Teaching Academic Writing Using Content-Based Instruction

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Abstract

Academic writing is a vital part of the education process and can be developed and enhanced through the content/genre/theme being taught. The term, Content-Based Instruction (CBI) is an educational approach where language learning takes place through learning the content. The study examines the practical aspects of teaching academic writing skills and English literature to undergraduate students as Second Language (ESL) learners using the CBI approach. Questionnaires were administered to the student participants to assess the effectiveness of the CBI approach to teach academic writing. Further, samples of the students’ writing were analysed based on the development of their academic writing skills. In the study, the student participants have shown engagement and improvement in critical reading and writing which serve as a crucial part in writing a good academic paper. The findings clearly indicated that the use of the CBI approach has enhanced the academic writing skills of the student participants.

Keywords: academic writing, content-based instruction (CBI), ESL, teaching

Introduction and Background

Academic writing can be defined as a type of writing which is concise, clear, structured, logical, and supported by evidence. It covers all aspects of the teaching and learning process which includes activities such as reading, researching, note-making, referencing, planning, structuring, writing, editing, proofreading, and sharing. It has a formal style and tone. Academic writing is different from other forms of writing like creative
and journalistic writing. It adopts an objective approach of an intellectual position with a logical argument supported by evidence (Fitzmaurice & O’Farrell, n.d.). In academic writing, it is pertinent to bring an argument in logical sequence and then to arrive at a final conclusion (Fitzmaurice & O’Farrell, n.d.). Academic writing can take various forms like a report, an essay, a review, an article, etc. In academic writing, the author always interacts with others’ works/txts; so, one can find recurrent references to the thoughts, ideas, and research of other authors in the same area. Therefore, it is pertinent to give credit to the works which have been referred to with a structured citation and referencing. It is also essential to support the claims made by reasons based on some form of evidence; as the author is expected to examine the material with a critical approach (Crème & Lea, 2003 & Borg, 2008).

Furthermore, academic writing is a vital part of the education process as it assists the learners to develop critical thinking thereby preparing them for their further studies. It helps the learners to arrange their thoughts and ideas in a logical and clear manner which helps in effective communication. Within the academic context, written discourse plays a fundamental role. The ability of the students to “prepare papers that meet reader expectations (with regard to rhetorical patterns) has a definite value within an academic environment” (Kroll, 2006, p. 429). Therefore, academic writing plays an important role in the university level English language courses. Though, writing has been taught, many students still struggle with these academic writing skills. The reason for this might be because for an academic writing to be effective students need to comprehend and they should be able to create the genres in that academic context (Hyland, 2004). So, students must not only learn how to write an essay, but they should also “learn to craft their writing in community-specific ways” (Hyland, 2013, p. 241). This will hold true in content-based classes where emphasis will be given on the genre of the subject being studied (Hyland, 2004). Therefore, for an academic writing to be effective, the students should be able to write in specific genres pertaining to the content being taught. The content should be comprehended well in the writing process. However, writing has always been given less emphasis, as the instructor focuses mainly on the content rather than focusing on the language being used to teach (Dalton-Puffer, 2007). This becomes a problem for developing the academic writing skills of the non-native speakers as more scaffolding is required to enable them
to effectively master the academic genres which they have not often been exposed to in their first language (Hyland, 2015). Relatedly, though knowledge of the subject matter is vital, language skills to communicate the knowledge learnt should also be taught to the students (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005). This is crucial as the students are mostly graded based on the written performance of their understanding of the subject matter. Therefore, it is important for the English as a Second Language (ESL) learners to develop their academic writing skills based on the genre of the content being taught. This will improve the motivation and creativity level of the learners thereby enhancing their academic writing skills. So, Content-Based Instruction (CBI) can be applied to teach academic writing skills to ESL learners as it can develop effective academic writing skills through learning meaningful content.

