Chapter 1

Introduction

1.0 Introduction

English language skills play an important role in the lives of people the world over. It is more evident in countries like India where it is considered as a second language. Therefore, the primary purpose of teaching English in the second and foreign language classroom is to improve the communicative abilities of the learners. In order to achieve this, classroom teaching should be skill based.

English was mainly considered a library language till recently. It was also recognized as a tool for communicating with people within the country and with the world outside. However, now all the four skills are considered important. With the growth of communication technology, the need for written communication has also been highlighted.

However, over the past several years, it has become clear that most of the undergraduate learners studying in regional medium colleges in suburban and rural areas lack the necessary writing skills needed to become successful communicators both during their undergraduate studies and after their undergraduate course. This claim made by the researcher was based on his own experience, first as a student in a suburban college in Bihar and later as a teacher of English in the same college. There was no change either in the way the students were taught English or any change in the proficiency of the learners. In other words, there was no change in the English language learning scenario. A majority of learners lacked the necessary skills to communicate effectively in written communication. It was imperative for the learners to understand the importance of good writing skills and being good communicators.
As the demand for English language professionals in various fields had risen, most of the learners realized the importance of English language. However, the support from the teachers and the textbook was not forthcoming. Therefore, there was a need to study the support required by these learners and provide them. The aim of the study was to help the learners improve their written communication by studying their needs and providing support to them.

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the present study. It also highlights the background, aim of the study, context and rationale of the study. Furthermore, this study also states research questions, research procedure, research tools, limitations and overview of the study.

1.1 Importance of teaching writing

Writing has always been regarded as an important skill in the teaching and learning of English as a second language. Writing stimulates students thinking, compels them to concentrate and organize their ideas, and cultivates their thinking to summarize, analyze and criticize. Moreover, it reinforces learning, thinking, reflecting on the English language.

Nevertheless, the students in ESL context find various challenges at different levels while performing the written tasks. Even native speakers find writing a very difficult skill. It is not surprising then second language learners find it doubly complex. Allen and Corder (1997) are of the view that writing is the “most difficult of the language abilities to acquire” (p.177). Therefore, almost all L2 learners often find writing an intimidating task owing to its complexity in comparison to the other three language skills.
Although writing is an intricate and complex skill yet learning to write remains pivotal for the ESL learners for several reasons. The first and foremost reason is that the ability to write well is a significant skill for academic and professional success. The second reason is that writing can be effective to improve learners’ academic language competence because they will be quite keen to explore lexical and syntactic terms in their work (Weissberg, 1999). The third and final reason is that writing may allow learners to master various subject matters because it increases their awareness about knowledge gaps and apply problem-specific knowledge into other areas (Reeves, 2002). Moreover, writing activates thinking, requires learners to focus and organize their ideas, and it also helps to improve their ability to summarize, analyze and criticise. Furthermore, it also improves the learners’ learning, reflecting and critical thinking skill.

As writing plays an important role in the life of any individual, the importance of writing cannot be ignored too long. There is not a single reason that an individual should not learn to write. Writing can help the individual to grow as a professional. With the growth in economy several opportunities are available for the writing professionals. Therefore, it becomes essential to improve academic writing skills of our learners.

1.2 The present status of teaching English in Bihar

In Bihar, English is taught in both English medium and vernacular medium educational institutions. In Government schools, English is taught from class VIth standard. However, English language is not compulsory till secondary (Xth) level in Bihar government schools. But at the undergraduate level, English suddenly starts playing a major role in academics. Although the textbook at undergraduate level
included all the four basic skills to be taught in the classroom yet all the skills were not given equal importance by the teacher. The teaching of writing was the most ignored skill in the classroom. In 2012, the government of Bihar in collaboration with the British council initiated a teacher education project which aimed to improve the teaching of English at the secondary level. The project, Bihar Language Initiative for Secondary Schools (BLISS) was funded by the Department of International Development of the UK (DFIED). The purpose of this project was to train the English language teachers.

