Action Research on:
English Writing Skill of the Tertiary Level Students of the Colleges of Dhaka City, Bangladesh

Mohammad Rukanuddin
Assistant Professor of English, Department of Arts and Sciences
Ahsanullah University of Science and Technology
141-142 Love Road, Tejgaon Industrial Area
Dhaka 1208, Bangladesh
Email: rukan2009@gmail.com

Abstract
This action research, though in a miniature scale, has aimed at finding out the condition of English writing skill of the tertiary level students studying in the colleges of Dhaka City in Bangladesh. It explores that the target students' writing skill is faulty (lexically, structurally, and cohesively). It also finds that if the students are taught this skill according to appropriate language teaching principles and methods, they are, in most cases, receptive and improve considerably.
Keywords: action research, tertiary level students, writing skill, language teaching method

1. Introduction

Writing skill is one of the four basic skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing - of language. It is a productive skill of language users, which enables them to put their thoughts into words in a meaningful form and to mentally react to the message. Though the goal of writing is expression of thoughts and ideas, it is attained through various phases. Hampton (1989) says that writers are independent when they are able to write without much assistance. Next, writers gain comprehensibility when they can write so that it can be read and understood by themselves and others. Then, writers attain fluency by being able to write smoothly and easily as well as understandably. Finally, writers gain creativity when they can write their own ideas, not copying what has already been written, so that they can be read and understood.

1.1 Importance of writing skill

Writing skill is an important tool for better performance in examinations and greater academic achievement. In real life situation most potential employers give importance to writing skill. Among a group of employees requiring writing skill, someone who writes well is sure to stand out and achieve success more quickly than others. Moreover, it is the writing skill that has enabled authors to record their thoughts and expressions in books and various other media from the far past.

1.2 Testing writing skill

Two different approaches are used for assessing learners' writing ability. Weir (1988) mentions them as direct method and indirect method. In the indirect method writing can be divided into discrete levels: grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation which can be tested by objective tests. In the second method 'more direct extended' composition tasks can be used as stimuli for assessing one's writing capability focusing on an understanding of vocabulary, structures and cohesive devices. This direct way of testing is regarded as a suitable tool for assessing the ability to present a written argument in a logical manner, which cannot be tested in other ways. However, there are criticisms of this direct way of testing on several grounds. They include the fact that this test involves subjective or impressionistic assessment.

1.3 Action research:

An action research is a kind of research through which teachers investigate teaching methods and approaches, and learning in order to improve their own and the students' performance. Carr and Kemmis (1986) state that action research is about the improvement of practice, understanding of practice and the situation in which practice takes place. Action research is used in real life situations, rather than in any artificial, experimental studies, since its primary focus is on solving real problems.

Educational Action Research, has its foundations in the writings of John Dewey, the great American educational

philosopher of the 1920s and 30s, who believed that professional educators should become involved in community problem-solving. Its practitioners, not surprisingly, operate mainly out of educational institutions, and focus on development of curriculum, professional development, and applying learning in a social context. It is often the case that university-based action researchers work with primary and secondary school teachers and students acting upon the conditions to make necessary changes.