CBI is an educational approach where language learning takes place through learning the content. In this approach, the target language is learnt while learning the content. Richards & Rodgers (2001) defined CBI “as an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus” (p. 204). Content is the subject matter or information that is learnt through the language rather than around the language (Richards, 2006). The subject matter can be diverse topics such as the themes that the students study in their school or any other theme that might suit an adult learner (Snow, 2001). CBI, is thus an approach which focuses on the teaching of subjects like history, literature, science, economics or topics such as environmental conservation, recycling, etc. CBI emphasizes the teaching of the content through the language. The main aim of CBI is to augment the cognitive, metacognitive, and linguistic proficiency of the learners while learning the subject matter. CBI draws its principles from Communicative Language Teaching which emphasizes real communication and exchange of information in the classroom (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). In the CBI model, ‘theme-based language instruction’, the syllabus or the course structure is based on the topics/ themes such as ‘environmental conservation’ or ‘the wonders of astronomy’. The topic forms the framework for language analysis and practice. The topics/ themes are used to instruct and formulate activities and instructions to teach reading, writing or vocabulary for a particular time period. In the whole process, content as well as language learning takes place.
Furthermore, Jaelani (2017) asserted that CBI can be effectively used to teach writing skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learner as it increases the creativity of the learners. Brooks (2017) in his research discussed the need to provide language support to the learners when teaching academic writing in content-based classes. In their research, Wingate & Harper (2020) affirmed that proper planning and formulation along with the reviewing processes and constant reference to scholarly texts are important for the learners to effectively develop their writing skills. In view of these observations, the study examines the various aspects of teaching academic writing skills and English literature to undergraduate ESL students using the CBI approach. The ‘theme-based language instruction’ CBI model is employed in the study.

Methodology

The study was carried out in a university in Meghalaya, a state in Northeast India. The participants who took part in the study were undergraduate ESL students in their semester 1 pursuing Bachelor of Arts (Honours in English). The number of student participants taken for the study is 32. The syllabus of this undergraduate course has ‘Academic Writing’ in semester 1 as a taught course. As a part of the course and for the study, the student participants were taught the fundamentals of academic writing and how to develop academic writing skills. The topics which were covered to teach academic writing and how to develop academic writing skills were:

1. Introduction to Academic writing
2. Planning the writing task
   - Freewriting
   - Controlling idea and supporting idea
   - Thesis statement
   - Using primary or secondary sources
   - Referencing other’s works in their writing
   - Structure and sequence
3. Reading critically from scholarly texts and writing critically
   - Summarizing
   - Paraphrasing
   - Direct quotation
   - Critical analysis
4. Intertextuality
5. How to structure an argument
6. How to bring in one’s voice
7. In-text citations and referencing

For the application part, they were given research topics on English literature such as, ‘Experiences of an Angry young man in Alan Sillitoe’s *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, ‘Historicism in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, ‘Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani’s play *Tara*, ‘Identity crisis in Kiran Desai’s *The Inheritance of loss*, etc. These topics were given to each student at the beginning of the course. While teaching academic writing and how to develop academic writing skills, these topics on English literature were used to create and develop good academic writing skills. The CBI model, ‘theme-based language instruction’ is employed to teach academic writing skills through the theme, research topics on English literature. Based on their topics, the students were given the study materials and were also guided to do their research work. While researching and reading critically about the topics/ content, the academic writing skills like freewriting, structuring, referencing, paraphrasing, summarizing, direct quotation, critical analysis, structuring an argument, etc. which have been taught earlier were developed concurrently. In each class, the student participants were instructed to write based on understanding the research topic assigned to them. Their writings were then shared in the class in the form of a group discussion which further gave them new directions in their research work. At the end of the semester, each student participant submitted their research paper along with a brief presentation and further discussion in the class.

