

Promoting Zadie Smith's Writing Rules to Encourage and Enhance Learner Autonomy among ESL Learners at the Tertiary Level

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ABSTRACT

The LSRW skills are part of the everyday classroom along with that of the 21st century. Skills like communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking and digital literacy become essential to learners globally. The aim of the paper is an attempt at the methodology of Henri Holec's Learner autonomy to make learners independent in their learning. It emphasises independent learning to build self-efficacy. The purpose of the study is to make learners independent in learning concerning the writer Zadie Smith's "Rules for writers" from The Guardian to make the learners autonomous in their writing process. This study explores the 3C's, creativity, critical thinking and collaboration to enhance the writing skills of ESL learners at the tertiary level to motivate them to become independent learners. This study also focuses on the strategies of classroom activities to enhance creative writing through critical thinking to improve learners' autonomy.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Zadie Smith, creative writing and critical thinking.

Introduction

In the English for Second Language (ESL) learners' classroom, the role of a teacher and learners' independent learning become essential. Teachers act as an instructor rather than a facilitator. Learners at the tertiary level are expected to fulfil the needs of the course and excel in independent learning. However, some students aspire and find it difficult to make their learning independently. The aim of the study focused on the methodology of Henri Holec's 'Learner Autonomy' which can be effective in making the learner autonomous in learning with some practical strategies and competencies laid down by the writer Zadie Smith. Her "Rules for writers" which is published in the magazine *The Guardian* serve as guidelines to develop learners' responsibility and to create more interest to personalize their learning skills. It is also helpful for teachers to experiment with creative activities to enhance learners' writing skills. It also makes

the teachers understand their role as facilitators rather than instructors to nurture creative writing through critical thinking among ESL learners by making them independent in learning.

This paper is an attempt from the inspiration of the British writer Zadie Smith, who is a Professor of Creative writing at New York University. She has authored five novels *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, *On Beauty*, *NW* and *Swing Time* and also published three collections of non-fiction, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, *Feel Free and Intimations*, and a collection of short stories, *Grand Union*. She is a recipient of many literary awards. Her work "Joy" from *Feel Free* motivated the researchers to explore the connection between thinking and writing. This essay focuses on the exploration of emotions and cultural aspects of the distinction between the words Joy Vs. Pleasure. When the Learners were assigned to make the distinctions between Joy and Pleasure, initially there was

some ambiguity while expressing its contextualised meaning and how the individual perceives the difference in meaning between the words. Gradually some students were able to connect to the denotated meaning of the words, but the focus was on connotative meaning to their understanding. Some were hesitant to express their thoughts and some found it difficult to answer. To make a better understanding students were asked to work on the words like Faith Vs Trust and Wish Vs Desire, this motivated everyone to get involved in the learning activity.

Writer Zadie Smith's "Rules for Writers" (Smith 2010) focused on the following habits of writing: read a lot, look at your work as a stranger, there is no writer's lifestyle in writing, don't hide your self-doubt, have time between writing and editing, avoid cliques, keep away from digital distractions, give importance to time and space all these practises emphasises on becoming independent and also stress the nuances of writing which is helpful to the budding writers and experiment in the classroom to enhance learner autonomy in writing.

Literature Review

Practitioners of ELT and teachers of various fields also experiment with learner autonomy regarding improving learners' abilities. Some studies investigated the factors of Learner autonomy in certain educational settings like English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English for Specific Purpose (ESP) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Researcher Daflizar reviewed and analysed the six approaches of Learner Autonomy by Philp Benson proving that promoting learner autonomy helped "the learners to plan and follow their language learning paths to achieve their goals. In addition, although various approaches can be used by teachers to promote learner autonomy, there seems to be no sole

approach that can be considered the most effective. It appears likely that the most effective way is by using a combination of approaches" (Daflizar 2023, p.156)

The study of Ngo Thi Thanh experimented with 'Learner Autonomy' to improve learners' listening and speaking performance outside the classroom through self-assessment and reflection activities. The outcome of the study was that "many students felt that they made progress in the target skills and they intended to continue to spend some of the strategies independently in their university study. That was certainly an encouraging outcome for the research" (Thanh 2020, p.152). An exploratory analysis was done to ensure the components of Bloom's Taxonomy in creative writing on critical thinking. "A certain amount of creativity is required to prompt critical thought. Creativity and critical thinking together are aspects of "good" and purposeful thinking. Therefore, critical thinking and creativity can be considered as two sides of the same coin." (Achilov 2017, p.22).