Regarding action research Susman (1983) gives an elaborate listing of its phases (Figure # 1). He shows five phases to be conducted within each research cycle. Initially, a problem is identified and data are collected for a more detailed diagnosis. This is followed by a collective efforts of several possible solutions, from which a single plan of action emerges and is implemented. Data on the results of the intervention are collected and analyzed, and the findings are interpreted in the light of how successful the action has been. At this point, the problem is re-assessed and the process begins another cycle. This process continues until the problem is resolved. In this way effective actions or measures are adopted for the betterment of learning and teaching in education as well as in the field of language learning and teaching.
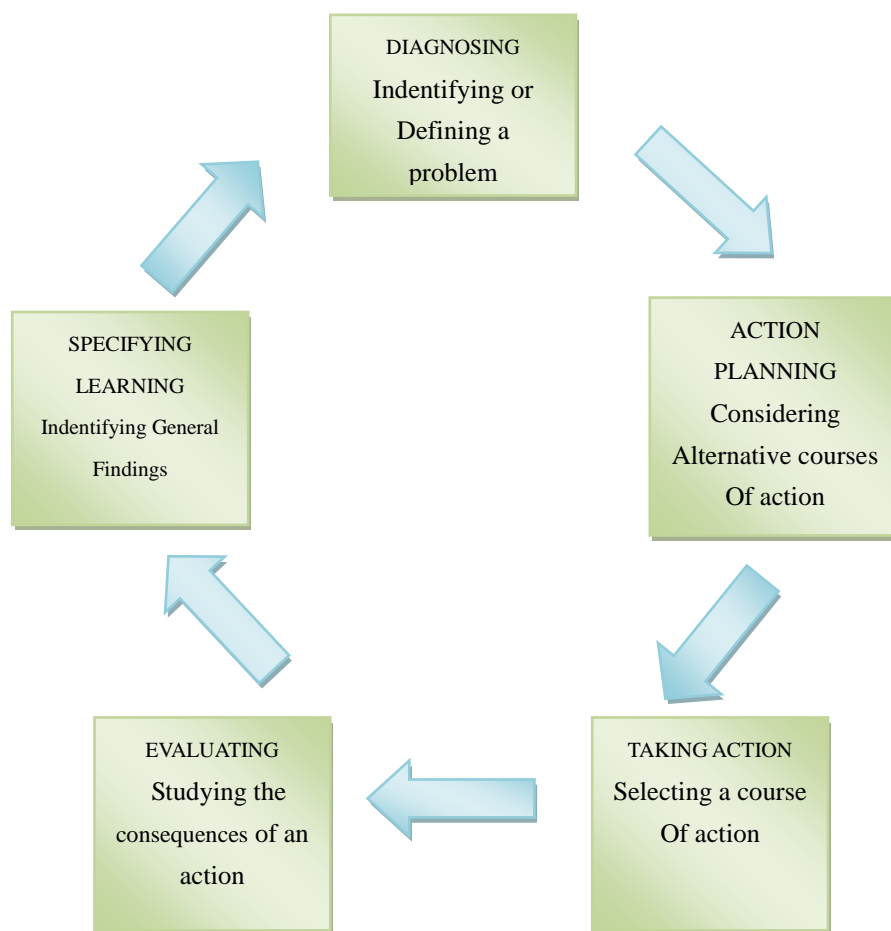

Figure 1: Action Research Model (adapted from Susman 1983)

2. Research area

The research area investigated by the researcher is the condition or quality of English writing skill of the tertiary level students of the colleges of Dhaka city of Bangladesh under the title:

Action Research on English Writing Skill of the Tertiary Level Students of the Colleges of Dhaka City, Bangladesh.

2.1 Aim of research

The aim of the research was to find out the quality of the writing ability of the students studying at the tertiary level colleges of Dhaka city in Bangladesh. It is very often noticed that the students at this level of studies fail to express themselves in writing in English. Most of them fail even to produce what they have learnt in their academic courses, and ultimately score very badly in examinations. That is why the researcher undertook an investigation to pin point the problem areas first and then to find out probable solutions to the problems.

2.2 Research question:

The question that has made the researcher undertake the incumbent action research work is how correctly the tertiary level students of the colleges of Dhaka city of Bangladesh write English. The same has been put as a question in the following manner:

How correctly do students write English at the tertiary level colleges of Dhaka City of Bangladesh?

2.3 Hypotheses:

a. The tertiary level students of the colleges of Dhaka City of Bangladesh cannot write English effectively.

b. The tertiary level students of the colleges of Dhaka City of Bangladesh write English effectively.

On the basis of the research question, the researcher assumes the above two probabilities in his research area: the writing capacity of the subjects is either effective or not effective with a view to finding out the truer fact between the two. As a hypothesis helps a researcher to collect data in an orderly way and it provides the basis for distinguishing relevant facts from irrelevant data, the researcher has adopted these two hypotheses.

The first hypothesis is a working hypothesis. The researcher has used this hypothesis as a presupposed or predicted fact for his research with the hope of establishing the fact.

The second hypothesis has been used as a null hypothesis which is eventually disproved or nullified, because when a null hypothesis is rejected, it actually proves the working hypothesis.

2.4 Justification of the project

One of the major concerns at our tertiary level educational institutions is that students are having difficulty mastering the writing skill despite the fact that they have studied English language as a mandatory subject from standard one to standard twelve. The researcher believes that because of the limited foundational instructions these students demonstrate a lack of proficiency in writing English among other reasons.

3. Literature Review:

Action research has been defined by many experts in different ways. However, almost all of them agree that this is done for the improvement of the 'strategies' and 'practices' with which some action is performed. The phrase 'action research' was first coined by Lewin (1946) to mean a social action research for the purpose of social development. Cohen and Manion (1985) in Nunan (1992) say that action research is situational and concerned with the identification and solution of problems in a particular situation. Allwright and Bailey (1991) say that through action research 'the exploratory teacher will not only improve achievement but also contribute to our … knowledge about how language classroom works."

