



Factors that Affect the implementation of Teaching Writing Skills: Focus on Second Cycle Primary Schools in North Shoa

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine the variables affecting the implementation of writing skills instruction and learning in grades 7 and 8 in North Shoa Zone Second Cycle Primary schools. The study's primary purpose was to determine the difficulties encountered by English language instructors and students while teaching and learning to write in English classes. The research included the participation of 25 English language instructors and 1484 pupils from 14 Second Cycle Primary Schools. A questionnaire and an interview were used to obtain the required data. Questionnaires were completed by instructors and students, and English language teachers were interviewed. The questionnaire data was tallied and examined statistically in terms of frequency and percentage. Similarly, interview data were categorized and qualitatively characterized. The investigation revealed that the majority of instructors and students struggle with teaching and learning writing skills. Additionally, although both English instructors and students believe they are engaging in writing activities in the classroom, the students' writing performance is not as promising as shown by open-ended questions and comments from English language teachers interviewed. Several key suggestions are made in light of the results of this research in order to mitigate the issues that impede the efficient implementation of writing instruction and learning in second cycle primary schools. The primary recommendation is to offer enough training for English language instructors on how to teach writing skills, which will then be conveyed to students in order for them to enhance their writing performance.

Introduction

In our country, Ethiopia, English is used as a means of communication in some governmental organizations, given as a subject starting from grade one, and used as a medium of instruction starting from grade 5,7,or 9 (depending on the regions) up to tertiary levels. Based on this, students in the second cycle of primary schools learn English language as a subject in an integrated way. Schumm (2006) and Harmer (2004) expressed that one of the most exciting parts of elementary education is teaching students how to become writers. Helping students learn how to express their ideas through the written word is a lifelong skill that has both personal and professional implications. Thus, helping students learn that writing is a process and learn how to work through that process is one of the most valuable gifts educators can provide.

Writing is considered as the most difficult skill for language learners as they need to have a certain amount of L2 background knowledge about the rhetorical organizations, appropriate language use or specific lexicon with which they want to communicate to their readers (Tangpermpoon, 2008; Heaton, 1988; Dyer, 1996). To enable students improve their writing

performance, EFL teachers are encouraged to implement the possible approaches to teaching writing skills. Besides, as to Kroll (1990), and Grabe & Kaplan (1996), as teachers, we must realize that for those engaged in learning to write in a second or foreign language, the complexity of mastering writing skills is compounded both by the difficulties inherent in learning a second/foreign language and by the way in which first language literacy skills may transfer to or detract from the acquisition of second/foreign language skills. In the same manner, students are also required to learn writing skills and enhance their achievement in writing in English. Tangpermpoon (2008) & Reid (1999) stated that writer requires having a great deal of lexical and syntactic knowledge as well as principles of organization to produce a good writing. Therefore, the teaching and learning of writing skills have been given due attention not only for the purpose of improving students' writing ability in the English classroom but also to enable them learn and understand other subjects given in English.

Hedge (2005) & Hyland (2003) expressed that classroom writing activities should reflect the ultimate goal of enabling students to write whole texts which form connected, contextualized, and appropriate pieces of communication. However, the truth is that EFL teachers' implementation of writing is not as such rewarding when we look at the outcomes from the students' side. The present researchers presume that there could be some possible factors that could hamper the practice of teaching and learning writing skills in grades 7 and 8 in primary schools in North Shoa Zone.

As mentioned above, writing is one of the English language skills which students learn in the second cycle of primary schools. Nevertheless, although students learn writing skills along with other skills starting from grade 7, their performance in writing is not as such satisfactory. The present researchers' experience in teaching writing for regular as well as for in-services program students reveal that most of the students lack adequate knowledge of writing skills. As a result, it is a common phenomenon for the researchers to observe most students being in difficulty to express themselves in good writing which is expected of their level.

In a research finding, Henning et al. (2005) indicate that many students do not seem to be able to demonstrate their knowledge of the topic within a developing and coherent argument. Unfortunately many students still copy directly from their sources, usually due to lack of trust in their own writing performance. The current researchers believe that there could be a variety of reasons that could affect the proper implementation of writing skills. The possible reasons, for instance, might be teachers' method of teaching and their attitudes towards the teaching of writing, students' background in relation to learning writing and the perception they have towards learning writing skills, and the nature of writing tasks students practice in EFL classroom, etc.