The objective of the study is to teach academic writing skills through the content, English Literature using the CBI model, ‘theme-based language instruction’. The CBI model, ‘theme-based language instruction’ uses a theme to teach language. In the study, various topics on English Literature are used as the theme to teach academic writing skills. After the study has been carried out, the student participants were administered with questionnaires. The questionnaires consist of 10 close-ended questions and use a Likert scale survey. Each question is provided with 5 points which are:

1. never or almost never
2. usually not true
3. somewhat true
4. usually true
5. always or almost always true

The respondents were required to indicate their options against each question. The questions were designed to elicit responses from the student participants regarding the effectiveness of the academic writing skills being taught, their attitudes to writing in general and comprehending the content/theme/genre used to teach the academic writing skills. The findings of the study are based on the analysis and descriptions of the data collected. Furthermore, samples of the students’ writing were analysed based on the development of their academic writing skills.

Findings and Discussions

The analysis of the questionnaires indicated that the student participants have learnt the techniques of developing academic writing skills to a certain extent. Most of the participants were of the opinion that the use of the content/theme augments the development of academic writing skills. The following are the findings of the study based on the questionnaires given:

1. I can write a clear topic sentence that identifies the topic and controlling idea of a paragraph.

   Ninety per cent of the student participants found this to be always or almost always true, 10 per cent found this to be usually true. This implies that the majority of the student participants can understand the content and so they can apply it in their research work. This induces them to identify the topic and controlling idea of a paragraph in general.

2. I can write a good academic paragraph.

   Fifty per cent of the student participants state that the above statement is always or almost always true. Another 25 per cent felt it to be usually true and 22 per cent indicated it to be somewhat true. This shows that many of them can apply their academic writing skills and develop into a good academic paragraph. Less than half of the student participants are not fully confident with their academic writing skills though they can still write to a certain extent. This can
be improved by constant practice thereby enhancing their critical
reading and writing.

3. **I can write using an academic style and tone.**

Fifty-eight per cent of the student participants asserted that the above
statement is always or almost always true. Another 22 per cent felt it
to be usually true and 20 per cent indicated it to be somewhat true.
This shows that many of them are clear with the formal style and
tone of an academic writing which is the basic feature of academic
writing.

4. **I can logically organize my ideas and develop my main point
when I write a paragraph.**

Sixty-six per cent of the student participants are of the opinion that
the above statement is always or almost true. Nineteen per cent of
them felt that it is usually true, 15 per cent are of the opinion that
it is somewhat true. Logical organization of ideas is a fundamental
aspect of an effective academic writing so the findings suggest that
most of the student participants can organize their ideas logically
and develop the main points. This proves that they can understand
the content and accordingly the writing skills have been applied.

5. **I can logically support and develop my thesis with paraphrases,
summaries, and quotations.**

In this statement, 65 per cent of the student participants asserted that
it is always or almost true. Twelve per cent of them states that it is
usually true, 14 per cent felt that it is somewhat true and 9 per cent
are of the opinion that it is usually not true. To be able to logically
support and develop with summaries, paraphrase and quotations
is a vital aspect of critical writing in the writing process. So, most
of the student participants have developed this aspect of academic
writing skills. However, 9 per cent of them felt that the statement is
not correct. This might be due to a lack of application of the academic
writing skills into the writing process. So, the students have to be
guided to make a continuous effort on their part to improve their
academic writing skills.

6. **I can use accurate in-text citations using MLA/ APA.**

Seventy-eight per cent of the student participants are of the opinion
that the above statement is always or almost true. Fifteen per cent of
them felt that it is usually true, 7 per cent asserted that it is somewhat
true. The student participants are clear with the style of writing,
so the majority of them felt that they can write an accurate in-text citation using MLA/APA.

7. I can write an accurate reference sheet for sources using MLA/APA.
   In this statement, 80 per cent of the student participants are of the opinion that it is always or almost true. Fifteen per cent of them felt that it is usually true, 5 per cent asserted that it is somewhat true. Here also, the student participants are clear with the style of writing so most of them felt that they can write an accurate reference sheet using MLA/APA.

