

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the improvement in English academic writing competency of English as a second language (ESL) learners at the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL), by applying the Process Approach (PA) using Blended-Learning (BL). It also examines the quality of writing in the online discussion forums, as well as the constraints and challenges that affect learner engagement in the assigned activities in the online component of an Advanced Writing Skills course.

Mastering the art of academic writing is viewed as the highest achievement that can be attained by any learner at university. The majority of ESL undergraduates experience great difficulty in writing academic essays in English in their disciplines of study, and this is also observed in the Sri Lankan context where English is the second-language of most undergraduates. In the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) context this is exacerbated since most of the learners are secularly employed, and have domestic and career responsibilities in addition to their academic studies, leaving little time to engage in writing practice. Although studies have been conducted in the use of the PA to enhance the writing proficiency of ESL learners in the Sri Lankan context, the use of the PA to teach essay writing to ESL learners studying in the ODL context has been under explored. Likewise, the use of the PA to teach essay writing in a BL mode is under-explored. Therefore, this research attempts to fill the gap in ESL writing scholarship, by investigating the extent to which the application of the PA will enhance the essay writing skills of ESL learners in the ODL mode in the Sri Lankan context, as well as to identify the constraints and challenges learners experience as they interact and collaborate to complete the given activities in the online environment.

The explanatory sequential mixed methods research design was used for this research because; using both the quantitative and qualitative approaches rather than a single approach will improve the quality of the research and give a wider more holistic perspective to the study. Also it is considered as one of the best ways to get accurate answers to research questions, as the validity of the findings can be confirmed from more than one vantage point. Furthermore, a mixed method approach is considered especially relevant when seeking an explanation for a complex phenomenon (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). The quantitative data were gathered through pre and post essay tests, questionnaires and online log reports. The qualitative data were gathered through interviews, open-ended questions in the questionnaires, and the transcripts of written texts extracted from the online discussion forums. The data were analysed using Engestorm's (1987) Activity Theory (AT) framework and Gunawardena Lowe, and Anderson's (1997) Interaction Analysis Model (IAM), Wilcoxon's Signed Rank Test, as well as Schreier's (2012) Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed and triangulated.

Findings of the research indicate that the PA in essay writing improved the writing competency of learners. Positive changes in writing behaviour were observed in all categories of the marking rubric. Also, the positive changes in perceptions of the learners towards the mode of delivery were observed. The majority indicated that the BL mode was preferred to fully online or fully Face-to-Face (F-2-F) delivery. The most significant change was in the pre-writing stage, the least in the proofreading stage. Interaction and collaboration, as well as feedback in the online activities were adversely affected, for which the contributory factors were: the background of learners, language proficiency, time constraints, motivation, pedagogy, and to a lesser extent technological issues. Despite these constraints the findings indicated that an overwhelming majority expressed

satisfaction with the course, and stated that the course was well-balanced and were willing to recommend the course to others. The findings also indicate that the quality of the learners' academic essay writing improved as a result of following the course. Recommendations were given to address the issues that were identified in accordance with the findings of the research.

Insights gained from this research will be of benefit to tertiary educators in the ODL context. The model proposed can be of benefit to educational practitioners teaching English writing to ESL learners in the ODL mode, as well as instructional designers when designing online writing courses. It can also be useful for teachers in the conventional universities to teach the PA using the BL mode. The insights gained from this research reveal that the use of the PA in essay writing can enhance the writing proficiency of ESL learners in the BL environment studying in the ODL mode.