However, the factors that could hamper the effective implementation of writing skills should be supported by evidence from research findings. Therefore, from the knowledge of the present researchers, no study has been conducted to explore the possible factors that could affect the implementation of writing skills in EFL classrooms in the second cycle of primary school in North Shoa Zone. This research, as a result, is intended to fill the gap and take appropriate measures based on the findings of the study for the betterment of teaching and learning writing skills at the primary schools level.

The main objective of the study is to find out factors that affect the implementation of teaching writing skills in grade seven and eight in some selected primary schools in North Shoa Zone, Amhara Region. The specific objectives of the study include the following; (1) To identify the approaches EFL teachers use to teach writing skills; (2) To explore the problems EFL teachers face while they teach writing skills; (3) To find out the difficulties students face in the writing

class; (4) To see the attitudes and practice of EFL teachers in implementing writing skills in the EFL classroom; (5) To explore the nature of writing tasks students practice in the EFL classroom.

It is hoped that conducting this research is expected to have its own contributions in improving the teaching of English in general and the teaching and learning of writing skills in particular. Based on this, it is expected that English language teachers could get some insights that could enable them improve their ways of teaching writing in the EFL classroom in primary schools. Furthermore, the findings of the study could contribute its own role by helping students reduce the difficulties they have in using writing for both academic and communicative purposes.

The study is delimited to explore the factors that affect the implementation of writing skills by second cycle primary schools EFL teachers. For this purpose, of 24 second cycle primary schools in North Shoa, only 16 second cycle primary schools are selected from 8 woredas which were selected randomly by lot. Therefore, the implementations of other skills of the English language are not the focus of this study. Besides, the first cycle of primary schools and other grade levels are not included in this study. For the purpose of the study, the participants of the study: the woredas, schools, students and teachers were selected mainly using purposive sampling technique. Based on this, the findings of the study might help others to get some ideas on what the general tendency as far as teaching writing skill in primary schools looks like, but the findings cannot be generalized. Had the researchers also employed other tools including classroom observation, and students' interview, it could have been possible to get a much reliable data from the respondents.

Methods

As the study attempted to identify the factors that affect the implementation of teaching writing skill, descriptive research was designed to have a wider overview on the area. To ensure this, a mixed method (i.e., both qualitative and quantitative) was used as the study requires to gather both qualitative and quantitative data.

There are almost 24 Woredas, excluding 3 Woredas (Alemketema, Ataye, and Mehalmeda) that comprise 386 government primary schools (Grade 1-8). Of these, eight Woredas (Kewot, Ankober, Mojana Wedera, Tarmaber, Baso, Angolela Tera, Chacha, and Enewari) were first selected by using purposive sampling. Then, two second cycle primary schools were selected from each Woreda, except from Mojana wedera and Tarmaber where one school from each was selected because of some inconvenience for one of the researcher using purposive sampling technique. Therefore, from the selected woredas, 14 second cycle primary schools were chosen. Purposive sampling was used as it enabled the researchers to choose those Woredas and schools which were near and accessible to the present researchers. As to Kothari (2004) & Creswell (2012), it is clear that purpose sampling may have its own drawbacks on the generalizability of the research findings to others, but the researcher did not have any other better alternative to select woredas and schools randomly because of the working condition and shortage of budget to afford the expenses for the researchers.

Based on the objectives set at the beginning, after the schools were selected, the researchers decided to conduct the study on the second cycle of primary school. The researchers focused the study on the second cycle of primary schools, i.e., Grade 7 & 8 for their own purpose deliberately. Furthermore, hoping that the number of grade seven and eight sections in the selected 14 schools was manageable, the researcher used all grade 7 & 8 students and teachers as participants of the study.

As stated earlier, grade 7 and 8 students and English language teachers from the 14 second cycle primary schools were participants of the study. In other words, although the number of

students in each school tend to be great in number, all the students from each grade level were selected using availability sampling technique. For this reason, a total of 1484 students and 25 English language teachers participated in the study.

