



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-III, Issue-IV, January 2017, Page No. 48-53
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

The Impact of Teaching Writing Skills on the Development in the Writing Skills Proficiency of the BBM Online Learners

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Abstract

The BBM Online learners who are the participants of the study are the first batch of students of the online learning degree course provided by the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Jaffna. English language proficiency is not mandatory for the enrollment for the BBM Online degree. Therefore the learners' proficiency level in English as a Second Language is not gauged before the enrollment for the online degree program. The last English examination the majority of them appeared is the General Certificate Examination in Advanced Level (GCE A/L) General English examination. The objective of this study is to explore the impact of teaching writing skills for Business English learners on the development in their writing skills proficiency. It is hypothesized that teaching writing skills for Business English to the target group has a positive effect on the development in the proficiency in writing skills. The participants were randomly selected from the BBM Online first years. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized. This research has an implication of utilizing the strategies recommended for the development of proficiency in writing skills.

Key Words: *Online ESL Learners, English as second Language, ESL writing skills, Proficiency*

Introduction:

Description of BBM Online Degree Program: Bachelor of Business Management Online Degree program (BBM Online) consists of twenty four course units with four units for each semester. The duration of the course is three academic years, with two semesters per academic year. Each semester has duration of 20 weeks. The course is conducted through online mode. The course is designed to be student centred learning. In addition to other core units, 'Business English' is conducted for the first two years consisting of four semesters.

English as a Second Language (ESL): English language has been taught in many names for various purposes. English is taught for specific purposes in the name of ESP, EST, ESOL, and EFL are the abbreviations of 'English for science and technology', 'English for speakers of other languages', and 'English as a foreign language' respectively. In the majority of the countries other than native English speaking countries English is taught and

learnt as a second language. In Sri Lanka English is taught as a second language from the primary level of education. Even though it is taught as an auxiliary unit, obtaining a pass in ESL is a must. For the online participants English is taught in the name of 'Business English'. A pass in Business English is indispensable for the award of BBM online degree.

ESL Writing Skills: Writing is fundamentally a system of graphic symbols used to convey thought. Fully developed writing systems which involve psycholinguistic aspects are capable of representing any and all aspects of thought and sound. In the English language, the graphic symbols of written language represent the translation of phonemes - the smallest unit of distinguishable sound - into graphemes, or functional letter units Metsala and Ehri,(1998). Writing has evolved steadily from pictograms to phonetic alphabets as part of a process to create an increasingly more appropriate reflection of the phonetic requirements of a language more completely and accurately (De Francis, 1989). Even for a native speaker the writing skills often seem to be the difficult one. Writing is a productive skill in the written mode. It does not just involve graphic representation of speech, but the development and presentation of thoughts in a structured way. Writing is a continuing process of discovering how to find most effective language for communicating one's thoughts and feelings. It can be challenging whether writing should be done in one's L₁ or L₂. Yet ESL learners have to face the challenges to master the skill. In fact, students' accuracy and fluency in writing is problematic.

Language Proficiency: Tumultuous definitions are postulated about language proficiency. Language proficiency is defined as 'the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language'. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_proficiency). An advanced proficiency level a learner is expected to 'understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. He /she should be able express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. He/she should use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. The target language learner should produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices'. <https://tracktest.eu/english-levels-cefr/>

Online Learners' Proficiency in English Language Skills: To achieve the objective of the gradual perfecting or shaping of the language writing skills is needed for everyday communication and for the learning of other curriculum areas.

Objective: The objective of the research is to find out the impact of teaching writing skills for Business English on the development in writing skills of the BBM Online learners.

Methodology: Fifty students from the BBM Online degree programme are randomly selected for the study. The 'ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines' is used in this study to evaluate the proficiency levels of the participants. For each skill, these guidelines identify five major levels of proficiency. They are Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice. The major levels are Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice. For this study they are further divided as 'low proficient', 'proficient' and 'high proficient'. The target group was

given a pretest on writing skills at the beginning of the first semester. An end of semester test on writing skills was conducted to compare the proficiency in writing skills at the beginning and end of the course.

Literature Review: Writing is a complicated skill, and as students enter the workforce, they will be asked to express notions and knowledge in an obvious style. This rise in writing significance as well as the ultimate writing skill improvement will permit the students to graduate with a skill that will avail them for life Alber-Morgan, Hessler and Konrad (2007). Teaching writing without utilizing direct instruction is troublesome Walker, Shippen, Alberto, Houchins and Cihak (2005). Even with direct instruction, writing demands that students should be simultaneously proficient in many skills. The student must reason, construct, accumulate ideas and write, all the while utilizing appropriate grammar and spelling Kieft, Rijlaarsdam, Galbraith and van den Bergh (2007). New Technologies could be utilized in an appropriate manner to improve writing skills.

Findings of the Study: Fifty BBM online learners from the first year degree program were randomly selected for the purpose of this study. The objective of the study is to explore the impact of teaching writing skills on the development in the writing skills proficiency of the first year BBM Online learners. The participants were administered a writing skill test to evaluate their proficiency in writing skills. Pre and post tests on writing skills were administered to the BBM Online learners. The participants' pretest performance is tabulated as follows in the table given below.

