



RESEARCH PAPER

Perceptions about Learner's Achievement in English Major Undergraduate Online Writing Classes

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ABSTRACT

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Teaching writing skills is a complex and uphill task. Hence, teaching them about the writing process, genres, mechanics, editing and drafting their writing often seems difficult and time consuming. Teachers have to design and prepare activities to keep the learners motivated in writing classes. However, the pandemic introduced a new reality; where the learners shifted from the physical to online medium. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the perceptions of English major students towards learning English writing skills in online classes. For this purpose, a qualitative case study has been undertaken and data has been collected using purposive sampling from 15 participants from a public sector university. The analysis of the data shows that teaching pedagogy and interactive activities were used by the teacher for the delivery of content and increasing motivation of the learners. However, critical feedback was not provided. Overall, participants reported that they were able to learn the mechanics and genres of writing in online classes. Hence, the present study draws the attention of curriculum designers and teachers to design effective lesson plan with engaging and interactive activities and continuous feedback for improving student's performance and learning achievement in writing skills course.

Introduction

Writing has always been regarded as a crucial and critical skill in English as second language classroom (Cole & Feng, 2015). It is the domain where students are required to be given enough time to improve their writing skills. Writing is, without a doubt, an essential part of learning English as a second language (Sheerah, Yadav, Allah & Abiden; 2022). This significance stems from the essence that it reconfirms the grammar rules, lexicon, and idiomatic expressions that we have been instructing our students. Writing should be given more emphasis in ESL classes to better prepare students to deal with the conversational requirements of real-life situations.

(McDonough & Crawford, 2020). Without a doubt, the aim of teaching writing skills is to prepare ESL students to be successful writers (Chen and Zhang, 2019). Subjecting them to the process of writing is itself a good way to accomplish this objective. When learners' preferences are identified and they are subjected to circumstances in which they can generate genuine writing, their writing skills can be acquired. One of the objectives of ESL learners is to learn how to write a well-structured piece of writing that is recognized and valued by their academic institutions. It is understood by now that how difficult the process of writing is and how much time and skill is required to write a good piece. Writing is a course that requires extra time and attention especially for students who are weak at writing and teaching and learning writing online and assessing it is the biggest task ever for both the students and teachers.

Academic writing

Academic writing comprises any writing which has been done to accomplish a requirement assigned by college or university (Borozdina, 2019). Writing skills is considered as a complex activity which not only includes mechanical skills but cognitive skills as well. Having a good command over academic writing means a student must master correct grammatical sentence structure, appropriate word choice, coherence and cohesion, perfection in writing style (Adas & Bakir, 2013).

Students often face challenges in connection to production of an academic writing. It seems difficult to draft an article using academic writing skills in a non-native language in comparison to native language (Borozdina, 2019). Writing in a second language requires a specialized set of skills. Consequently, writing academically in a non-native language entails social relation apprehension including the culture of the targeted language. Hence, the language teachers need to address all such issues and take measures to eradicate barriers to make their learners skilled in the academic writing

Online education has become a part of majority of the educational institutions in the recent technology revolutionized era (Carolan & Kyppö; 2015). With the arrival of Covid-19 and the series of lock down imposed at different times in the world, online education is turned into a necessity for institutions and they are obliged to fulfil the requirements for running the online educational programs. Consequently, Pakistan has faced different modes of challenges in dealing with online mode of education. The foremost challenge comprises the accessibility of internet for students which has turned into a major obstacle for the accomplishment of educational goals for them (Manzoor, 2020).

In order to teach English in academic courses at tertiary level in Pakistani universities, writing is considered as a focal skill among all four English language skills (Jokhio, Raza, Younus & Soomro, 2020). Moreover, it is also observed that learning writing skills for majority of the students is more difficult than other language learning areas including, reading, listening, speaking and grammar (Carolan & Kyppö; 2015 & Swaity, 2021). With the current occurrence of occasional shift to online and in person mode of classes, it is crucial to explore the perceptions of undergraduate students on how was their experience of learning academic writing skills in online classes in comparison to taking physical classes.

Literature review

Researchers around the globe have conducted studies in the significance of recent shift of educational mode due to covid-19 restrictions. There are some of the previous researches reviewed below which linked with the one of the aims of present study about students' perceptions about learning writing skills through online classes.

