

Reflection and Self- Induced Alteration: A Third Space in Learning IELTS Writing – Case Study

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Abstract

Teaching IELTS writing can often be a tricky situation. Consistent writing practice with tutor feedback and review are key in learning writing for second language learners. While the immediate goal entails an eight-band score in the examination, acquiring language efficiency in a long run is indeed a process in itself. Although the learners are equipped with teacher feedback and peer review in IELTS classroom with additional activities that promote learning, there remains an unseen third element in procuring writing skills - self introspection and alteration. This research paper elucidates how a process approach method brings in a third space of self- induced alteration beyond teacher feedback which helps L2 learners become better second language writers. Through a case study of three learners, this paper looks at methods adopted by tutor to enhance learner's self-efficacy in acquiring writing skills and compares different self- alterations made by each learner.

Keywords: IELTS writing, feedback, peer review, self- alterations, language acquisition

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching IELTS writing is a daunting task as it entails dual purpose – short term goal of making a perfect band-score and long- term language acquisition. In other words, the learners are not only being prepared for examination but also made to learn a second language. The writing part of the IELTS general demands the candidates to write two tasks- a letter and an essay. However, the task at hand looks easy but the real work a tutor does is to encourage the candidates to build the language skills for future. Tutors approach teaching writing in two major ways – the Product approach and the Process approach. The former looks at tutoring learners in the traditional way by providing a model essay, highlighting features of a perfect write up while the latter aims at looking at writing as a “language development activity” (“IELTS teacher newsletter”, 2016). However, with an examination point of view, tutors adhere to product method by making students memorize perfect phrases, essay structure

and replicating in multiple essays. What this approach does is decelerate the rate of a learner's individual development skills- “the ability to brainstorm ideas and develop ideas, organize writing effectively, edit and rewrite to improve the quality of their written piece.” (“IELTS teacher newsletter”, 2016). This research paper taking the example of three learners, looks at how process approach methodology has helped them go beyond reviews and feedbacks and encouraged them to take up self-induced alterations as a sustainable means to second language acquisition in the long run.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, Raimes (1983 :3) underscores the reasons of including writing in EFL syllabus; firstly, it reinforces linguistic development through grammar, structures, idioms and vocabulary, helps them unravel beyond what they say and helps them express in a new language. This perhaps underlines the importance of writing in language acquisition in

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general and IELTS examination in particular. On similar lines, writing has been described as an evaluation process, that promotes critical thinking, communication and professionalism. (Coffin 2003, 20). Quoting Raimes, “learning to write is not just a natural extension of learning to speak.” (1983:3) writing has to be taught and involves different approaches.

Brown (2001: 335) bifurcates these approaches in simple terms as product and process. Under the product methodology, students are given writing samples and are required to emulate the style, structure, phrases and vocabulary of the samples. On the other hand, a product approach involves different steps to writing – drafting, peer- review, teacher feedback and revisions. (Hassan and Akhnad, 2010: 77). Laser focus on product method would mean high scores in IELTS examination, but process method adopted by the tutor enables the students to not stay limited to scoring, but enhance their second language skills.

Process approach has gained momentum in most EFL classes that aims at language acquisition. A number of researches has also gone into the different number of steps involved in the process. Coffin (2003 :33 – 34) elicits process approach with eight stages that includes pre-writing, planning, drafting, reflecting, peer reviewing, revising, proofreading. While Harmer (2004 :4-6) goes by four elements – planning, drafting, editing (reflecting and revising), and final version. Johnson (2008 :179) suggests a five-stage writing process – prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and submitting.

On the whole process approach is learner centric and helps each individual the process of understanding a new language. This research paper revolves around a process methodology where L2 learners are exposed to different activities in addition to basic classes which helps them tap into a space of self-revisions; beneficial for a long-term success.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study examined three students over a period of ten weeks. Each one belonged to a different educational backdrop namely science and technology in general and engineering in particular. This elucidates that the study bunch are non-English majors and essentially L2 learners. The ten-week writing course followed a methodology which enabled them to excel in writing part of IELTS examination (General Training). The writing exam tests language competency in students by evaluating two parts:

Task 1 – Letter Writing

Task 2- Essay

The course induced a process- writing approach throughout by focussing on different ways of writing drafts and revision between each draft for better results. Table 1 illustrates the core methodology adopted in teaching writing.