Table-1: Participants' proficiency in writing skills at the beginning Semester 1

Skills	Low Proficient No. of Students	Proficient No. of Students	High Proficient No. of Students
Writing	30	14	06

The participants' performance in writing skills was gauged in the following manner. Those who did not follow any functional writing ability in the test were categorized as 'Low Proficient' in writing skills. Those who could write simply about a given topic in a given situations and showed good control of morphology and basic syntactic structures are categorized as 'Proficient' in writing skills. The participants who were able to write the language precisely and accurately in a variety of prose pertinent to social issues and professional needs were categorized as 'high proficient' in writing skill. Their Writing is found to be consistently and explicitly organized with appropriate connectors and discourse devices.

Post tests on writing skill: After gauging the proficiency levels of the participants through pre writing test, the participants were facilitated to learn the writing skill according to the descriptors elaborated in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. ACTFL are descriptions of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context. The Guidelines describe the tasks that writers can handle at each level as well as the content, context,

accuracy, and discourse types associated with the writing tasks at each level. They also present the limits that writers encounter when attempting to function at the next higher major level. The researcher could make use of these guidelines to enable the participants to write messages, e-mail communication, essays, reports and letters. Moreover, it was checked whether they apply these learning clues in their tasks.

The participants followed the online Business English course for 20 weeks. Special attention was given to those who were found to be 'low proficient' in writing skills. They were found to be unable write grammatically correct and meaningful sentences. They could memorize and write. They needed adequate time and familiar cues to write answers. They could reproduce from memory a very limited number of isolated words or familiar phrases. The researcher facilitated them with relevant grammar, spelling, and sentence structure through various tasks and examples. It was checked whether their proficiency in writing skills improved to a higher level such as from low proficient to proficient. Majority of the participants were able to go to the next higher level. The 'low proficient' learners exhibited improvement in accuracy in writing on well-practiced, familiar topics using limited formulaic language. At the same time it is also found that the participants could not write well in less familiar topics. Initially the researcher found that there is a marked decrease in accuracy in the writing skill performance of all the participants. By the end of the fifth week of Business English programme, the participants showed remarkable improvement in writing. It was noted that they were able to meet some limited practical writing needs. They could create statements and formulate questions based on familiar materials utilizing the learned vocabulary and structures. The participants slowly progressed in writing with fewer errors in grammar, word choice, punctuation, and spelling. They had to put additional effort to come to the intermediate level. Towards the end of the 13th week, majority of them could follow the instructions given to them to complete various writing skill tasks. Soon they could perform writing tasks well and meet a number of practical writing needs. It was also found that the participants mastered to control basic sentence structures and verb forms. At the end of the 14th week the participants' performance in writing tasks and assignments indicated improvement in quality and style of writing. Intermediate level exams on writing were administered. Majority of the participants extended their corporation. Gradually they were able to write meaningful and lengthy passages. They could write compositions and simple summaries related to their field of study. The vocabulary, grammar and style of the participants improved remarkably. The researcher also marked the online tutorials and commented on each participant's performances.

Towards the end of the semester the participants exhibited lot of improvement in writing skill by the frequent guidance, tutoring and marking of the researcher. The participants could take any task and write about a variety of topics with significant precision and detail. They followed the writing style appropriate for informal and formal correspondence according to appropriate conventions. They finally could show the development in writing skill proficiency by writing summaries and reports.

A posttest on writing skills was conducted and the participants' answers were corrected.

The posttest performance indicates that the participants are able to demonstrate the ability to handle writing tasks easily with fewer errors in grammar and structure. It also shows that the participants can identify the mistakes that they tend to make and even improved in spelling, grammar and their vocabulary use increased. They could develop arguments which show remarkable ease of expression. They obviously improved in employing complicated structures with the guidelines given by the online Business English facilitators via online.

The following table shows their proficiency levels in writing skills after following the twenty weeks' Business English program.

Table-2: Participants' levels of writing skills' proficiency at the end of Semester 1

Skills	Low Proficient No. of Students	Proficient No. of Students	High Proficient No. of Students
Writing	9	21	20

Proficiency level of the online learners at the end of Semester: The participants' levels of English language proficiency at the end of the first semester were elicited as it was done at the beginning of the semester. The data tabulated from their performance and displayed in the above table shows the improvement in the performance and proficiency in writing skills. The participants' proficiency on the whole improved very much from 'low proficiency' to 'proficient' as shown in the above table. Twenty participants were identified as 'high proficient' in writing skills. The research indicates that more participants have achieved high proficiency in writing skills, which indicates that as they were facilitated to learn, they obtained high proficiency in English language skills. From this, it is found that by facilitating the online learners with appropriate guidelines their proficiency in writing skills could be developed.

Conclusion: The online learning is a new phenomenon for the respondents, staff, and the parents. The research shows that those participants who were lacking in writing skill proficiency could be facilitated to improve their levels of proficiency in writing skills. The study proves that the participants were able to fulfill their routine as well as academic writing needs with the appropriate teaching of ESL writing skill. The study shows that second language learners can obtain proficiency in writing skills, if they are facilitated to learn the skill. It could be concluded that teaching writing skills has a positive impact on the development in the writing skills proficiency of the BBM Online Learners.

The study has an implication of utilizing appropriate teaching online tools and materials the target groups in order to obtain proficiency not only in writing but also in the other three skills viz listening, reading, and speaking skills.

Recommendations: It could be recommended that the online mentors and facilitators could follow a proper guide line such as ACTFL to understand various levels of proficiency in writing and other three skills. The teachers / facilitators can identify in which level their children are. By understanding the various levels of proficiency and categorizing the

learners accordingly different teaching strategies could be adopted. The online facilitators can then take appropriate teaching techniques to upgrade the target groups.

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