As far as research on writing skill is concerned the samples of writings are required. For this purpose, the subjects should be made to write on something. Hughes (1989) says that 'the best way to test people's writing ability is to get them to write.' Harris (1969) points out five principles to follow in order to make the testing tasks representative. First of all, arrangement should be there to take several samples, rather than one. Secondly, writing tasks should be within the reach of all. Thirdly, regarding the writing tasks all necessary directions should be provided. Fourthly, no alternatives should be allowed. And finally, the writing assignments should be pre-tested if possible.

4. Data and Data Collection Methods

As the sample population of the study, 33 students were chosen from a tertiary level educational institute of Dhaka city. Among them 96.97% were male, 3.03% were female (Fig # 2)
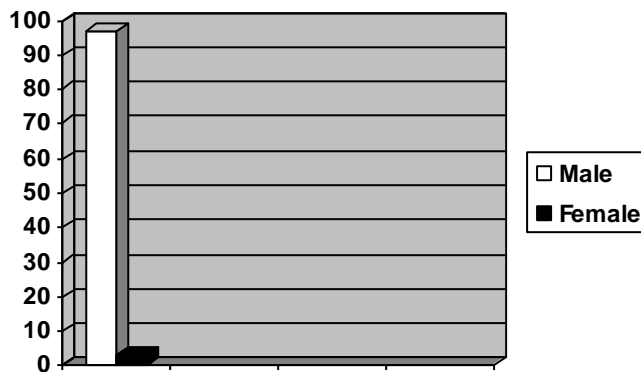
Figure 2: Percentage of male subjects and female subjects of the sample population in graph

30.30% participating subjects had Dhaka based urban school background, while 69.70% had high school background
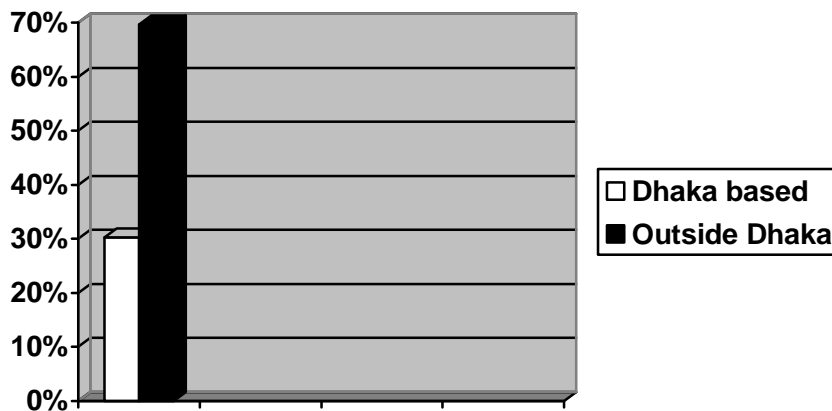
from outside Dhaka (Figur#3)..

Figure 3:Percentage of the Dhaka based and out-side Dhaka subjects in the study in graph

4.1 Data Collection Methods

As Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2005) suggest that typically minimum sample size of 30 is required for an action research, the samples of writing from 33 students studying at a bachelor's (honours) degree programme (not majoring in English) at an institute in Dhaka City, Bangladesh, were taken before and after treatment. Next, some relevant information regarding the students' learning background and teachers' teaching strategies were collected through interview.

4.2. Data Collection tools:

Writing task, tests on grammatical items like right use of verbs, identifying sentence structures like simple, compound and complex, questionnaire for the learners and teachers were used as tools for data collections.

4.3 Action

At the first meeting with the subjects, they were motivated and asked to write a paragraph on 'An Ideal Student', a

very basic type of paragraph. They wrote the same, and the scripts were collected. In the second class, the subjects were given treatment depending on the errors most of them committed in their writings. They were shown the errors they committed in subject verb agreement, singular and plural forms of words. They were taught the basic parts of a paragraph: the topic sentence (the beginning of a paragraph), the body of the paragraph (the middle), and conclusion (the end). Most importantly they were shown how to logically connect the sentences of a paragraph by using appropriate connecting words and phrases.