Week 1-3	Instructions for writing prompts: Basic grammar rules and formats
Week 4	General Essays drafts submission, Review and Feedback
Week 5	Free write drafts, Rubric for Analysis
Week 6	2 General Essays and Letter Writing Exercise, Oral presentations
Week 7	Cue Card based on previously written essays, Self- reflection and marking
Week 8	Essay and letter writing with review and feedback
Week 9	Writing three drafts and submitting a final essay and letter each
Week 10	IELTS test

Table 1 illustrating the methodology adopted during writing course

As proclaimed in the table, the first three weeks were spent on emphasising the basics of writing which includes grammar, structure, punctuations

that help in producing a clear, coherent and meaningful writing. By week 4, the learners were asked to turn in essay drafts for review. The whole week was spent on giving feedbacks to individual learners which would enable them to turn into an autocorrect model. It is in the fifth week that the methodology takes a full-fledged process approach where the learners are expected to draft free writes as per their liking. A Rubric, rather a checklist was also provided to them for self-analysis.

From Week 6, several activities were included in the teaching methodology which included oral presentations and cue cards (speaking exercise based on previously written essays). In later weeks, essays and letter writing with review was practiced. The final week before taking up examination solely focussed on writing numerous drafts and a final essay and letter submission.

A close analysis of the table gives us a cyclical pattern being followed; where the first five weeks were spent by giving instructions, reviews and feedback. Week 5 then, marked a break where the writing process took a turn, became self-oriented. Activities like free writes, oral presentations and cue cards gave the learners freedom to explore the language on their own and re-instated a process approach to learning writing with the additional help of rubrics and feedbacks. This cyclical process approach kindled the learners to evaluate their own drafts through close reading, multiple draft revisions and self- analysis.

These activities were followed during course framework to reiterate self- induced learning for better writing comprehension.

1. Free Writes

Free writing in simple terms is scribing whatever comes to the mind. This technique often helps the learners to remove inhibitions and just start writing. This forms the perfect example of a process approach method as it is purely learner centric and helps them evaluate where each one stands in terms

of fluency, vocabulary and sentence structures. As these free writes are not graded, it reckons as the first step to open up channels for L2 writers. With increased free writing, the learners also improve their formal writing with continued practice.

2. Rubric

A writing rubric is a guide or a checklist that helps the learner improve their skills by determining which areas to focus or not. It also acts as a catalyst to the learning objective by helping them in self-analysis. The rubric essentially gives the learners a reference point to gain perspective about formal writing and its evaluation. It takes away the subjectivity in evaluation and employs a holistic approach to test one's own writing progress. In this study, the learners were given a writing rubric in the 5th week. This checklist helped them monitor their own progress and understand which areas to focus on while undertaking essay and letter writing. The rubric given below in depth discuss the surface and meaning aspects of writing. While first part of the rubric questions about the structure and organisation with regard to writing both formats- letter and essay; the later part of it looks at grammar, sentence constructions, vocabulary which helps them further enhance the meaning of their script. Henceforth, a rubric encompasses criteria to define growing performance levels and writing proficiency.

The rubric prescribed for this ten-week course sheds light on different areas of writing:

- a. Meanings- Does the essay or the letter give out a clear meaning through formulation of ideas, arguments and evidences?
- b. Development – Does the writing follow a well planned out structure with one idea leading to other in coherent manner?
- c. Convention – Is the writing free of grammatical errors? Does it employ well framed sentences
- d. Language – How does the vocabulary enhance the writing?

