

Assessing Students' Writing Performance in Narrative Genre at Higher Level of Education

Dr. Tariq¹, Saddam Hussain², Sadeed Ahmad Khan³, Ibad Ullah⁴

¹Lecturer Department of English, University of Malakand, Pakistan (tariqahmaduom@gmail.com)

²Lecturer Department of English University of Malakand, Pakistan (sadam.khan10022@gmail.com)

³Lecturer Department of English University of Malakand, Pakistan (sadeed_faridoon@yahoo.com)

⁴Lecturer Department of English, National University of Modern Languages, Peshawar, Pakistan (ibadullah@numl.edu.pk)

ABSTRACT:

This study attempted to investigate students' writing competence in the narrative genre by engaging them in group writing activities using the process writing approach utilizing short fictions as source texts. Participants in this study were N= 63 aged 21 and 23 enrolled in semester four at Government Post Graduate College Swat. This is a quasi-experimental study; participants of the study were assigned to control group and experimental group non-randomly. To account for observable variables, an informative questionnaire was administered for the selection of participants before administering the pre-test; learners found similar on all observable characteristics were pre-tested. For data collection, this study employed survey questionnaire (PSM), pre-test, post-test, group writing activities and group discussion, and also conducted semi-structured interview on the key informants for in-depth investigation. For measuring the scores made on the pretest and post-test, adapted analytical scoring rubrics were employed, also utilized as an instruction guide. To compare the means score of the two groups, independent t-test was used. Thematic analysis was applied for data collected through group discussion and semi-structured interview. The findings of the present study revealed that group discussion broadened students' imaginative thinking and helped them interpret the texts from different dimensions and the group writing activities using process and genre approach using short fictions as source texts helped them improve their overall writing skills. Besides, this study found that formative feedback on each other draft improved their final draft also their critical and creative thinking. Results from interviews indicated that students felt confident to write on various topics. The findings of this study suggest that suitable teaching strategies and techniques be adopted in order to change students' perception from product writing to process and genre approach. This study also suggests that critical reading of the content-rich texts be applied so that students struggle with detail, wrestle with facts and attempt to transform dimly understood concepts into their writing.

Keywords:

Narrative genre, process writing, short fictions.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is central and critical to all educational sectors, firms, and organizational domains which is perceived as a finished product. The focus is on the finished product rather than the recursive stages that lead to the creation of effective text. Writing skill is the most important skill but students often do not try their hand at attempting to write anything on their own to improve at a young age. The apathetic and uninformed learners need to be convinced and educated that it matters for them both in their academic and professional life. As later in life, when applying for jobs or corporate business sectors, they fail to perform well as the jobs sectors need proficient and excellent writers, where employers offer jobs to those who are exceptional in their writing. There is no denying the fact that writing skill is not limited only to one's academic career but it also extends beyond their academic career. Prevalence of writing is intensely

felt in places where records of deeds, decisions, agreements, and MOUs are preserved.

Besides, writing is generally considered as a support skill rather than an independent and social activity per se. In the Asian context, writing is very critical to one's academic career which is often bereft of all their necessary processes. The first stage is often taken for the final stage for the production of text, which mostly ends up below the required standard. The present practice of teaching writing skill focuses on the final product and expecting the text to be of high quality without considering feedback, revision and editing processes. Expecting high-quality text from the students who have been trained through the rote learning method seems hard to imagine. This approach reduces the scanty resources of working memory and restricts the capacity to create language fluently (Kellogg, 2008). In this type of practice, feedback is summative, not formative, given on the final product. However,

writing skill can come into a fuller play only when a writer is made aware of its different refining processes and different genres of writing. To instill this idea in the mind of students that writing is a socially constructed and cognitively demanding task that needs consistent efforts and training will help them abolish the notion that writing is not an innate ability. As remarked by Harris (1993), "writing is not an innate natural ability but is a cognitive ability" (p.78).

Most importantly, using standard written English at higher education level is important for students. For competency in writing is regarded as critical for student learning outcomes (SLO). A research study conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) found that 99% of the chief academic officers from 433 higher education institutions rated writing as one of the most important intellectual skills for their students. (Sparks, Song, Brantley, & Liu, 2014). While one involved in writing needs to use every cell and parts of their brain for completing the given task. Besides, it is a conscious and taxing activity which requires cognitive efficiency. Thus, communication through writing brings in exactness, precision, accuracy, efficiency and correctness to the wandering thoughts of learners by molding the scattered thoughts pattern into a recognized pattern. It proves one's ability and makes him/her prominent among peers and colleagues due to their effective writing skills.

