

Teaching Strategies and its Influence on Students’ English Writing Skills at Secondary School Certificate

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Abstract

Teaching strategies perform a great role in students’ learning at every level of education. This paper presents achievement in English writing skills and the practices of teaching used by teachers. Under Mixed-method, Sequential exploratory design was chosen for this study. Sample was selected from private schools of Lahore city offering Secondary School Certificate. Four private schools were selected through purposive sampling technique. In each school one section of SSC was selected as sample. Teachers and students of the selected classes were included in sample. Research instruments comprised of interview protocol and achievement test. Interviews were conducted to explore the teaching strategies for developing writing skills. Essay type test was developed and administered to students to measure the English writing skills. Test was developed by using intended learning outcomes of curriculum of English language. Criteria for developing rubrics for scoring of test was based on the students’ intended learning outcomes from curriculum of SSC. Findings revealed that for developing writing, teachers frequently use lecture, questioning, feedback, self-review and pair work. Test results showed that writing skills of students are not much developed. They rely on textbook as an important resource. Teachers do not give emphasis on student centered methods for teaching writing because it takes much time.

Keywords: teaching strategies, English writing skills, secondary school certificate, English as foreign language

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Introduction

Language is vital part of human life. In educational pursuits it plays a central role in students' learning and achievement. It is used for sharing ideas and attaining educational access. Curriculum is a vital component through which language is taught in classrooms. English language is considered as second language in Pakistan and has important place in academia. Due to its importance English is being emphasized in our educational institutions as a compulsory subject from early grades to higher level.

Writing is a process to convey messages. It is a complex act of effective communication (Nation's Report Card, 2012) that is linked with every subject and grade. Writing is an essential skill of English language that integrates the other skills. Javed, Juan & Nazli (2013) stated that writing skill is more complicated among four skills of English language i.e. reading, listening and speaking. Students' academic success is indicator of good writing skills because assessment of every subject is linked with proficiency in writing. Geiser and Studly (2001) highlighted that good writing skill is an indicator of academic success. With good command of writing, students express their abstract thoughts, experiences and interests. Similarly, they meet the needs and challenges in classrooms and in their daily lives.

Writing can be assessed on three aspects such as generation of ideas, organization of ideas and language conventions. Writing as purposeful activity starts from planning where writer lists all the points relevant to the topic. Next step is organizing the outline by chaining ideas with logical order. After planning and organizing, last step is editing to know if there is something unclear, grammatical mistakes, spelling errors, sentence structure and punctuation (The Nations Report Card, 2012; Clementson, 2009). So in this process, writer starts from generating ideas that leads to whole piece of writing.

Students' achievement in English and other subjects can be measured on the basis of their skills in writing. On the basis of good writing skills students communicate and discuss their ideas with others. Therefore, it develops critical and analytical thinking among students. If teachers use appropriate teaching strategies it enhances students' performance. It has been observed that English writing skills of students of SSC are not much developed. Research also shows (Khan, 2012) that writing skills of students are not much improved and they face difficulties in learning English due to traditional methods of teaching used by teachers. No significant research work in the same context has been carried out after the implementation of curriculum of 2006 of English language which was implemented in 2014. In curriculum of 2006 intended learning

outcomes are described in the form of competencies, standards, benchmarks and students' learning outcomes. In National curriculum of English language Competency 2 is related to English writing skills.

In spite of studying English as compulsory subject from early grades to higher levels of education, students are not able to communicate in English effectively. Although teachers give emphasis in classroom on English reading and writing skills, students still face problems in English reading and writing. Teachers ignore the other two skills i.e. speaking and listening because they are not being assessed in examination although included in curriculum. Harmer (2006) stated that through students' writing examiner can assess picture of overall skill of students to understand the concepts of language. Fatima & Akbar (2017) found that students of SSC perform poor in English writing due to inappropriate teaching strategies used by teachers. Poon (2005) pointed out that traditional strategies include lecture, recitation or book reading, grammar translation method, use of vocabulary tasks and memorized essays. He clarified that teachers stick to these strategies because examination system does not assess the versatility and creativity in students. This is the main cause of using traditional teaching strategies in English language classrooms where English is taught as a second language.

