

Students' Reluctance to Participate in Writing Tasks: Challenges and Ways out

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ABSTRACT

Writing is a secondary skill as it requires a lot of training and practice to acquire. It is also important for language students in grades eleven and twelve in Nepal as it is the only means of evaluating students' levels of skills and knowledge of the language. This article is based on the first phase of an exploratory action research project. I discovered that students who were hesitant to engage in writing tasks and attempted to discover why they were hesitant despite the importance of writing tasks in passing board exams. Analysis of students' writings, classroom discussion, focus group discussion, and self-reflection were used to collect the data. After the analysis and interpretation of the data, it was found that students' lack vocabulary and limited understanding of writing mechanics and organization of ideas in coherent manner discouraged them from being involved in writing tasks in the classroom. Moreover, they were not taught writing systematically and both teacher and students spent less time in the class developing students' writing skills.

Keywords: writing, mechanics, grammar, vocabulary

Writing Skills

There are four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Among them, writing is considered a secondary skill, as it needs systematic guidance and support for its development. Gaith (2002) mentioned that writing is a complex process that allows a writer to explore thoughts and ideas and make them visible and concrete on a piece of paper. There are two approaches to developing students' writing skills. They are process and product approaches. In the process method, students go through various processes such as planning, drafting, reviewing, editing, and developing their final work, which makes students aware of developing writing skills (Harmer, 2004). However, in the product approach, teachers simply ask students to write a paragraph or an essay on a given topic, where they do not follow various processes but begin writing at once, which could be highly beneficial for some students. Therefore, we need to concentrate on the process of writing too (Harmer, 2004, p. 11).

Good writing skill involves the knowledge of various things, such as grammar, vocabulary, genre, audience, and purpose. First, the writers have to be clear on their purpose of writing, such as describing, persuading, or narrating. Then, they have to keep the audience in mind that is going to read their writings. And then they should know the vocabulary needed to write on a topic. If they lack appropriate vocabulary, they have to do research for the same. Similarly, genre is important. Without looking at examples of different types of writing, they do not know how they are constructed, and without becoming used to drafting and re-drafting, students are unlikely to become effective writers (Harmer, 2004).

Writing may not be easy-going for everyone as it requires much contemplation. They have to think about several different things and do a lot of careful back and forth thinking when they write.

It is necessary to ask students to think carefully about what they are writing, and then think about evaluating what they have written. If, over a period of time, these activities are incorporated in a program that also includes sentence and paragraph writing and 'habit-building' writing, there is a good chance that students will emerge as competent writers. (Harmer, 2004, p. 86)

It means that students need to be attentive while writing. Also, it is necessary to teach them the writing process explicitly and provide them with ample opportunities to practice their writing skills. As Nunan (1989) said, writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to demonstrate control of various mechanics altogether. Spelling, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, content, as well as ideas need to be put into coherent and cohesive paragraphs. According to Harmer (2008), it is necessary to involve students in the process of writing. It typically involves planning what we are going to write, drafting it, reviewing and editing what we have written, and then producing the final version. He further writes that many people think that writing is a linear process, but in reality it is more of a kind of chaotic order like planning, drafting, re-planning, editing, and re-planning. Once we make students familiar with the process, they develop the habit of thinking and rethinking about what they are writing, which to some extent reduces the chances of making mistakes in their writing. By doing so, we will assist them in becoming better writers, both in exams and in their post-class English lives (Harmer, 2008, p. 113).

Purpose of the Research Study

The main purpose of the first phase of the exploratory action research was to shed light on the reasons for students' reluctance to be involved in writing tasks.

Literature Review

I attempted to review research articles that were available on topics like *students' reluctance to writing tasks, ways of developing students' writing skills, and ways of teaching writing skills in the classroom*. Gardner (2013) published an article based on his research in the UK age group between 6–9 on teachers called "reluctant writers" and found that they were reluctant because they were confused because of the lack of knowledge of what to write. Similarly, Adhikari (2019) carried out an exploratory action research on the topic, "My students do not appear to be interested in writing, and they have difficulties in writing with grade eight students," and concluded that the students were found to be interested in writing but they had difficulties in writing because they did not have adequate vocabulary power to write. It shows that a teacher has to consider their level of vocabulary and content knowledge on the topic before giving them writing work otherwise they might not be able to write, be frustrated and develop negative attitudes toward writing tasks.

Acharya's (2010 as cited in Sapkota) research on "activities used in teaching essays" found that the teachers were not comfortable with teaching essays because of the poor linguistic background of their students. Similarly, Sapkota (2012) carried out an action research study in B. Ed level students in Lalitpur on developing students' writing through peer and teacher correction, concluded that it is necessary to focus on writing in the class along with other skills as a form of action research.