Reading Zadie Smith's works helps the readers to make connections between creative writing and critical thinking. Smith is a professor of creative writing, her guidelines on writing encourage teachers and learners with new insights into the process of writing, in her chapter titled "That Crafty Feeling" which appeared in her essay collection *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, she delves "each novel is its own rule book, training ground, factory and independent republic." (Smith 2008, p.1) She explores on how writers can use creative writing and imagination which has a range of purpose and also the complex and recursive process of writing. In her "Rules for Writers" She emphasised achieving autonomy in the use of language, ideas, emotions and joy of creation.

Learner Autonomy, in 1980s Prof Henri Holec, coined the phrase 'Learner Autonomy' and defined "learner's ability to take charge of his or her learning" (Henri Holec, 1981). This concept has been popular in the foreign language which transforms the old practices to meet the needs of the millennium learners. This concept has different interpretations according to the context and need. Following Holec's definition, many terms have been used to define the nature of this responsibility. Terms such as 'ability', 'capacity', 'and take responsibility' and 'take control' have been used. The term 'autonomy' has been used to refer to at least five different modes of learning. According to Benson and Voller, autonomy as follows:

1. for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
4. for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
5. for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

Prof Jack C Richards "Learner Autonomy refers to the principle that learners should take an increasing amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it" (Richard, 1996). It is very useful to the instructors to facilitate learning to the needs of the learners and also help them to achieve their autonomy.

The following are the principles of Learner Autonomy according to Prof Jack C Richards

1. Autonomy means moving the focus from teaching to learning.

2. Autonomy affords the maximum possible influence to the learners.
3. Autonomy encourages and needs peer support and cooperation.
4. Autonomy means making use of self/peer assessment.
5. Autonomy requires and ensures 100% differentiation.
6. Autonomy can only be practised with student logbooks which are documentation of learning and a tool of reflection.

Achieving Autonomy empowers the learners to learn and be independent. In an ESL classroom or any other field of the classroom, teachers face many challenges to make the learners active and attentive in the learning process, achieving autonomy among learners requires different strategies to be followed in the classroom. The instructor plays a significant role in it, to facilitate the role of teaching-learning process, innovative strategies could be designed by the instructor according to the needs of the classroom which will help to achieve desirable results. In this, the role of an instructor is transformed into a facilitator rather than instructing the learners, the teacher facilitates the learning process independently among the learners.

Furtherly, Learner Autonomy highlights that learners' achieving autonomy is not specific to knowledge but rather, an ability that allows learners to direct their learning:

According to David Little "Essentially, autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning". (Little 199, p.4)

Research Questions

The study aims to address the following research questions:

- i) How do teachers enhance learning behaviour among ESL learners to develop creative writing and critical thinking in the principle of Learner Autonomy?
- ii) In what way Zadie Smith's "Rules for Writers" can be implemented by educators to design classroom strategies that encourage and enhance the writing proficiency of ESL learners?

Research Design

The researchers experimented with this study among second-year undergraduate students for Part IV Skill Based Elective (SBE) course titled Creative Writing. There were a total of 82 students, from both classes. In the process of the Course, the researchers identified that students struggled

with their thoughts in writing and felt hesitant and they needed constant mentoring in their learning to make them independent. To solve this challenge and to improve their learning ability different classroom activities were designed to motivate the learners to take responsibility in the process of their learning. It is hoped that the designed activities explored in this study will be helpful to the instructors in enhancing writing skills among ESL learners. It was also helpful to achieve learners' self-efficacy.