Borozdina (2019) conducted a case study on EFL students of Russian university to analyse the students' perceptions about an academic writing course taught online. The study used the sample size of 13 participants and the research instruments comprised questionnaires, course reflections along and interviews. The study concluded that all the participants held positive perceptions about the academic writing course and expected to expand their learning experiences of online classes in future.

In addition, Irawati (2021) also reported the similar findings on the basis of students' perceptions about online writing classes. The researcher investigated the perceptions of students about their online writing classes taken on Google classroom. Data for this qualitative study was collected by using interviews from the sample size of 30 participants. The findings revealed that students had positive perceptions of taking writing classes using Google classroom. It further concluded that the use of technology for learning writing skills was productive and suggested to continue the technology integrated writing classes in future as well.

Rosyada and Sundari (2021) aimed to explore the practices of Google classroom in the facilitation of academic writing course to EFL undergraduate students. Data for this explanatory sequential research was collected from 96 participants and analysed by correlating the result data on writing assignments and use of questionnaires. The findings revealed students' satisfaction with Google classroom feature for taking academic writing online classes. With the availability of clear instructions and reminders for assignments, online academic writing course through online classes turned out as a beneficial source for undergraduate students.

Sheerah *et al* (2022) also studied the perceptions of teachers and students towards learning online writing skills using qualitative interviewing approach. Data was collected from 42 participants from the two groups using open ended questions. The findings showed that teachers and students had positive perceptions about using technology to learn writing skills.

There was also a comparative study conducted by Swaity (2021) in which she investigated the effectiveness of teaching English writing skills through online classes. The study comprised two groups (controlled and experimental) of 18 students. The overall progress of both groups in their respective writing course was assessed through pre-test and post-test using writing rubrics. Also, experimental group who took online classes was further given pre- and post- surveys to explore their experience of online writing classes. The test result showed slightly improved results of experimental group in comparison to controlled one who took face-to-face classes. The survey concluded the uncertainty of experimental group relative to their preferences on taking online classes in future over traditional classes.

The universities around the world and especially in Pakistan are confined to modify their traditional way of teaching practice from physical to online mode as a result of the global pandemic scenario due to Covid-19. Under the circumstances, there has been exceeded dependency on technology by both teachers and students. The existing literature mentioned above highlighted both positive and adverse perceptions of students on the use of online classes for academic writing skills worldwide (Barozdina, 2019; Irawati, 2021; Rosyada & Sundari, 2021; Swaity, 2021). However, there is an existence of uncertainties linked with the perceptions of Pakistani undergraduate students about taking online classes of academic English writing in the limited technology local environment. Therefore, the present study aims to explore the perceptions of undergraduate students about taking academic English course online.

Material and Methods

The present study was conducted to explore the perceptions of undergraduate English major students towards students' achievement in online writing classes. For this purpose, the study used a qualitative research method approach which is explained by Creswell (2015) that one of the major characteristics of the qualitative research is to explore a problem in order to develop an in-depth understanding of a central phenomenon. As the present study tends to explore the perceptions of undergraduate students towards their learning achievement in online writing classes, therefore qualitative research is further followed by grounded theory research design. Grounded theory aims to "explore common experience of individuals to develop a theory" (Creswell, 2015, p.20).

Research Site and Population

This study was conducted in a private sector University in Karachi where undergraduate students are taught academic writing as a compulsory course in their BS English. The academic writing course consists of 3 credit hours. The population for the present study was second year BS English students who had studied academic writing course in online classes.

Sampling Technique and Sample

Purposive homogenous sampling was used to select the participants for the present study. In homogenous sampling "the researcher purposefully samples individuals or sites based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics" (Creswell, 2015, p.208). This study comprised sample size of 15 students (10 Female and 05 male). The sample size was enough as the data reach saturation point and the researcher started receiving same amount of data. The students were selected on the basis of being enrolled in the online writing class course.

