channel were watched by the learners. Watching to the recorded lecture was followed by a set of activities in which the participants were engaged before they showed their work in the physical classroom. Subsequently, relative effectiveness of these writing activities was studied through written tests. Quantitative data analysis was made by SPSS. Furthermore, qualitative data collected through interviews were analyzed by inductive approach thematic analysis. The Mathematical nature of Sentence Slots, Matrices and Step by Step Addition made them relatively more effective.

Keywords: Task-Based Learning, Flipped Method, Writing Activities, Pakistani ESL Context

Introduction

Writing has always facilitated human communication, collaboration, and mutual understanding. Written history has also benefited societies in their evolution. Moreover, writing is a life skill and it is frequently the benchmark by which people assess our knowledge and social contributions. We can reach a far wider audience through writing, across time and in many different locations.

English's standing as a lingua franca and the language of research, education, communication, and the internet has grown significantly in recent years. So, the English language instructors carry a mandatory obligation to offer learners appropriate opportunity to acquire and use the English language.

Writing proficiency is a sign of academic accomplishment (Bhowmik, 2022) and the writing of Pakistani ESL learners faces grave crises (Samiullah & Haidar, 2022; Shah, Hussain, & Rashid, 2023). The primary causes of writing issues are narrow vocabulary and poor understanding of sentence structure of English. Writing is also adversely affected by writing anxiety, poor structural organization, reliance on L1, and a lack of original ideas (Fareed, Ashraf, & Bilal, 2016; Shahid & Irfan, 2021; Umar, Ajmal & Ajmal, 2023).

One of the most complicating factors that hamper writing of students is ELT teachers' aversion to Task-Based Learning and insistence on the use of traditional lecture-delivery method which fares badly due to its characteristic teacher-centered approach and failure to offer autonomy to learners to experiment with their learning materials (Ahmad & Arif, 2020; Khan, 2020; Shahid & Irfan, 2021). In the developed countries across the globe, Task-Based Learning (activities-based learning) enjoys wide popularity in the contemporary landscape of language teaching, for it generously subscribes to the centrality of learners and encourages integration of technology. It puts the needs of the students first, facilitates more meaningful communication, and frequently offers opportunities to develop useful extralinguistic skills. Writing activities given in (Saddler & Preschern, 2007; Benjamin & Berger, 2013; Burrows, 2014; Orr, 2017; Moore, 2001) were employed to teach different elements of writing.

Problem Statement

College learners' writing, crucially important for satisfactory performance in exams, is alarmingly low (Umar, Ajmal & Ajmal, 2023; Shah, Hussain, & Rashid, 2023).

Research Question

How do writing activities vary in their relative effectiveness to teach writing and why?

Review of Literature

Research on the writing of the Pakistani ESL learners has attracted attention recently and studies have been made. Moses and Mohamed (2019, as cited in Shah, Hussain, & Rashid, 2023) found that spellings, vocabulary, and grammar of the Pakistani ESL learners are poor and it is so because of overcrowded classes, poorly trained teachers, influence of L1, and the limited exposure to English language. The study suggests that teachers should focus on building vocabulary and teaching grammar. It advises to teach writing as a process by incorporating technology. A study conducted by Shahid and Irfan (2021) explored difficulties undergraduates face in construction of complex and compound-complex sentences and suggested

pictorial demonstration of syntactic structures a way out. A meta-analysis of already conducted research on ESL writing challenges was undertaken (Naseem, Shah, Shafiq, & Aqeel, 2021). Grammar, vocabulary and coherence surfaced as main problems. The studies suggested that teachers may integrate writing strategies with explicit grammar instructions to enhance writing of ESL learners. There is little research on the relative effectiveness of writing activities and it is identified as research gap.

Brief Description of Writing Activities

Sentence Slots: This activity was used to teach students major kinds of sentence patterns in English. Additionally, it was also used to teach them sentence expansion that involved stepwise expansion of subject, verb, and object. In the beginning, the researcher showed a diagram with no words in it and asked them to notice that it consisted of two lines: a horizontal line bisected by a vertical line. After this, they were told that the two slots they see could be used to diagram a sentence: The subject fits into the subject slot, and the verb occupies the verb slot. Pointing out that the subject and the verb go above the horizontal line and the first word of the sentence requires capitalization, the researcher diagrammed the first category of a sentence that consists of a subject and an intransitive verb (Benjamin & Berger, 2013).

