

Using "Big Writing" Strategy for Developing Writing Ability; A Study

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ABSTRACT

Writing in English effectively has become mandatory for academic success at secondary and tertiary levels. Students are assessed, evaluated and graded only by their written work, which signifies the importance of writing skills. Developing writing skills is invariably one of the responsibilities of teachers of English. Hence, it is the need of the hour for teachers of English to find out various strategies to improve the writing skills of students. 'Big Writing' is a strategy used by many primary schools in the UK to develop the writing skills of primary students. Having identified the challenges faced by high school students during writing tasks, the researchers used the 'Big Writing' strategy as an experimental method to explore its significance in developing the writing skills of high school students. The participants were 14-year old high school students, who were at an intermediate level of language proficiency. They took a pre-test on a paragraph writing task before the 'Big Writing' strategy was used and a post-test after taking 'Big Writing' classes. The results indicated a significant difference in their writing ability.

Introduction

Effective oral and written communication skills are very important in today's highly competitive world. Writing, in particular, is an important skill and essential for academic success and career growth, but in the language classroom it has become mechanical and exam-oriented rather than creative and imaginative. Writing is a demanding process that involves extremely

complex cognitive processes.

Heterogeneous environment is a common phenomenon in today's classrooms. In such classrooms, not all students understand lectures and texts in English, and respond to them correctly. Hence, when writing tasks are given, students who exhibit average proficiency in English language skills become frustrated and show reluctance to participate. The main reasons for their

The Design of the Study

The design of the study was experimental which involved only an experimental group. The experimental group's data before and after the 'Big Writing' classes was analysed and compared to evaluate the impact of using 'Big Writing' strategy in developing writing abilities of high school students.

The Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were fifteen high school students, who were at an intermediate level of English language skills, belonging to the age group of 14-15 years, and whose parents were graduates. They participated in writing tasks that did not require any recounting or imagining but were highly reluctant when creative writing activities were suggested.

The 'Big Writing' Tasks

'Big Writing' classes, which involve the teaching of vocabulary, connectives, openers of sentences and punctuation, were conducted once a week for forty minutes focusing on teaching writing. Before beginning the 'Big Writing' classes, a pre-test was conducted by the researcher for the fifteen participants on a paragraph writing task. The topic given for the pre-test was, 'The things I like about my school.' Then four 'Big Writing' classes were conducted, one each for vocabulary, connectives, openers of sentences and punctuation. In the fifth class the researcher administered the post-test to measure the efficacy of the 'Big Writing' classes. The post-test was a paragraph writing task on the topic, 'The Morning Beach.' The description

of the 'Big Writing' classes conducted for the study is as follows.

'Big Writing' Class 1 (vocabulary): The participants were given the topic, 'The Morning Beach,' and asked to give words related to it. They were encouraged to write down a list of words. The researcher was ready with a lexical set on the topic and the words that were not listed were added. Then the participants were divided into three groups of five each and a vocabulary quiz was conducted in five rounds: Round 1 - Spelling; Round 2 - Define the words; Round 3 - Synonyms; Round 4 - Antonyms; and Round 5 - Frame sentences. By the end of 'Big Writing' class 1, the participants had sufficient knowledge of vocabulary on the topic, 'The Morning Beach.'

List of words learnt by the participants:

early, relax, sunlight, sun rise, waves, spray, salty, cool, wet, breath, smell, fresh, seagulls, crash, blue, jogging, walking, alluring, sight, wonderful, beautiful, sun rise, shining, morning, sandy, breeze, refresh, glittering, cliffs, rocks, sky, gentle, shells, shore, washed, golden.

Outcome: When this task was given, 100% participants' involvement in the vocabulary quiz was observed. The activity promoted the learning of meanings, synonyms, antonyms, spelling and sentence formation of the 'beach' words.

'Big Writing' Class 2 (connectives): The participants were tested for their existing knowledge of connectives. Then the

were able to punctuate the sentences accurately and the remaining participants committed errors in second and fourth sentences.

'Big Writing' Class 5: The participants were asked to write a paragraph in about 200 words on the topic, "The Morning Beach", for which they had learnt the vocabulary; they were instructed to use four connectives as sentence openers and punctuate the paragraph accurately.

Data Collection

The researcher developed a paragraph rubric (**Appendix I**) using the parameters: number of words used from the vocabulary list, connectives, openers of sentences and number of errors made in punctuating the paragraph, to measure the efficacy of 'Big Writing' classes in developing the writing abilities of the participants. In order to determine if 'Big Writing' classes had any significant impact on the high school students' writing abilities, the pre-test and the post-test were evaluated using the paragraph rubrics and the results were compared.