Teachers of SSC don't provide opportunities to students to use language within variety of contexts. Therefore, if such type of questions is asked in examination, students do not attempt those questions and select the other one due to choice of questions in examination. However, pictures are the best resource in English language classroom for developing students' writing skill (Harmer, 2007).

Objectives of the Study

It has been observed that English writing skills of students of secondary level are not much developed. This study is an attempt to measure the English writing skills of students of private schools on narrative writing. This study seek to explore the influence of teaching strategies for developing writing skills. Likewise, this study will highlight the reasons for the use of teaching strategies in English language classrooms for developing writing skills.

Specific objectives of the study were

1. To identify teaching strategies for developing English writing skills of students of Secondary School Certificate
2. To determine the challenges faced by teachers in classroom during teaching writing.

3. To assess writing skills of students on overall and aspects of narrative writing of students of Secondary School Certificate.

Method of Study

Mixed method approach was used through the collection and integration of qualitative and quantitative data. Under mixed method, sequential exploratory design was chosen for this study which is characterized by the collection of two data strands and makes interpretation after comparing results (Creswell, 2014; Morgan, 1998; Clark & Creswell, 2008). In this study private schools were selected. The reason for selecting private schools is that people prefer private schools than government schools. They think that they offer better learning opportunities, have small class size, more attention to students, better learning environment and high standard of teaching. Through purposive sampling, four teachers were selected for semi-structured interview to determine teaching strategies. Sample of qualitative research was small for in-depth investigation that is fundamental to this mode of inquiry. In qualitative research detailed inquiry is more important instead of just accepting large number of samples. Interviewees were asked to give information about teaching strategies for developing writing skills as well as challenges they face during teaching. Students of the selected teachers were included in the sample for quantitative investigation. Test was based on intended learning outcomes of curriculum of English language of SSC. Scoring rubrics were developed to score the essay type writing test. Rubrics were developed on the basis of intended learning outcomes given in curriculum. Sample of the study comprised of 65 students of 10th grade from four classes of private schools of Lahore. English writing test was administered to students to determine the writing skills of students. Test developed in this study was to assess the narrative writing skills of students. In English language curriculum of secondary level, intended learning outcomes of writing skills includes narrative writing. Under narrative writing three aspects of writing i.e. generation of ideas, organizing ideas and language facility and conventions were also assessed separately. The reason to assess skills of narrative writing is that it is important objective in curriculum of Secondary School Certificate as it is used to convey real or imagined experiences for the reader.

Marks on English writing test were given according to the criteria mentioned in rubrics:

Effective skill = (26-30 marks)

Competent skill = (21-25 marks)

Adequate skill = (16-20 marks)

Developing skill = (11-15 marks)

Marginal skill = (6-10 marks)

Little or no skill = (1-5 marks)

Reasons for the Use of Mixed Methods Design

Mixed method design has been used in this research. Mixing both quantitative and qualitative data is to capture the details of a situation. At the first consideration, scores from achievement test (quantitative data) were obtained. After that they were combined with interview data (qualitative data) to provide deeper understanding (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2010). Mixed method design complement each other taking advantage of the strengths of each (Green, Caracelli, and Graham 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

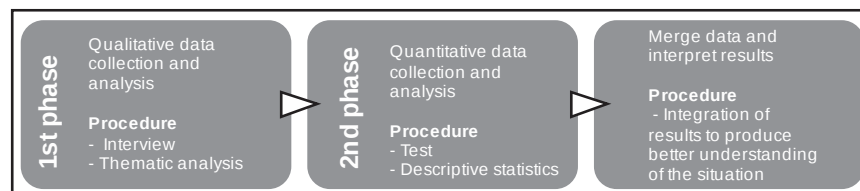


Figure 1: Source: Research design (based on Creswell, 2009)

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

- Which teaching strategies are being used at SSC level for development of writing skills in the subject of English?
- What type of difficulties are faced at SSC level for developing English writing skills?
- What are the overall English writing skills of students at secondary school level on narrative writing?
- What are the English writing skills of students on each aspect of narrative writing?

