

# Teaching Writing to Hearing Impaired Students: Interactive Writing as an Instructional Approach

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## ABSTRACT

*The study presents a qualitative analysis of Hearing Impaired (H/I) Students' writing development during a ten-week period (spread over a semester) of interactive writing instruction. The intervention involved teaching English writing skills through an Interactive Writing (IW) approach. The participants in this study included 25 H/I students at high school level. This paper reports the findings of a pre-post experimental design based study with 50 H/I students divided into experimental and control groups. The paper only deals with the qualitative analysis of the writing development of the experimental group.*

**Keywords:** Interactive Writing; Writing skills of Hearing-Impaired; Teaching writing skills in English.

## Introduction

There is no doubt that H/I students do face challenges in learning new concepts and exhibit delayed language development as compared to their hearing peers. Studies based on analyses of H/I students' writing indicate that H/I students' compositions are shorter in length with less content and a limited cohesive lexicon but increased use of nouns and articles (Myklebust 1960; Yoshinaga-Itano, Snyder and Mayberry 1996; Arfe and Boscolo 2006). Genre-based anomalies are also common in H/I students' writing samples (Albertini and Meath-Lang 1986), which display fragmented expression

lacking in organization and detailing (Antia, Reed and Kreimeyer 2005; Mayer 2010; Albertini and Schley 2010; Paul 2008).

The H/I students encounter serious issues when they enter school as they do not have as much access to sound (auditory input) at birth or in pre-schooling years as the hearing students do. This difference in their hearing abilities affects their ability to acquire and learn a new language. Teachers and educators, since the beginning of formal education for the hearing-impaired, have grappled with the fact that a sign language does not have written form and in order to teach them literacy, there has to be a method

which can bridge the gap between students' sign language and writing in a spoken language. Educators have been concerned about the role of literacy in the life of a hearing-impaired child and whether literacy can take the place of the diminished auditory medium.

Interactive Writing (IW) was first developed by teachers of Ohio State University as part of the *Early Literacy Lesson Framework*. According to Button, Johnson and Furgerson (1996), it "has its roots in the language experience approach developed by Ashton Warner (1963)" and Shared Writing developed by McKenzie based on a collaborative composition by the teacher and her students (p.447). Through IW, the teacher guides and scaffolds the learners towards a stronger understanding of print. The teacher shares the pen with each student and helps them move towards greater independence as writers. The learner plays an active role by holding the pen and writes with the help of the teacher's scaffolding. The teacher and learners jointly decide the topic of writing (based on previous lessons or a common experience). The writing process involves questioning, availing hints or clues and instruction. After the completion of the text, it is made available to the learners for reading. The written texts are thus used for reading, revising and recalling the information. To make the writing process more engaging, the teachers can make use of colourful charts and pictures (McCarrier, Fountas and Pinnell, 2000). Even in the case of students with special needs, IW has been used in an adapted and specialized manner.

## **Literature Review**

Though IW had been developed as early as 1991 and used as an intervention in numerous studies, no such study with H/I students was found till 2008. The first study based on IW with H/I students was conducted by Wolbers (2008). Wolbers' was a 21-day long study with 16 H/I students from elementary and middle school levels. The students showed significant improvement as writers during the intervention. The analysis of findings demonstrated that, in addition to the reading and editing/revising skills, the students showed positive growth in primary traits and contextual language. The variables which did not show any significant gains included contextual conventions and total word count.

Giddens (2009) also conducted a study to investigate the impact of IW on writing skills of three H/I students at kindergarten level. After the intervention of 6 weeks, the students' writing was analyzed. The findings indicated positive gains in areas such as use of lower-case letters, spacing, and awareness of purpose. Similarly, in Williams (2011), IW was used with six H/I students at kindergarten level for one year. Williams observed that during this one year, the students learnt to translate face-to-face language into print and also realized that writing is meant to be read. The intervention made them aware of their writing abilities.

In a recent study by Karasu (2018), the efficacy of IW at the pre-writing stage was examined with seven H/I students for three

months. The findings suggest that with the exception of only one student, all the other students have made significant gains in their writing skills. Since no such intervention has ever been attempted with Indian H/I students and, keeping in mind, the dearth of data on literacy levels of these students, this study was initiated with an aim to report the effectiveness of IW on writing skills of H/I students in India. This paper presents the qualitative aspect of the larger study based on mixed-method analysis.

### **Participants and Setting**

The main study involved 50 H/I students at high school level distributed into experimental and control groups. The results and findings reported here are based on a qualitative analysis of writing development of 25 H/I students in the experimental group. The students were selected from special schools in Punjab and three teachers participated in the study. Student participants were proficient in Indian Sign Language (ISL), and a few of them knew basic Punjabi words (mother tongue of hearing members in the family). Written English and Hindi were learnt as a second language. Moreover, since the mode of communication followed by the selected schools was total communication, other possible forms of input such as sign Hindi and finger spelling were also used. Students had a mean age of 15.3 years and mean hearing loss of 94dB. Each teacher had a Diploma in Special Education (Hearing Impairment) with at least five years of experience at special schools for the hearing-

impaired. The qualitative data was collected through the researcher's field notes and teachers' interviews.