The evaluation was based on the performance of the participants in the pre-test and post-test. A four-point scale (Good, Fair, Satisfactory and Needs Improvement) was used to evaluate writing skills against the criteria, namely, Vocabulary, Connectives, Openers and Punctuation. The rating of writing skills was based on the

ability of the participants to use the four key elements effectively in their texts. Vocabulary was evaluated based on the number of words used appropriate for the context in the pre-test and the number of words from the list on 'Beach' and the context in which they were used in the post-test. The evaluation of connectives was based on the number and choice of connectives they made. Sentence openers and punctuation marks were also assessed based on their effect and accuracy, respectively.

Data Analysis

This study was an attempt to determine the effect of 'Big Writing' approach on developing the writing abilities of high school students. This part presents the results of data analysis. For this purpose, inferential statistics was used to analyse the data. First, the data collected from the fifteen participants on pre-test was analysed using the paragraph rubrics designed by the researcher. Then the data collected from the participants on post-test administered after the 'Big Writing' classes was analysed. Both the results were compared to measure the efficacy of 'Big Writing' classes on developing the writing abilities of the high school students. The comparative chart below shows the percentage of students who needed improvement in their writing tasks before and after the 'Big Writing' classes by using their pre-test and post-test results (**See Figure 1**).

researcher explained the different types of connectives and their usage. At the end of the class, the participants did the worksheet given below.

Underline the connectives in the following passage and explain their usage:

Many doctors and scientists have studied the effects of smoking on the human body. Their results show that people who smoke, or passive smokers, have a much higher risk of developing many diseases. For example, smoking can cause some cancers, emphysema and angina.

Also, the risk of contracting one of the diseases mentioned is directly proportional to the length of time and amount that a person has smoked. Therefore, people should not delay quitting the habit.

Passive smokers (people who inhale secondary smoke) are at risk of developing the same diseases as smokers. Hence, smoking has been banned in many places and will be banned in many more in the future.

Because of the health risks associated with smoking, cigarettes keep getting more expensive to try to deter people. However, many people continue to smoke despite the enormous risks and huge expense.

Outcome: 60% participants identified all the connectives and explained their functions. The remaining participants were only able to identify the connectives but had difficulty in explaining their functions.

'Big Writing' Class 3 (sentence openers):

The participants were asked to discuss among themselves and list the different ways of beginning a sentence. The researcher guided the participants to write different sentence openers. Then the participants wrote sentences in the right order starting with time connectives: *First... Then... Next... Soon... Suddenly... After that... Finally... At last...*

Outcome: About 47% of the participants were able to write simple sentences using the time connectives as sentence openers and the remaining participants showed interest in learning them to use in sentences.

'Big Writing' Class 4 (punctuation): The

participants were taught the basic punctuation marks, necessary to punctuate a paragraph. Then the following task was given to the participants.

Punctuate the following sentences. Ensure whether you have used the following basic punctuation marks – changing small letters into capital letters wherever necessary, full stops, apostrophe, commas, question marks and quotations.

1. where did raju go last weekend
2. i dont believe it said rekha
3. the sun rises in the east
4. my father bought me a blue shirt a parker pen a story book and a big chocolate cake
5. william wordsworth is a famous poet

Outcome: About 53% of the participants

frustration and reluctance in writing activities include lack of vocabulary, spelling, grammar and handwriting skills. Moreover, students rarely write even in their own language, and so the writing activity feels strange. Another powerful disincentive is the fear that they have 'nothing to say' – a common response of many students when asked to write (Harmer, 2004, p. 16).

In a heterogeneous environment, teaching writing skills is not an easy task because "Writing is the result of employing strategies to manage the composing process, which is one of gradually developing a text, it involves a number of activities: setting goals, generating ideas, organising information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft, reading and reviewing it, then revising and editing it. It is a complex process neither easy nor spontaneous for many second language writers" (Hedge, 2000, p. 302).

There are various factors that affect the teaching of writing skills effectively. Time constraint, syllabus completion, classroom management and less effective teaching methods are a few of the factors. As a result, students who can write well in English miss opportunities to enhance their writing skills and students with average English skills struggle to construct sentences and paragraphs on their own. When these students get enrolled in higher education, they require English for Specific Purposes (ESP) depending on the branch they choose at the tertiary level and need to write fluently different forms of texts such as reports, process descriptions, formal letters, articles and theses. This future requirement emphasises the significance of teaching

writing skills. Thus, it is very important for the teachers of English to try various strategies to teach their students writing skills, as "the skill of writing well in a second language is important and needs separate and special attention" (Brookes & Grundy, 1998, p. 1).