5. Data Analysis and variables

Two kinds of variables have been used in this research: dependent variables and independent variables.   The dependent variables indicate the effects or outcome which the researcher wants to find out. On the other hand, the independent variables refer to the presumed cause or condition for which changes may take place in the dependent variables. (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991).   So, the former is the effects or results and the latter is the cause. Here in this research the scores on composition task, cloze test and multiple choice questions have been used as dependent variables. And teaching or instructions on the technicalities of composing paragraphs and grammatical structures required for constructing sentences have been use as independent variables. |

5.1Analysis of the pre-treatment tests

After the collection of data they were analysed and found that among 33 students, 3 subjects' performance in writing a very basic level paragraph was zero. They did not have the ability to distinguish between a phrase and a sentence. They do not have even the knowledge of subject verb agreement.   And the rest 30 students have difficulties in the use of proper words like 'honest' and 'honesty' or structural difficulties like, 'Who is attentive in the class is an ideal student' and so on. And all of them lack in cohesive aspects of a composition. The percentile representation of the pre-treatment test results is   a. Zero performance (9.09%),   b. Erroneous performance (90.90%) ,   c. Good performance (0%)   (figure # 4)
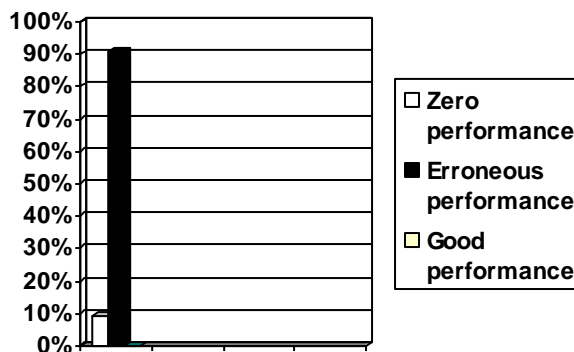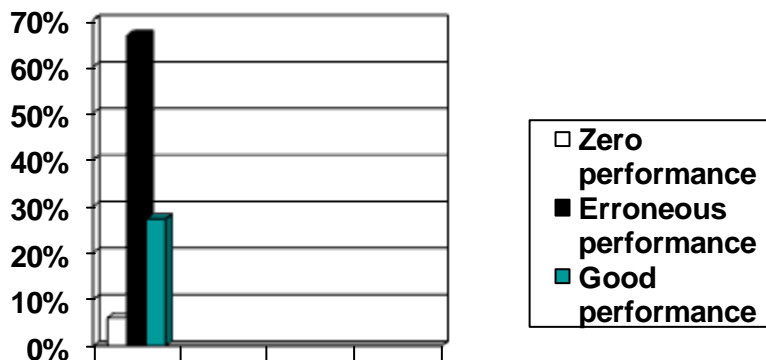

Figure 4: Graphical presentation of the pre-treatment test results in percentage:

5.2 Post treatment results:

Post treatment test results show that 9 subjects out of 33, improve positively. They have written almost without any errors, 22 improve a little but still erroneous and 2 remain at the zero level performance.

The percentile presentation of the post treatment test results are a. Zero (6.06%), b. Erroneous (66.66%) and c. Good (27.27%).   (Figure # 5)

Figure# 5. Graphical presentation of the post treatment test results in percentage

5.3 Analysis of the scores of cloze test on linking words, multiple choice questions, sentence structures and use of verbs (Table 1):

Type of test	No. of subjects obtaining 50% and above	No. of subjects obtaining below 50%	Total number of subjects
Cloze test on the use of linking words	13	20	33
Multiple choice questions on sentence construction (simple, compound and complex)	27	06	33
Gap filling on the use of right forms of verbs	29	04	33

In a cloze test of six gaps requiring the subjects to fill in with linking words in a process paragraph, 13 out of 33

scored 50% and above, and the rest 20 got below 50%.

Next, in a test of multiple choice questions on the sentence construction (simple, compound and complex) techniques 27 out of 33 got 50% and above, while the rest 6 got below 50%.

Finally, in a gap filling exercise to test the knowledge of the right forms of verbs 29 scored 50% and above and the rest 4 got below 50%

On the basis of the table of scores on three types of test it holistically appears that the subjects' knowledge of the use of verbs in isolated sentences and isolated sentence constructions is better than their ability in cohesive and coherent text composition.

5.4 Learners' interview (through questionnaire) analysis

Basing on a questionnaire of 15 questions the incumbent subjects were interviewed. Analysing the responses of the questionnaire it was found that 87.87% students were of the opinion that the present poor condition of English language learning and teaching was due to the lack of proper teaching of the language. The rest 12.12% of the population opined that it was due to the reluctance and negligence of the students in their studies of English language. (Figure #6).
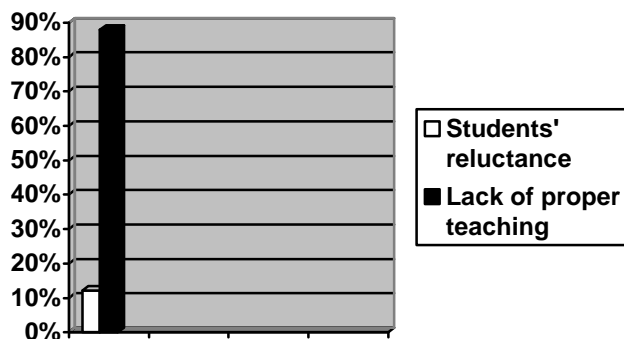