Methodology and Classroom Experiments

The focus of the study was to enhance and engage the learners' creative writing through critical thinking and also to encourage learners' autonomy in the learning process. The 3C's Creative, Critical thinking and Collaborative skills were taken for the study to improve the learners' autonomy in their learning process. The Figure 1 model was in the process of achieving the focus of the study

LA - Domains

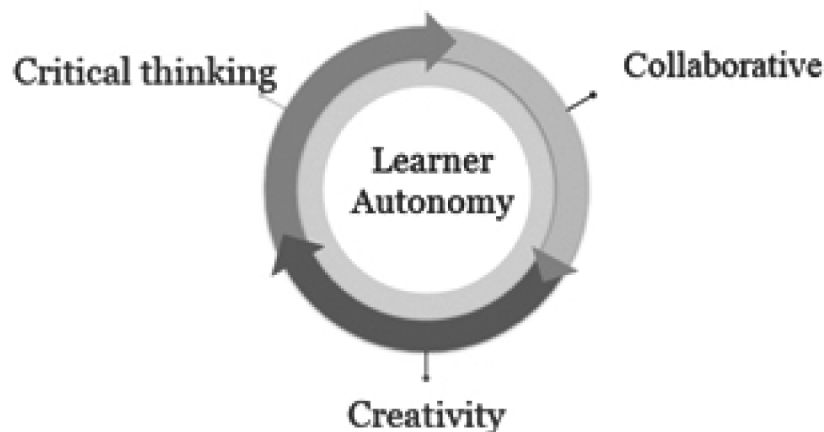


Figure 1

The following strategies were designed by the researchers to fulfil the needs of a learner with a focus on reflective learning to achieve learner autonomy and to develop a fine balance between critical thinking and creative writing. Eight two second-year students from the department of English were taken as samples who pursue creative writing as their course paper at Holy Cross College (Autonomous) in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu. The activities were designed based on Zadie Smith's habits of writing as a creative writer and experimented with the learners to make them independent in their learning process. The following are the practical activities implemented and analysed by the researchers in the classroom to enhance critical thinking and creative writing skills.

1. Title of the activity: Choose your choice and describe it.

Objective: to enhance simple sentence structures by making individual choices.

Process of the activity: Fill the sentence by picking your choice given below:

I ' m _ _ _ _ _ (N o u n) _ _ _ _ _ because _____

Examples: Orange juice/ Fruit salad

Icecream/ Chocolate/Soup

Shakespeare/ Dryden

Sample responses of the learners:

I'm an orange juice because I feel refreshing and cool.

I'm a chocolate because I spread happiness.

I'm Dyden because I'm able to do thoughtful evaluations.

Task outcome: Learners were interested in selecting their choices, it helped their thinking ability and they also took responsibility in describing themselves with their choices.

Analysis of the activity: This task is effective in achieving its goals. It enhanced the learners' language skills and also nurtured their creativity and individuality. By relating to choice and self-expression this activity promoted a comprehensive learning experience for the learners. It also encouraged active participation, critical thinking, and the ability to articulate personal preferences. The limitation of the activity is some students hesitated to express their thoughts. They were motivated and gradually they also expressed their thoughts.

2. Title of the activity: Write a storyline or poem based on any flavours of colours.

Objective: to draft a short storyline or poem based on any colour

Process of the activity: Learners were made into groups they chose a colour of their own choice and wrote a storyline or poem on it.

Sample responses of the learners:



Task outcome: Learners were grouped into 5 and they framed a short storyline or poem based on their colour of choice.

Analysis of the activity:

The activity achieved its objective by encouraging creative expression also promoting collaborative learning and emotional engagement. By exploring the world of colours through storytelling and poetry, students honed their creative, descriptive and expressive skills. The activity fostered a

positive learning environment.

3. Title of the activity: See, think and wonder

Objective: to enhance divergent thinking and to analyse different perspectives of the visual with 3 to 5 specific reasons.

Process of the activity: The following pictures were shown to the class and in groups, they discussed 5 W's- what, when, where, why, whom and how.



Sample responses of the learners:

Group 1: Parents should spend time with their children.....

Group 2: I'm Pragalya, I want to become an IAS officer, I want to work in my native place.....

Group 3: It's a pathetic picture that depicts the displacement of people who live below the poverty line.....