Data Collection Procedure and Tools

As the study focuses on knowing the perceptions of participants about their achievement in writing classes. Hence, semi-structured interviews were conducted. As the study focused on perceptions; therefore, semi-structured interviews appeared to be the most appropriate tool to collect the data from the participants. Semi-structured interview provides in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell,

2015). Before the actual data collection, piloting was done with two participants to check the clarity, reliability and understanding of the questions from the participant. A formal consent was taken before the actual data collection from all the participants. The interview data was recorded and transcribed after the consent and analyzed for thematic analysis. Codes, categories and themes were generated from the recorded data. The interview with each participant lasted for 20-to-25 minutes from 15 participants. Participant's convenience, ease of communication and place of interview was given priority. Also, the transcribed data was shown to the participant and cross-checked with a researcher for member-checking and exact analysis of the data and avoiding researcher bias. Ethical protocols were followed and the participants were assured that the data was going to be used for academic purposes only and the identity of the participants will not be disclosed at any time.

Results and Discussion

To investigate the perceptions of students achievement in online writing skills; data was collected using semi-structure interviews. The coded data was analyzed for themes and sub-themes to know about undergraduate English major students' progress in online writing skill classes. Figure 01 shows the different themes analyzed after students responses.



Figure 1 Students Achievement in Online Writing Skills Classes

Teaching Effectiveness

One of the major focus while teaching any skill of language is the teaching pedagogy and content. Hence, teaching writing skills course in online classes offers an insight to the teaching practices. While inquiring about the teaching methodology the participants narrated that *"the teacher used recorded lecturers and live sessions for teaching academic writing"*. Another participant remarked *"that the teacher used interactive PowerPoint slides during recorded lecturers"*. Similarly, another participant narrated that the *"teacher used ppts with color variations and different font size that make*

learning engaging and interactive". In the same way, another participant explained that the "teacher used samples, example texts and simple language to convey ideas and learn about structure of paragraph and essay". Hence, most of the participants agreed that "recorded lectures were the best way to teach as the learners can watch it at their own pace and convenience because of internet issues". Another participant remarked that "these can be watched over and over again for clarity and conceptual understanding". Moreover, another participant while narrating the experience for online writing skills classes said that "sometimes we are unable to understand a concept and cannot ask the teacher to repeat in physical classes but in line classes we can listen the missing concept again and again. Thus recorded lectures were helpful in many ways" Online writing classes and lectures provided easy convenience and access to learners as one of the participant explained that

"During the pandemic situation where we had zero interaction with our teacher, these lectures really helped us better understand the conceptual underpinnings in writing. As sometimes classes were cancelled or some students faced connectivity issues so these lectures and activities guided us about the writing approach and different styles of writing"

Comparatively, physical classes offer lecture-based approach. As most of the participants narrated that the *"teacher used multimedia and PowerPoint slides to teach writing skills"*. In the same way, another respondent said *"that major focus is on lecture-based approach"*. Most of the participants agree that *"in physical classes teacher relies on learning by doing and practicing rather than conceptual clarity while explaining"*

Integrated Engagement Activities

Teaching writing skills requires interactive content and curriculum. As the sole focus is integrating the activities in the course to make writing fun and engaging. Participants in online classes narrated that the *"teacher used a range of activities before teaching the strategies, we were engaged to learn the process of writing by following and practicing each step"*. As another participant explained in detail that *"teacher used to send us interactive recorded lectures, we used to listen to them talk about it and tasks were assigned in it as well for practice"*

Similarly, while commenting about the different activities, one participant said that *"the teacher used picture cues, brainstorming, critical thinking activities and free-writing activities to help us to get use to writing"* Moreover, another participant narrated that *"the teacher used pictures cues for brainstorming, bucket list for listing; mind-mapping for clustering and questions for journalistic writing"*. In the same way one participant remarked *"that the teacher planned movie-watching and rewriting a famous story for narrative and descriptive genre writing"*. Consequently another participant said *"that the teacher used Google maps and virtual tour to teach descriptive writing"*. Additionally, another participant said *"that teacher used TedTalks to teach argumentative and persuasive style of writing and recorded videos explaining and giving feedback about the different genre of writing to get a better understanding"*. Hence, overall the participants believed that the teacher used a range of activities to teach and create interest in learning academic writing virtually.

