In-service Teacher Training for Teaching Writing in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) Mode

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ABSTRACT:

This paper focuses on problems in teaching writing in conventional instructional programs and henceforth, attention to the development of writing skills is not very promising. By contrast, the scope and function of writing skills in ODL mode is greater, provided the self learning materials (SLM) in ODL mode specifically caters to teaching of writing. Subsequently, the paper looks at the possibility of in-service teacher training for teaching writing in ODL mode.

1. Background to the study:

1.1 Curriculum and pedagogical constraints:

Out of four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), teaching of writing suffers the most in the conventional mode. Compared to speaking and reading skills, attention to writing is very low. And writing instruction seems to have failed to produce much impact on academic performance. Writing skills in textbooks have been either totally treated as syllabus item or merely mentioned it in passing. This is because formal teaching of writing in conventional institutions faces enormous constraints in operationalizing writing not simply for inappropriate teaching method but for the lack of other teaching-learning resources. Even if the teaching resources are available they are not fully utilized. And hence the attention toward the development of writing skill is inadequate.

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If we look at the issue of curriculum and pedagogy, the general English curriculums in India have been by in large operating upon three types of curriculum. And they are Grammar-based curriculum, Function-based curriculum and Process-based curriculum (Prahalad, 2010). In all the three curriculums, the orientation to writing appears to be very different. In the grammar-based curriculum, the objective was that the learner should be able to master the grammatical competence through writing. Teaching of Writing was governed by graded structure of grammar

and lexical item and learners were supposed to practice writing in terms of language structure and vocabulary items. Writing was only possible in the "accurate mode" that is grammatically correct and hence learners wrote in a very guided and probably following more accurate pattern. However, in the function-based curriculum, writing was done to achieve communicative functions. Learners were given interesting activities and writing tasks, that were aimed at "providing opportunities to practice understanding and meaning through an effective and efficient use of the language skills" (ibid: 485). The process based curriculum is considered very important. Process learning moved away from the handling of the finished products and lead to the act of composing writing. This process based curriculum focused upon process based activity and tasks which had problem solving and recursive features of writing (Prahalad, 2010:485).

Yet so far, ESL educators seem to have overlooked the issue. The real time conditions of classroom teaching do not exactly match with the required opportunities for teaching writing. In most of the cases, this is practically impossible. Certain obvious constraints and fixation delimits the actual scope of writing. The quantum and quality of writing done in language classrooms is less and what normally surfaces is the reproduction of "content based writing skills", but this too has not guaranteed the effective use of writing in real life tasks. A real life task here implies the writing done in the real life situation like writing a letter to some authority or writing an application etc. Teaching of writing has never been fully operationalised in language classrooms contrary to the claim made by several institutions. Teaching of writing in conventional teaching setup encounters several difficulties, ranging from handling the large heterogeneous classes to the scarcity of effective writing tasks (Carpenter and Hunter, 1981). It becomes difficult for a teacher to handle the problems of each and every learner, to provide them feedback on their writing and also it is challenging because of diverse needs and backgrounds,learning styles and mixed ability levels, medium of instruction differences and the kind of writing learners need to master (Cowie and Heaton, 1977 as cited in Carpenter and Hunter *Ibid*). Instructional materials for writing particularly in Indian context in conventional programs are not easily forthcoming and the learners somehow cannot access them because of various classroom and institutional constraints.

2. Rational for the study:

As discussed above, the outcomes in writing in large ESL classroom has not been very promising for various reasons since the roadmap to effective writing is a complex operation. Enormous amount of integration is required in materializing writing which is beyond the scope of teacher to implement in a classroom especially with a large class-size. However, this is not to deny that writing instruction even in this situation is impossible. The fact is that it has never been on the top agenda for teaching 'composing' whereas writing is very often used as an academic tool for assessing the academic content as well. Although, there has always been the concern for individualized instruction for handling the process of composing, but this is often left to the learner for his personal initiative or home assignment. Individualized instruction in writing is one

of the major problems in conventional mode of teaching writing. Individualized instruction is not possible in the traditional classrooms environment because there is one teacher assigned at times to large class size. Since writing demands a heavy follow-up work and consequently immediate and individualized feedback on writing is not always possible in regular classrooms. On the other hand, individualized instruction backed up by SLM is possible in distance mode.

Conventional writing programs have the above limitations. Now the question arises that, if the writing in conventional mode is this much problematic then how writing can be taught at distance in the absence of a teacher? Although teaching of writing at distance is far complex than conventional but at distance it can provide more opportunity to the learner in terms of SLM based writing assignments, feedback through the assigned tutor and the follow-up work that can be mediated between the tutor and the learner. This potential of learning writing through distance has never been felt since writing is essentially an internally motivated and self initiated activity whereas the conventional programs go with the whole class approach failing to tap, nurture and monitor the silent unassuming learner. Of course, there are limited outcomes in writing catering to just small numbers in conventional classrooms. The rest of the learners who are not motivated do not get chance to write and they fail to access the materials. With the result, standardized materials often remain short of learner differences, differentiated instruction and varied learning styles. Yet, with all these shortcomings, ODL mode can bring greater flexibility to connect the learner with his writing abilities. To make things clear we can take up the discussion with reference to specific writing task:

2.1 Writing task in ODL:

Write a letter to a professor asking him/her if you can mention him/her as a referee in your CV and whether he/she will be willing to provide a reference for you when needed. Include the following points:

A reminder of who you are (professor teach hundreds of students and should be able to place you)

Request for the permission to name her/him a referee

Inform them about where you are applying-it could be an institute of Higher Education or a business organization.