'Big Writing'

'Big Writing' was created by Ros Wilson, a highly experienced English educationist, and marketed by Andrelle Education, a literacy-based education company which provides professional development to teachers and educators, to raise the writing standards of primary school students in the UK (Harland, Lynn and Sainsbury, 2014, p. 5). 'Big Writing' classes are usually conducted for forty-five minutes to one hour focusing on speaking and writing skills. 'Big Writing' strategy is used in English classrooms to teach four elements of writing: Vocabulary, Connectives, Openers of sentences and Punctuation, which promotes efficiency in the writing abilities of students. The importance of teaching connectives and punctuation are evident in the words of Hedge (2000, p. 326), "teachers can support students in their growing awareness of how to achieve accuracy in a text: of such things as how the parts of a text are linked through cohesive devices, how sentence structure can vary to develop meaning, and the role that punctuation plays. These are aspects of crafting a text, putting together pieces of English language."

'Big Writing' approach was implemented by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), a centre for educational

research and development in England and Wales. The investigation, "Initial Evaluation of the Impact of 'Big Writing'" was done on 635 students belonging to 9 primary schools in the UK. The aims and objectives of this initial evaluation were to:

- Investigate teachers' experiences of using 'Big Writing' and their perceptions of its impact;
- Compare teachers' confidence and competence before and after the use of the 'Big Writing' approach;
- Compare pupils' writing performance before and after exposure to the 'Big Writing' approach; and
- Compare pupils' confidence in enjoyment of writing before and after exposure to the 'Big Writing' approach (Harland, Lynn and Sainsbury, 2014, p. 9).

The evaluation focused on schools that were beginning to introduce 'Big Writing' and involved four strands of data collection activity (Harland, Lynn and Sainsbury, 2014, p. 9):

- **Strand 1:** before and after pupil writing assessment tasks in nine primary schools (a total of 635 pupils completed both baseline and endpoint writing tasks);
- **Strand 2:** before and after pupil writing attitude survey in nine primary schools (a total of 635 pupils completed both baseline and endpoint attitude surveys);
- **Strand 3:** before and after teacher survey in nine primary schools (28 teachers completed baseline surveys and 21 teachers completed endpoint surveys); and
- **Strand 4:** qualitative telephone

interviews with five teachers from five different schools using 'Big Writing' (three of these schools were also involved in the writing tasks and surveys).

The findings and implications of the 'Initial Evaluation of the Impact of 'Big Writing'' programme suggest that teachers and students are strongly positive about the 'Big Writing' approach and its effectiveness in enhancing teaching writing for primary students and their writing performance and attitudes.

The 'Big Writing' strategy was adopted for the present study since it focuses on developing the four elements: vocabulary, connectives, openers of sentences and punctuation, which form the basics of writing. This strategy was used to teach an experimental group of 15 high school students to assess its effectiveness in developing the high school students' writing ability.

The Study

The present study addresses the use of 'Big Writing' strategy in developing the writing abilities of high school students. The study is significant as the impact of 'Big Writing' on high school students has rarely been explored by researchers. The objective of the study is to determine whether the 'Big Writing' approach has any significant impact on high school students' writing abilities. The study, especially, seeks to answer to the following question:

- Does 'Big Writing' approach significantly affect the writing abilities of high school students?