For teaching of another pattern in which transitive verb was used, the researcher used another diagram in which the verb slot was further divided into two sub-slots. Students were asked to notice that the difference between Patterns 1 and 2 was that Pattern 2 had three slots and that the third slot had a vertical line that did *not* cut through the horizontal line. The researcher explained that the bisecting line was a firewall between the subject and the predicate, while the direct object occupied a slot that belonged to the predicate. The verb announces the relationship between the subject and the object.

For teaching students how they differentiate between the direct object and complement, the researcher used the third diagram. Students were explained that in this pattern, a linking verb was followed by a completer/complement. While the direct object receives the action of the verb, the completer simply talks about the subject. In other words, subject complement comments on the subject. Therefore, in the diagram, the slanted line was shown to be pointing backwards in the direction of the subject. The researcher emphasized that the difference between a direct object and a subject complement could be observed in the use of adverbs to modify action verbs, and of adjectives to complete linking verbs (Benjamin & Berger, 2013).

Subject and Predicate Test: This activity was used to teach students the fundamental sentence structure. After this lesson, students were able to identify the subject and the predicate, the two essential constituents of a clause. The researcher told the students that he had a pile of fiction books which he wanted to categorize. The cue for categorization was this: Some titles are sentences, and some are not, that is, some are phrases. For making two piles, the decision was to follow the application of two tests on each title; if the title satisfied the test conditions, it was sentence, otherwise not. The first test was 'what and who' test also called Subject test. In other words, the subject refers to 'who or what' is under discussion. The second test entailed what was said about the Subject. This part called predicate either shows what the subject does or tells something about it (represents something). With the application of these two tests on each book title, the researcher decided whether the title was a sentence or a phrase (Benjamin & Berger, 2013).

Exploring Verb Territory: To explain students how verb system in English works, the researcher divided his first lesson into two phases. Discussion started with the explanation that the verb territory to be explored has two sides: Action Town and Linking Town. The figure was also drawn to help students visualize better. Both sides are linked to each other by a railway track. To distinguish between the two verb categories, the students were introduced to a unique slogan created by each town; the slogan of the Action Town is: 'Where We Find Out What Things Do,' and the slogan for Linking Town is: 'Where We Find Out What Things Are.' Since students cannot grasp these concepts without examples, the researcher populated both the towns with verbs that met the demands of the slogan. There followed a detailed discussion on the forms of verbs that inhabit the action town. Students' understanding of verbs developed when they observed that there were two types of verbs: regular and irregular. The first type had four forms in which infinitive, -s form and progressive were distinct whereas past and participial had same form. However, in the second type, there were five distinct forms because the past and the participial of these verbs had distinct forms (Benjamin & Berger, 2013).

The second lesson on verb territory started with the discussion on two subjects of the linking town: be and have. Students were explained how they could understand why they are called helping verbs and what impact they have on the action verb they accompany. After the full explanation of these two helping verbs, they were provided nine more helping verbs and with examples, their use and function were explained. The nine helping verbs included *would, should, could, will, shall, can, may, might and must* (Benjamin & Berger, 2013).

Three Villages: To develop further discussion on verb system in English, the researcher selected this activity and explained to students how they could understand and remember differences between three categories of irregular verbs. Students were asked to imagine three villages in which the life pattern of every village was distinct from others. The irregular verbs that inhabit *Village One* belong to the pattern of verbs that have the same past and participial form. The past and participial forms involve either a change in the last sound of the base form or a change in the last letters. Sometimes, the last sound of the base form and other forms remains unchanged as the middle sounds are changed. In *Village Two*, the past and participial forms are different; these verbs make their participial in irregular form ending either in '-n' or some other endings. However, most of them make a regular past, while some also have an irregular past. The irregular verbs that inhabit *Village Three* verbs are easiest to remember. These are verbs that undergo no change at all. Put simply, their past and participial are same as their base form. For the development of clear understanding, students were provided with considerable number of examples of every category (Benjamin & Berger, 2013).