Unfortunately, writing skills being complex, time-consuming and a daunting activity is often marginalized, as doing writing there needs high-level coordination of meta-cognitive skills. To produce effective texts, a writer has to draw on his/her previous experience and existing knowledge to convince a diverse audience from varied perspectives (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson, 2014). Learning to write effectively in L2 is a daunting and challenging task. However, it should not come as a surprise even for those who speak English as a first language requires extensive and specialized instruction to write efficiently and effectively (Hyland, 2003). Developing writing skills involves knowledge about texts, contexts, audiences (readers) and composing skills. It is not only a tool of thinking but a vehicle by means of which one can achieve his or her educational goals as well as professional targets. O'Brien (2004), defines the process of writing an activity where teachers urge students to see writing, not as an exercise of grammar rather a discovery of meaning and ideas. He further remarks that teachers during the writing process can encourage students to explore their thoughts and improve their own writing. Even so, writing is a process of discovery of meaning, but to think and write creatively and effectively, it needs a lot of reading of good materials and writing about those materials. Communicating ideas, information and decisions in

writing are virtually central to all disciplines whether it is an organization, school/college, university, or workplace (Spack, 1985; Zamel, 1982).

Writing is not only a tool to demonstrate what one has learned but it is also a way of learning in itself and a tool for testing all that learning (McLeod & Soven, 1992). In order to develop students' overall writing competence, extensive reading of different genres needs to be done, based on various themes and topics capable of meeting the needs of different contexts and audience. It is due to the fact that writing activities are often organized around different social and psychological issues, and student writers are at disadvantaged to write on them effectively for they do not have familiarity with the topics and the sort of texts they need to produce. Hence, they should be provided with content-oriented resources to help them generate ideas, organize them and be familiarized with appropriate language structure. In other words, the source texts will provide them with relevant cognitive schemata that are, knowledge and vocabulary they need for the topics to create effective texts (Hyland, 2003). A study in Japan, indicates that rhetorical differences in language vary from culture to culture (Connor 2002) which being unique in nature causes difficulties for L2 learners because of differences of organizational patterns (Kubota 1997; Casanave 2004). For example, those students who had not received instruction on English writing preferred Japanese rhetorical pattern and those who received favoured English rhetorical pattern.

This paper is part of doctoral thesis (research) conducted on the three genres in sequential order in sequential order, starting from a narrative genre and then moves to descriptive genre, and ends up with argumentative genre. However, the present paper focuses only on the narrative genre. This is probably the type of genre a child usually starts narrating his/her story or experience in chronological order. This genre) makes it easy for student writers to produce texts based on some memorable events in the past. Besides, narrative writing is arranged in chronological order. It begins with what happens first and move on to what happens next, and so on. However, narrative writing can also start at the end of a story and then flashbacks to the first event, and continues in linear order. It can also begin somewhere in the middle of a story and then goes back to the beginning.

Apart from developing learners' overall writing skills, the importance of each genre needs to be explained as each of which has its characteristics. Focusing on one genre may not meet the need of learners' academic or professional life. However, the present study first focuses on the narrative genre. Starting with the narrative genre, student writers can share their feelings, experiences and inform what happens when something unusual happening entertains, instructs, clarify and persuade (Clouse, et al 2013). Besides, narrative

writings show us how the people in the world behave and the world works, and how the event develops. According to psychologists, narration can have a therapeutic value, for example making them to writing about their past events and overcome them. It is observed that children first start talking with the narrative genre. With adults to make their memorable narrations more vivid, need to add descriptive details to their stories. Developing students' writing skills in the narrative genre requires authentic materials. In which case, short fictions seem to afford authentic materials for these materials give access to authentic materials used in the practical world. Besides, short fictions provide learners with an approach to the language nourished by different linguistic and rhetorical uses of the language, forms and conventions of the written mode (Collie & Slater, 2004; Erkaya, 2005; Kim, 2004; Oster, 1989a; Rosenblatt, 2005; L. M. Rosenblatt, 2005).

Getting command over writing cannot be acquired by practicing writing alone, but rather be supported by extensive reading (Krashen, 2003). Whether it is an assigned work or voluntary, these two activities (assigned or voluntary work) have a positive impact on composing skills at different stages of proficiency. It is in consideration of the fact that these activities will involve learners in constructing meaning by applying their complex cognitive, and linguistic abilities which take the help of problem-solving skills as well as activate their acquired knowledge both of content and structure, (Carson & Leki, 1993; Grabe, 2001). To make the development of writing skills interesting and involving, engaging students in group discussion and different writing activities should be at the core of teaching. In a situation, where there exists no concept of making errors and mistakes and only a finished product is valued. Having zero tolerance towards errors and mistakes violates the fact that making errors is part of a learning process; this is an error that fixes the writer in his/her writing process (khan, 2012). There lie learning outcomes when students make mistakes or correct each other mistakes (Baker & Westrup, 2000).