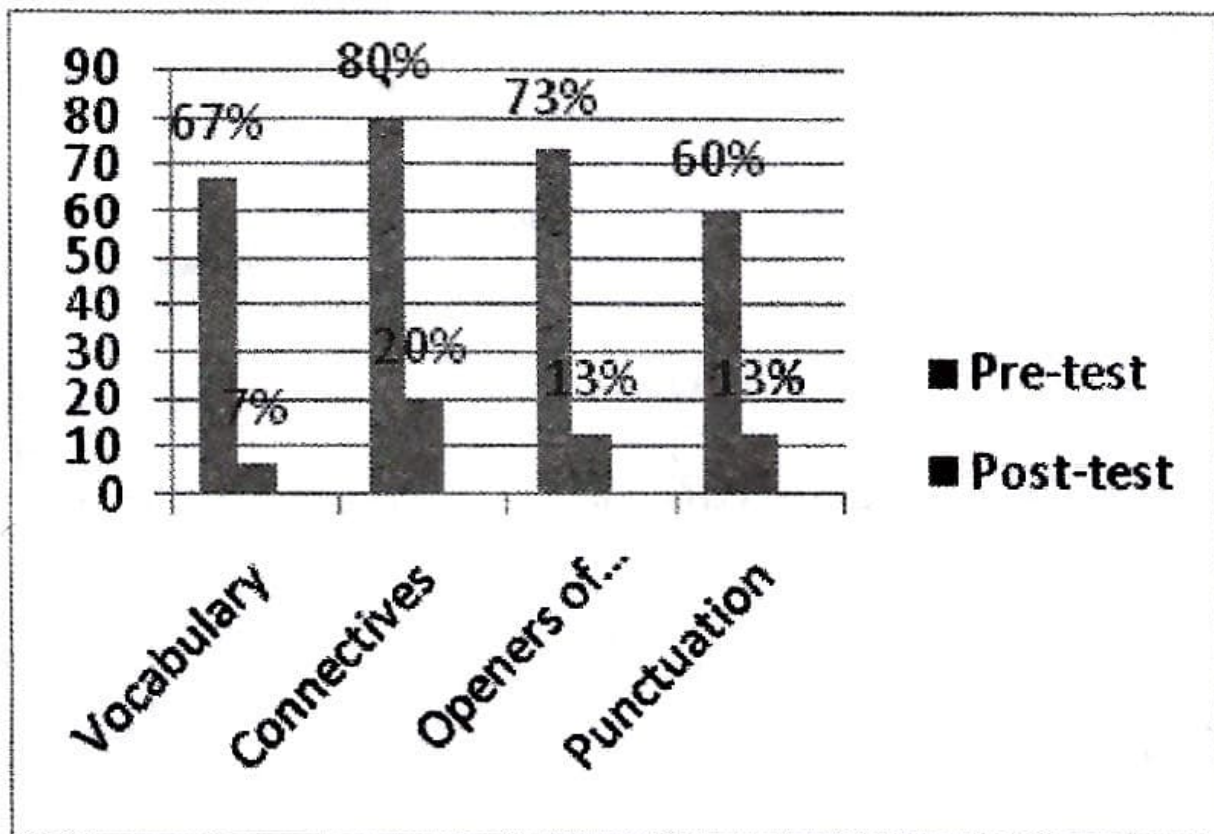


Figure 1: Comparison of Pre- and Post-Test Results

Results, Findings and Discussion

When the results of the pre-test and post-test were compared, it was revealed that 66.7% students needed improvement prior to the training in Vocabulary, whereas 73.3% showed "Good" performance post-'Big Writing' classes. 80% students and 20% students needed improvement in the area of Connectives prior to and post-'Big Writing' classes respectively. 73.3% students showed poor performance in sentence Openers before the 'Big Writing' classes; in contrast, 66.6% students showed "Good" performance after the 'Big Writing' classes. 60% students needed improvement in Punctuation prior to the 'Big Writing' classes. On the other hand, 60% showed "Good" performance in Punctuation post-'Big Writing' classes.

The evaluation substantiates the fact that there was a marked improvement in the writing abilities of the students. The improvement seen in the participants could be attributed to the 'Big Writing' classes they attended. This is evident from the improvement and accuracy seen in using vocabulary, connectives, openers of sentences and punctuation by the participants in their post-test.

The findings of this study are significant because the previous studies on 'Big Writing' approach focused on the improvement of writing standards of primary students. The findings revealed that the participants of the 'Big Writing' class who were high school students also showed a positive impact in learning vocabulary, connectives, openers of sentences and punctuation.

Conclusion

'Big Writing' classes, which are not based on prescribed textbooks and are not exam-oriented, give special attention to the writing needs of the students and remove their anxiety. The focus was on enabling the key elements of writing: vocabulary,

connectives, openers of sentences and punctuation, which develop their writing abilities. Each class offers the students well planned writing tasks to build their confidence, knowledge and motivation, which would go a long way in enhancing their writing skills.

Appendix I

'Big Writing' Elements	Good performance 4 points	Fair Performance 3 points	Satisfactory Performance 2 points	Needs Improvement 1 point
Vocabulary	The student has included all the words from the list.	The student has included many words from the list.	The student has included some words from the list.	The student has used only a few words from the list.
Connectives	The student has used four connectives.	The student has used three connectives.	The student has used two connectives.	The student has used only one connective.
Sentence Openers	The student has used four meaningful sentence openers.	The student has used three meaningful sentence openers.	The student has used two meaningful sentence openers.	The student has used only one meaningful sentence opener.
Punctuation marks	0-1 error	2-3 errors	4 errors	More than 5 errors

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