Impacts of Technology based ESL Writing Skills at Tertiary Level

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Abstract:
The ESL learners face challenges in learning writing skills especially through the traditional mode. This study explores the effects of using technology-based computer assisted language learning (CALL) on the development in the proficiency in writing skills of the target group. A qualitative and quantitative mixed methodology was utilized to gather data. Two hundred students from the first-year arts were selected as participants for this study. A pretest on writing skills was conducted to gauge their proficiency in writing skills. After introducing and using the technology based (CALL) ESL writing skills for a semester, a post test was designed to see their development in the proficiency in writing skills. The teachers' observation, questionnaires, interviews, the participants' performances in pre and post writing skills and literature relevant to the study were utilized as data for the study. The findings reveal the fact that the CALL- a technology-based teaching and learning has kindled the interest of the participants as well as the teachers in teaching and learning writing skills. The study recommends the implementation of CALL- a technology -based teaching and learning for the other three skills in English as a second language.

Key Words: ESL, writing skills, tertiary level, traditional mode and technology-based CALL.

Introduction

The users of the first language acquire listening and speaking skills from their birth. Reading and Writing skills are learnt from home and in schools. Whereas a second language learner who is not exposed to the target language has to learn all four language skills such as speaking, listening, writing and reading skills and the grammar of the target language flawlessly. All four language skills depend on each other. The writing and speaking skills are called productive skills. The target learner should have sufficient vocabulary knowledge, spelling rules, sentence patterns, and grammar in order to write the task correctly. Competency in writing skills depends on various factors such as educational, home background and the individual's cognitive abilities. As writing is a complex skill both the learners and teachers find various challenges in learning and teaching the skill respectively in the face-to-face mode.

Background of the study

Obtaining high proficiency in writing skills in a second language is a challenging task. In the researcher's context in Sri Lanka majority of the ESL learners have not developed their writing skills up to each level of learning. When such students come to the target level without much proficiency the teachers need more extra hours to bring them to that target level of learning. the second language learners find it difficult to express their ideas in the second language. They come across various linguistic elements in writing such as lack of knowledge in spelling rules, grammar, not knowing the appropriate vocabulary and sentence patterns, particular choice of words with different connotation and denotation, lack of vocabulary, poor grammar, poor spelling knowledge, students' readiness and lack of exposure to books and reading materials are some of impediments in obtaining high proficiency in writing skill.

Face to face mode

The face to mode is used for teaching and learning even in this era of the highest development in science and technology today. It is within the last three decades that the online and distant modes have been introduced. The second language learners are now getting familiar with the online learning tools with the impacts of the spread of COVID 19.

Technology based (CALL) ESL writing skills

Today technology plays an important role in every field including education. With the introduction of various tools for online teaching and learning numerous curricula and courses are introduced the CALL based teaching and learning is used by many developed countries.

Computer Assisted Language Learning CALL)

The computers have various teaching and learning tools and materials to practice perform, learn independently and gauge their own development in the writing skills. Writing skill packages in the form of CDs are available for various proficiency levels. In the researcher's context personal computers and desk top computers are now available and the language laboratories could be utilized for the technology-based CALL.

Tertiary level writing

The tertiary level writing is usually circumscribed to narration and description; students lack the necessary tools to approach writing an argumentative essay and engage in a complex process that includes exploration of a problem, evaluation of facts and evidences, generation and testing of hypotheses in relation to new ideas and evidence. In order to overcome these problems, students need to be aware that good writing is not just grammatically accurate and that other factors, such as organization, coherence, and use of cohesive devices, are essential elements of good writing. The participants of this study face challenge in writing different tasks. The three hours of learning ESL is insufficient to provide time for practice.

Research Problem

The increasing number of students in ESL classes does not permit staff to do individual correction in the class. It is therefore intended to explore the effects of the use of technology-based writing skills on the first-year students of the faculty of Arts. Teaching and Learning writing skills in English as a second language has always been a challenging task at the tertiary level. In many tertiary level classes teaching writing skills for different levels of writing proficiency students is very challenging. The teachers find it difficult to cater material and deliver their lectures to suit all of them in a class. In this study the participants are very much familiar to face-to-face mode of learning. Their proficiency in writing skills is not up to the

tertiary level. It is as a result; the teachers feel difficult to plan their lessons and prepare appropriate activities for the students.

Research Questions

1. Can the proficiency in writing skill be increased solely through face-to-face mode?
2. Will the technology-based computer assisted language learn improve the proficiency in second language?

The Research Objective

The objective of the study is to find the impacts of Technology based ESL Writing Skills at Tertiary Level. The increasing number of students in ESL classes does not permit staff to do individual correction in the class. It is therefore intended to explore the effects of the use of technology-based writing skills on the first-year students of the faculty of Arts.

Significance of the study

The study emerges to identify the challenges and seeking solutions to the poor performances in ESL writing skills. The study utilized a technology-based CALL mode of teaching parallel to the face-to-face teaching to gauge the performance of the participants in writing skills. The study explored the challenges in teaching and learning solely through the face-to-face modes and the CALL based teaching and learning. It is also observed the shift and from the teacher centered to student centered learning and the benefits.