Diliduzgun (2013) carried out a quasi-experimental design on the effect of process writing activities on the writing skills of perspective Tuskish teachers and found that the effect of process writing activities on developing writing skills was significant. Similarly, Raimes (1991) noted that the product-oriented approach was the dominant approach up to the mid-70s, when the focus shifted to the writer and the content of writing, and thus to a more process-oriented writing pedagogy.

This literature review shows that both product-oriented and process-oriented writing pedagogies are important for helping students advance their writing skills. Before engaging students in writing tasks, teachers need to make sure that students have got the necessary vocabulary and content knowledge, which encourages students to engage in writing tasks.

Methodology

An exploratory action research explores teachers' problems or issues that are existed in their classrooms or outside and solves them. It further helps teachers find the problems and come up with solutions. Therefore, it is a way of empowering teachers in their professional life. Exploratory action research is different from action research because

it has visible two different parts. First teachers explore the real causes of the problems and then they will intervene to minimize the problems.

Exploratory action research is a way to explore, understand, and improve practices. It means teachers explore their situations to find out and understand genuine problems or issues and solve or improve them through the intervention. In exploratory action research, teachers become aware of their problems, difficulties, or challenges in the classroom. First, they verify whether the problem is a real problem. They collect data to establish the problem and explore the issue further, which they later gets evidence to go to the second phase in which they design or develop intervention plans to address the issues or problems.

Teachers could interview students, colleagues, or reflect on themselves about their teaching process in the classroom. It means they attempt to find the root causes of problems. After exploring the issue, they make decisions on ways of improving or solving the problems, which could lead to improving the students' achievement or solving the problem. They read available literature and talk to their colleagues regarding the steps taken to solve the difficulties in the classroom. They make changes in the teaching and learning process and collect the information using various tools suitable, and then analyze and interpret the data to verify where it has brought expected outcomes. They later decide whether to continue the new practice or to go again the same process for improvement.

I teach compulsory English to the students who come from government-aided schools. During my teaching I have noticed that they are basically poor in English. Writing skills are important to pass the board examinations as the examination system does not test their oral proficiency. The national results of grade eleven are also poor because of the poor results of the English subject. If their writing skills are boosted, the pass percentage also increases, which obviously leads to an increased overall result in grade eleven. The first stage of this exploratory action research is to explore the problem. It means to find out the real problem of the students or teacher on an issue. To find out the real problem, I reflected on my teaching in classes. I organized a focus group discussion with my colleagues regarding time spent in classes to develop students' writing skills. There are eight teachers including myself teaching English at different levels of the participating. As we sometimes observe each other's classes, the discussion gave me more ideas on the students' level of English as well as the way we teach writing skills in the classroom.

Then, I asked students to write a paragraph and an essay on various topics: "write a paragraph describing your room," and "make sentences from jumbled words." As the students are familiar with the topic and could write easily. And the next day, I organized an informal whole-class discussion to get their ideas and views on writing skills. I

asked them the following questions: Do you like to write in English? How were writing skills taught to you? Do you think writing skills are important in passing exams? The discussion lasted for about 40 minutes. Discussion was written in the notebook in points.

Results and Discussion

I asked colleagues to read the writings developed based on the focus group discussion for the verification of their ideas, and then I analyzed students' writing to find out the discrepancy between informal discussions and their real writing tasks. Similarly, I read the data time and again before developing it into various themes.