1.3 Background to the study
Due to the flourishing economic growth in India, there has been increasing demand for graduates with good proficiency in English. The National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF) promotes the teaching of all the four basic skills as well as the study skills from the school level. Moreover, it is also expected from the graduate students to be proficient in all the skills including writing and speaking skills. However, educational institutions face several challenges while implementing the NCF. The main problem faced by the institutions was the policy of implementing English language from class 6th in Bihar as a non-compulsory subject. As it was not compulsory, English language was not taken seriously. Teachers and learners at this stage focused on science and other subjects. The second hurdle was a lack of awareness among the learners about the importance of English at the secondary stage. When they come for the undergraduate course, they realize the importance of English but a lot of time had been wasted by then. By the time learners reach upper and higher secondary level or undergraduate level they are left with no choice.
There was a demand and need to produce quality graduates with sound knowledge about different genres both for their academic success and for improving their employment prospects. But in reality, the learners were not aware of the importance of academic writing skills and there had been insufficient or negligible writing practice in the classroom. Further, inadequate writing inputs, tasks and activities also failed to provide an adequate environment to practice academic writing skills. Therefore, there was a need to help the learners improve their academic writing skills.

1.4 Statement of the problem

As stated before, writing is a neglected skill in the context of second language learning. A recent writing commission report has mentioned that in spite of existence of various writing models of teaching writing, the report further revealed that there was a great decline of teaching and practice of writing in schools and colleges. The report has further stated that writing is the most neglected skill in the Indian classroom. The primary reason for the decline in the performance of writing was the negligence of the teaching of writing instruction and lack of practice by learners.

So was the case with the teaching of writing. Teaching of writing had gone through several major changes in the last ten to twenty years. Moreover, these major changes had not reached the teachers who had hardly made any effort to bring changes in their teaching of writing methods and techniques. The teachers of second and foreign language still followed the product based approach to teaching of writing.

We found the situation in the degree college of Chapra, Bihar no different. The researcher had firsthand information of the learning and teaching of writing in the same college first as a student and then after a few years as a teacher. In the first place, writing was not given any importance. Secondly, teachers lacked insights into
the writing problems of their students. Moreover, most of the teachers did not have English language teaching background, and they seemed to be unaware of the latest developments in the field of writing instruction. They were familiar mainly with the product approach to teaching writing. Furthermore, for many teachers teaching of writing was synonymous with teaching of grammar. Thus, teaching writing tended to be ineffective and failed to develop in the learners the ability to write on their own. Findings of other researchers have also been similar. For example, Hegen and Chan (1996) remarked that ESL classroom “has yet to experience the paradigm shift from product to process writing”.

Therefore, the researcher felt the need for a systematic study to first identify the problems of the learners and to help them overcome those by using the process-genre approach.

1.5 Aim of the study

The current practice of teaching writing at undergraduate level to the regional medium students of Chapra, Bihar was below par. Most importantly, the present practices of teaching writing did not help the learners to become independent writers. Therefore, there was a need to study the needs of the undergraduate learners and provide support to them so that they could acquire the language and the appropriate conventions of academic writing. As someone who was familiar with the context of the study, the researcher was of the view that explicit instruction using the process-genre approach would help the learners improve their writing skills. Many studies (Lee 2002; Fahnestock, 1983; Johns, 1986) have marked the importance of explicit teaching of coherence and cohesion in the academic writing and many genre based approaches
had focused on teaching of formal aspects, metadiscourse and hedging (Crismore, Markkanen&Steffensen, 1983; Cheng&Steffensen, 1996; Hyland, 2004).

In other words, the purpose of this research was to examine the effectiveness of the process-genre approach in helping the first-year undergraduate learners improve their writing skills. To facilitate this, there was a need to find out the writing tasks and activities these learners needed to do as part of their study and their support requirements.

1.6 Research questions

The study tried to address the following research questions.

- What types of writing do the first-year undergraduate learners require to write?
- What problems do these learners experience while writing at the undergraduate level?
- How effective is the process-genre approach in helping these learners develop their academic writing skills?