Matrices: This activity was used for teaching tenses. For the development of deep understanding of the four categories (Indefinite, Progressive, Perfect and Perfect progressive) of three major kinds of tenses (Present, Past and Future), the researcher relied on a three-column matrix. For every category, a separate matrix was used. In the first row, the tense name was followed by a formula which provided guidance on the creation of three types of sentences: positive, negative, and interrogative. With large number of examples, the researcher explained to the students how they could identify a tense and construct their own sentences of the target tense. An in-depth discussion on every category preceded the drawing of the matrix with the entry of the formula in which the researcher thoroughly elaborated the context in which the target category is used; nuanced differences in their distinct use and function formed the central point of discussion (Burrows, 2014).

Step by Step Addition: With this activity, students were taught how sentence could be improved. Students were explained through an example sentence what steps they should take for the creation of effective and meaningful sentences. They should start with a simple sentence in which a simple subject is followed by a verb phrase which contains a simple verb with its direct object. In the first step, students were instructed to add an adjective. After this, they should substitute the verb with a more powerful one. Further, after the addition of a suitable adverb, they should use a connective and a comma. Reordering the clauses leads to the removal of comma. Now, the students were advised to insert an embedded adjective clause after the subject. Finally, with addition of an appropriate simile, students could create more effective and more meaningful sentence (Burrows, 2014).

Bridges: This activity was used for teaching students how sentences are combined with subordinate and coordinate conjunctions. Before showing two types of bridges, the researcher explained in detail how a simple sentence is different from a complex or a compound sentence. The discussion also included the nuanced differences in the use and functions of subordinate and coordinate conjunction. Students were also provided with a set of delicate instructions which could help them create their complex and compound sentences. To help them remember commonly used coordinate conjunctions and subordinate conjunctions, the researcher advised them to record two acronyms FANBOYS (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) and AAA-WWU-BBIS (after, although, as, when, while, unless, before, because, if, since), respectively. The explanation on bridges started with the first type called COORDINATE. The following conditions for their use were necessary: There is one way traffic, there is always a comma, the conjunction and comma can be replaced by a semi-colon because the sentences across the bridge are independent, neither clause answers the question how, when, where and why of the action in the other clause. In the other type called SUBORDINATE, there is two-way traffic, comma is necessary only when the main/independent clause follows the subordinate clause, the use of semicolon is not possible, the subordinate clause always answers any of how, when, where and why of the action in the main clause (Saddler & Preschern, 2007).

Five Senses Grid: With this activity, the researcher taught students how they could write effective and coherent descriptive paragraph. The step-by-step analysis of the sample paragraph accompanied the filling of the five senses grid which consisted of five separate columns for five types of imagery: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile. Students were also informed that writers' careful choice of a variety of phrases and clauses enhances the impact of the text on the reader (Orr, 2017).

Steps to follow: This activity was used to teach students how to build a coherent argument in persuasive writing. Starting with in-depth discussion on what persuasive writing is and what constituent elements increase its impact, the researcher advised the learners to follow the following four steps when they compose argumentative paragraph. First, they should create a thesis statement expressive of your clear position on the issue. After this, they should explicitly state the purpose of their composition. The third step entails careful selection of supporting details in the form of facts, expert opinions, personal views, examples, etc. The final step is to provide logical conclusion of the entire discussion of the paragraph (Moore, 2001).

Methodology

Constructivist paradigm offers the study a coherent theoretical framework with its claim that learners' active interaction with the environment leads to more productive learning (Ning, 2015). The study is delimited to public sector Rawalpindi Board affiliated Boys' intermediate colleges in the city of Rawalpindi. The students and teachers at intermediate level in these colleges are the population of the study. Using Microsoft Excel's RANDBETWEEN function random sampling has been done in the selection of the college and sample population. Using intact class as the sample, study employed quasi-experimental research design. The study made use of Mixed-Methods approach. A 40-minute task-based class, 3 days a week, was run for four weeks. 111 students of Intermediate Level participated in the study. The researcher created videos on writing activities and the learners watched it through YouTube (Links given in Annexure-A). Learners practised these activities in class in the guidance of a participant teacher. Different elements of writing were taught through different writing activities and test was taken after every lesson. Each test comprised ten MCQs and its reliability was calculated by Cronbach's alpha. 0.821 is a respectable alpha.

