

The struggle of Level 1 undergraduates in coping with English writing requirements

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Abstract

The number of Level 1 students, i.e. undergraduates in the lowest proficiency level of English has been increasing over the past few years, especially in the Faculties of Arts and Management. The survival of these second language speakers with the onset of English medium instruction is a struggle with their limited language proficiency. This study was conducted with the objective of identifying writing difficulties faced by level 1 students with the onset of English medium instruction and providing them support to overcome those difficulties. This study was conducted in the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo.

In conducting this research a placement test was administered to identify the sample. Questionnaires were administered to students, subject experts and English teachers to identify language needs and writing difficulties of Level 1 students. Incorporating the identified needs, a Remedial English program was designed and conducted. A post test was organized at the end of the course to evaluate students' progress and the success of the program.

Keywords: Undergraduates, Lowest Proficiency Level of English, English Medium Instruction, Remedial English Program, University of Colombo

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, English is considered as a second language by many citizens, and the majority of speakers speaks either Sinhala or Tamil as their first language. Even though it is a second language, it is a dominant language in Sri Lanka. According to Kandiah (2010: 56) “This is the language that provides access to modern knowledge, ... it is the instrument of development, it is the medium of international communication and of the reciprocal discharge of international responsibilities and commitments.”

Developing English language proficiency of the citizens, particularly of the student population, is one of the top priorities of the development agenda of the government. For example, General English has been introduced as a subject to the GCE Advanced Level, so that students in all streams can have an Advanced Level qualification in English. Furthermore, English medium instruction has been introduced at school level. The year 2010 was declared as the year of English and Information Technology. Most recently, i.e. in 2011, a Pre Orientation Programme (POP) was conducted by the Ministry of Higher Education, targeting all the new entrants, with the objective of empowering them with the English knowledge required for their higher studies. However, despite the initiatives adopted by the government, it has been observed that the number of Level 1 (low proficiency in English) new entrants has been increasing over the past few years, especially in the Faculties of Arts and Management. The highest number of Level 1 students was reported in the 2011/2012 batch in the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo. That was one fourth (25.7%) of the total student population. This controversy between the government’s commitment to improve English knowledge and the increasing number of students with weak language skills deserves the attention of the university academic community.

This research focused on Level 1 undergraduates as they belong to the lowest proficiency level of English. According to the benchmarks designed through the University Test of English Language (UTEL) in 2004, Level 1 students belong to Benchmark band 4. Their skills in relation to reading, writing, listening and speaking are considerably limited. As an example, their ability in reading comprehension is restricted to passages on familiar, personal topics. They can write only 5-10 simple sentences. Oral communication is limited to basic personal information.

For this study, Level 1 undergraduates were selected from the first years of the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo, since the first year is crucial for any undergraduate to adjust to the requirements of academia.

First year students may be far from home, family, friends, familiar streets, for the first extended time so far. For sometime like being on remand-they've been sent there by other people. Some are delighted in their new environment, others are homesick but all are expending a lot of their energy adjusting their lives. (Race, 2007: pp. 15-16)

This research focused on the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo, since it conducts lectures only in the English medium. How Level 1 undergraduates are struggling in this Faculty to fulfill the requirements of English medium instruction with their limited language skills has been frequently observed by the teaching staff.

The scope of this research was narrowed down to English writing difficulties since writing is frequently identified as one of the most difficult skills for any language learner.

...learning to write in either a first or second language is one of the most difficult tasks a learner encounters and one that few people can be said to fully master...Many native speakers leave school with a poor command of writing. (Richards, 1990: 100)

This is a valid statement in relation to undergraduates in Sri Lankan universities. According to a Test of English Proficiency (TEP) conducted under the supervision of Raheem (2009) across 12 Sri Lankan universities and two private institutes, it was found that overall writing is a weak skill among the undergraduates (ibid).

Through this study, an attempt is made to find answers to the following research questions:

- What are the difficult writing tasks assigned to Level 1 undergraduates?
- Why are they difficult?
- What support do they need in overcoming such writing difficulties?

Methodology

At the very beginning, a placement test was administered targeting the new entrants in order to identify the undergraduates with the lowest proficiency level of English. Since the focus is writing difficulties, the placement test was administered in the form of a written paper. According to the test results, 108 students out of 420 were in Level 1, as they scored less than 40 marks in the test. According to the existing criteria, 40 is the cut off point between Level 1 and Level 2.

The answer scripts produced at the placement test were closely analyzed while marking, and it was possible to identify some of the writing difficulties of the students. Incorporating the identified difficulties and the ideas of the experienced English lecturers of the English Language Teaching Unit a Remedial English course was exclusively designed, targeting only the Level 1 students. This course was conducted during the first semester.

