

Grade 12 Students' Leaving Essay Questions Unsolved in the Exam: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the issue of grade 12 students' leaving essay type questions unsolved in the examinations. The main objective of this paper is to explore the causes of leaving essay type questions unsolved and to explore the effective ways of solving the issue. As my study is guided by interpretive paradigm, it demands qualitative research design to explore the multiple realities through the methods of questionnaire and in-depth interview. One of the exam centers of Bajhang district was selected as research site. In this study, 10 students, from different schools attending their final exam at a school, were selected as sample by using purposive sampling strategy. They were assigned questionnaire to fill up and one secondary level English teacher was interviewed on the issues raised in the study. Teachers' negligence in teaching composition, lack of sufficient time for teaching, lack of practice in classroom, and students' poor performance in writing from the very beginning are found as the main causes. The findings show that overall scenario of teaching composition in school level is not encouraging.

Keywords: interpretive paradigm, composition, examination, writing skill, cooperative learning

Introduction

English has been made compulsory subject from class one to bachelor level in Nepal and it is taught as a foreign language. There is the provision of compulsory subject as well as major English in school and college level curriculum. Most of the teachers, who are teaching at schools and campuses, are trained in ELT. The teachers, who are not trained, have access to in-service training too. Furthermore, curriculum is designed on the basis of communicative approach. I have also been teaching in school level as well as college level students for 16 years. But, to my knowledge, as I myself a teacher, my students as well as other students from other schools, have poor performance in composition writing, especially in English essays. Many of them are found leaving essays unsolved in the exam. Basically, in community run schools, the performance of students in writing

essays is not satisfactory and they fear when they are assigned writing English compositions. Developing effective essay writing has become a challenging task for the English teachers too, however, they teach all the four skills to their students for the whole year in each grade and levels, but the students' writing performance in terms of composition especially in essay is very poor. Ahmed (2010) says that a growing challenge in education is to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for student- teachers of English to effectively write essays in English. It is necessary to know the reality where there are loopholes in teachers' teaching strategies and in learners' learning styles.

Adas and Bakir (2013) view that unless the teacher is able to create an interest in the minds of the learners, he cannot expect the desired results. This shows that it is must to develop writing skill. However, the most of the students from government schools are still found composition type questions leaving unsolved at home as homework and in their answer sheets in the exam. Only a few students try to solve, but their answers are not satisfactory. Since, writing is one of the most important skill out of four skills to be developed in learners as Nziramasanga Commission of 1999 mentions in its findings that failure to comprehend English essay writing techniques is a part of reason to the high failure rate in most subjects. From beginning classes to upper classes, the students' writing is not satisfactory. This has created problem in upper level classes too. Composition writing is for creativity.

Ferris(1998) defines the composition as "composition is a means of communication between the writer and the audience on paper. One of the distinctive types of communication by means of written words is called composition. It is a piece of writing made up of one or more paragraphs. It has a theme that can be broken into a number of topics. Each topic in a composition has its own paragraph (p.12). Kareem (2015, as cited in Ariyanti, 2017) mentions that to write a good English composition seems never very easy. It requires an ability of assessing a good grammar, imagination and thought, exploring major and supporting ideas, putting them together revising then final editing.

It is also clear that writing needs huge efforts as well as practicing it in terms of paragraph organization, language use, and mechanics. The reason is that those three aspects are potential in influencing the writing performance such as content and vocabulary including elements of how to formulate ideas, develop and analyze them before displaying the essay writing as a final product. Though, writing is complex activity but it is too important skill as other skills.

In this scenario, this paper tries to explore the challenges as well as causes of difficulties and explore the ways of improving composition especially essay writing considering the following objectives:

1. To explore the grade 12 students' causes of leaving essay type questions unsolved in the classroom and in the exam.
2. To explore the strategies in order to assist the students in writing good essays in the context of Nepal.

Review of Related Literature

Many researchers have conducted a research in different aspects of language teaching like effective grammar teaching methods, reading materials, vocabulary learning strategies, role and status of English, journal writing and its effectiveness, paragraph writing and teaching paragraph, but not a single study has been conducted in terms of avoidance of essays by 12 grade students in the exam. To link and make this study systematic with the existing knowledge the researcher has gone through the following research works conducted by the different scholars.

Trang and Hoa (2008) conducted research on "Students writing process, perceptions, problems, and strategies in writing academic essays in second language: a case study" and found that the subject did not pay much attention to grammatical errors or spelling mistakes and he met many problems and used a lot of strategies to solve them.

