To write or not to … The art of writing a research paper

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Writing a research paper is more of procrastination, speculation, hesitation than execution. I do not say this in any negative sense, but in reality this is what happens to all of us. We do not sit at the computer and start keying in our papers impulsively; a lot of thinking, introspection, revision, and discussion (within self or with others) has happened before something can appear on the paper.

Research by definition is *re-search*. We do not aim to find out something new, invent a new thing, but make ourselves aware of what has been around us for a long time, and giving it a reason for people to believe in. If you look at several of the concepts put forth in the field of ELT, you will become more than aware of this fact. We are reminded of what we have been doing in the class as a good method with reasons to prove that it is good. For example, we have been teaching our learners to use language by making them repeat what we have said or make alterations to come out with their own sentences. Using language as the best means to learn it was well practised before it was said in most obvious terms.

Any good research paper should begin with a commitment, a sense of faith and belief in the work we are doing. Why am I taking up this research? Is there a genuine problem? Do my friends have a similar problem? An answer to these questions leads us to think and arrive at a problem (tentative or confirmed) which can be stated crisply. The title of a research paper should not read like the title of a thesis. Here is an example: 'Teaching writing to undergraduates through communicative strategies' might be good enough for a paper, while in a thesis it would be "Developing Writing Skills among Undergraduate Students Using Communicative Strategies in the State of Jharkhand". Perhaps, the research problem in both these cases remains the same, but the scope may change.

Having arrived at the title, it is necessary to reason out what the focus of the paper is on. In this case, we may have students whose writing is weak because of weak competence in language, weak vocabulary, unorganized thought processes as manifested in disjointed sentences or any other reason. A research paper cannot focus on all these aspects. The author has to pick one of these, which appears to be most important (prioritize), and pick that up and formulate a strategy (action research) to help the learners overcome the weakness. This can be stated as a problem or a hypothesis. A hypothesis is a conditional statement that can either be proved and accepted or rejected. (Rejecting the hypothesis is not a reflection on the scholar's weakness or failure.)

The Hypothesis when stated (e.g., 'If learners

are exposed to good literary pieces, their organization skills in writing may improve.') can help the researcher plan strategies of teaching or remedying. In this case we have a hypothesis that needs to be established. The learners are undergraduate learners. Their textbooks have literary pieces. Can we analyse these pieces and look for their relevance in terms of their lexical, syntactic and conceptual load and replace them with appropriate alternatives. The paper should delineate what criteria are used in selecting these pieces and how these can be analysed for their organization.

Some graphics (e.g., flowcharts, web charts, outlines) can be used to help the learners understand the structure of a paragraph, which basically has a topic sentence (obvious or apparent) and how this is supported by other sentences. The graphics can show the linkers that bring about the unity among the sentences and how these can be made obvious to the learner. The paper should also suggest how much time is required for the teacher to teach these materials (perhaps, six to eight teaching hours) and how these can be divided rationally and what strategies of teaching are employed (e.g., analysis of the text, brain-storming, developing web-diagrams, flow charts, discussing with others, using the mother tongue as a support to understanding).

Notes on teaching in the classes followed by assignments written by the students provide the data for analysis. The data has to be presented in a proper form using tables, or using simple percentages where complex statistical analysis is not essential. Data organization in a systematic manner facilitates analysis. Analysis for a simple research paper can restrict itself to generalizing using percentages, or analysis of variance to establish significance of the experiment.

Once the analysis is over, an honest conclusion should be written suggesting to the reader why the author thinks the experiment has been either a success or a failure. Failures, let us remember, are the stepping stones to success. Let us not shy away from them.

One last word! While writing the paper, you would have relied heavily on earlier research. You would have gathered ideas from a variety of sources through your reading, discussion, etc. If you have used these ideas, remember to acknowledge them faithfully. There are accepted ways of acknowledging, and these days your computer helps you organize your bibliography properly. Beware of plagiarism. This is taken very seriously these days.

These are a few stray thoughts I have put together on how to write a research paper. The key features of the process can be listed as follows:

a. Choose a genuine problem that bothers you.

b. Crystallize it in the form of a title.

c. Define your hypothesis – research problem/questions.

d. Plan your action and describe it.

e. Produce relevant data and analyse it.

f. Give your conclusion.

g. Acknowledge the sources you have used.

Happy writing!