1.7 Methodology

The mixed method approach was adopted for this study. The study was done in three stages: pre-intervention, intervention and post-intervention. In the first phase of the study, the needs of the learners were analyzed through pre-intervention questionnaire and informal semi-structured interviews. Next, a diagnostic test was conducted to find out the problems faced by the learners. Their written scripts were analysed and based on the analysis of the writing tasks and taking into account the findings from the questionnaires and interviews, a list of their support needs was made.
In the second stage, intervention stage, necessary inputs were provided using the process-genre approach and they were also given practice in writing with the help of a series of writing tasks and activities.

The third stage was the post-intervention stage. To study the impact of the intervention, a post test and informal written feedback was collected and analysed.

1.8 Sample

The research sample for this study comprised of thirty first-year undergraduate learners of Jai Prakash University, in Chapra, Bihar. They were from regional medium background. The average age of the learners ranged from 18 to 23 years. The students had exposure of 6-7 years of English language. They had limited exposure to academic writing in English.

1.9 Research tools

In order to collect data, questionnaires for learners and teachers were administered. The purpose of administering the learners’ questionnaire was to know learners’ background and their interest and their opinion about their own written communication skill and how it was taught to them in the college. The main purpose of the teachers’ questionnaire was to know about their opinion on the present textbook, the needs of the learners, and the teaching methodology they used to teach writing skills. Both the learners’ and teachers’ questionnaire were followed by semi-structured interviews. In addition, there was a pre-test to find the level of proficiency of the learners and their support needs. After the intervention stage, again learners and teachers were administered a post-test and informal written feedback to study the impact of the intervention. The classroom observation checklist was also used during this study.
1.10 Significance of the study

The study was conducted to investigate the impact of the process-genre approach to teaching writing skills to the first-year undergraduate learners of Jai Prakash University in Chapra, Bihar where English was taught as a second language. This study was first of its kind in the Indian context and sheds light on the support needs of undergraduate learners with regard to writing. This study also made an attempt to study the impact of the process-genre approach in teaching writing to the undergraduate learners. By applying the same method, it would be possible to enhance further understanding of learners’ cognitive processes, critical thinking, discourse analysis and how genre approach to writing can persuade the learners for their improvement of academic writing skills.

1.11 Scope of the Study

The study was completed using mixed methods approach to investigate the effectiveness of the process-genre approach to teaching writing to the regional medium first-year undergraduate learners of Rajendra College in Chapra, Bihar. The findings of the study should therefore be interpreted in the same context. The study involved explicit instruction using the process-genre approach to writing to encompass the entire process of composing with the active participation of thirty learners whose ages ranged between 18 and 23 years. However, due to time constraints, only three types of genre writing, namely, formal letter writing, paragraph writing, and essay writing were included in the study.

1.12 Limitations of the study

Owing to the constraints of time, the study was limited to first-year undergraduate learners studying in a regional medium college. As the study was carried out in the natural setting of the college, the sample size was thirty. Only those who attended the classes regularly were included in the sample.
1.13 Overview of the study

The study has been designed into five chapters.

Chapter One highlights the importance of teaching writing, the current status of English in Bihar, and aims of the study. Apart from that, it further focuses on the background to the study, statement of the problems and the research questions. In addition, the significance of the study and overview of the study were also included.

Chapter Two provides the theoretical background to the study. This chapter mainly deals with literature available in teaching writing, various approaches to writing including genre and process-genre approaches to writing.

Chapter Three discusses the procedure adopted for the present study. The chapter further dealt with the sample of the study, context of the study, materials used, and the rating scales used for the study.

Chapter Four focuses on the analyses of the questionnaire for the learners and the teacher, semi-structured interviews with learners and teachers, think-aloud protocol, classroom observation, and analysis of pre-test and post-test written scripts. Further, this chapter provides the findings of the study.

Chapter Five provides suggestions and implications of the study.

1.14 Conclusion

The chapter has provided a brief introduction to the current study. Further, it discussed the importance of writing, the background to the study, statement of the problem, and the aims of the study. Moreover, the research questions and the limitations of study were also stated. In the next chapter we will present review of the related research and the theoretical background to the study.