In order to answer the main question "What impact does IW have on H/I students as writers?", the field notes and teachers' interviews were thoroughly examined through thematic analysis. Teachers' interviews were first transcribed and the data was read and re-read to generate codes. The codes were assigned by collating similar sections under one code. Notable themes were extracted out of the data and consolidated into four categories:

- 1) Engagement of H/I students in the writing process;
- 2) Participation of each individual participant;
- 3) Understanding the writing process; and
- 4) Independence as writers.

In order to study these patterns, the researcher referred to her field notes. The notes were based on her observations about students' behaviour, body language and teachers' moves while delivering the lesson. The other source of data was teachers' interviews. The interviews were conducted immediately after the intervention was completed.

### **Findings**

Based on her observations in the initial ten to fifteen days, the researcher had reported that students' engagement was not consistent throughout the IW sessions. In

fact, some of them were found to be disinterested in the middle of the lesson. Most of them used to express their ideas instantly. They grew restless when they were not given proper attention or when they did not understand the teacher's point. The use of signs (visual-gestural expression) for 'confused', 'bogged down' and 'boring' were frequently used by them during the IW sessions. One of the reasons for such behaviour of students was that IW is a process-oriented approach. To understand the process was not easy for the H/I students. Moreover, IW was different from conventional instruction which had been used for teaching them literacy.

After fifteen to twenty sessions, however, the students started becoming familiar with the process. They understood 'what follows what' and started taking the initiative in the writing process. Except on some occasions, the students were aware and attentive for most part of the intervention. The teachers also mentioned that they faced challenges with H/I students initially but with each passing day, teaching them became less challenging. One of the teachers (Tr. 3) was recorded saying,

*"The H/I students can only be attentive when they find the process interesting. They need to enjoy that process. We cannot make them sit for more than 20 minutes if they do not like our teaching. Moreover, writing had never been so much fun for them. They eagerly wait for their turn. They not only compete but correct each other."*

The teachers found that IW had made

writing more engaging and interesting for the H/I children.

Similarly, IW is an interaction- and activity-based approach. The participation of each individual student was inevitable. Without students' active participation, IW would not be successful as an instructional approach. The researcher had observed the absence of active participation in the pre-intervention phase of the study.

Prior to the implementation of the intervention, the researcher had observed teaching through the conventional method. The most unexpected and notable pattern was that while young students were more open to discussion and interactions inside the classroom, the students at middle and high school levels turned out to be more shy and self-conscious. During the intervention, the lesson plans were designed in a way to make them more interesting and innovative for the students.

Sometimes, the most silent (least active) students in the classroom were asked to draw colourful charts. These charts were later used as visual stimuli during sign-to-print translation. The students were asked to explain the art forms drawn by them. Through 'thinking aloud' and constant scaffolding, the students were made to translate the visual stimuli into written form and compose a text. This way it was ensured that each student played an active role in the writing process. According to the teachers, there were a few students in their classrooms who never used to participate much during IW sessions, but scored

significantly positive in the post-test. Thus, with the exception of a few students, all students participated actively in the sessions.

The teachers also opined that active participation of students was the result of their understanding of the writing process. Though the students took some time to understand the various stages of writing, they eventually realized the importance of each stage in the composition of a meaningful text. At the beginning of every lesson, the teacher ensured that the sub-processes of writing were discussed in the classroom. The students were given clues and made to think which stage followed which.

By the end of the intervention, the students started following the sequence of the sub-processes in their writing. They understood that they need to plan their text before starting the actual composition. The planning stage is followed by gathering or organization of ideas. In the case of H/I students, the third most important stage is translation. This is a complex sub-process in which the students are taught to translate their ideas from the visual-gestural mode (sign language) into the print (written English) form. After translating the ideas into the written form, a draft is prepared which is further edited and revised. The revised text is finally used for reading purposes. The students were made to read from the text composed by them. The researcher in the later part of the intervention observed that the students were not only aware of the sub-processes

but follow them diligently.

About H/I students being independent writers, the teachers emphasized that it was too soon to expect this from their students. Without doubt, the students had become aware of themselves as writers. A major change, according to Tr.1 is that the students don't give up on limited content; instead, they ask more questions on things they are most curious about. The teacher said,

*“One of my students asked about our Maths teacher who was not coming [to] school. I told him that she was not well since the previous week. The student asked me again about what had happened to the teacher. I told him that she was suffering from Typhoid. I also told him that Typhoid is a kind of infection. As I finger-spelt the word T-Y-P-H-O-I-D for him, he repeated the finger spelling with me. The next day, he showed me what he wrote on Typhoid. I was surprised because I had never expected this. He told me that he searched the exact term on the Internet and found some additional information. The student had also added a picture of a man lying on the bed. He also asked me the meaning of a few words he found on the Internet. I knew that next time he will use all these words in his writing.”*

The teacher, through this incident, wanted to convey that the students have the desire to write more but sometimes due to limited background knowledge, they do not feel the motivation to write. Through this intervention, the students have definitely gained much knowledge about the

conventions of print. But it would be an exaggeration to say that the intervention has prepared the students as independent writers.

### **Conclusion**

All the patterns observed having been studied together, the intervention was found to have a positive impact on the students. Keeping in mind the short attention span in H/I children, their engagement and participation levels in the classroom indicated the success of using IW as an instructional approach.

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