Table 1 Reliability Statistics Writing Test

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.821	.826	10

Scores on these tests provided quantitative data to measure relative effectiveness of eight prevalent writing activities. Quantitative data analysis was made by SPSS. Two students were interviewed. Interview guide was checked by an expert and

it was found suitable. Interviews were video-recorded carefully. Interviews were analyzed by inductive approach thematic analysis. There were two coders and several exact statements were quoted from interviews. The issue of reflexivity in validity of qualitative data was addressed by acquiring the services of externals with high level of expertise who transcribed, translated and subsequently coded the interviews. The transcribed and coded qualitative data was presented to the respondents for validation. Qualitative data was also subjected to constant comparison during coding for identification of similar themes. It was also found that there were no deviant cases.

Data Analysis

Using SPSS, mean, median and mode were calculated and it was found that three activities Sentence Slots, Matrices and Step by Step Addition had scored comparatively higher means. Pairwise Comparisons were run and the analysis revealed that the means of the above mentioned three activities are significantly higher than the rest of the activities. The means of the above mentioned three activities do not differ from one another significantly.

The qualitative data revealed that it was the mathematical nature of these activities which made them more effective. These activities broke lessons in steps and it facilitated learning. One step guided and led to the next. Secondly these tasks and activities excited learners and they participated actively in the lesson. It was not one-way traffic as is often the case in the classes run by GTM. Table 1 details the means, median and modes of all the eight activities and it can be seen that Sentence Slots, Matrices and Step by Step Addition scored comparatively higher means. Table 2 displays the post hoc test and the pairwise comparisons show that the means of Sentence Slots, Matrices and Step by Step Addition are significantly different (higher) from the rest of the five writing activities. The data also reveals that means of these three above mentioned activities do not differ significantly among themselves and it means that their effectiveness is almost at the same level.

Table 1 Relative Effectiveness of Writing Activities Statistics

	Sentence Slots	Subject and Predicate Tests	Verb Territory	Matrices	Step by Step Addition	Bridges	Five Senses Grid	Steps to Follow
Mean	7.4135	5.6027	6.0441	7.2964	7.2694	5.4225	5.4405	5.7018
Std. Error of Mean	.06110	.07736	.05116	.05806	.05128	.05117	.06762	.06105
Median	7	6	6	7	7	5	6	6
Mode	7	5	6	7	7	5	5 ^a	6
Std. Deviation	.64912	.82042	.54439	.61706	.54566	.54451	.71780	.64857
Variance	.461	.747	.315	.414	.317	.315	.569	.460
Range	3	3	2	3	3	3	3	2

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Table 2 Writing Activities Pairwise Comparisons

Dependent Variable: Scores on Writing Activities

(I) Writing Activities	(J) Writing Activities	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig. ^b	95% Confidence Interval for Difference ^b	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Sentence Slots	Subject and Predicate Tests	1.811*	.1	.001	1.499	2.123
	Verb Territory	1.369*	.1	.001	1.148	1.771
	Matrices	0.117	.1	1	-.195	.429
	Step by Step Addition	0.144	.1	1	-.168	.456
	Bridges	1.991*	.1	.001	1.679	2.303
	Five Senses Grid	1.973*	.100	.001	1.661	2.285
	Steps to Follow	1.712*	.100	.001	1.400	2.024

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Bonferroni.

Conclusion

The findings from the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data converge on the greater efficacy of activities sharing mathematical element in them. They include Sentence Slots, Matrices and Step by Step Addition.

Annexure –A- Links of Videos on Youtube

Understanding Sentence Structure (Sentence Slots)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBxFb0CIPEo&t=895s>

Understanding Helping Verbs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BB73mr3ogtc&t=37s>

Understanding Verbs

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_EQJqFCg4g&t=446s

Understanding Transitive & Intransitive Verbs

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F8LLApo2gP4&t=34s>

Expanding Sentences

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7mK01CU-E0&t=199s>

Tenses by Matrices

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOwQ61wV0po&t=6s>

Tenses by Matrices 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NYNs5K3iOzo&t=1s>

Subject and Predicate Test

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZLK-Lu5b4o&t=966s>

Improving Sentences

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=He970gSKqDA&t=144s>

Comprehension by Cause & Effect

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SxZQICfWsUs&t=17s>

Comprehension by Comparing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u8CFCFHP-Ok&t=116s>

Joining Sentences by Conjunctions

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9i-2S3KJjg&t=580s>

Discovering Writer's Purpose

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFEoMa96Gko&t=193s>

Writing a Descriptive Paragraph

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juYc6i1yGiI&t=4s>

Writing an Argumentative Paragraph

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7e4t-9mQlk&t=10s>

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