To gather appropriate data on the factors that affect the implementation of teaching writing for grade seven and eight students, a questionnaire was administered for all English language teachers in each selected school. The researchers employed a questionnaire because they believed that it could help them to get relevant data that can address the intended research objectives. The questionnaire comprised both close ended and open ended questions so as to get the views of teachers and students clearly. Hence, the questionnaires were administered for 25 English language teachers who were teaching in grade seven and eight. Besides, a semi-structured questionnaire was also distributed to the students to gather information on learning writing. The students' questionnaire was in Amharic so as to enable them express their view clearly, and minimizes misunderstanding in answering the questions with confidence.

To triangulate the data that were gathered through the teachers' and students' questionnaire, a semi structured interview was conducted with English language teachers. Interview was used because participants may get the opportunity to express their views about the teaching and learning of writing freely which they fail to forward in the questionnaire. The main focus of the interview was to enable the interviewees to express whatever they feel towards the teaching of writing from their own sides and the learning of writing from their students' side. The interview with the teachers was recorded with their consent.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the major findings gathered through questionnaire and interview.

Table 1. How often do you practice writing skills?

Item	Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Practicing writing skills	472	31.76	302	20.32	457	30.75	205	13.79	50	3.36

The data in Table 1 indicate that most of the students, 472 (31.76%) responded that they always practiced writing skills, and some of them 302 (20.32%) also said that they often practiced writing skills. There are also a great number of students 457 (30.75%) who mentioned that they sometimes practice writing skills in the classroom. Below a quarter of the total participants, 205(13.79) and very few 50(3.36%) revealed that they rarely and never practice writing skills in the classroom. Therefore, from the data it is possible to deduce that the majority of the students have the exposure to practice writing skills in the classroom.

Table 2. How often do you show your writing to your friends to read?

Item	Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Showing your writing to peers	138	9.28	224	15.07	496	33.37	440	29.60	188	12.65

Table 2 show that the majority of the respondents, 496 (33.37%) answered that they sometimes show their writing to their peers to read and comment, while a lot of students, 440 (29.60%) said that they rarely show their writing to their friends to read what they have written and 188 (12.65%) of them also said that they never show what they have written to their friends. On the other hand. The table also show that some of the respondents, 224 (15.07%) and 138 (9.28) indicated that they often and always show their writing to their friends to read. From the analysis, we can deduce that although some of the respondents mentioned that they show their

writing to their friends, most of the students do not have the practice of showing their writing to their friends to read which indirectly exhibits that most of the students do not get peer feedback from their classmates.

Table 3. How often do you ask your English language to teacher to give feedback on your writing?

Item	Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Asking teachers for writing strategies	240	16.15	244	16.41	374	25.16	363	24.42	254	17.09

In Table 3, when the students were asked how often they ask their English language teacher to give feedback on their writing, the majority of the respondents, 374 (25.16%) and 363 (24.42%) mentioned that they sometimes and rarely ask their teachers to give written feedback on what they have written. A large number of respondents, 254 (17.09%) said they never ask feedback from their English language teachers on their writing. Most of the respondents, 240 (16.15%) and 244 (16.41%), on the other hand, expressed that they always and often ask feedback on their writing from their teachers. Hence, the table shows that although it seems that students ask feedback their teachers on their writing, the practice is not as such frequently done by the majority of the respondents which shows that less comment is given from their teachers.

Results and discussions of students' questionnaire

From the different responses that were given, it is possible to understand that writing is a difficult skill for students for different reasons. For instance, most of the students mentioned that writing is difficult for them because English language is not their native language, they do not understand what they learn or write in the language. Some of them also expressed that they do not know even the English language alphabets properly and then they cannot spell words correctly. For this reason, writing in English language is difficult for them.

The other important point most of the students raised was that students do not read different materials to improve their writing skills. Therefore, from the students response, it is possible to deduce that if English language teacher try to help students identify the spelling of different words, let students read different materials written in English and allow them to practice writing in English, advise students not to worry that English language is a difficult language, and give much opportunity for students to write by themselves, a lot of students can improve their writing skills in English.