Findings

Interview transcripts were analyzed by identifying themes. Results from the qualitative and quantitative data are explained as under:

Qualitative Data: Interview Data

Interviews were conducted with teachers to determine the teaching strategies used by them. Purpose of conducting interviews were to determine teachers' style to teach English and its influence on students' outcomes. Teachers' responses were taken on three aspects of students' writing i.e. generation of ideas, organizing ideas and language facility and conventions. Main themes were broken into categories. Following themes emerged from teachers' responses:

Generation of Ideas

Teachers were asked about the teaching strategies which they use in English writing classrooms for generation of ideas. Their responses showed that they were in favor of extensive reading, lecture and brainstorming for generating ideas.

Lecture: When teachers were asked what type of teaching strategies they use in English writing classroom, three out of four teachers reported that they use lecture method.

.....I use lecture method to develop writing skills in my students. I already taught them procedure to generate ideas. I am in favour of this method because i have a large number of students in my class and there is no best way to teach other than this method.

Teachers responded that they use lecture method which is traditional strategy to teach English writing skills. They do not prefer that method which cannot be easily handled with large classes.

Extensive Reading

One of the four teachers from private sector schools mentioned in their verbal description:

.... Mostly I involve my students to make them understand the process of writing because I want to give extra knowledge to my students. For this, i ask them to read English newspapers, novels and magazines. Students share with me what they read at home. But in classroom I have no time to practice these things. The reason is that duration of class is not long enough to use these resources and we have restriction from board to complete the prescribed syllabus within time. Although I use this method for developing writing skills but students know that they are not going to get higher marks because of this method.

Brainstorming

All the teachers were in favor of brainstorming questions in classroom to gather students' ideas.

For example

.... I consider this strategy very important for developing writing skills. I always try to use brainstorming questions about essays which students are asked to memorize. I write the topic on board and invite students' ideas. In this way ideas are gathered.

One teacher responded differently....

... I want to use this strategy but classroom routine is only focused on the plans given by our school. We strictly have to follow those plans. However, when I engage my students in writing. I ask them to brainstorm ideas before writing anything.

Organization of Ideas

Teachers of SSC declared that they use discussion and lecturing for organizing the points.

Discussion: According to all four teachers of SSC

....After gathering ideas students organize it with the help of teacher or themselves. I discuss with them which points should come in the beginning, middle and end. They also give reasons about the arrangement of all points which are already gathered by them.

Lecture: Two teachers mentioned that they use lecture method to teach organization of ideas.

.....I deliver lecture to tell them how to organize ideas. I tell them that first of all they have to write introduction, then main body and at the end conclusion.

Language Facility and Conventions

For teaching language facility and conventions, teachers of SSC prefer questioning, feedback, pair work, peer review and self-review.

Questioning: All teachers responded that they ask questions for developing language conventions. Their questions are based upon the exercises given at the end of each chapter from textbook. According to them

....I use questioning in classroom because through inquiry students are better able to understand the concepts. I take questions from exercise

of chapters. Students prepare the answers of these questions, discuss with me and in this way their writing skills are improved.

Two of the four teachers of SSC reported that ...

.....It is obvious from teachers' responses that they use only those questions which are given in textbook. They do not ask questions that are not asked in textbook.

Feedback: All teachers showed their concern for using feedback for development of writing skills in students of SSC.

....I give five comments on students' work because without giving feedback students are unaware of their mistakes and they make same mistakes again. I give both oral and written feedback but mostly I prefer oral feedback because it saves time. I also correct their errors through written feedback on their notebooks and through tests but it cannot be done on regular basis.

It is clear from teachers' responses that they use oral feedback in their classes.

Pair Work: Teachers were asked how frequently they involve their students to work in pairs and what its importance is. Three teachers reinforced that pair work is effective strategy.