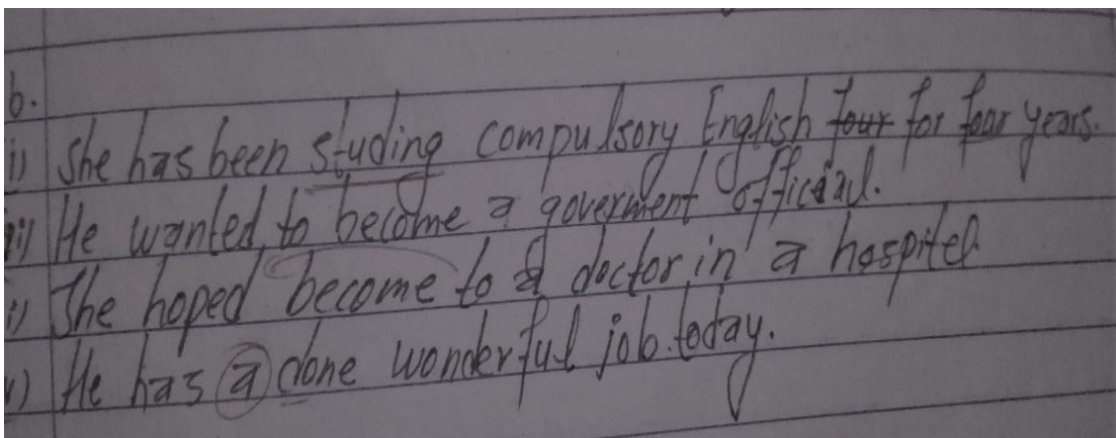
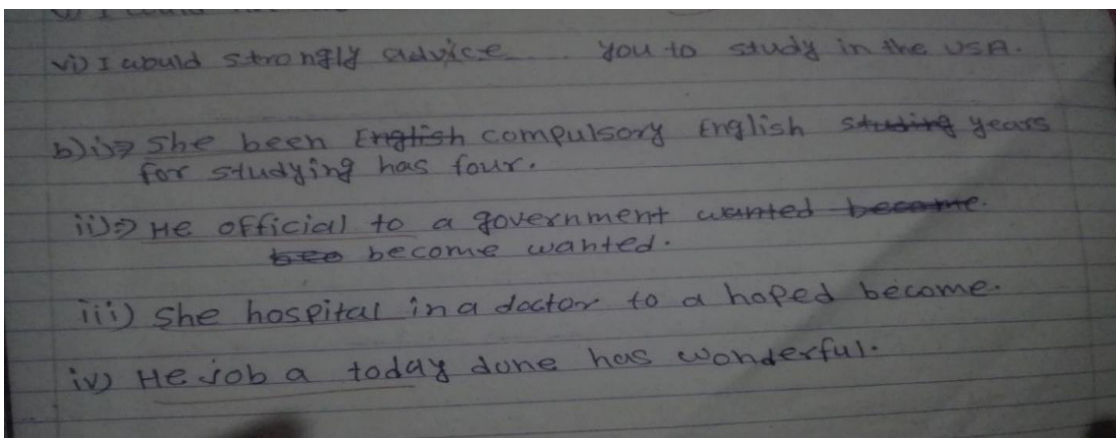
Teaching Writing Skills

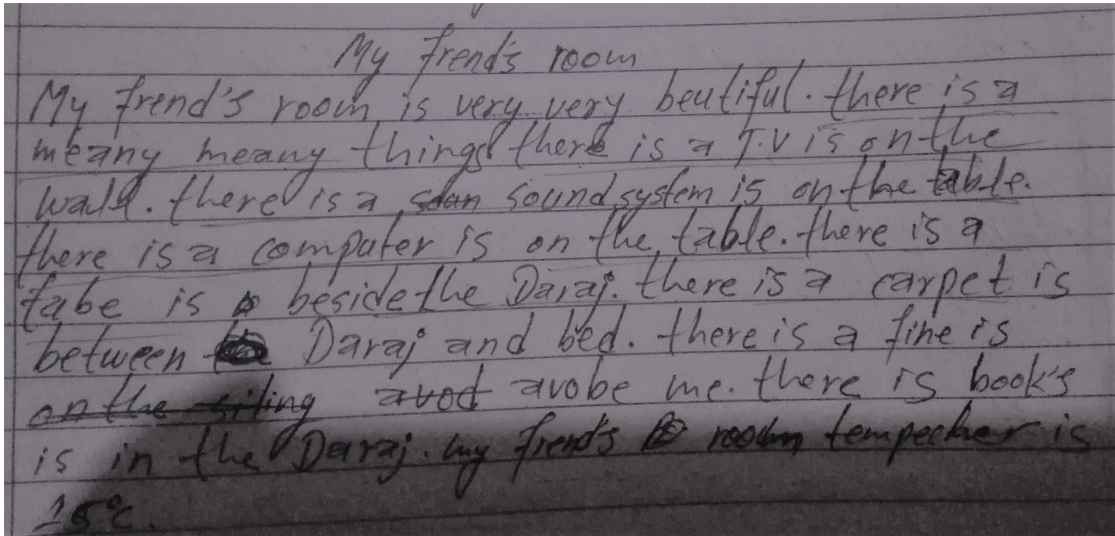
A writing skill is a secondary skill as it needs to be taught systematically. It means, without proper teaching and encouragement, students feel difficulty in developing writing skills. It is the confluence of ideas, vocabulary, and grammar that kills putting them together by maintaining coherence and cohesion. Students need to know how to put ideas onto pieces of paper. There are two different approaches to teaching students writing skills: product and process.