Most of the students responded that the purposes of learning writing skills are that to go abroad, to pass exams, to communicate with people in writing, to author or writer, to express our feelings/ ideas in writing, to identify English language words, to give information for others, to understand what we read, to understand what we do not understand, to write notes, etc. Thus, from what the different students expressed about the benefits of learning writing skills, it is possible to deduct that they know why they should learn writing skills for the different importance of writing skills in the classroom.

Most of the students also replied positively to show that their English language teachers give them different activities that can help them practice writing skills. Although few in number, there are also some students who said that their English language teachers sometimes give them activities to help students practice writing skills. A few of the respondents also said that their English language teachers do not give them different activities that can help students practice their writing skills. Therefore, from the responses it is possible to deduce that English language

teachers seem to give a chance for the students to practice writing skills although the students' writing performance is not as such promising.

Results and discussions of teachers' responses

The respondents expressed that writing difficulties emerged from different causes. For instance, they stated that students' interest to learn writing skills is low and they have low knowledge in writing. The other reason mentioned by the respondent is that writing in English is the students' foreign language which makes it difficult for them to write. Besides, one teacher respondent said that the possible reason that makes writing in English difficult for students is that because the students cannot express their ideas in English, they do not have a good base, they do not translate English into Amharic well. Lack of interest to English subject, and the students' interest or attitude is also another factor. Therefore, from the teachers'; response it is possible to presume that there are a lot of reasons that make writing difficult for the students.

As far as teachers' role in supporting students to improve their writing difficulties if they have any, teachers responded as follows: Teachers are expected to give day to day different exercises as class work, group work assignment, etc. The other respondents said that English language teacher must give some writing activities to the students, for example, by giving paragraph writing. Hence, from the respondents' responses, we can deduct that there are a lot of things that can be done by English language teachers so as to help their students enjoy the writing lessons and improve their students writing performance.

In order to make students become a good writer at their level, English language teachers are expected to have the necessary knowledge of writing which can help them teach their student properly. The given question was asked to find out what teachers think about the writing knowledge teachers need to have. Concerning this, different respondents forwarded their feelings. For instance, one of the respondents commented that English language teachers must know grammar rules, consonants and vowels, how to read letter, and know the steps of writing paragraphs. From the respondents' view, it is clear that English language teachers should have the necessary knowledge of English language in general and teaching writing skills in particular.

As the respondents were asked to tell the purposes of teaching writing for their students, they indicated the reasons why students learn writing skills, especially in the classroom. One respondent mentioned that the purpose is to communicate among each other, develop writing skill, and transfer a message. The other respondent also revealed that the goals of teaching writing are to understand any written material, and help students to write any text during the teaching learning process. Consequently, from the respondents' ideas, we can deduce that English language teachers teach writing in the classroom for different purposes.

Teachers were also asked if English language teachers' method of teaching has its own positive or negative impact on the students' performance in writing. The respondents expressed that if the teacher focuses on grammar rules, the students do not develop their writing skills. They also added that the teacher's lack of interest, lack of experience in teaching writing, not encouraging students, and using teacher-centered methods can influence students' writing performance negatively. Therefore, from the responses, we can deduce that the different techniques of teaching writing skills used by English language teachers could have its own influence on the students' performance in writing skills.

The respondents also recommend that the students should have the motivation and generate ideas. To do so, the teachers should have good experience of teaching writing and good methods of teaching. The students should be competent in the language. As can be seen from

the responses, although teachers forwarded the factors that should be considered, it seems that they are not well aware of the most important issues that should be taken into account.

Results and discussions of teachers' interview

The first question that was raised for the English teachers was to tell their opinions towards teaching writing to their students. For this question, almost all the four respondents gave similar ideas about teaching writing. For instance, one of the respondents indicated that he wants to teach the writing lessons in the students' textbook, but he mentioned that he faced some difficulties while teaching writing to his students. He mentioned that the difficulties he faces in teaching writing skills are lack of words, shortage of grammar rules, and the failure to use words in any context. Another teacher on his part mentioned that teaching writing for his students is not that much good because there are shortage of teaching materials, teaching aids, lack of time, students' negative attitude to writing, shortage of language knowledge, like grammar, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary and lack of practice from the students' side are the challenges he faced while teaching writing to his students. Thus, these teachers feel that teaching writing is somewhat difficult for them.

