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Promoting Free Writing Skill in ELT Classroom: An Exploratory Action Research Study

Yam Bahadur G.C., Lecturer, English Subject Department
Waling Multiple Campus, Waling Syangja

Abstract

This exploratory action research (EAR) study investigated the difficulties faced by class ten students in free writing in English and implemented interventions to enhance their writing skills. The EAR study was conducted to the class 10 students of Shree Jeevan Jyoti English Boarding School, Syangja. The study involved 23 students and used both quantitative and qualitative data through close-ended and open-ended questionnaires, classroom observations, reflective journals and analysis of students' writing samples. The exploration phase revealed that students lacked confidence, hesitated to write, relied on guidebooks and faced challenges in vocabulary, grammar and organization of ideas. Various interventions including brainstorming activities, vocabulary journals, model writing, regular free writing practice, and peer feedback were implemented over four weeks. Post-intervention findings indicated significant improvements in students' fluency, coherence, vocabulary use, confidence and originality in writing. The study shows that the effectiveness of EAR as a reflective, practice-based framework for addressing classroom writing issues in Nepalese EFL contexts.

Keywords: Exploratory action research, free writing, EFL, writing skills, student-centred interventions.

Introduction

English is implemented as a compulsory subject from basic to higher education in Nepal. It is popular medium of instruction in private and community schools in Nepal. In the context of globalization, English proficiency has become essential for academic success, higher education, employment, and international communication (Dearden, 2013, Poudel

& Choi, 2021). Consequently, the proficiency on English language has become a major concern for teachers, learners, and policymakers in Nepal. Writing is considered the most difficult and demanding skill among four language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing to the English as a foreign language (EFL) learners. Writing requires not only knowledge of vocabulary and grammar but also the ability to generate ideas, organize them logically, and express them coherently in written form (Hyland, 2019).

Writing is the visual representation of speech. It is the productive skill which involves manipulating, structuring and communicating. According to Elbow (1998), free writing helps learners overcome writer's block and develop fluency by separating idea generation from editing. Nation (2020) focuses that frequent free writing promotes automaticity and confidence in writing. Though it has the academic value, it is given less priority in the classes of Nepal. Teachers focus memorization of model essays, answers from guide books and guess papers in Secondary Education Examination (SEE). Students depend upon on the ready-made answers.

English is implemented as a compulsory subject in class ten in Nepal. As an English subject teacher in Shree Jeevan Jyoti English Boarding School, I observed that many students were hesitant to engage in free writing tasks. I used to provide topics to write in the classroom. Students used to write whatever they like without writing topic sentence, supporting sentences and thesis statement. They did not think of cohesion and coherence in writing. They feel confused from where to start. They seemed confusion on free writing. Despite English as a compulsory medium of instruction and communication in school premises in my school except Nepali and Serophero/Social subjects, students feel reluctant in writing. They fear of making grammatical mistakes. They ask for sample answers and guidebooks to copy. Their writing lacked originality, coherence and personal voice. These observations inside my English classes attracted me to reflect on my teaching practices and seek ways to understand address students' free writing problems systematically. So, I decided to do exploratory action research. Smith and Rebolledo (2018) urges that Exploratory Action Research (EAR) provides a practical framework for teachers to investigate classroom-based problems, understand their underlying causes, and implement context-sensitive interventions. EAR does not focus only solving the issues or problems in the classroom, it focuses on exploration, understanding, and reflective practice. To address the issue of free writing in my classroom, I needed to do something immediately and intensively. I believed that EAR could be an effective means for teachers to explore and understand classroom issues and devise context sensitive strategies to address them (Smith, 2015a). There were many

issues in my classroom related with listening, speaking, reading and writing. Some issues were related with motivation, management of class and with the use of modern technologies. Some issues were related with me. I was not able to wrap up my class properly and not able to teach according to the objectives that I set in the lesson plan. Among many issues related with teacher, students and classroom, I chose the issue related with free writing. My EAR study is guided by the following research questions.