Source: communication skill block I of MCA (MCS 015), IGNOU:page no 52

2.2 Analysis of writing task*: Presuming that the learner attempts the writing task assigned in the given block .There is a greater possibility of mimicking the model answer given in the review section. He will not find opportunities to utilize his cognitive process in doing the task and in case he encounters a challenging task in real life situation (example, writing application for

different purpose or letter to different authorities etc) he/she might face problems in completing the task. Students want that their writing should be assessed through the tutor followed through the feedback process. Here writing suffers since the follow-up work on the part of teacher is missing.

Tutors and Material producers in ODL mode need specialized training on how to respond to the writing and also how to provide sufficient feedback on their students writing.

3.0 *Strategies:* The first thing that the students may require is of enormous support and assistance from the assigned tutor. These instructors can provide sufficient feedback on students' writing and their comments can further motivate the learners to rewrite. Students can send their written work to the tutor through postal or email (if there is an access to the computers). It can also be coordinated on telephone. Remedial or supplementary SLMs are needed to cater to low skilled learners as well. These strategies used in ODL mode could even benefit the learners in Conventional mode. We will not discuss how conventional institutions will utilize the ODL SLMs, since this will require a separate full-fledged discussion.

3.1 *Cognitive strategies:* cognitive strategies are activated in terms of structuring and restructuring,revising and editing the text which finally leads to the writing enhancement. Writing involves a lot of thinking which enable learners to become more strategic, flexible and more productive writer (Scheild, 1993 as cited in Edutech wiki.year.n.d http://edutechwiki.unige.ch/en/cognitive_strategy_instruction). A conventional program offers this benefit when students interact with their peers and teachers but a distant learner has to locate such interactive advantage. SLM can be designed to locate such advantage.

3.2 *Individualized instructional strategies:* individualized instruction in ODL mode is only possible through SLM. To improve the quality of teaching writing the instructional design with the help of systematic knowledge of subject and cognitive skills provide the foundation of professional expertise in particular skill(Braden, 1996 as cited in Taylor 1998:61). The growth in instructional design has promoted a shift from an approach wherein a single teacher is responsible for the teaching, design, development, and delivery, evaluation of education and training programs (Taylor 1998:61). Students can despatch their work to the assigned teacher through various channels such as postal, through email (if there is access to the computers), through teleconferencing, video conferencing, and computer conferencing or even through personal contact programs or counseling.

3.3 *Activities:* Activities are the key components to improve writing in a distance program. Self instructional distance teaching materials are integrated with writing activities, which helps the learner in solving their practical problems for example, self assessment questions (SAQs), unit and exercises, etc (IGNOU, 1997:8-9 as cited in Mishra and Gaba, 2000:41). Writing activities need to be designed according to the learner's interest and need and should be able to grab the learner interest and maintain the enthusiasm so that a learner must complete them. This can be done by presenting a variety of activities and in doing this, learner will also get

exposed to the different kinds of writing activities and will be able to achieve the satisfaction and autonomy (Lockwood, 1992 as cited in *Ibid*: 42).Research in this area reveals that the role of activities has been taken differently by learners. Some use them as instructed in the course, other try to skip them and go directly to the model answers. To improve the quality it is important that there should be relationship between activities and assignments, the space provided for writing descriptive answers is not sufficient, so practice questions should be given in the blocks. More descriptive questions with model answers may be added (*Ibid*: 43)

3.4 Using *Multi-Media:* teaching of writing at distance can become more challenging and problematic for those students who have taken only classroom based writing instruction. They will find more difficult to process writing in the absence of other students and teacher. These students need some special attention and need to taught how to write independently, how to organize their writing, how to make a piece of writing more coherent and logical, etc. To overcome these problems there should be contact and counseling program from the beginning so that they can establish relation with students and teachers (Tooth, 2000:140). Media can serve different purposes like if students want to discuss the problems like accuracy, grammatical errors etc while writing he/she can discuss this with tutor/instructor through videoconferencing or computer based course ware. Students want or need regular feedback or follow up work, which they can do through email, audio conferencing or even video conferencing can be helpful. These mediums are used in training to improve quality of the learning process for students. However these medium have their restriction depending on students (their background, geographical area, their learning style and skills) for example: if a learner is living in an isolated area than telephonic communication will break the barrier between him/her and teacher or if the rate of literacy is low, audio or video resources will be useful. Teachers also need training for applying these resources according to the needs of the learners. A good teacher seeks as many ways as possible to stimulate their thinking (*Ibid*: 140-41). Teachers should use only a few strategies and support their use over a prolonged period of time (UNL, 2006. http://www.unl.edu/esi/teachingstrategy.shtml).