2. Research Objectives

- To develop students' writing performance in the narrative genre
- To improve students' writing skills through process writing approach using narrative short fictions as source texts

3. Research Question

Q.1: Does developing narrative writing skill lead to a difference in the performance of students' writing skill?

Q. 2: How does the process approach in combination with the narrative genre improve students writing skill?

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The focus of this study was on the investigation or inquiry into the students' writing processes in the narrative genre, it was deemed necessary to choose a mixed-method design while employing quantitative instruments for data collection in order to produce useful results. The existing context under which the present study was conducted (Government Post Graduate Jahan Zeb College) warranted non-random sampling; the intact groups. In situations under which random assignment or re-assignment of participants creates disruption in the learning process, quasi-experimental study designs are commonly used (Creswell & Garrett, 2008). Therefore, this study used a quasi-experimental study design as in most educational settings, random assignment is not possible. Participants of the study were BS four years program, aged between 20, and 22. The assignment of students to control and experimental groups was carried out non-randomly. Teaching to the Control group was lecture-based, with no group discussion or writing activities performed by the students. On the other hand, the Experimental group used the process writing approach which involved interaction and different writing activities. A Quasi-Experimental like experiment design tests a causal hypothesis in which a program or policy is seen as an "intervention" and is tested on how well it works or achieves its objectives.

In order to cope with the ethical consideration; denying treatment to the control group, this study administered a self-designed survey questionnaire based on Propensity Score Matching (PSM) to select students who are equal on all observable variables followed by a pre-test to both Control and Experimental groups. This study picked up a control group as a comparison group which was as similar as possible to the treatment group in terms of baseline characteristics (White & Sabarwal, 2014). Student participants performed group writing activities during the intervention under the supervision of the researcher on different topics according to the process writing recursive stages. The results obtained from the pre-test were analyzed using analytic scoring rubrics. The experimental group was exposed to treatment for a period of six weeks, during which period different group writing activities were performed using the process writing approach. An independent t-test was applied for pre-test in order to compare the means of the two groups. A post-test was carried out at the end of the treatment. The results collected from the post-test were evaluated using analytic scoring rubrics. An independent t-test was applied to compare the mean scores obtained from the post-test between the two groups.

Based on the sampling methods adopted, both qualitative and quantitative instruments were used for data collection. The main instruments this study used include PSM survey questionnaire, pre-test, post-test,

semi-structured interview, group writing activities. Activities in the intervention include interaction among the students and group writing activities based on narrative genre using different narrative short fictions as source texts.

5. Results of the study

In order to select students who are similar on all observable variables, a Propensity Score Matching

(PSM) survey questionnaire was administered to seven faculties. ANOVA test was applied to seven faculties to figure out the overall differences among them, It was found that students in these seven faculties were similar on almost all observable variables with a P = 0.651 as illustrated in table 2.1. No significant difference was found among the 7 faculties as shown in table 2.1

Table 2.1 Means scores of the Seven Faculties

Source of variation	Sum of Square	Degree of Freedom	Means Square	F	P= Value
Between Groups	0.161416991	6	0.026902832	0.698606445	0.651128335
Within Groups	5.814901428	151	0.038509281		
Total	5.976318419	157			

Four faculties; Faculty of Pakistan study and Faculty of History as Control Group, Faculty of Political science and Faculty of Management Sciences as experimental group were selected for the intervention. An independent t-test was applied to compare the mean score of the two groups (experimental and control) on their pre-test in order to find out their language

proficiency for the intervention. Table 2.2 shows that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups with $p > .05$. Therefore, the two groups were almost at the same level of writing proficiency before the treatment.