8. I can use my own independent thinking in my writing.
   Fifty-eight per cent of the student participants are of the opinion that the above statement is always or almost true. Twenty-two per cent of them felt that it is usually true, 20 per cent are of the opinion that it is somewhat true. Understanding the content and developing the writing bringing out one’s independent thinking is an important criterion in academic writing. This observation asserts that many of them can understand the content and their independent thinking have been incorporated in their writings.

9. I can understand the content and can write a critical note on the content.
   In this statement, 62 per cent of the student participants asserted that it is always or almost true. Eighteen per cent of them state that it is usually true, 10 per cent felt that it is somewhat true another 10% are of the opinion that it is usually not true. This suggests that there is an understanding of the theme/content which leads to an effective writing of a critical note. However, some of the student participants have difficulty in framing a critical note.

10. I can write a good research paper based on the content.
    Eighty per cent of the student participants asserted that it is always or almost true. Ten per cent of them state that it is usually true and 10 per cent felt that it is somewhat true. This shows that they can comprehend the content and then can apply their academic writing skills in creating a good research paper.

From the above findings, it can be inferred that the development of academic writing skills has taken place amongst the student participants. The first step of developing academic writing skills is to plan for the
writing task. In the study, the student participants were well versed with this step as they thoroughly researched on the topics given to them. They worked on secondary sources. With the researched materials, they could structure the sequence of their writing. From the findings, it is observed that the student participants understood the content as they were able to write a critical comment on the research topics provided to them. In the study, the theoretical critical concepts of the topics on English literature were well researched by the student participants. As critical reading and writing is a significant aspect in academic writing, the student participants fulfilled this part and created a critical writing based on understanding the theoretical concept in relation to the books assigned to them. The important academic writing skills of paraphrasing, summarizing and direct quotation were well received by the student participants. They could formulate these skills in their research work. The literary device, intertextuality which creates an understanding between texts has been applied by the student participants in their critical reading of the various secondary sources. This in turn assists them in creating a good research paper. The technique of structuring an argument with supporting evidence is an important element in academic writing. In the study, the student participants read the theoretical concepts and the texts and referred various sources for understanding the content. Based on their understanding of the topics, they could structure their arguments with the help of supporting evidence as has been obtained from critical reading of the various texts.

Some of the samples from the students’ writing are given as follows:

**Sample 1 Writing on the topic ‘Historicism in Amitav Ghosh’s The Shadow Lines’**

Bhattacharya (2017) observes that the characters involved in the story have an infinite relation with history. This can be clearly seen through instances such as Tridib pursuing a PhD in Archaeology, the narrator’s visit to London to collect materials for a PhD thesis on nineteenth century textile trade between England and India and Tha’mma having lived through the Partition.

**References**


Sample 2 Writing on the topic ‘Gender Discrimination in Mahesh Dattani’s Tara’

Tara’s dilemma can be seen from the perspective of all women. This becomes a relatable issue in the present scenario. Tara lost her rightful leg because of the injustice she endured due to gender discrimination. Her sorrows and miseries were beyond comprehension. Arora asserts, “What Dattani wishes to convey is that we are born whole human beings, but gender-based discrimination breaks us into fragments which are called man and woman” (23). Tara tried hard to create a respectable position in a male-dominated society. The play poignantly portrayed issues related to women and to instil the idea that each individual is born free.

References


Sample 3 Writing on the topic ‘Identity Crisis in Kiran Desai’s The Inheritance of Loss’

The Inheritance of Loss is a story concerning cultural identities and cultural conflicts present in human civilization across the globe. Bhabha is of the view that a tension in identity will be created powerfully influenced by various cultures resulting in mimicry to represent this compromised tension (3). The characters in the novel are depicted as innocent victims of alienation from their real selves. This results in the crisis of identity. Kiran Desai explores the theme of identity crisis where she shows the sense of loss and also shows the struggles of the characters regarding their identity.