...I use pair work in doing exercise of chapter because when students work with their peers it increases their motivation and they are better able to understand difficult concepts. Therefore, I give opportunity to my students once a week to learn through this strategy. Whenever i do not find enough time to guide students individually I ask them to work in pairs.

Remaining two teachers also use pair work but the justification for the use of pair work is different.

.....I prefer pair work due to its significance. Research shows that students' learning is significantly better as compared to those who have not been provided opportunity to work together. I try to use this strategy twice in a week. Similarly, students find more time to speak than teacher. Therefore, they are active learners in classroom as opposed to traditional teaching.

Teachers' responses revealed that they give importance to pair work and all are using to some extent. They communicated logically why they prefer pair work.

Peer Review

Two teachers have the view that through pair work students' learning can be enhanced.

....Due to shortage of time I ask students to check each other's work. They feel comfortable when they are assessed by their peers and it also saves time. I ask students about the errors which they have made and make corrections.

Self-Review

All the teachers involve their students in self-evaluation of their work.

....Sometimes I use strategy of self-evaluation. When students evaluate their own work it enhances their confidence. They come to know their error as well as it develops curiosity how to correct those errors. It also helps the teacher to manage time.

Teaching Grammar through Lecture

Although students know about grammatical rules and tenses but because of examination pattern, teachers teach it.

...we teach grammar to students because it is requirement of board paper pattern. Students know the grammatical rules, therefore, only revision is done in classrooms. Students also know the importance of it because assessment of grammatical principles is compulsory part of paper.

Problems and Prospects

In terms of problems and prospects teachers were asked about the strategies they want to use and the challenges faced by them.

Shortage of Time: Teachers' comments show that they face various challenges in teaching. All the teachers explained about shortage of time. For example, one teacher said:

....There are various strategies to improve students' writing. For example, extensive reading, brainstorming, presentation, and projects but time does not allow us to use these strategies.

Examination Pattern: Board's examination pattern is not favorable for using student centered strategies because students writing is assessed on the basis of memorization. Likewise, classroom routine does not allow us to engage students in practicing writing. We have much more than doing this.

Use of Resources

All the teachers reported that they use textbook for teaching writing. The reason for using textbook was stated as:

....We are bound to use textbook and we have to complete it. Once it is completed then we revise it. Students memorize the questions from textbook that are going to be asked in examination. The reason is that examination is entirely based upon textbook.

Teachers communicated that students prepare the questions given in textbook and we do not want to go beyond it.

Quantitative Data: Test data

English writing test was administered to students of SSC to measure their writing skills. The purpose of test was to measure narrative writing skills of students. There was one essay type question of 30 marks to measure narrative writing skill. Following results describe the overall writing means score of students on narrative writing skill.

Overall English Writing Skills of Students

Table 1 shows the overall writing skills of students of SSC on narrative writing.

Table 1

Overall writing mean scores of students

Grade level	(N= 65) Mean	SD
SSC	16.42	4.38

With respect to students' achievement in English writing skills Table 1 shows that overall mean score of students on English writing test is 16.42 with a standard deviation of 4.38. Mean score shows that students' scores are not good enough in English writing test. They have just *adequate* skill having (marks 16-20) as mentioned in criteria given in rubrics to perform the task.

Narrative Writing Skills of Students with Reference to Three Aspects

Along with measuring the overall writing skills of students, three aspects of writing skills have been assessed under narrative writing. Each aspect of English writing skill i.e. generation of ideas, organizing ideas and language facility and conventions were assigned 10 marks as per criteria given in rubrics.

Assessment of Students on Three Aspects of English Writing

Students of SSC were assessed on three aspects of narrative writing i.e. generation of ideas, organization of ideas and language facility and conventions.

Table 2

Scores of students on three aspects of narrative writing

Aspects of writing	(N=65) Mean	St. dev
Generation of ideas	5.01	1.60
Organizing ideas	5.16	1.72
Language facility and conventions	5.87	1.68

Table 2 reveals that students of SSC are comparatively better on language facility and conventions ($\bar{x}$ =5.87; SD=1.68) as compared to other two aspects such as developing and organizing ideas ($\bar{x}$ =5.01, SD=1.60; $\bar{x}$ =5.16, SD=1.72 respectively).