Task outcome: Learners were able to think deeply and it provokes them with thoughtful ideas.

Analysis of the activity: The "See, think and wonder" activity effectively achieved its objective of enhancing divergent thinking and analysing the different perspectives related to

visual stimuli. By encouraging critical thinking, observation, curiosity and collaboration, the activity enhanced students' analytical skills.

4. Title of the activity: KWL chart

Objective: to achieve the six levels of Bloom Taxonomy- Remembering, understanding, application, analysing, evaluating and creating.

Process of the activity: KWL

What I know	What I want to know
What I have learned	

A newspaper article, poem, short story and novella were circulated, learners read the whole text and individually worked on the chart after reading the given material.

Sample responses of the learners:

Topic : Issues of Covid-19 (Newspaper Article)		
What I know	What I want to know	What I have Learned
Covid is a highly contagious viral disease.	To understand the long term effects.	Symptoms even after recovery.
preventive measure include wearing masks, social distancing and vaccination	Economic, social and political impacts of the pandemic	Healthcare systems and the importance of international collaboration.

Topic Harry Potter Series		
What I know	What I want to know	What I have Learned
It is a fantasy book written by J.K Rowling	To delve deeper into the Symbolism & themes	Representation of good vs evil
It contains 7 books	Curious to know about the creative process	Explored J.K. Row-ling's inspiration for the magical world and the challenges

Analysis of the activity:

The KWL chart activity serves as a dynamic tool for promoting active and interdisciplinary learning. By addressing students' curiosity and encouraging critical thinking and research skills, the activity enhances their depth of understanding and prepares them to engage with complex topics in a meaningful and comprehensive manner.

Task outcome: Learners became responsible and able to distinguish and establish their skills.

5. Title of the activity: Personal log - Everyday Learning to learn and relearn

Objective: to encourage and engage the learners to record their everyday activity and review their progress.

Process of the activity: Learners got their individual log page in their notebook and it was asked to be submitted every Monday to review the progress of the learning.

Sample responses of the learners:



Analysis of the activity:

This activity had a significant impact on students' learning experiences. This encouraged their reflective learning, fostering adaptability and enhancing learners' self-regulation. It equips the

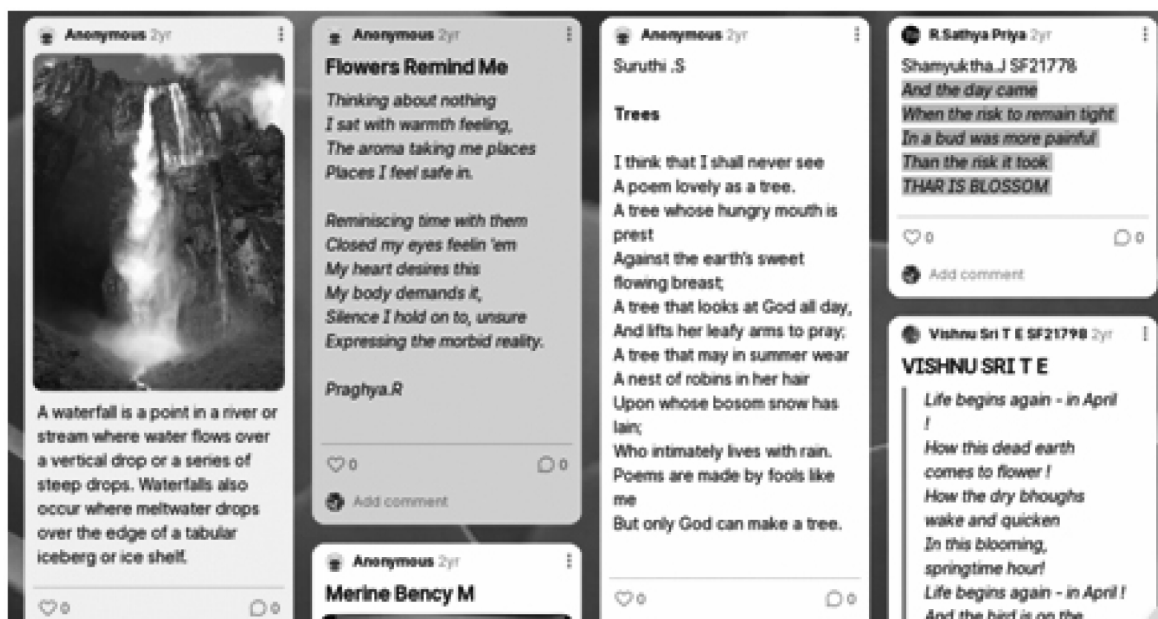
skills and attitudes that are in their lifelong learning journey.