1. What difficulties do class ten students face in free writing in English?
2. What factors contribute to students' hesitation and poor performance in free writing?
3. How do exploratory action research based interventions promote free writing skills?

Review of the Related Literature

Literature review section of this study contains theoretical overview of the study, empirical literature review and the research gap.

Theoretical Literature Review

Writing is one of the language skills among four language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing. According to Hyland (2019), writing is a complex cognitive and linguistic activity that involves planning, drafting, revising and editing. In EFL contexts, students often struggle on writing because they have to face multiple situations like native language interference, language accuracy and less opportunity on writing. Even the teachers do not entertain on teaching of writing. Free writing is a process-oriented technique that encourages learners to write freely for a fixed period without stopping or editing. Free writing helps learners overcome fear and self-censorship, allowing ideas to flow naturally (Elbow 1998). Research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) focuses that fluency prioritized writing activities contribute to long-term writing development by increasing learners' confidence and writing speed (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). Nation (2020) focuses that EFL learners commonly face problems in writing because of limited vocabulary, grammatical inaccuracies, weak organization and lack of coherence in writing. Writing anxiety has also been identified as a major affective factor that negatively affects learners' willingness to write (Aryal & Paudel, 2025). Writing difficulties have been widely studied and researched in the EFL context like ours.

Empirical Literature Review of the Study

Shrestha (2019) in his EAR, he explored why students hesitated to speak English in an

English medium schools and sought strategies to improve their communication. He used interviews, discussions, questionnaires and classroom observations. The finding showed that peer pressure, fear of mistakes, low confidence, and habitual Nepali use hindered English communication. After implementing student centred speaking activities such as group discussion and presentations, students showed increased participation, confidence, and improved use of English within the classroom.

Additionally, in the similar type of study ran in Indonesia, Sukmawati (2020) in EAR on Students' Writing Issues in EFL Classroom published in Journal of ELT, aimed to identify students' writing problems and apply instructional strategies to improve their performance. The study involved thirty purposively selected secondary level EFL students in Indonesia. Data were collected through observations, interviews, students' written texts, and reflective journals, and analyzed qualitatively. The findings indicated that students struggled with idea generation, grammar, vocabulary, and organization. After implementing guided writing and continuous feedback, students showed improvement in coherence, grammatical accuracy, and overall writing quality highlighting the effectiveness of exploratory action research in enhancing writing skills.

Similarly, Bhattarai (2023) carried out a research to examine the free writing competence of secondary level students by using survey research design. He found that most of the errors were found in grammar, vocabulary and organization in free writing.

In our Nepalese context, Bhandari (2024) did a research in Challenges of Teaching and Learning Writing Skills in Nepalese Classes published in the TU journal, explored challenges in teaching and learning writing. Using a survey design, he collected data from 80 respondents through questionnaires. Finding showed students faced vocabulary, grammar and organizational problems, while teachers struggled with motivation, activity preparation, mixed -ability classes and limited training opportunities.

Oli (2024) conducted an EAR on speaking issue and found that self-suggestive and reflective notes, clapping instead of laughing while someone speaks in English, creating learner autonomy in the classroom, focusing on group and pair activities and clear instructions in English help to overcome the speaking issue of the classroom.

