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DEVELOPING ACADEMIC WRITING AND SPEECH SKILLS THROUGH COMMUNITY
SERVICE ACTIVITIES

SUNAYANA MANOJ

Faculty, Al Ghurair University - United Arab Emirates



SUNAYANA MANOJ

ABSTRACT

Several studies conducted on academic writing have revealed that students can be rapid writers without possessing the ability to organize their ideas. Generally at most universities, students are required to write reports, proposals and academic essays. These are the genres of writing that students are unable to address with adequate ease. In most cases, academic essays may display a dearth of supporting evidence and the interpretation or analysis could be flawed. It has been found that scaffolding done in the form of a community service activity can help undergraduate learners to improve their skills in writing and boost their ability to speak with confidence while using the target language.

Key words: Academic Essays, Community Service, Writing skills, Speech Development, Communicative Skills, English for academic purposes

Introduction

What is community service? It is all about working without payment and sharing what you possess with less fortunate people in the community. However, it does not have to be financial service that is rendered to deprived sections of society. It can even be a form of service where students are encouraged to spend their valuable time in the company of a section of society that is often ignored and neglected by humanity.

There are plenty of elderly senior citizens in old age homes who are on the brink of insanity due to the fact that they don't get to see their loved ones too often. They may suffer from emotional trauma apart from physical ailments. English language Faculty does have an obligation to enhance the writing and speech skills of young people and build some awareness on social responsibilities.

The aim and purpose of this study is to illustrate how a scaffolding activity carried out through a visit to an old age home in the Middle East proved to be beneficial.

Literature Review

It is widely assumed that EFL, ESL and EAP students struggle to understand the genre approach that is a part of the writing process. In addition, students strive to gain some mastery over communicative skills. Faculty cannot take it for granted that students know how to organize or interpret ideas and express them using the target language. However, this is necessary in today's academic context and undergraduates need to carry out "critical thinking, become independent and analytical writers as well as independent speakers." (Hyland, 2007; 150)

Researchers have discovered that EFL students are "very weak" when it comes to "organization of their thoughts" and ideas. (Al Khairy, 2013; 5 and Seidlhofer 2005; 340).

Furthermore, most researchers in today's scenario feel that students in higher education learn better by writing across the disciplines. According to personal communication, technology is making a big difference in developing the English language proficiency levels of students. Hyland(2016 ; 78) particularly has emphasized how most organizations delivering higher education are "focusing on writing using technology" . However, he also observes that using such scaffolding methods have not been highly successful as the success rate varies based on several factors. Certain researchers have noticed that students may struggle while writing due to "negative transfer" that takes place "from the L1" and at times it could also be due to "poor instructional methods."(Kaplan, 1966; 16).

Speaking about micro organization it has been noticed that writers need to use cohesive devices such as transitions, coordinators as well as pronouns. They will also need to use lexical items in order to show relationships that are logically organized . Furthermore, writers have to establish "coherence through discourse markers." (Hoey, 1991;67) In addition, there are other challenges while writing a good academic essay such as "macro organization" using a suitable genre. (Bacha,2012 ; 237). Moreover, researchers such as Mukattash (2003 ; 213) state that students generally use "long introductions, description as well as narration" without the usage of adequate support . It is necessary to remedy these foibles through proper hand holding or scaffolding which is done without undue pressure by involving students in an activity that could be enjoyable and educational at the same time.

Methodology

The study was carried out on two groups of students who were enrolled on a freshmen composition course. This is a course that is based on an American model and it is a part of the general education mandatory requirements . The course constituted students from various colleges such as Engineering, Business, Interior Design and Architecture. Both the groups were informed that they would be a part of a research study. The morning section was treated as the experimental group while the evening section was treated as the control group. Both the groups were given a diagnostic piece of writing at the beginning of the semester and the results of the diagnostic test were almost similar. In addition, they were asked to introduce themselves to the class in the form of a self presentation and it was noticed that both the groups had some limitations in terms of the self confidence that they exhibited as well as the shortage of vocabulary.

As the control group was a late evening section, it was not possible to take them out as most organizations close by dusk. However, the experimental group was taken on a visit to an old age home as a part of a community service initiative by the researcher. Students from the experimental group were asked to converse with the elderly inmates, read newspapers for them in English and recite poems. In addition, they were asked to interview the Filipino caretakers in the target language. Moreover, they were permitted to meet the therapists and in house doctors and take notes on the information that they had gathered. Finally, after instructional support was extended in the classroom, they were asked to write an organized academic essay about the information that they had gleaned and submit it based on a given deadline. This was treated as a part of their continuous assessment.

Meanwhile, the control group was given plenty of instructional support during classroom sessions and were assigned an academic prompt based on which they had to produce an essay. In addition, both the groups were taught how to do a presentation and asked to prepare for a presentation that had to be given at the end of the semester.

Findings

Undergraduates who were involved in this particular community service activity found it very stimulating. When students were asked to write a reflective essay at the end of the semester and carry out an oral presentation on a topic of their choice, there was a significant difference in the results of the control group in comparison to the experimental group. The average ratio of percentage revealed that the experimental group outperformed the control group. This was particularly noticeable through the quality of the essays. The experimental group that had visited the old age home had a better grip on organizational structure and was able to use the right transitions. They were able to visually connect with their thoughts and express themselves fluidly.

In addition, the experimental group showed a better command of language through their presentations and it was evident that their English language skills had undergone a remarkable transformation. Their speech skills were more polished and refined and they were able to use the right vocabulary with ease and conviction. Although the control group had improved considerably through effective teaching practice, they were not on the same level as the experimental group. The exposure that the experimental group received through a visit to an old age home had a dramatically positive outcome. Students from the experimental group appeared to have an increased awareness of the community around them as well as their social responsibilities.

Discussion

Although both the groups developed their English language skills over a period of one semester, the significant improvement displayed by the experimental group was very heartening. It proved beyond a doubt that the academic prompts and tasks that are given to students do matter. An outdoor experience that involved talking to strangers and gathering information had a positive impact on the learners. Therefore, instructors, professors and faculty in higher education can use a community service initiative to assist undergraduate students in enhancing their English language skills while guiding students through the norms of social etiquette .

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