Task outcome: Learners took responsibility for their learning and were able to show their progress.

6. Title of the activity: Voice of the Nature

Objective: to engage and enhance imaginative writings based on the moon, rain,

Sample responses of the learners:



Analysis of the activity: The “Voice of the Nature” activity enhances students’ imaginative writing skills and cultivates a deep appreciation for nature’s beauty and also encourages a sense of wonder and curiosity. The limitation of this activity was a few students found it difficult and had fears about expressing their thoughts in writing. Those students were encouraged by the researchers to attempt to write.

Task outcome: Learners enjoyed the activity, it encouraged their writing spirit and motivated them to present their writing.

mountains, waterfall, sea, trees and all grandeur of nature.

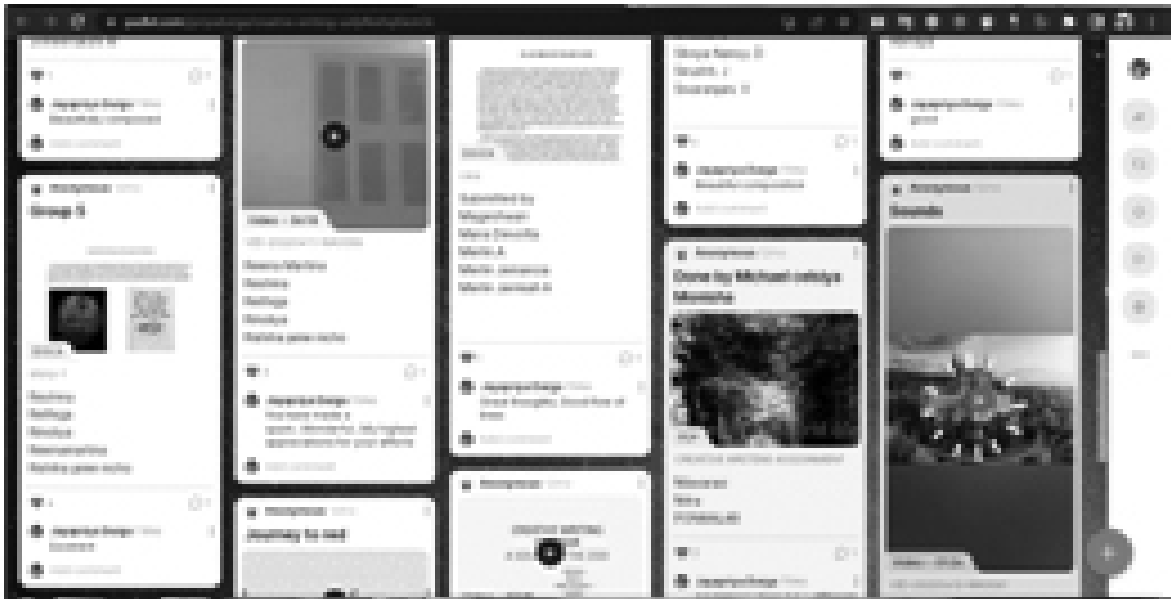
Process of the activity: Learners were asked to write imaginative writing on any one aspect of nature and some students worked on native songs representing the natural elements which they translated into English with the help of the course in charge and dictionary.

7. Title of the activity: Digital Wall

Objective: to engage and enhance divergent and convergent thinking using e-tools: Padlet and Google Docs.

Process of the activity: Topic: Create a story/poem by infusing ‘colours’, ‘sounds’, and ‘taste’ in your own story, as a group students came up with different stories as per the guidelines given by the researchers. All the stories of the learners were uploaded in the Padlet and Google Docs for peer group reading and suggestions.