Likewise, Bhatt (2026) in his EAR study investigated the causes of student's passivity in poetry classes and introduced learner-centred strategies to increase participation. The study involved thirty-two grade ten students using questionnaires analyzed through frequencies and percentages. After implementing strategies such as predicating themes, explaining context and figures of speech, pair reading, and summary writing, the

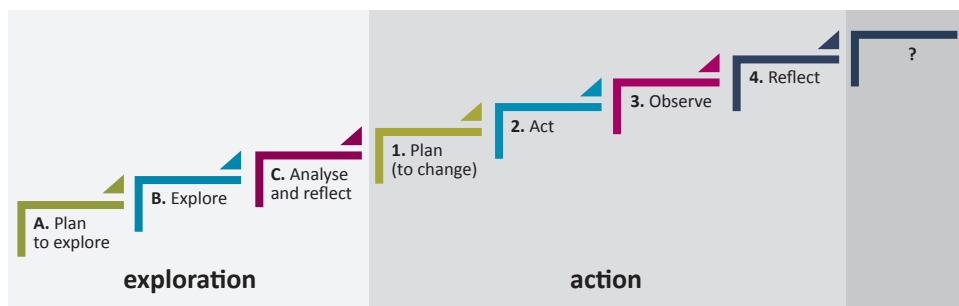
finding showed improved student motivation, comprehension, confidence, and active engagement.

Research Gap

The above mentioned literature shows that free writing is an issue in the classroom. I found so many EAR studies related with classroom issues including free writing but I did not find the free writing as an issue to the SEE appearing students. Though many studies were done on action research but less EAR are done. EAR justifies whether it is an issue or not. Smith, R., & Rebolledo, P. (2018) mention in their EAR book that after verifying issues in the classroom, it follows MUSE (manageable, urgent, significant, engaging) technique. Then, I measured that free writing is manageable, urgent, significant and engaging in my class. So, I decided to carry out research on free writing issue.

Research Method

This is an exploratory action research that aims to find difficulties students face while doing free writing, factors contribute to students' hesitant and poor performance and interventions to promote free writing in my English classroom. EAR is a practice based research that aims at solving classroom issues through exploration, planning, action and reflection. It helps to cope the classroom issues and gives the proper ways of teaching. This research is divided into exploration and action phases. Issues are explored and the reasons behind the issues are find out in the exploration phase. To solve the issues, some interventions are planned and sorted out. So, I did not follow the steps of only action research. I followed the steps of exploratory action research because exploring the issues before putting and action plan into action is crucial for teachers to comprehend and make well-informed decisions. Smith, R., & Rebolledo, P. (2018) clarify the steps of EAR with the given diagram.



Steps of Exploratory Action Research

I provided close and open ended questionnaires to the students of class ten to explore the reasons behind hesitant for free writing. There were 23 students in the class. In the implementation phase, I implemented actions for four weeks. I ran regular free writing sessions. Students engaged in free writing activities at least twice a week for ten to fifteen minutes. Topic were related to simple subjects like 'Our School', 'My First Day at School', 'My Aim of Life', 'Student Life' etc. Focus was given on fluency rather than accuracy during the preliminary phases of free writing. Then, I provided them the model of writing myself in the classroom. I helped to generate the ideas. This helped students understand that making mistakes is a natural part of the writing process. Before free writing, twice in a week, they were participated in brainstorming activities as mind mapping, listing ideas and discussing key words related to the topic. Vocabulary development is the integral part of free writing. They were given the task to maintain personal vocabulary journals where they recorded new words, meanings and example sentences. This practice of the students helped to increase the lexical sources. To improve sentence structure and coherence, students practiced combining simple sentences into more complex ones. These exercises supported grammatical development without interrupting free writing fluency. After these activities, students were given to write the topics for free writing. Then, they were encouraged to share their writing with peers and provide constructive feedback. Open ended questionnaires were given to write their reflection about their writing experiences, challenges and improvements at last. I maintained a reflective journal throughout the action phase.

Findings and Discussions

Close ended questionnaire before the intervention phase showed that a significant number of students had negative perceptions toward free writing. 74 percent of the students agreed that they felt nervous when asked to write freely in English, while 78 percent reported fear of making grammatical mistakes. Likewise, 70 percent of the students worried that their classmates might laugh at their errors. 82 percent of the students expressed that they felt uncomfortable writing without seeing a model answer first and expressed that they depend on guidebooks. In terms of writing skills, 76 percent of the students found it difficult to start writing. 80 percent reported problems in organizing their ideas coherently. Similarly, 85 percent of the students expressed that limited vocabulary hindered their expression and 72 percent admitted that they thought in Nepali but struggled to write in English. Only 18 percent of the students

reported practicing free writing at home. These data show that students generally lacked confidence fluency and independence in free writing before intervention phase.