Adas and Bakir (2013) conducted a case study on the topic "Writing Difficulties and New Solutions: Blended learning as an Approach to Improve Writing Abilities" and the findings show that blended learning was effective in improving students' writing abilities in general; students' motivation to learn increases when they are given the same material in different ways using technology and simulation and constant exposure to the material solves many problems.

Similarly, Ariyanti (2017) conducted a research on "EFL Students' Difficulties and Needs in Essay Writing" and the findings showed that students have major difficulties in grammatical, cohesion and coherence terms. Moreover, minor aspects also had been revealed regarding to students' writing, namely paragraph organization, dictation and vocabulary misspelling."

Mohite (2014) in his study on the topic “An investigation into the English language writing strategies used by Polish EFL secondary school learners” concluded that the students lacked the understanding of the compositional aspect of the English writing and they did not view their English written text as a means of communication.”

Alfaki (2015) conducted a research on “University Students’ English Writing Problems: Diagnosis and Remedy” and found that university students have various writing problems including: language problems at the level of morphology and syntax; usage errors, and mechanical mistakes, that is, spelling, punctuation and capitalization, lack of several writing skill development skills, cognitive problems and graphomotor problems.

Oyedele and Chikwature (2016) in their study on “English Composition writing Skills at Ordinary Level and its Effect on Students’ Performance in Three Day Secondary Schools in Mutare district, Manikaland” found that English language students have a myriad of writing skills difficulties in composition writing. These include mother tongue interference, inconsistent use of mother tenses, spellings amongst other various challenges. Teaching methods used by teachers were also another contributory factor.”

In the same way, Jimenez et al. (2013) in their analysis of the writing skill difficulties of the English composition” noted that students generally come to English composition without any idea about organizing their ideas, even in their mother tongue.”

Joyace (2016) conducted a research on “L₂ vocabulary learning and testing: student proficiency and the use of L₁ translations versus L₂ definitions” and the findings showed that the low proficiency group learnt significantly more vocabulary than the high proficiency group.

In the study of Tamang (2017) on paragraph writing: A Process Based Model”, the researcher found that writing a paragraph can be a joyful task if it follows a process based model.

Bajgain (2019) in his action research on teaching paragraph writing” found that writing a paragraph in a given topic is the easiest when picture with clues are given. Average score of writing paragraph with the clues along with picture is more fruitful than providing picture only. Attempts of teacher with positive attitudes help learn target language effectively.

From the above review, it has become clear that there is rich literature in terms of English writing challenges in the different contexts of the world. Still, there is need to explore the challenges faced by Nepalese students in writing English composition which are not explored yet. Considering this fact, I envisaged to explore the challenges in writing and to suggest some suggestions to stakeholders.

Research Questions

Most of the studies that are mentioned in the review section were conducted in foreign context. My study focuses on writing composition in the context of Nepal. This research will be a building block for further studies in the field of writing composition and it will give insights to the teachers on difficulties faced by the learners in writing composition especially essays in the context of Nepal. The following questions were addressed in the study:

1. What are causes of students' leaving essay type questions unsolved in the classroom and in the examination?
2. What could be the ways or strategies to improve their essay writing?

Research Methodology

Research Paradigm

This study is guided by interpretive paradigm which believes in multiple realities. It claims that individuals are complex to understand and different people experience and understand the same objective reality in different ways. The sources of my knowledge were the shared information from teachers and students. Furthermore, I constructed my knowledge through my lived experiences and through my interactions with students as well as teachers. I, myself, participated in the research process with my study participants to ensure that the knowledge I possessed would be reflective of participants' reality. Thus, the philosophical belief in my epistemology is that people construct their own understanding of reality; they construct meaning based on his or her interaction with surrounding. I collaborated and spent more time in the field with participants as an insider and I was closer in research part. I openly discussed values that shape the exploration of my study and I included the interpretation part with the interpretation of participants that was the axiology of my study.

Research Design

This study is based on the qualitative research under which I selected

phenomenology research design. Creswell (2007) states that the type of problem best suited for phenomenology research design is one which it is important to understand several individual's common or shared experiences of phenomenon. It would be important to understand these common experiences in order to develop practices or policies, or to develop a deeper understanding about the features of the phenomenon (p.60).

Area of the Study

To explore the grade 12 students' writing difficulties and failure in composition writing especially essay writing as well as to explore the strategies in order to assist the students in writing good essays in the context of Nepalese classroom situation, the examination center, Bhairab Secondary school, Jhota, Bajhang was selected as a research site. Samples were selected by using purposive sampling strategy. Ten students and one secondary level English teacher were selected as participants for the study.

