

Promoting EFL Learners' Writing Skills through Assigned Tasks

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ABSTRACT: Writing as a work of art and a form of connection has become the framework of our world's communication, business, job-opportunities, and foreign language education. In their early struggles with major skills, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students describe the process of writing as problematic and complicated. Yet, throughout time as their academic tasks become more demanding and enquiring and with the assistance of their teachers, these language learners can become writing connoisseurs. This paper tried to explore if these students can overcome the writing difficulties by engaging in assigned activities. The data were collected through a case study carried out with third Year LMD students using questionnaires administered to the learners, informal interviews, discussion classes and assessment of students' feedback from the assignments. Findings demonstrate that the suggested techniques have helped the learners' promote their writing aptitudes and nourish their motivation to write in the target language.

KEYWORDS: EFL Students, assigned tasks, writing difficulties, improving the writing skills

1. Theoretical Scope

Writing as a major productive language skill is viewed as a strong means that allows the transmission of knowledge and ideas (Diamond 1999). Today, with the internet explosion, more communication is taking place in the written than in the spoken form, and developing good writing habits has become a must. In academic settings, EFL learners need to rely on writing to an unprecedented extent because they know that its mastery offers them massive merits such as becoming effective language learners, being equipped with teaching career readiness, and having access to the best salaried jobs, etc. This viewpoint is clearly illustrated by Glazier (1994, 3) who asserts *“Being able to write in English is essential in college, and it probably will be an asset in your career.”*

Yet, it has been observed that standards for great writing among these EFL students have declined. Throughout time, as these learners approach the end of their training, this decline is getting steeper. This situation requires then, prompt actions to offer our students possibilities to improve their writing skills. This is well explained in Conley's words (2007, 4):

“If we could institute only one change to make students more college ready, it should be to increase the amount and quality of writing students are expected to produce.”

Also, it should be acknowledged that being skilled at writing is very demanding and requires a lot of efforts, as claimed by Godfrey (2016,1):

“Writing well is not a natural gift but something that needs to be learnt and practised. You may struggle at first because the style and content of writing for university is new to you but you will improve steadily and may even start to enjoy it.”

To highlight the quality of academic writing, Godfrey (2016, 3) continues explaining:

“Successful writing is precise, clear and to the point. This means that you do need to use more formal vocabulary but not overly complex words or sentences.”

In EFL contexts, many learners describe the task of writing as an annoying exercise and uneasy situation, since they will be corrected and criticized by their teachers, as described by Hamp &Heasley (2006, 2):

“Few people write spontaneously and feel comfortable with a formal writing task intended for the eyes of someone else. When the “someone else” is the teacher,

whose eyes may be critical, and who indeed may assign an individual assessment to the written product, most people feel uncomfortable.”

Another issue faced by EFL learners in their written expression courses is the notion of time limit which is discussed by Chandrasegaran (2002, 14) as follows:

“A problem to be expected in the writing classroom is that some students take much longer than others to write the required parts of the essay. Many never finish their writing in class.”

Thus, successful writing requires hard work and intensive practise as contended by Lagan (2002, 14)

“Because writing is a skill, it makes sense that the more you practise writing, the better you will write.”

To help these students overcome their writing difficulties, this paper aims to provide some guidelines through a case study carried out in the department of English at the University of Oran 2 in Algeria and which presents some teaching techniques in the form of assigned tasks that have been developed into successful practice and effective writing. The strategy of assigned tasks undertaken in this research work is viewed as demanding and stimulating. It also helps students develop a much wider knowledge of the language and the topics dealt with, which can make them more autonomous and confident. In this sense, Shih (1986, 1) maintains:

“It is argued that such instruction develops thinking, researching, and writing skills needed for academic writing tasks and does more realistically than does traditional instruction.”

2. Problem Posing

This study attempts to meet the following objectives:

- Explore the current problems faced by 3rd year LMD students in their written expression classes
- Help these students overcome the writing difficulties
- Suggest some teaching techniques and put them into practice to encourage effective writing.

This research addressed the following basic research questions:

1. Can assigned tasks improve EFL learners' writing abilities?
2. Can EFL learners' writing motivation be increased through assigned tasks?

It is hypothesized that:

1. Crafting specific assigned activities can help EFL learners enhance their writing skills.
2. Developing useful assigned activities may raise the students' interest and elevate their writing motivation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. *Participants*

71 third year LMD EFL students from classes of approximately the same writing proficiency level (based from the students' grades from the previous tests) at the department of English at the University of Oran 2 in Algeria took part in this research. The learners were assigned every two weeks in-class writing tasks, individual projects about various topics, and take-home written assignments.

3.2. *Data collection tools*

A qualitative approach was adopted and data were gathered from questionnaires administered to the students at the beginning and the end of the research, informal interviews conducted with the participants, discussion classes and the assessment of assigned work. After each assigned work, the corrected pieces of writing were returned to the learners accompanied by elaborate and detailed comments and advice, then the tasks were corrected in the classroom. By the beginning of the second semester, the students' written products in all activities increased in length and the number of constructive and correct ideas, but diminished in the number of errors.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Positive Effects of Assigned Tasks on Learners' Written Abilities

4.1.1 The Students' Questionnaire

It is found that 95% (68) of the learners reported that they gained profit from these techniques, mainly the incorporation of various tasks. They acknowledged that the range of topics they worked on, the intensive homework and projects, classroom discussions, and the detailed remarks they found on their assignments raised their motivation, and enthusiasm to write in the target language. The students' responses demonstrated that:

- ✦ They learnt clearly how to follow the key stages of the writing process.
- ✦ They became more aware of error correction and fluency in writing.
- ✦ They have become critical in their writing and analytical in their way of thinking.
- ✦ They noticed that their language mistakes were better stressed.

4.1.2 Informal Interviews and Discussion Classes

Data from Informal interviews reveal that 94, 37% (67) of the respondents explained that they developed the notions of collaborative skills and classroom engagement through pair work and the discussions and debates they launched in their classrooms.

4.1.3 Assessment of Assigned Work

The number of mistakes made by the learners fell by 60% in the post assignments compared with the departure of practiced activities, which implies that these graduate students showed a considerable progress in terms of writing accuracy.

4.2. Positive Effects of Assigned Activities on Learners' Motivation

Most of the learners 77,46% (55) responded that they became accustomed to surf the Net searching for interesting topics to write about, joined the university library looking for interesting books of written expression, and started reading and writing about different themes to enrich their linguistic repertoire, and enhance their writing abilities. Consequently, this illustrates the positive impact of the suggested activities on our graduate students' motivation.

5. Conclusion

This study has attempted to offer some insights into how assigned activities can contribute in the improvement of learners' writing skills, and the increase of their motivation in writing in the target language. The suggested strategies, due to their interactive quality have served as an encouraging instrument to ameliorate EFL learners' writing capacities, better understand and identify their needs and thoughts, elevate their motivation, and enhance their linguistic performance, to help teachers readjust their teaching practices and offer their students relevant assistance.

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