Sample responses of the learners:

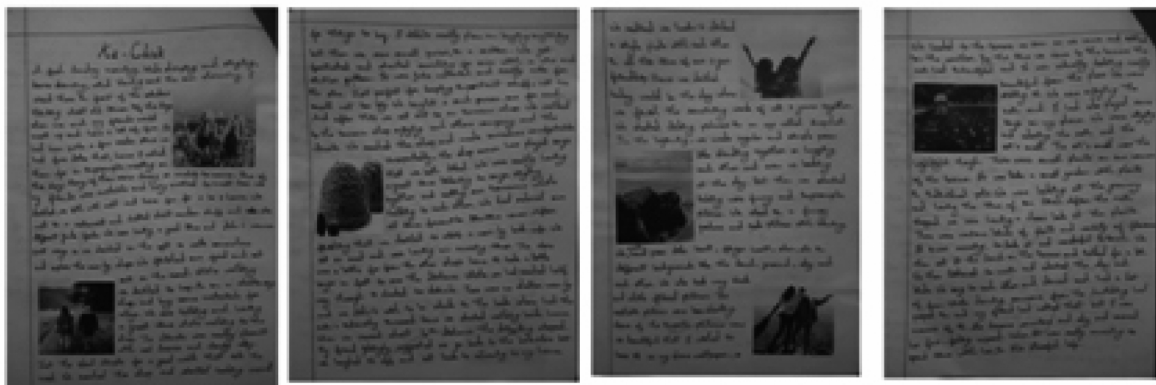


Analysis of the activity:

The “Digital Wall” activity, utilizing e-tools like Padlet and Google Docs, enhanced divergent and convergent thinking and also promoted critical thinking, creativity, technological proficiency and student engagement.

Task outcome: Learners were eager to participate and presented their ideas in the videos as well as in PDFs formats and they enjoyed watching and reading their peer posts by giving

Sample responses of the learners:



comments and likes.

8. Title of the activity: Writing Portfolio

Objective: to encourage students to write the reflections to write down their thoughts and maintain a journal of their writing on the specific topic.

Process of the Task: Clear guidelines on facts and factual information, setting goals for their writing, word limit were given (according to the learners’ choice) to track their writing progress.

Analysis of the activity:

The “Writing Portfolio” activity has a profound impact on students’ personal and academic growth.

Task outcome: Learners started marinating their logs which became their habit of writing, this helped their thoughts to transform into writing.

Further activities like prompt writing, Picture talk, Response writing and Storyboard writing also experimented to enhance learners’ skills. All the activities were also uploaded in the digital platforms by the learners for peer discussions.

Process of Evaluation

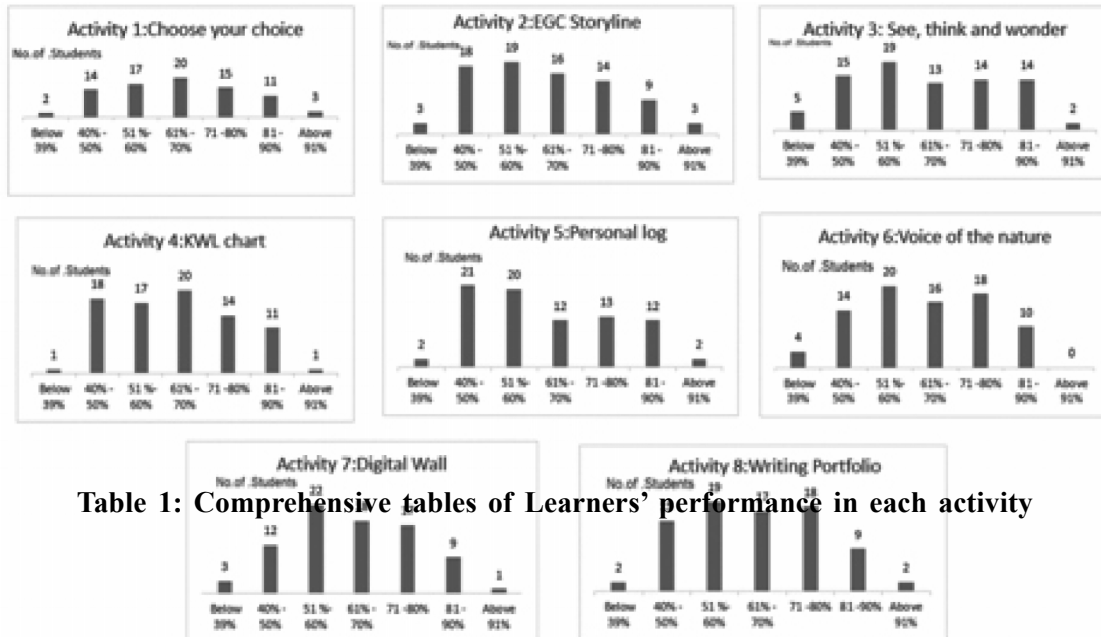
The process of evaluation is essential to check the progress of learning. Rubrics were designed according to the activity assigned. Each activity was evaluated by the course instructor using a