Tools for Data Collection

To achieve the objectives of my study, I applied the following multiple data collection methods and tools as phenomenology research design demands.

In-depth interview. In-depth interview was conducted to investigate the teacher's perceptions regarding the challenging they face when teaching the students the essay writing.

Documents analysis. Students' composition exercise books and teachers' progress mark of records were used for document analysis.

Participant observation. Behaviors of learners and teachers as well as events that were related to the problem and situation were noted down in the observation and further they were analyzed. The researcher could gain close and intimate familiarity with given individuals and group and could make observation as well as make notes of observed phenomenon.

Open-ended Questionnaire

The researcher distributed the open ended questionnaire in order to have factual data regarding with students' difficulties in learning essay writing as well as to explore what they really want and need to improve their ability in essay writing.

Results

Finally the data collected from different tools was analyzed in the spirit of the phenomenological analysis. As per the ideas of Creswell (2007) that building on the data from the first and second research questions, data analysis go through the data (e.g., interview transcriptions) and highlight “significant statements,” sentences, quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon, In this study too, I used significant statements and themes to write a description of what the participants experienced (textual description). Then, I put together or rearranged the data obtained from the tools under the found themes, so that there was no bit of data be left out. As discussed above, the objective of this study was to explore cause of students’ leaving composition question unsolved and explore the ways of improving the situation of students’ composition writing. From the analysis of the data, the following findings have been derived:

- Only one student was found to solve all the questions including essay question in the exam, there were 11 questions in total in the question paper.
- All the informants found essay question difficult to solve.
- Five informants out of 10 said that they did not write anything at all about essay question because the teacher hadn’t taught such questions.
- Seven informants out of ten said that essay questions are really difficult.
- Teachers were occasionally found teaching essays.
- They were found practicing composition type questions only when teachers assigned them essays for homework and class work.
- Some of the teachers were found assigning essays as homework but they rarely check their homework.
- Students were not informed about process and types of essay writing in class by the teacher.
- Teachers sometimes observed their students to read essay books but not get them write similar essays.
- Informants were found in agreement for the exclusion of essay type questions from their question paper.

- They viewed that essays should be avoided from exam question paper since it is long and difficult to answer.
- Both teachers and students were found responsible for difficulties in solving essay questions.
- To make essay writing practice easy and interesting, the informants agreed that there should be more practice. For this there should be daily practice in composition type questions too since they carry 30 marks.
- Teachers rarely provided composition type assignment and give them feedback.
- Writing composition is not found given priority in government run schools.
- Students fear with such composition type question, i.e. they are developing fear for these types of questions in mind.
- There is lack of time for engaging students in writing activities. Within 8 months, teachers have to complete the course. Though there are long vacations within period too.
- The cause of fear towards composition type question especially essay is teacher's negligence or careless too.
- The teachers were found to be talking about composition type questions only when the examinations are coming near.
- Sometimes, teachers themselves advised their students to leave long and difficult questions and do grammar and textual questions.
- Both the teachers and students, however, considered the essay type questions as relevant for learners' creativity.

Discussion

In this section, the information obtained from the primary sources have been analyzed and interpreted. It consists of the information gathered by the open ended questions and the interview taken from one of the English teacher of the same level. The information obtained from the grade 12 students and their teachers has been discussed with the themes below.

Dropping of Composition Type Question: The Lack of Practice

As asked to the informants about the reasons of leaving composition type question unsolved to the students of grade 12, they had varied responses. In questionnaire; they said that they didn't practice it in classroom. They said that essay writing questions made them difficult to solve in the exam. This showed that difficulty was caused by teachers' negligence. If they teach, they will solve the questions.

In the response to the question, 'What do you say to the criticism that some guardians and students say that teacher's don't teach' one of the teachers said,

"Yes, when students come out of exam hall, they say we have done all textual and grammatical questions and left composition type questions and I ask them why you left, then they say our teachers didn't teach us and we don't know the answer. Some guardians are also known to this fact." (A male teacher in in-depth interview).

Ways of Dealing with Compositions: Occasional Teaching

Some of the teachers were found talking about essay question at the end of the course. According to the information collected from questionnaire, teacher didn't teach composition type questions in the community run schools. Students were not told about types of essays and were not given models of different essays to read still in grade 12. They didn't get such opportunities in the classes. In the interview, the English teacher said :

"Yes, myself I engage them to do, but they are very busy in doing other activities. Time is not sufficient. Classes generally run from Shrawan- Bhadra in community run schools and exam is held in Chaitra. We have to do a lot of things during short period of time, so we ask them to do such questions to do at home occasionally."

