Abstract

Writing is considered a core academic skill and the most complex skill to be mastered when compared to the other three skills—reading, listening, and speaking (Krashen, 1984; Makalela, 2004; Nunan, 1990). Despite the complexity of writing skill, in most of the schools and colleges in the ESL context, it has been ignored or taught using the product-based approach to writing. (Parina, 2011, p.188) and is not given the importance it deserves. Such practices do not motivate the learners to learn to write and they hardly provide any opportunities to them to develop their writing skills. This situation is not very different in the state of Bihar where the researcher studied as a student and also had an opportunity to work as a teacher in a college.

The importance of academic writing skills cannot be ignored as the ability to write well in English is seen as a precursor for success both in college and at work. Therefore, the present study examined the writing problems of the undergraduate learners and tried to understand ways and means of helping them improve their writing skills. Specifically, the present research tried to find answers to the following 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?
The study was conducted with thirty undergraduate learners of Rajendra College, in Chapra, Bihar which is a suburban college. They were first year undergraduate learners studying through the regional medium. The intervention programme lasted thirty sessions.

The present study was conducted using the mixed methods approach. The study used Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) of genre approach to writing which is also known as the Sydney School in United States. Genre in SFL is seen as “a staged, goal oriented social process” (Martin, 1992, p.505), emphasizing the purposeful, interactive, and sequential character of different genres and the ways that language is systematically linked to context. The study further analyzed the role and effectiveness of the process-genre approach in order to improve the academic writing skills of the learners of Chapra, Bihar. As Goa (2007, p.4), defined process-genre based approach to writing as a combination of process models and theories of genre. This study is based on teaching and learning cycle adapted from Joyce and Feeze to practice the various generic tasks using the process-genre approach to teach academic writing.

The research tools used for the study included pre and post intervention test, tasks and activities during the intervention phase, questionnaire for teachers and learners, semi-structured interviews with learners and teachers, classroom observations, think aloud protocol and research diary.

The study was divided into three phases: pre-intervention, intervention and post-intervention. In the pre-intervention stage, an attempt was made to learn the learners’ background, their exposure to English language, their perceptions about English and learning English and their strengths and weaknesses in academic writing skills. In this
stage, pre-intervention test was conducted to find the problems of writing skills faced by the regional medium learners of Chapra, Bihar. The findings from the pre-intervention test written scripts, questionnaire, semi-structured interview and informal discussions with learners revealed that they had no exposure to academic writing and it led them to the poor academic writing skills at the undergraduate level.

Armed with this knowledge, the teacher-researcher planned the intervention strategies for helping the learners to improve their writing. During the intervention period, the researcher used the process-genre approach in order to provide explicit instruction to raise the awareness of the learners regarding various genres of writing in academic context such as formal letter, paragraph and essay writing and also helped the learners to use the processes of writing such as brainstorming, selection and organization of ideas, writing the first draft, and revising the drafts before producing the final drafts. They were also given help with regard to use of grammar, vocabulary, discourse markers, punctuations and sentence structure. During the intervention period, the focus was on formal letter writing, paragraph writing and essay writing as they were part of their syllabus.

After the intervention stage, a post-test was conducted to make a comparative analysis of the performance of the learners from the pre-intervention test writing scores. The pre and post-test written scripts were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative methods. The findings of the comparative analysis of pre and post-intervention test indicated that there was a decrease in the number of errors of writing at various levels such as the use of formal style, discourse markers, spelling, using third person, and punctuations. They were also able to identify and use the various types of rhetoric genres, thesis statement, topic sentence, supporting sentences, and formal aspects of academic writing which they were unable to use during the pre-test.
The findings of the study revealed that the process-genre approach to the teaching of writing had a significant effect on the learners’ written performance. The post-intervention test scores of the learners were significantly higher than that of pre-test scores as the performance of learners’ written scripts were analyzed and interpreted. The findings also suggested that using the process-genre approach helped the learners become aware of the processes of writing and the various genres of writing. Also, it helped them to identify the purpose, context, situation and style of writing. With adequate support and motivation learners were able to develop and use appropriate writing skills at the undergraduate level.

This study is divided into five chapters.

Chapter One provides a brief introduction to the study. It discusses the background, significance, statement of the problem, aims and objectives, scope, research tools used and the limitations of the study.

Chapter Two provides the theoretical background. It reviews the literature related to academic writing, the various approaches to writing, and an overview of genres of writing.

Chapter Three presents the design of the research. It explains the aims and objectives, context, sample and the methodology used for this study.

Chapter Four provides a detailed analysis of the data collected using questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with learners and teachers, classroom observation, pre and post-intervention tests, think-aloud protocols, and research diary.

Chapter Five discusses the major findings, implications and limitations of the study and suggestions for further research.