The analysis of the exploratory phase questionnaires before intervention phase revealed that most students had negative feelings toward free writing in the classroom. A majority of the students reported that they felt nervous and anxious when asked to write freely in English. Fear of making grammatical mistakes and concern about peers' reaction such as being laughed at were common among the students. Many students expressed discomfort in writing without first seeing a model answer, indicating their strong interdependence on guidebooks and memorization practices. Moreover, they stated difficulty in starting writing tasks, generating ideas and organizing their thoughts coherently. Limited vocabulary and the habit of thinking in Nepali further hindered their ability to express ideas in English. Overall students lacked confidence and showed reluctance toward free writing which shows a teacher-centred learning.

After the intervention of various activities that is mentioned in the methodology section, it was found that there were significant improvement in students' attitudes and abilities in free writing. 87 percent of the students agreed that they felt more confident in free writing than before. 82 percent reported that they were less afraid of making grammatical mistakes. Similarly, 78 percent of the students stated that they could write continuously without stopping too often. 74 percent felt comfortable sharing their writing with classmates. Brainstorming activities were found helpful by 90 percent of the students in generating ideas before writing. In terms of writing skills, 83 percent of the students reported improvement in writing clear topic sentences. 80 percent expressed that they could organize their ideas more logically. Likewise, 85 percent of the students believed that their vocabulary had improved. 88 percent felt that they could express their ideas more clearly in English. Moreover, 91 percent of the students acknowledged that regular free writing practice contributed the effectiveness of peer feedback and writing journal activities respectively. These findings clearly demonstrate that the intervention strategies had a positive impact on students' confidence, fluency and overall writing performance.

The analysis of students' open-ended responses after the intervention shows noticeable positive changes in their writing skills and attitudes. Most students reported increased confidence and fluency in free writing. They stated that they could now write more easily without fear and hesitation. They highlighted improvements in idea generation, vocabulary use, and organization of paragraphs. Many students identified brainstorming

activities, regular free writing practice and vocabulary journals as the most helpful techniques. It supported them in developing ideas and expressing them more clearly. Peer feedback was also appreciated for helping them recognized and correct their mistakes. However, few students still reported minor difficulties to grammatical accuracy and finding appropriate vocabulary. Overall, the responses indicate that the interventions were effective in enhancing students' confidence, participation, and writing competence.

After reviewing students' free writing copies across various topics (as mentioned in appendix) noticeable improvements were observed in their overall writing performance. Most students were able to write more fluently and produced longer pieces of writing compared to the initial phase. They showed better ability to begin their writing with relevant ideas and attempted to use clear topic sentences in their paragraphs. There was a visible improvement in the organization of ideas. Many students presented their thoughts in a more logical and coherent manner. Vocabulary use also appeared to be richer. Students learned new words from their vocabulary journals. Although few grammatical errors were still present. Additionally, students demonstrated greater confidence and originality in their writing. They less focused on memorized content. These observation of the students show that the implemented interventions had a positive impact on students' free writing skills.

Conclusions and Implications

This study explored the difficulties of class ten students in free writing and tested interventions to improve their writing skills. The finding show that before intervention, student lacked confidence, hesitated to write, relied on guidebooks, and struggles with vocabulary, grammar and organizing ideas. After implementing activities like brainstorming, vocabulary journals, model writing, regular free writing, and peer feedback, students showed significant improvement in fluency, coherence vocabulary use and confidence. They were able to write longer, more organized and original texts.