Discussion

Having described results of quantitative and qualitative data I will discuss major findings of this research. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze achievement of students on various aspects of English writing test and strategies of teaching used by teachers. The paper in hand draws attention that writing skills of students of SSC are not much developed as desired. This finding is consistent with Naeem (2011) and Mirza, Nosheen & Mahmood (1999) and Fatima, Q., Qureshi, A. M., & Tatlah, I. A. (2021). They discussed that students of SSC have weak English writing skills. The most likely explanation of this result is the use of teaching strategies.

Findings of the study showed that teachers of SSC use lecture, questioning, feedback, self-review and pair work. Research shows that lecture is widely used resource at SSC level and it is used with students of low proficiency in English language classrooms. Not surprisingly, this method is not suitable for students who are proficient in English but is used with students who have low skills. Students of private schools are good in English because of their syllabus of early grades which was meeting international standards. It is worth mentioning that they consider lecturing as translation of each chapter and after that exercise of chapter given at the end of each chapter. Lecture is not used to make them understand the whole process of teaching writing.

Teachers of SSC also reported that they use questioning but their responses showed that the questions they ask are directly taken from

textbook. If only that questions are asked which are given in textbook they do not develop criticality and creativity. There is no high level of questioning in classroom to make students learn. All the questions are taken from textbook. Although textbook contain high level questioning but that questions are skipped by teacher. Previous research highlighted that if higher order questions are used in classroom it increases students' motivation to learn and their learning is much better as compared to those students that are being taught by surface questions (Nausheen, 2016).

Pair work is an effective strategy that is being used at SSC level. Research shows that if students are allowed to work in pairs or groups they perform better. Students are motivated to help each other through this strategy. They receive feedback from their peers. This finding is consonant with Elftorp (2007). Although teachers use pair work but class time does not allow them to approach each pair and discuss the questions that they want to ask from teachers. A possible interpretation is that teachers of SSC use this strategy due to large class size. Instead of giving written feedback on students' notebooks teachers find this strategy better due to shortage of time. While doing pair work students are also asked to check each other's work through peer assessment. Through this strategy they learn from each other's mistakes. Teachers' comments clarified that they know the importance of student centered teaching strategies but the system of examination is based on memorization therefore student centered strategies are irrelevant, consistent with Khan (2013). Due to this reason they cannot give projects or other assignments in which that writing is involved that is beyond the familiar context. Likewise, they clarified that they are in favor of extensive reading but they do not ask students to bring newspapers or other unseen material to learn various aspects of writing because students feel that such type of tasks are not relevant.

With regard to the use of resources, results highlighted that highly used resource in classroom is textbook. This finding is in consonance with Bibi (2002) who found that teachers of SSC rely on textbook that is actually application of grammar translation method in classroom which teachers use for their facilitation. Although teaching activities are mentioned in textbook but both teachers and students consider it useless according to examination point of view. Although students of private schools have better communication skills due to the syllabus of schools that is meeting international standards. They are generally good in English but when they reach at SSC, teachers have to follow the syllabus prescribed by Punjab Textbook Board.

Although curriculum has been improved and students are studying revised books but teachers stick to old pattern of teaching. Therefore, students' performance is not much improved.

Conclusions and Suggestions

Teaching strategies have great influence on students' achievement in English writing. English is not first language of students and they have to prepare students according to examination point of view, therefore, they are bound to use teacher centered teaching strategies. Although they know the importance of student centered teaching strategies but do not use it frequently. So, there is a need to revise the paper pattern which invite cramming and rote memorization. If paper pattern is based on unseen question, then teachers will definitely use student centered teaching strategies. Likewise, use of textbook in classroom is the guarantee of students' success in examination. If reference books are recommended. then teacher would be able to teach the concepts that are beyond the familiar contexts. It is worth mentioning that there is lack of coordination between curriculum objective and classroom objectives. Such alignment may be possible if classroom teaching is based upon extensive reading strategies.

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