References


The above samples from the students’ writing shows that the learners have critically comprehended the text. It also shows that the students have developed their skills of paraphrasing, direct quotation and summarizing. They could structure their arguments with the help of supporting evidence as has been obtained from critical reading of the various texts. With this stance, they could also find their voice and
incorporate in their research papers as can be seen in Sample 2. The style of writing plays a very crucial role in academic writing. The in-text citations and referencing style using MLA/ APA are well received by the student participants. In their research papers, they have efficiently used MLA style of in-text citations and referencing style as can be seen in the preceding samples. The findings, therefore, indicated that the CBI model, ‘theme-based language instruction’ has been effectively used in the study. The study showed that the student participants are well versed with the theme/ content. The CBI approach uses a theme to teach language. In the study, various topics on English Literature are used as the theme to teach academic writing skills. In sample 3, it is seen that the student is clear with the theme of her/ his research paper. This sample uses the theme of understanding identity crisis in *The Inheritance of Loss* to teach academic writing skills. The sample indicated that the student has a fair idea about the theme and the style of writing. From the sample, it is also observed that the student is clear with the MLA style of referencing and in-text citation. Relatedly, in Samples 1 and 2, the students can be seen to comprehend the critical stance of the theme. At the same time, their academic writing skills are seen to have been significantly enhanced.

Another important observation is that the student participants have well received the critical stance of the research topic. They are introduced to an understanding of the critical theories which helped them in comprehending the texts. This in turn has improved their overall critical thinking and reading of other texts in general. The group discussion in the course of their writing also assists them in understanding their research work from a different perspective.

The final writing of the student participants is structured in the following sequence:

- Introduction
- Summary of the text
- Critique
- Conclusion
- References

It is observed that the student participants could write well in almost all the above-mentioned points. In the introduction section, they could write
a brief introduction of the author, the text, the critical theory, and the thesis statement. They had written the story of the text in the summary section. However, it is observed that the student participants took time to write the critique of their research paper. In this section, the three important skills of academic writing, i.e. summarizing, paraphrasing and direct quotation played a crucial role in enabling them to write a good critique. After a thorough practice, they could write the critique of their paper. It is followed by conclusion and references. Furthermore, presentation of their research topics followed by a brief discussion towards the end of the course engages the student participants into enhancing their communicative competence. Real communication and exchange of information can be observed in these classroom tasks and activities as has been emphasized by the CBI approach drawing its principles from Communicative Language Teaching. This part of language learning augments the motivation of the learners and also enhances their creativity and critical thinking which again plays a seminal role in improving and developing their academic writing skills. Though there has been effective learning of academic writing skills through the content assigned to the student participants, there is still room for improvement. The comprehension of the content has been well received but its incorporation in academic writing still needs to be improved. This can be achieved by continuous practice.

Conclusion

Unquestionably, it is observed that academic writing plays a pivotal role in the education process. The study adopted the CBI approach to teach academic writing using the content/theme, English literature. The questionnaires administered to the student participants and the analysis of the samples of the students’ writing elicited that the use of the CBI approach has enhanced the academic writing skills of the student participants. Concurrently, their comprehension of the content has also been highly enriched. The pedagogical implication of the study is that the CBI approach can be effectively used to develop academic writing skills through learning the content. In the study, the student participants have shown their engagement and improvement in critical reading and writing as has been shown in the samples of the students’ writing. This serves as a crucial part in writing a good academic paper. However, it also illustrated that there is room for improvement in the
development of the academic writing skills discussed in the study. The student participants needed more practice to enhance their academic writing skills like paraphrasing, summarizing, direct quotation and structuring an argument. Therefore, it is suggested that to improve academic writing skills, the students need to continuously practise critical reading and writing and to incorporate the various academic writing skills which have been deliberated in the study. The present study has been confined to the use of the themes from English Literature as content to teach academic writing skills. The study paves the way for further research into employing themes from various fields to develop academic writing skills.

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