Assessing Learner's Writing Skills

While explaining about the assessment criteria and students' progress and achievement. Learners narrated that *"in online classes, teacher took quizzes on Google*

forms and examination was conducted on Google Doc which provides an automatic feedback mechanism and feedback is received via email” However, in traditional classes as participants narrated *“assessment is writing based and done on paper with ink an sometimes assignment are given which are preferred to be typed and sometimes handwritten”*. Similarly, another participant remarked that the teacher used *“digital portfolio as an assignment to read our work and give comments”*. In the same way, another participant said that *“digital portfolio boosted my writing confidence and provided an opportunity to learn about coherence and cohesion in an text”*

Feedback in Writing Classes

Feedback is an important aspect of writing skills. While expressing their opinions about feedback; participants narrated that *“during online classes, the teacher initially provided the feedback on our write-up with comments”*. However, *“detailed and constructive feedback was not given”*. Similarly while remarking about feedback in physical classes experience; one participant narrated that *“in physical classes the teacher gave weekly-based continuous assessment and write detailed comments with pen in our English classes during early semester”* Another participant remarked that in online classes; *“the teacher took a lot of time and constructive feedback was missing”*.. While remarking about the online writing classes experience one participant narrated that *“the drawback of online academic teaching was lack of teacher-student interaction; which In fact affected student’s performance in getting feedback on their assignments”*

Learning Achievement in Writing Classes

While narrating about their overall learning achievement in online writing skills classes. Participants narrated that *“various aspects of academic writing improved”*. As one of the participant remarked that *“we were able to learn about; writing thesis statements, topic sentences paragraph writing, descriptive writing and narrative writing”*. Similarly; another participant remarked that *“I was able to learn “the Do’s and Don’ts of writing”*. In the same manner, one participant said that *“the course helped in improving the basic skills and common mistakes which needs to be avoided in academic writing. For instance, using clichés, personal pronouns etc.”* In the same way, another participant said *“we were able to write critical essays using APA referencing”*. Overall, participants remarked that they were able to understand the different complexities of writing in online classes.

Discussion

The present study explored the perceptions of undergraduate English major students about learning achievement in online writing classes. As the pandemic introduced a new reality; it is highly significant to know about the perceptions of students towards learning writing skills in online classes. The analysis shows that the teaching methodology and content was highly effective; as the teacher used synchronous and asynchronous way of teaching. Along with it; the teacher used interactive lesson content to increase the motivation of learners. Integrated interactive activities made learning interesting. Similarly, the use of variety of activities to fit the learners’ needs made online writing classes engaging. The participants narrated that teacher used samples and online tools to improve the quality of teaching. Similarly, assessment and feedback is an essential part of writing. The students were satisfied with the online assessment via online tools and Google

Doc (Irwati, 2021) However, learner's preferred continuous feedback as it is provided in physical classes. Holistically, the study shows that learners were able to achieve and learn the basic mechanics of writing and how to avoid the common mistakes in writing. Holistically, the students were able to write critical essays.

Borozdina (2019) conducted a similar study as well; however it relied on collecting data using multiple tool. The present study utilized semi-structure interviews only. The findings were similar as the respondents had positive perceptions about writing skills and narrated that online classes provided a better learning environment. Similarly, Irwati (2021) also reported that technology improved the learning experience; as students' writing abilities improved. Similar findings were narrated by Pakistani English major students who narrated that teacher used interactive lesson plans and samples for writing using Google Classroom and recorded lectures. Rosyada and Sundari (2021) presented similar findings as well; where technology improved the overall quality of teaching and students learning needs especially writing. However, Swaity (2021) conducted a quantitative study and analyzed students' achievement using pre and posttest writing rubrics in online writing classes. The result shows that experimental group which was exposed to technology performed better than the controlled group. Overall, all these studies shows that online classes provide a positive learning atmosphere. However, the present study also highlights the drawbacks of online writing classes from the perspective of students.

Conclusion

The present study shows that students can achieve success in online writing classes; if teaching methodology is accurate and meeting the demands of learners. As the study explore the perceptions of learners towards learning achievement in online classes; therefore the study reports that the teaching methodology, interactive engaging activities, online assessment and continuous feedback are the prerequisites for achieving success in online writing classes. The content, curriculum, activities, interaction, assessment and feedback must fit in the medium of online teaching and it must be designed according to the needs of learners. The present study provides an accurate representation of how learners can achieve success and learn the mechanics of writing from a single classroom. The study is limited as it provides a glimpse of a single classroom and 15 students. A longitudinal study across different universities among English major students can further provide accurate details and achievement of learners.

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