Figure 6: Graphical presentation of the results of the students' interview through questionnaire

Besides the above information, the learners' interview also reveals that majority (80%) of them were not happy with the English language teaching they got in their school life. Moreover, according 75% of them speaking is the most essential skill of English language, but in their institutions writing skill (grammatical exercises) is given importance. And even then, the students' basic writing skill is seriously faulty. About 90% of the subjects opine that they have hardly been taught any composition with the techniques of writing paragraph. They do not know that all the sentences in a paragraph or any composition should be logically connected with one another for the sake of coherence and cohesion of discourse.

5.5 Analysis of teachers' interview

Teachers' interview on the basis of a 12 question-questionnaire indicatess that the teachers are not capable of teaching English language properly as they are not trained in this discipline. They are just completing the syllabus designed by the National Curriculum Board or institutional authorities. They seem not to have expertise required for handling the listening, speaking, reading and writing skills of English language aptly.

5.6 Comments on the classroom observation

The class room observation suggests the poor teaching and learning condition of English prevailing in the city. In the city there are well built schools, classrooms, good seating arrangements, adequate teaching and non-teaching staff; but there are shortages of the competent facilitators who can provide the learners with effective language teaching in English.

6. Conclusion

On the basis of the findings of the research it may be inferred that these subjects were not taught English language properly in their secondary and higher secondary levels of Education. From their interview it reveals that most of them come from different remote areas of different districts,   while a very few of them are from the capital city Dhaka.

And the substandard level of English writing of the subjects might be attributed to the shortage of teachers that prevail in the educational institutions situated outside Dhaka. That is why, the researcher assumes, the students of the tertiary level educational institutions of the city lack in effective writing skills in English.

6.1 Suggestions

For making the students concerned proficient in all the skills of English, steps may be taken so that there are sufficient well trained, well educated teachers who are able to contribute effectively in the teaching and learning of the English language in the city as well as in the whole country.

The authorities in the education sector of the Government, perhaps, can play effective roles in planning and implementing nation wide training programme for all the English teachers of all institutions of the country to remove the horrible state of affairs existing in the teaching and learning of English in the country. Only then, may the writing capability along with other skills of the learners improve.

6.2 Limitations of the action research

Because of time and other constraints this research work has its limitations. The researcher feels that instead of only one educational institution, if more institutions were contacted for data collection, the results might be more representative and the assumptions deduced could be more widely generalized. However, utmost care has been taken to stick to the norms and methods of action research in doing this work.

References
Allwright, D. (1988) Observations in the Language Classroom. London: Longman
Carr, W. and S. Kemmis. (1986) Becoming Critical: education, knowledge and   action   research. London, Lewes, Falmer
Cohen, L ; L. Manion & K.   Morrison. (2000). Research Methods in Education, (5th edition), London, RoutledgeFalmer.
Hampton, Roberta S. (1989) Community Involvement in Alphabet and Material Development. Notes on Literacy 60. S.I. s.n. pages 11-14, Ghana.
Harris, David P. (1969). Testing English as a Second Language. New York:
McGraw-Hill Book Company.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Action_research (January 12, 2011)
Hughes, Arthur. (1989). Testing for Language Teachers. Cambridge: The Press
Syndicate   of the University of Cambridge.
Lewin, K. (1946) "Research and minority problems". J. Soc. Issues 2(4): 34 – 36.
Nunan, David. (1992).   Research Methods in Language Learning. Cambridge: Cambridge   University.
Onwuegbuzie, A.J.& Leech, N.L. A Typology of Errors and Myths Perpetuated in Educational Research Textbooks
Current Issues in Education [On-line], 8(7). (2005, March 10).

Rosenthal, R., & R. L. Rosnow. (1991). Essentials of behavioral research: Methods and Data Analysis (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Seliger, Herbert W. and Elana Sohany. (1989). Second Language Research Methods. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Susman, Gerald I. "Action Research: A Sociotechnical Systems Perspective." Ed. G. Morgan. London: Sage Publications, 1983. 95-113

Weir, C. (1988). Communicative Language Testing With Special Reference toEnglish as a Foreign Language. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.