Table 2.2 Independent-Samples T-Test of Pre-Test Scores for the Two Groups

Narrative Genre	Group				t	p value
	EG (n=34)		CG (n=33)			
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Composition 1	25.20	11.20	21.46	6.32	.752	.450
Composition 2	23.49	11.05	24.49	7.01	.030	.960
Composition 3	18.57	7.39	19.03	5.69	.210	.820

In order to answer research question no 1, a post-test was applied to the two groups at the end of the intervention to evaluate if the treatment made any difference to the students writing skill in the narrative genre. For longer-term effects of the study, researchers prefer delayed post-test in comparison to immediate

post-test (Mackey & Gass, 2015). This is because one gets a wider snapshot of the treatment effects. Besides, it measures the change caused by the treatments (Dimitrov & Rumrill, 2003). The results indicate that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the post-test for all the three compositions as shown in table 2.3

Table 2.3 Independent-Samples T-Test of Post-Test Scores for the Two Groups

Group	
CG (n=33)	EG (n=34)

Narrative Genre	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	T	P value
Composition 1	24.68	8.16	30.90	9.91	3.202	0.002
Composition 2	23.90	8.90	29.90	13.41	2.041	0.046
Composition 3	21.07	8.02	25.01	12.63	1.692	0.096

6. Comparison of the Mean Scores on the Post-Test of the Experimental and Control Groups

An independent t-test was applied to compare the mean scores of the two groups for the three compositions in the post-test. The results show that the EG students made significantly higher mean scores in the post-test than CG students for all three compositions of writing, with a $p < .05$. First, the mean score for composition no 1 stands at $M=30.90$, ($SD=8.90$) by EG and $M=24.68$, ($SD=8.16$) by CG, $t=3.202$, $P=0.002$, with the mean difference of 7.96, indicating that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean score for all the three compositions.

Second, a significant difference with the mean score of $M=29.90$, ($SD=13.41$) was found in EG for composition no 2 while the CG mean score for composition no 2 stands at 23.90, ($SD=8.90$); $t= 2.041$ with the mean difference of 6.36. Third, there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for composition no 3 of the EG $M=25.01$, ($SD=12.63$) and CG $M=21.07$, ($SD=8.02$); $t=1.696$, $p=0.002$, with the mean difference of 4.92. Hence, the results from Table 2.3 show that the score gained by EG students for composition no one is significantly higher than CG students. However, the two groups were not as significantly different on composition no 3 as they were for composition no 1 and composition no 2.

The analysis and the mean difference show that there was statistically no significant difference in the individual performance of the CG as compared to the experimental group. Hence, the result indicates that they did not improve their overall writing skills. Increase if any, they made, is for composition no 3 only. However, it must be noted that only slight differences in the two compositions were observed in composition no 1 ($p=.28$), and composition no 3 ($p=.172$).

The analysis of Pre-test and Post-test or individual writing performance shows that there were statistically significant differences with a $P < 0.01$, for composition no 1 .002, composition no 2 .011 and composition no 3 .001 in terms of individual performance after the treatment of the experimental group. The result of the post-test indicates that the experimental group improved as compared to their pre-test. The highest increase was for composition, whereas the smallest increase was in composition no 3.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study correspond to the findings of a study conducted by Adam (2015), in Saudi Arabia at Al-Baha University which attempts to develop Saudi university students' narrative writing skill through short stories. He suggests that there is a positive correlation between short stories in developing narrative writing skill. Explicit teaching of genre writing produces good results, as the genre approach emphasizes the relationships between text-genre and their contexts (Hyon, 1996). Besides, knowing genre features help a writer to consider social factors which influence the writer's creation of text such as choice of words, organization of content and linguistic features (Hyon, 1996; (Hammond & Derewianka, 2001).

As for the significant performance by EG students on their post-test, it might be attributed to their group/cooperative writing activities and interaction among them during the intervention. To this effect, Johnson and Johnson (2008) remark that in cooperative learning (writing) activities learners not only improve their learning but also their peers' learning in order to achieve their shared goal. In this study, when the two groups were compared, students taught through the process writing approach performed better on all three compositions than students taught by a lecture-based method.

To answer research question 1, students from both experimental and control groups were pretested and post-tested, and the gained scores were analyzed using two different statistical techniques. Two independent sample t-tests were applied to compare the mean scores between the two groups, one was run for pre-test and one for the post-test. Besides, a paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test for the students within each group.

The findings obtained from the pre-test indicate that students were not significantly different from each other in terms of their level of writing proficiency ($p > .05$). Whereas, the results from the post-test mean scores indicate that EG students gained significantly higher mean scores for all three compositions with ($p < .05$). On the other hand, CG students did not make a significant improvement for any of the three different compositions based on the narrative genre. Hence, it can be concluded that students in the experimental group made greater improvement for composition no 1, and composition no 2, but did not make a bigger improvement for composition no 3.

To conclude, the higher mean scores by EG students might be attributed to the consequence of explicit teaching on narrative genre, group writing activities and group discussion on different short fictions of narrative genre and their respective characteristics concerning the context. According to the genre teaching approach, students should be aware of the text, context, purpose, audience and content knowledge to produce an effective text. Besides, grammatical features, conventions and appropriate vocabulary for the specific social context are required to achieve the communicative purpose.