At the end of the course, a post test was administered to evaluate the progress they had achieved by following the course.

Of the student population, one third was selected i.e. 36 students through the technique of disproportionate stratified random sampling in order to observe their written work closely. This sample selection technique became useful to select a representative valid sample. The written work produced by the informants during in-class writing activities, take home assignments, continuous assessments and final papers were collected at the various stages of the research study. They constituted the main source of information to identify students' writing difficulties and needs, and to gauge students' development with regard to second language (L2) writing skills and ultimately to check the effectiveness of the teaching program.

Moreover, three questionnaires were administered i.e. to Level 1 undergraduates, experienced English teachers in the English Language Teaching Unit, and the subject teachers in the Faculty of Management and Finance. The objective of administering three questionnaires was to get a clearer overall picture of students' writing difficulties.

Findings

Data gathered through various research instruments provided important insights in relation to English writing difficulties of the students, and in relation to pedagogy in teaching writing. The findings are discussed in keeping with the research questions mentioned earlier.

Among the numerous writing activities assigned to undergraduates in the Faculty of Management and Finance, taking down notes, writing assignments and writing essay type answers under examination conditions were claimed as the most strenuous tasks by more than 65% of Level 1 undergraduates.

As revealed through their written scripts and the data provided through the questionnaires, there were language related reasons and other reasons behind their writing difficulties. As claimed by more than 90% of the student sample, limited vocabulary, poor grammar and difficulty in expression were the main language related reasons pertaining to their writing difficulties. Three fourths of the students declared

that they have problems in relation to spelling, sentence structure and overall structure of written work. Poor foundation, lack of reading and lack of practice in writing were revealed as the other stumbling blocks which obstruct their writing proficiency. 100% of the students and 88% of English teachers cited poor foundation in English basics as the main reason behind their lack of writing skills. There were other scholars who had made the same observation. For example, Karunaratne (2009: 23) also claims that the Faculty of Management currently has linguistically divergent students, the majority hailing “from vernacular speaking families or from under-resourced government schools.”

Through the data gathered through the questionnaire survey, it was revealed that Level 1 undergraduates should be provided support in enriching their limited vocabulary and in improving the grammatical accuracy of their writing. From the point of view of the language teachers, more opportunities should be made available to weak students to practice writing under the supervision of a teacher, since writing is a skill which should be practiced in order to achieve mastery.

Since writing is learnt through practice, instructors should provide positive and cooperative learning opportunities in which students feel comfortable to express themselves without being afraid of the teachers red ink. (Boonpattanaporn, 2010: 86)

Further, as revealed through the questionnaires, both English teachers and subject teachers bear the opinion that reading should be integrated into the teaching of writing since reading can provide necessary input for writing. As Eisterhold (1990) commented,

Reading in the writing classroom is understood as the appropriate input for acquisition of writing skills because it is generally assumed that reading passages will somehow function as primary models from which writing skills can be learned. (Eisterhold, 1990: 88)

In conclusion, the data gathered through the written work and the questionnaires revealed that students have difficulties in vocabulary, grammar and expression. Their poor foundation, lack of reading, and lack of practice are the main hindrances to improving their writing skills. It was suggested that they should be provided support in remedying their difficulties.

Teaching Intervention: Remedial English Programme

Incorporating the problems identified through the written answer scripts of the placement test and the feedback of the experienced lecturers in teaching Level 1 undergraduates, a Remedial English Programme was exclusively designed to suit the needs and the pace of Level 1 undergraduates. It was designed for 30 hours and conducted throughout the first semester of the first year. After administering the questionnaires, adjustments were made to the original program, incorporating the feedback gathered from the stakeholders.

Improving students' vocabulary was one of the main priorities of this program. Students were made aware of different types of words that they can make use of in producing different types of answers (e.g. argumentative essay, analytical essays, comparisons, contrasts etc). These words were provided not in isolation, but in context and the students were given hands-on experience on how to use them in sentences. Moreover, improving students' vocabulary building strategies was one of the main concerns of this program. In that regard, students were exposed to word structure giving a broader view of prefixes, suffixes and word stems. Moreover, as revealed by the data gathered through the questionnaires, subject teachers were informed of the important role that they should play in improving the subject specific technical words or vocabulary of their students.

Since the findings revealed that grammar is another crucial area that Level 1 undergraduates need help with, it was incorporated into the curriculum of the Remedial English Programme. Deviating from teaching grammar through the traditional grammar translation method, it was systematically incorporated into writing activities. Further grammatical components, that are useful in completing writing tasks assigned by the core subjects, were carefully selected in teaching grammar. Moreover, an attempt was made to make learning grammar a pleasant experience by incorporating games, group work and interesting activities.