Review of Literature

The literature relevant to the study was reviewed. Writing skills is a complex skill. The learners struggle to write given tasks as well as to fulfill their

writing needs. According to Pennington [9] "writing is a thinking process in the sense that one writes to externalize one's thought, both as a way to express those thoughts to others." Hampton [4] defined writing goals: retention by their audience. These recent developments reveal that rapid changes in literacy have taken place as a result of the arrival of the computer and the development of other new technologies. Setiawan, Rohayati, Sari, and KUSUMA [12] argue that writing is a perception of the abilities that involve the rules of grammar, vocabulary and different concepts of sentence formation. The rise of technology integration has significantly contributed to the change in teaching reading and writing in a second language. Such integration in second language learning teaching demonstrates a shift in educational models from a behavioral to a constructivist learning approach [6].

Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that the technology-based Computer assisted language learning has a positive effect on the development of proficiency in writing skills at tertiary level.

Materials and Methods

Two hundred students from the first-year faculty of Arts were selected on a random basis. A pretest on writing skills was conducted at the beginning of the study to find the proficiency level in writing skills. A questionnaire was designed to collect data for the study to find out the impacts of technology-based ESL writing skills at tertiary level. The participants were divided as controlled and experiment group. Those who obtained less than fifty were named as group A and the others who have got more than fifty were considered as control group and named as group B. The B group followed the face-to-face mode of learning. Group A was taught with computer assisted language learning. A common posttest on writing skills was conducted for both the groups. The performance of the group was

compared to the pretest performance and the finding was utilized for the analysis. The teachers' observation and the relevant literature were utilized to triangulate the data to help to enhance the validity and credibility of the findings.

Limitation of study

Only two hundred students were selected for the study due to time and space constraints.

Analysis and findings

The analysis and data derived from the study are presented herein.

Pre and post-test performances

Two hundred students from the first-year arts, who were selected as participants, were issued a pre-test on writing skills. They were divided as groups "A" and 'B', based on their performance in the pre-test. Eighty participants who obtained less than fifty marks were grouped as group "A' and the rest of them as group "B' and considered as experimental and controlled groups respectively. All the participants followed lectures through face-to-face mode for a semester. Meanwhile the experimental group followed additional writing skills lectures utilizing the technology based (CALL) computer assisted language learning for the same semester. A post test conducted for the participants showed that the group "A' - the experimental group - has performed better than the 'B' group. The performance in the tests were analysed and the findings reveal the fact that the group "A" participants who obtained less than fifty marks in the pre-test have obtained above fifty marks in the post test.

Teachers' observation

The five teachers including the researcher have found the positive effects in introducing technology-based writing skills through CALL, they could observe how motivated the experimental group was from their attendance, attention, responses, interaction, and involvement in learning writing skills through CALL –technology based- learning. The teachers could notice how each student first found it difficult in operating computers and later picked up after following the instructions. The teachers followed the same syllabus for both face to face and online teaching. The teachers stated that on the whole the CALL has positive impacts on learning writing skills. It is observed that the target group was able to make use of word-processing programmes which transform the computer into a sophisticated and flexible writing aid that can improve learners' writing skills and their attitude toward writing. They were able to handle the texts and lessons freely. They could check spelling, grammar and use thesaurus, dictionary for connotative and denotative meanings of words and find the synonyms and antonyms and also get the necessary tips to write essays.

Questionnaire survey

A questionnaire was designed to gauge the learning and performances in writing skills through face to face and online modes. The participants expressed the challenges they faced in learning writing skills from their primary level of English education. They stated that there are challenges in learning ESL writing skills at the tertiary level. The literature on CALL based ESL and ESL writing skills and face to face mode of learning supported the research question and objective of the study.

Interview with the teachers

The teachers involved in this study could find the striking improvement in the writing skills performances through the CALL-technology based delivery

of teaching. They discussed the fact that at first the experimental group needed help and guidance to operate the device, The teachers coached the participants to follow the instructions to learn and do activities and how to upload materials, completed task sheets and how to check their own performances. The teachers further stated that 'you tube" videos and slides show on writing skills were very useful for them which they found drew the attention of the participants and motivated them to study and learn more and perform well in the writing skills. The staff expressed that in a face to face classroom the students are hesitant and reluctant to communicate within a group setting. They further stated that in a CALL based teaching, computer is used as an aid to the production, substantiation and evaluation of material to be learned, usually including a significant interactive element. On the whole the teachers involved in this study found, that a blended modes-face to face and CALL –technology based –of teaching and learning will reduce the challenges in teaching the writing skills which they found difficult to coach for mixed ability ESL groups

Conclusion

The study reveals the fact that technology can fill the gaps, for the students in a mixed ability ESL group, giving greater access to those with different proficiency levels in writing and other learning needs. The study emphasizes the fact that through a personalized, adjustable approach, CALL tools can address a range of needs in developing the language skills. Even though there is a risk of depending very much on technology, teachers and administers can monitor to make the live instruction go hand in hand with CALL. CALL should augment instructor efforts but not replace them.

Recommendation

The study recommends that technology-based CALL could be delivered with the face-to-face mode of teaching in a blended manner. the study has an implication for developing and improving the students who are less proficient in speaking, listening, reading and writing skills.

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