My own reflection shows that there seems to be carelessness on the part of both teachers and students in developing writing skills. It means we don't focus on developing students' writing skills systematically. In other words, we spend less time in classes developing students' writing skills. The students are simply given topics to write a paragraph or an essay at home. A similar finding was made by Shapkota (2012), as he concludes, "Teachers assign writing as homework, giving it less preference, but the examination is highly based on testing writing proficiency." Sometimes teachers write or give students ready-made essays and ask them to learn. It shows that a product-oriented approach has been followed for teaching writing skills. Raimes (1991) noted that the product-oriented approach was the dominant approach up to the mid-70s, when the focus shifted to the writer and the contest of writing, and thus to a more process-oriented writing pedagogy. Reading different literature shows that the latter trend also coincided with greater emphasis on language as communication, focusing teachers' attention away from as prescribed by controlled-traditional rhetoric towards collaboration between teacher and student, and among students themselves (Jozsef, 2001). Similarly, Caudrey (1996) conducted an electronic mail survey and found that many came to adopt an approach that combines the two elements-one that stresses that "the writing process is a means to an end." It seems that we are still following the traditional way of teaching writing skills, which alone is not sufficient to help students advance their writing skills.

I had a focus group discussion with colleagues on developing students' writing skills, and we unanimously agreed that we really did not pay much attention to developing

students' writing skills systematically. They further said that they did not spend much time systematically developing students' writing skills. One of the colleagues said that he spent a lot of time lecturing on the chapter. Another colleague said "If I speak frankly, I hardly remember spending much time on developing students' writing skills systematically." Then I asked him what he meant by "systematically." He continued that he either told students to write at home or asked them to write simply in class, but he rarely checked it and gave feedback for improvement. Similarly, another colleague said that it was really hard to teach students writing skills as they were poor in English and could write a sentence correctly. He continued it was necessary to have an extra period in which we could deal with writing skills only. It shows that students are very poor at writing skills.





I began recording words that they wrote with incorrect spelling. And also, I went through their writing and found the following words that they do not know the spelling of. The following table 1 shows that they are poor at spelling too, which again strengthens the opinion the colleagues expressed in the focus group discussion that they needed extra classes to improve their knowledge of language to come to their level in grade eleven.

Table 1: The Words Misspelled by Students

S.N	Incorrect Spelling	Correct Spelling	S.N	Incorrect Spelling	Correct Spelling
1	Find (I am find)	Fine	17	Vaction	Vacation
2	Panling, planed, plane, pain	Planning, planned, plan	18	Comming	Coming
3	Shick	Sick	19	solder	Shoulder
4	Beautiful, beaufil, beutiful,	Beautiful	20	Aneversary	Anniversary
5	Yound	Young	21	Rember	Remember
6	Supernutral	Supernatural	22	Envieroment	Environment
7.	Charaster	Character	23	Knowaldge	Knowledge
8	Breain	Brain	24	Belive	believe
9	Recever	Repair	25	Relized	Released
10	Vachiles	Vehicles	26	Angrey	angry
11	Grageg	Garage	27	Secreatary	Secretary

12	Necessary	necessary	28	Thinks	Things
13	sussful	successful	29	Bulding	Building
14	Experinens	experiences	30	Kitchen seit	Kitchen set
15	Oposative	Opposite	31	Inserce	Insecure
16	Coluring	Colouring or coloring	32	Studing	Studying

One of our senior colleagues said that students did not show much interest and were also not motivated in developing writing skills despite it being very important for passing board examinations. Therefore, he said that it was necessary to motivate the students by telling them the benefits of developing writing skills.

There are two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. As Harmer (2008) mentioned, intrinsic motivation is more important than extrinsic motivation. He further writes that intrinsic motivation is generated by activities organized in the classroom and also relationships between teachers and students. This type of motivation is important for its sustainability. The literature shows that we, as teachers, need to focus much more on designing activities or tasks that motivate students to engage in tasks that promote writing skills. Instruction of writing concepts must be explicit, hands-on, engaging, and interesting for the students to increase motivation and scores (Cooper, 2014). Interesting and engaging tasks need to be designed to motivate students' writing skills.

In short, a teacher has to teach writing skills systematically by making students understand the importance of developing writing skills. They have to design activities that are interesting and engaging for the students. Moreover, they should get ample opportunities to practice their writing skills in the class. Classroom pedagogy should be a balance of product and process approaches that address all kinds of learners in the classroom.

Challenges for Students in Writing Skills

I asked students to write a paragraph on various topics, such as "My Best Friend," "Describe Your Room," and "My Place." Many students were reluctant to commence writing. Out of 50 students, only 5 wrote on the topic without hesitating. But the rest of them could hardly write a paragraph. I collected their writings and left the class. The next day, I asked them why they hesitated to write on the given topics. I organized a whole class discussion on the topic.