The interviewees expressed that it is common to hear that some English language teachers think that writing skill is difficult for their students. For instance, the four interviewees stated that writing is difficult for the students because students' interest to learn writing skills is low and they have low knowledge in writing. The other reason mentioned by the interviewees is that writing in English is the students' foreign language which makes it difficult for them to write.

Besides, one interviewee said that writing is difficult for the students because the students cannot express their ideas in English, they do not have a good background, and they do not translate English into Amharic well. Therefore, from the interviewees' response it is possible to come to an agreement that there are a lot of reasons that make writing difficult for the students based on the respondents' comments. Regarding the roles of EFL teachers, the interviewees said that English language teachers should first inform the students that the purpose of learning writing skill is to communicate among each other, develop writing skill, and transfer a message. The other respondent also revealed that teachers have a responsibility to tell the goals of teaching writing which are to understand any written material, and help students to write any text during the teaching learning process. Besides, the interviewee suggested that English language teachers must give some writing activities to the students, for example, composition writing, story writing, and giving paragraph writing.

Interviewees also responded that they focus on word construction, sense of the sentence and spelling errors when they correct errors. Others also mentioned that they believe in the importance of giving feedback to their students focusing on checking missing letters, subject-verb agreement errors, illegible hand writing, spelling and punctuation errors and they try to correct these errors and give comments on students' writing. They were also asked to comment on when they should correct errors. For this question, the interviewees expressed that English teachers should not discourage when students make mistakes in their writing, but they should tell the correct answers. Finally, the interviewees commented that English language teachers should have some basic knowledge of writing which can help them teach their student properly. Another interviewee also expressed that English language teachers must know grammar rules, and know the steps of writing paragraphs.

Conclusion

Based on the data analysis and the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn. The findings also show that practicing writing skills is sometimes done. Besides, it was found out that most students do not show what they write to their peers and their teachers to get

feedback from them. Although the students stated that they reread what they have written quite often, English teachers repeatedly said that students lack the ability to edit what they write. The other findings of the study based on the students' questionnaire was that students get very less practice in letter writing, and paragraph writing at their level. Moreover, although students expressed that they often learn different writing skills in the English class, the teachers and the students themselves believe that writing is a difficult skill for different reasons. Therefore, it is concluded that how the teachers teach the different writing skills do not improve the students' performance in writing. Furthermore, from the close ended questions in the students' questionnaire, the researchers concluded that students' writing ability is not promising for different reasons mentioned by them and their teachers. The analysis of the students' questionnaire also shows that English language teachers are not teaching the writing lessons well in such a way that it improves students' writing performance. The findings of the teachers' questionnaire data show that English language teachers know the goals of teaching writing for their students, but they have different difficulties that hinder them from teaching the writing skills for their students. Thus, teachers have problems in teaching writing lessons properly for their students. Besides, it is found out that English teachers blame students for being weak in writing, but teachers should also take the blame for being incapable to help students improve their writing skills. From the findings of the study, it is also possible to conclude that teachers have some knowledge of the writing principles, but it is not adequate as most of the teachers know some writing principles to some extent.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher forwarded the following suggestion; (1) As both students and teachers think that writing is a difficult skill, they should be encouraged not to have that kind of negative attitude in their mind. Thus, English instructors from university, and college who train English language methodology for English language teachers should create the awareness in the minds of teachers and students not think like that; (2) The findings also show that students perform different writing activities in the English class, but this practice should be done frequently to improve their writing performance. Hence, primary schools' English language teachers should encourage their students to practice different writing tasks regularly. writing performance only through writing; (3) As English language teachers have different difficulties that hinder them from teaching writing lessons for their students, university instructors should give training for primary schools English language teachers on how to implement different approaches to teach writing in primary schools; (4) To fill the knowledge gap English language teachers in primary schools have, awareness training on the principles of teaching writing should be delivered by English language teachers in our university.

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