The study implies that teacher-guided, student-centred interventions can effectively enhance free writing skills. Teacher should support and make creative environment in the class. They should provide idea generation strategies and encourage regular writing practice. Free writing should be integrated regularly in the curriculum rather than relying on memorized essays. These strategies can help students become independent and confident. It helps them in their summative and formative evaluations too.

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Appendices

Questionnaire for Exploration Phase

Questionnaire for EAR

Dear Students, Namaste.

These are the questionnaires that how you feel on free writing. Please, honestly tick the options. Your true answer gives me the idea to overcome on the issue 'free writing'. There are no right and wrong answers. If you don't entertain, no need to write your name. Thank you.

Name:(Optional)

Class : Ten

Symbols :

Strongly Disagree : SD

Disagree : D

Neutral : N

Agree : A

Strongly Agree : SA

Please, tick the short forms that you wish.

1. I feel nervous when my teacher asks me to do free writing in English.
SD D N A SA
2. I feel fear of making grammatical mistakes while writing in English.
SD D N A SA
3. I worry that my classmates may laugh at me if I make mistakes in writing.
SD D N A SA
4. I feel uncomfortable writing without seeing a model answer first.
SD D N A SA
5. I find it difficult to start writing on a given topic.
SD D N A SA
6. I do not know how to write a clear topic sentence in a paragraph.
SD D N A SA

7.	I find it difficult to organize my ideas properly in a paragraph.	SD	D	N	A	SA
8.	I often stop writing because I cannot generate enough ideas.	SD	D	N	A	SA
9.	I have limited vocabulary to express my ideas clearly in English.	SD	D	N	A	SA
10.	I usually thing in Nepali but struggle to write those ideas in English.	SD	D	N	A	SA
11.	I depend on guidebooks to prepare written answers.	SD	D	N	A	SA
12.	I prefer memorizing essays instead of writing my own ideas.	SD	D	N	A	SA
13.	I practice free writing regularly at home.	SD	D	N	A	SA

Open Ended Questions

1. How do you feel when you are asked to do free writing in English?

Ans:

2. What specific difficulties do you face while doing free writing?

Ans:

3. Why do you think you hesitate to write in English?

Ans:

4. What kind of support or help do you expect from your teacher to improve your writing skill?

Ans:

Questionnaires after intervention phase

Dear Students,

This questionnaire is prepared to understand the change in your writing skill after participating in different writing activities. Answer it honestly. Your responses will remain confidential.

Name:(Optional)

Class : Ten

Symbols :

Strongly Disagree : SD

Disagree : D

Neutral : N

Agree : A

Strongly Agree : SA

Please, tick the short forms that you wish.

1. I feel more confident in free writing now than before.
SD D N A SA
2. I am less afraid of making grammatical mistakes while writing.
SD D N A SA
3. I can write continuously without stopping too often.
SD D N A SA
4. I feel comfortable sharing my writing with my classmates.
SD D N A SA
5. Brainstorming activities helped me generate ideas before writing.
SD D N A SA
6. I can now write clear topics sentences in my paragraphs.
SD D N A SA
7. I can organize my ideas more logically in a paragraph.
SD D N A SA

- | | | | | | | |
|-----|---|----|---|---|---|----|
| 8. | I can now write clearer topic sentences in my paragraphs. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| 9. | My English vocabulary has improved during this writing practice period. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| 10. | I can express my ideas more clearly in English now. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| 11. | Regular free writing practice helped improve my writing. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| 12. | Peer feedback activities helped me improve my writing. | SD | D | N | A | SA |
| 13. | Writing journal activities increased my confidence in writing. | SD | D | N | A | SA |

Open Ended Questions

1. What improvements have you noticed in your writing after participating in these activities?

Ans:

.....

2. Which writing activity helped you the most? Please, explain.

Ans:

.....

3. Do you still face any difficulties in free writing? If yes, what are they?

Ans:

.....

4. What suggestions would you like to give to improving writing classes further?

Ans:

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