4. Problems in writing Instruction: Surveys in Aligarh

According to the survey[1], 76% of teachers say that, they perform almost all academic tasks related to college and to their own research work such as writing letters , essays , application, assignments, projects, articles, study materials, , class notes and so on. This shows that teachers are performing all the important writing tasks but inside the classroom they are not comfortable with the teaching dimension of writing. The survey reports:

Writing is time consuming (61%)

Implement writing activities as per the curriculum goals (33%)
Implementing new methods for the teaching of writing (38%)
Teaching writing for a diverse group of students (61%)

Teaching writing for a mixed ability learners (57%)

Teaching writing for less-skilled learners (80%)

Correcting written answers (52%)

Giving written feedback to the students' written work (28.5%)

No opportunity for assessing the writing difficulties (28.5%)

In another survey[2], the responses of the secondary school teachers of English on the status of teaching of writing are quite similar to the survey[1]. The areas of immediate concern are structures of English, coherence and cohesion in writing, lack of materials, time factor in materializing writing, students' motivation and issues in writing assessment.

4.1 Need for in-service teacher training:

More importantly, the key issue pertaining to lack of receiving training in writing has received a great attention. Admittedly, respondents felt the need for acquiring special training in teaching writing with regard to process, accuracy and fluency based writing. The responses of teachers on the basis of survey[1] and survey[2] are the following:

- 80% of teachers say that the teaching writing to for less skilled learners is difficult.
- 61% of teachers say that the teaching writing for a diverse group of students is very difficult.
- 57%% of teachers say that the teaching of writing for a mixed ability learners is difficult.
- And 28% of teachers say that providing feedback to the students' written work is very difficult.

Most of the teachers feel that making students to write is not an easy job because their comfort level with English language is at low level and this actually involves the issue of providing adequate training. There are no teacher training programs available and those which are available do not cater to the teachers' concerns. Teachers are not trained in giving feedback to the students so as to help them improve their writing. Teachers need to be trained because they do not have a fair idea of writing. About 70% of teachers felt that they need training in writing. The results are not very promising and show that teacher at conventional are not comfortable with the writing and they demand and require training. What about the teachers who are dealing writing at distance? What kind of training do they need? Or are they better facilitator than conventional teachers? Or can they provide assistance to the learners in conventional mode?

We now take up the crux of the problem; distant tutor is definitely a better tutor than the conventional one provided he is in the know of appropriate and relevant SLM. His interaction with the learner may be one to one whereas in conventional mode students hesitate to ask questions but in distance students do not as fears may be shared and also SLM flexibility caters for individual differences (VSL, 2010 http://www.vsl.edu.au/pdf/Distance%20ED.pdf)). First of

all it is not always possible to train huge number of English teachers teaching writing in conventional program whereas this is possible in ODL mode.

But this doesn't mean that the teacher at distance don't require training. A distance teacher also has to be trained for designing writing -specific SLM. Training teachers for teaching writing at a distance will bring several advantages as outlined in the following section.

5.1 Suggestions for in-service teacher training at distance:

1. SLM in ODL mode can very well cater to the less skilled writers, where as less skilled writers are at disadvantage in conventional mode.
2. Mostly training programs and seminars are hypothetical and they are quite distanced from the learner; there is a need for regular follow-up and training programs.
3. Teachers in conventional mode too need training to facilitate the regular learning and they can get this training through ODL mode and vice versa.
4. Trainers also need training in terms of catering to the need of teachers and writing is an area which requires more attention.
5. In training programs teacher must be given training in almost all the areas of writing so that they can overcome with the fear of writing.
6. While designing the SLM, tutor/teacher/instructor need to be put at the centre of decision making process.
7. There should be effective communication between learner and the tutor through various configurations available through multimedia.
8. Training should also be given to teachers in terms of given feedbacks on students writing. Anticipating students problems (Verma, 2008:20)

SLMs can be used in conventional universities as well in the form of textbook because this will provide the students of conventional universities with self-study tools and direction for better writing and practicing and also they can minimize their mistakes through self checking questions and review sections. Utilization of SLM in conventional mode will open the new method of transformation of learning writing from traditional textbooks and study materials (Rozenblit, 1990:76).

Notes:

Survey[1]: a survey on Status of Written Communication was conducted at UGC Academic staff college, A.M.U Aligarh on the participant attending 106th orientation course. October, 2010.

Survey[2]: a survey was conducted on Teaching of Writing on Secondary Scholl of Aligarh 2010. The names of schools are: AL- Barkat, Woodbine Florent Public School. Iqra Public School(boys), A.B.K. Union School (Girls' school), A.B.K. Union (Boys' section), Our Lady of Fatima School, St. Fidelis School Sr.Sec. School, S.T.S. high School, City high School (Boys'

section), Aligarh Public School, Zakir Hussain Modern SE.SEC.School, A.J.M.P.s, Gagan Publifcd School, Blue Bird Sr.Sec. School, Blackdale Public School, A.M.U. Girl's high School.

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