A considerable number of opportunities were provided to students to practice writing under the supervision of the teachers through in-class writing activities and take home assignments. Their written work was first peer reviewed and then corrected by the teachers. Teachers constantly provided them feedback and they were instructed to reproduce an improved version of the script, incorporating the received feedback. As Biggs and Tang (2007) commented, teacher feedback played an important role in improving students' writing.

If there is any single factor that supports good learning it is formative feedback: teaching is good or poor depending on how readily students receive feedback on how they are doing. (Biggs and Tang, 2007: 102)

This exercise gave them an additional opportunity to practice writing by repeating the same writing tasks with further improvements. The strength of such re-writing is expressed by Prose (2006), who states that ultimately writers learn to write by practice, hard work, by repeated trial and error, success and failure.

As suggested by the English teachers and subject teachers, students were encouraged to read inside the class as well as outside the class as a means of improving their writing. Creating an interest for reading among these learners with limited language proficiency was challenging for the teachers. Reading and comprehending the recommended academic texts were beyond the reach of Level 1 undergraduates. Therefore, creating an interest for reading was initiated through the reading of tabloids. In fact Krashen (1984: 20) claims that the development of writing ability and of second language proficiency occur via comprehensible input with a low affective filter. He theorizes that writing competence derives from large amounts of self-motivated reading for interest and/or pleasure.

It is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture of reader-based prose. (Krashen, 1984: 20)

In addition to providing the support mentioned above, it was necessary to adopt special measures in order to motivate the students towards English language learning. With their inadequate language skills, naturally, their attitudes towards learning English were negative and lethargic. Therefore, in this regard the English Language Teaching Unit offered them a second opportunity to get to Level 2 within the first year itself by performing well in the post test.

The class size was also purposely made small (only 20 students in each class), enabling the teachers to provide individual attention to each and every student. According to Deutch (2003):

...high school students can benefit enormously from small classes... student engagement in learning, individual interaction with teachers, extensive teacher feedback, lively class discussions, hands-on instruction, and high teacher morale... small classes promote engaged students who interact with teachers and each other in positive and enriching ways" (Deutch, 2003: 41)

Overall, the Remedial English Programme rendered support to improve limited vocabulary and grammatical accuracy of the writing produced by Level 1 undergraduates. Further, ample opportunities were provided to practice writing under the supervision of language teachers, and students were encouraged to read as a means of improving writing. A favorable learning environment was created by adopting required motivational strategies and by providing individual attention to each and every student.

Results

The post test administered at the end of the Remedial English Programme indicated that 82% of the student population had scored more than 50% . 28% of them scored more than 70% of the final mark. Most significantly, 88% of the student population improved their essay writing skills considerably.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, it can be said that coping with the writing requirements of English medium instruction is a struggle for Level 1 undergraduates with their limited language skills. Through the Remedial English Programme, it was possible to offer them a helping hand to survive in their struggle. The support provided to them was effective. Many of them were able to improve considerably in comparison to their entry level, but still there is a long way for them to go. Level 1 students are still at a disadvantage with their inadequate English language skills in an environment in which English is the only medium of instruction. Therefore, throughout their academic career they should be constantly supported and guided by the English teachers in order to empower them with the required language skills.

Implications for Future Research

- The acquisition of all four skills i.e. reading, writing, listening and speaking are important in order to excel with the onset of English medium instruction. Therefore the struggle of Level 1 undergraduates in relation to the other three skills (reading, listening and speaking) can be researched.
- A comparative study can be conducted among Level 1 undergraduates across Faculties and across universities in order to identify their differences and similarities in light of English language proficiency, e.g. English medium instruction vs. bilingual instruction, Management stream vs. Science/ Arts/ Mathematics stream, etc.
- Identification of the grammatical components which cause most difficulties for the Level 1 students, such as prepositions, adverbs etc.

Limitations of the Study

This study was not free from limitations. Though the Remedial English Programme was originally designed for 30 hours of classroom teaching, it was possible to cover only 20 hours due to administrative problems. As a result of that, the students were not able to reap the full benefit of the program designed especially for them.

Another limitation was narrowing down the scope of the study to the Faculty of Management and Finance, University of Colombo. Due to practical difficulties and the time constraints, language difficulties faced by Level 1 undergraduates in other Faculties and in other universities were not taken into consideration.

Limiting the investigation of Level 1 students' language difficulties to writing difficulties is also another restriction of this study. Students' struggle in the acquisition of other skills (reading, listening and speaking) was not studied during this research.

Neither the Remedial English Programme nor the teaching staff can take full credit for the progress that students achieved at the end of the program, since there were other positive, uncontrollable factors in the environment. Support provided by student peers, senior students, subject teachers, and other parties (e.g. parents, private tuition classes) were not taken into consideration. The contribution of the "other parties" may have been a strong, positive factor.

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