On the other hand, CG students' lower mean scores for all three compositions are indicative of a lack of explicit explanation on narrative genre and the writing activities. In a teacher-centered approach classroom in Pakistan, students mostly depend on rote learning and are supposed to memorize what is taught to them as prescribed in the syllabus. They are supposed to reproduce them in their examination. Emphasis is on the linguistically correct product rather than how to produce the correct texts. In addition, students are not engaged in any problem-solving activities. This inductive way of teaching and learning fails to help students determine how the choice of words, organizational structure and conventions are influenced by social context.

In the traditional method of teaching, students may not have the opportunity to develop an understanding of how to choose information on the topic, style and conventions, organizational structure and language features that are required to produce text in response to a specific context. The smallest improvement made by CG students is for composition three and composition one which might come from their background knowledge in linguistic resources. As, their content, organization, choice of words, style and convention seem contextually less appropriate as compared to EG students. Similarly, the findings of the second Research Question are based on experiences of EG students using the process writing approach are interpreted and presented below.

To compare the experience of students concerning process writing and product approach, the control group experienced a tense environment, whereas EG students enjoyed their class. They expressed that the product approach does not promote confidence and competence of students rather than making them dependent on others. Besides, working in groups improves students' knowledge which in turn eliminates hesitation and develops understanding with other students. They expressed that learning through the traditional method (rote learning) limits creativity and critical thinking because this approach emphasizes the reproduction of what is taught in the class.

Whereas, students working in process writing approach promote their knowledge and creativity. As working in

a group infuses the spirit of sharing knowledge and ideas and promotes teamwork. They expressed that friendly and open interaction helps them produce their final drafts effectively. Besides, open interaction eliminates competitiveness and may strike reconciliation and friendship among some of the estranged students. Whereas, learning through rote teaching method and working individually makes one selfish and self-centered preventing them from sharing their ideas and suggestions for fear of competition or higher grade. Referring to the difficulties in the intervention, they expressed that they experienced difficulties during different processes of writing largely in the initial stage. Whereas, others expressed that their weak sentence structure and poor vocabulary caused difficulties. They all expressed that they never experienced such activities nor had any knowledge about revision or giving feedback on each other drafts and editing.

Considering the advantages of feedback, they expressed that feedback makes them aware of their weakness and strength by providing them with an opportunity to revise and improve the text. Elaborating on the utility of feedback, they expressed that the first draft revised in the light of the feedback comes out refined and effective. Distinguishing the difference between teacher's and student's feedback, they expressed that teacher's feedback guides students in the right direction; organization, development and content, whereas students' feedback help student produce good ideas to write an effective draft. However, they expressed that they would carry on with the process writing approach. The result suggests that CG students had higher motivation to continue with the process writing approach than those in the experimental group. Regarding the similarities between the two groups, they all expressed that feedback is the most important element in improving writing skills and developing critical thinking skills.

8. Conclusion

The findings obtained from this study support the claim made by scholars that explicit teaching on the writing process could help produce quality texts (e.g. Badger & White, 2000; Hyland, 2003, Tribble, 1996). Considering the significant scores gained by the experimental group in all three compositions suggests that giving an explicit explanation of narrative genre in combination with the process writing approach can help students to produce quality texts or compositions. This is because students are made aware of the specific features, conventions and mechanics of a particular genre. The findings of the present study suggest that interaction among students based on the short fiction with a certain issue in the story broadened their imaginative thinking, also helped them interpret the texts from different dimensions. As for group writing activities using the process approach helped them

improve their overall writing skills. Additionally, this study found that formative feedback on each other draft improved their final draft and also developed their critical and creative thinking. Results from interviews indicated that students felt confident to write on various topics based on narrative genre. The findings of this study suggest that suitable teaching strategies and techniques be adopted to change students' perception from product writing to process and genre approach. The findings of this study support the theoretical discussion that writer's awareness of genre features and the different recursive stages of processes writing are essential to deal with the complex nature of writing. The nature of writing is complex, and it should be viewed from a cognitive aspect. In order to produce effective drafts, the writer needs to be equipped with the knowledge of the writing process such as writing multiple drafts on the same topic and getting them revised in the light of feedback received from by their peers, teachers and seniors. This study also suggests that critical reading of the content-rich texts be may be employed in the writing classrooms so that students may learn how to struggle with detail and wrestle with facts to tease out the exact meanings or ideas and make attempts to transform their dimly understood concepts into a simple language in their writing.

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