set of parameters in the classroom as well as the individual self-evaluation sheets done by the learners. E-tools like Padlet, Nearpod and Google Docs were also used for scaling the presentation, peer group evaluation was also taken into consideration. The following parameters were used to evaluate the learners’ performance for each activity.

1. Creativity and Originality
2. Relevance to the learning objective
3. Use of Language Proficiency
4. Structure and organization
5. Peer Group Interaction

Summary of the Results

The overall presentation of each activity of the learners’ results was given in the chats below



The above results summance that 5 students got below 40%, nearly 75 students ranged between 40% to 89 % and only 2 students were able to

perform above average. On the whole, the overall performance of the learners was satisfactory. The task assigned to the learners motivated them

to perform better, it also helped them to enhance their writing skills and encouraged them to create new stories. Zadie Smith's rules for writing deal with concepts like self-expression, creativity and critical thinking enabling the learners to explore in writing to foster learner autonomy.

Findings

The activities designed and followed in the classroom helped improve the learners' autonomy. Elements of adult learning and andragogy were achieved through learner methodology by implementing the above innovative strategies. It was also helpful in paving new learning strategies for attaining Heutagogy in the following ways:

1. Learners became independent, they identified their ability to manage their self-learning patterns.
2. Course in charge as a facilitator rather than instructor by providing resources.
3. Learning takes place even in novel situations.
4. Learners learning patterns were helpful for their lifelong learning management.
5. It improved Learners' self-efficacy and helped them to be aware of their learning habits.
6. Learners were able to set regular goal setting and also able to do self-assessments.

Limitations of study

1. Researchers found it difficult to make some students regular in attendance.
2. Coursebook/handout materials would have benefited both the researchers and learners.
3. It was a challenge and time-consuming to teach basic writing skills to some students

during the course.

Conclusion

Zadie Smith, professor of creative writing, her guidelines on writing rules were highly resourceful for the researchers to explore and design new ideas in teaching creative writing to undergraduate students. Implementation of these innovative strategies was effective in the ESL classroom at the tertiary level to achieve learner's autonomy in creative writing and also enhance their critical thinking. This methodology sets a learning habit among learners and makes them responsible towards their learning. This also nurtured intelligence among learners to be aware and active in all their endeavours. This brings clarity to learners work what they do, this clarity increases their confidence to perform well. This attainment of confidence helps them to believe their self. While learner autonomy may pose challenges in ESL classrooms, especially at the tertiary level, incorporating Zadie Smith's writing rules can serve as a bridge between creativity and autonomy, motivating students to develop their writing proficiency in English

The activities experimented on by the researchers in the classroom enhanced learners' writing skills and also created a fine balance between creativity and critical thinking. These practical applications mentioned above and techniques applied in the classroom motivated learners to be independent in learning. These activities would be useful to teachers across the globe to make their classrooms more interesting. This research is helpful for the attainment of heutagogy. Hence it is focused on the development of autonomy to achieve self-determined learning. Learners have become more active and confident and will perform well in their future endeavours.

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