Cause of Difficulty: Teachers' Negligence

The respondents' views on cause of difficulty in writing composition were created by teachers' negligence. Writing composition need for stylistic polishing. If the teachers taught them process and types with models, they could have solved questions. They didn't get chance to practice. Even teachers were found advising them to drop long and essay questions. This also indicates that teachers are also in the opinion of avoiding teaching these topics in class. If they had intension

of making their students perfect in composition type questions, they would not have advised them to avoid composition questions. As a result, the students also wouldn't have habit of dropping essays from the very beginning up to upper level classes. They would not have fear too.

Importance of Composition: Exclusion vs. Inclusion of Essay

The information provided by the students in the questionnaire showed that the essay type questions are long and hard to solve and they say that it should be replaced by short textual questions, and grammatical questions, but the teacher in the interview says that it should not be avoided since composition type questions are for students' creativity. There is need of students' in-depth knowledge to solve these questions. As an evidence, the teacher said:

"I don't agree with this. There should be focus on essay questions while teaching questions are for students' creativity. They make students creative. They must be included in course. Teachers should get their students practice in class. If you come to my school next year, I will show you what my students will do. I promise you. I will do this."

Learning Context: Private Schools vs. Community - run Schools

It is also found that students from private schools whose medium of instruction is English are found solving essays in the exam and writing essays as homework. The situation was found different in terms of private and community based schools. In this respect, the teacher reported:

"Curriculum designers have separated composition type questions for 30 marks. Now teachers should consider this reality. For example, one of the students solved all the questions easily. I asked him about his previous school education background and he informed me that he was from English medium, private school up to grade eight."

Strategy to Improve the Situation: Teacher's Time and Cooperative Learning

Due to the lack of classroom environment for practicing composition types of questions, students are found afraid of answering these questions. But, for the creativity of our students, these questions are must. For this teachers need to consider principle of cooperative learning, they should be encouraged to do writing task in groups or pairs in classroom. In this regard, a respondent who had 29 years teaching experience said:

“Well, the teachers who are the in the remote areas and community- run schools, they should work hard. They should encourage their students write essays in classroom in groups and pairs. The teacher should provide their teaching time to the students. It promotes their creativity. Up to today, I just thought just like others teachers, but from today, I will improve this situation and I will tell my colleagues and other teachers of whole Nepal to give time for composition type questions. They should be involved in group work or pair work while getting them to write essays or composition type questions.”

The above discussion implies that composition type questions are important for language learners for their further studies too, but they fear with them and similarly they are found leaving these questions unsolved because of lack of practice in classroom and lack of encouragement from teachers in the classroom.

Limitations of the Study

The study has revealed some interesting findings with regard to students’ avoiding essay type questions. However, the study had some limitations. The first limitation concerns with the number of participants or sample size. Only ten students from five schools (i.e. two students from each school) and 1 teacher were selected as sample. Thus, a small number of respondents were selected as sample size. This may limit the transferability of the results to other circumstances. Findings are not totally conclusive. For this future research in this area with a larger sample from the same or similar population is recommended to validate the results of the current study. It is conducted with limited number of respondents. Similarly limitation also concerns with the reliability of the questionnaire responses.

Conclusion

Reflecting on my journey as a teacher and interaction with teachers as well as the information collected from the questionnaires, I realized that there is lack of practice in terms of writing skill in language classroom in English subject from very beginning to higher level. It has created difficulties in our students’ writing compositions in the classroom as well as in the exam. This study also shows that there are weaknesses from teachers’ side in community-run schools. There is need of initiating and supporting action in writing activities.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, I would like to put forward some suggestions for policy maker, curriculum designers, teachers, school administration, students,

and researchers. The study has same practical implications for classroom instruction too.

While designing curriculum, teachers' voice must be heard and interest should be given in teaching learning activities of the students by the school authorities in time. While appointing teachers, energetic, experienced qualified and honest teachers should be appointed.

Teacher should take their accountability for their teaching and should think deeply about students' further studies. Government should utilize subject experts, expertise and mobilize them as well as there should be system of monitoring in schools in the presence of experts. Cooperative learning should be encouraged for developing writing skill in students.

While teaching composition type questions, the teachers should teach their students with examples. They should inform them process and types. There is the need of motivating the students in writing composition. Teaching of composition needs examples or model, process, types, while teaching. If the teachers consider these things it would be better.

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