Through the whole class discussion, I found various reasons for not writing: They were not confident in writing because they thought that they would make grammatical mistakes. They feared not being able to write with correct spelling. Similarly, they

thought that their friends might laugh at their writing in the class if their writing was read aloud. They also said that they lacked words to describe a person or place. It shows that because of a lack of vocabulary, writing mechanics and organizing ideas into different paragraphs they could not engage in writing tasks.

I asked them how they were taught to develop their writing skills. Many students said that they spent a lot of time on reading based writing activities. One student says, "We used to read a passage or lesson and write the questions' answers." They further said that they used to be given different topics to write essays on as homework. Sapkota (2012) also concluded that teachers assigned writing as homework, giving it less preference. Similarly, all students agreed that they used to copy essays on various topics from the teachers and learn them by heart. The discussion shows that teachers did not give much importance to developing students' writing skills in the classroom. Furthermore, a product approach was followed in the classroom while dealing with writing skills, which alone is not sufficient or enough for developing writing skills.

The same thing was reflected while they were given writing tasks. Many students did not write, but some students wrote paragraphs without taking much time. It means that they did not spend time for planning, brainstorming, or writing some points or words before starting their writing. It shows that they were not familiar with the process approach of developing writing skills.

I read their written work and found several errors and mistakes in their writing such as:

- Best friend are the friends who is helpful to his own friend for the life.
- In this words every body have best friend.
- She is help me every sectors.
- She is study good.
- He is study is brilliant.
- His speaking skill most best of our school.
- Peoples lives there.
- She live in Nayabato.
- She my best friend from class seven.
- I like Godawari a lot As it is a botanical garden.
- There are many places with beautiful sineary.
- My best friend name is dipesha Khadka.
- His handwriting is so Brillent.
- He has very skill.
- She helps me in very problem.

my room.

A story my Room. I from walesher. Bulth. my Room is very beautiful. There is under the table a football. There are. swite. Table rose. my Room is two bed room. There are one. is ^{one} one kitchen my room is between two windows. There is sleeping but high one ~~to~~ bute bute. There is wof inside buck. There are. Right windows. Look in the sky.

12. About my friend room

All men have his friend. I have also a friend. his name is santosh khatri. he is a good and helpful boy. Santosh is. He live in next to my home. he has a different room. for study. there is a so many things inside the room. His room is very beautiful. there is a sofa under the ceiling of his room there is a study table on the floor. There is a fan above this had now there is a door beside the window. there is a also so many book. in the bookes. there is a beautiful flower behind the table. there is a bag outside the his school uniform. my friends room is very safe and very comfortable.

My room

My room is very beautiful. There was my room is well managed. There are the thing on the own place. It consists of this. sleeping. dining table. There is cupboard have. seeing he was restless. Then he started banging. the pots and boxes with my room corner near kitchenette. It each corner near kitchenette. It has well water connected with well too. It consist of. Aggs with many other things.

These writings show that students do not have the broad vocabulary power to describe the room. He has written the sentence (there is under the table Foodbull), which shows his lack of knowledge of word order and the spelling of words in the English language.

I reflected on the time spent during class developing writing skills. I found that much less time was spent in the class helping students improve their writing skills. I generally taught various chapters by explaining, describing, and giving them a summary. I sometimes asked them to write essays or paragraphs on their own and rarely checked them properly to give feedback that could help them improve their writing skills. I also had an informal discussion on time spent developing students' writing skills and came to the conclusion that much less time was spent on advancing students' writing skills and also increasing students' vocabs.

Conclusion

After the analysis and interpretation of the data, and discussion, I have drawn the following conclusions: First, the students are interested in developing writing skills; they even lacked basic vocabulary and mechanics of writing. Producing a coherent discourse was far beyond their ability. Second, less time was spent in the classroom developing their writing skills, and it is important to use both product and process approaches in the class in a balanced way that could help them develop their writing skills. Third, they need to spend more time developing their vocabulary power and writing mechanics under the guidance of a more knowledgeable person, who can help them, keep on track in their endeavor.

Once they develop their vocabulary, writing mechanics, and ideas they develop confidence and don't hesitate to engage in writing tasks. While teaching them, teachers need to follow a process approach that could help them generate ideas, learn related words, develop a first draft and edit it before developing its final version. This research confirms the finding of the previous research studies (Raimes, 1991; Caudrey 1996; Adhikari 2019) which revealed that teachers did not spend much time in developing writing skill rather they simply gave writings as homework.

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