Does the essay follow a basic structure of four paragraphs?
Does the introduction answer the basic questions in four lines?
A thesis statement in the first paragraph-
Does the thesis statement elucidate the crux of the essay with clarity?
Inclusion of two body paragraphs-
Each body paragraph discusses a single viewpoint-
Do the body paragraphs have evidences to support the argument?
Does the conclusion sum up the basic arguments in the essay?
Does the conclusion match the thesis statement?
Clear transition of ideas in the essay?
Looked for grammatical errors, Capitalizations?
Crosschecked sentence constructions?
Re read for inclusion of a better vocabulary-
Doubled checked the guidelines in the rubric-

Table 2 describing the rubric given to students for self- assessment

Oral presentations and Cue cards

After weeks into the writing course, the learners made oral presentations of their previously written essays. This prompted them to undertake close

reading of their write ups. In order to give a crisp presentation, the learners were forced to re-read which enabled them revise and edit the minor errors in writing. This often gave them the objective approach into language learning, where each one became more conscious of their writing progress.

The study made with the help of three L2 learners using process approach methodology helped in curating the following observations.

IV. OBSERVATION AND DISCUSSION

After the ten- week IELTS writing course, the study was conducted by analysing the revisions made by the L2 learners from their first drafts to the final write ups. For further analysis, Coomber's breakdown of revision (2016) made in an EFL classroom was used. Coomber in his study elucidates the effectiveness of various techniques in understanding the revisions made by each learner. His study promulgates the idea that the students indulged in additional practices to writing revised their essays almost three times than the control group. What is significant about the test group is that their revised editions achieved greater level of success with over 80% of them improving the quality of their writing, rather than 66 % in the control group. (Coomber, 2016) This paper takes up Coomber's model to be applied in IELTS writing classroom and explores a third space in learning writing – self induced alterations, revision and auto correction.

The paper further analyses three participants and how these techniques given in the IELTS classroom enhance a third space in learning writing apart from peer reviews and feedbacks.

Participant 1: Saranya V Raj

Revisions	Successful	Unsuccessful
Surface Changes		
Grammar, Spelling Checks	6	0
Sentence Structure	2	0

Capitalization	4	0
Meaning Changes		
Clarity and Coherence	2	0
Deletion of material	3	1
Addition of material	5	2
Total Changes made	22	3

From the data mentioned above in the table, we draw that Saranya (Participant 1) made a total of 22 changes (12 surface and 10 meaning changes) from her first draft to the final essay. The data also shows a higher rate of successful revisions, although there is also a possibility that the student has altered changes wherever she is confident. However, among the three learners, Saranya has made the maximum number of successful changes in her final essay. These successful surface changes she has attempted can be traced back to the availability of a writing rubric which emphasised on grammar, sentence structure and capitalization. A checklist often gives the learners an awareness to autocorrect every time they revise. Throughout her revisions, Saranya has also improved on her choice of words which brings in clarity to her writings.

Draft 1

Nowadays children are intelligent therefore they have a clear ideology of about what they want to be in future.

Essay

Nowadays children are intelligent therefore they have a clear vision of where they want to be.

Draft 1

For instance, India is the country where children are born and brought up with parents. So most of the children are spoon fed in this scenario, children who take their higher education from other country make more independent and substantial future.

Essay

In Asian countries, children are dependent on parents and the educational system is largely spoon-fed. In such circumstance, young adult chooses to pursue higher education in countries abroad which makes them independent and have a sustainable future.

Participant 2: Manoj K Devarajan

Revisions	Successful	Unsuccessful
Surface Changes		
Grammar, Spelling Checks	5	1
Sentence Structure	2	1
Capitalization	3	0
Meaning Changes		
Clarity and Coherence	1	0
Deletion of material	1	0
Addition of material	2	0
Total changes	14	2

The table gives out a numerical equivalent of the revisions done by the second participant Manoj. Although he has comparatively lesser alterations than the first participant, the success rate remains high.

Manoj through his series of re-readings for oral presentations was able to produce a quality essay from his previously written ones, with emphasis on avoiding repetitive words and ideas. A well-structured final essay brings into forefront his adherence and awareness of a writing rubric. Apart from correcting minute spelling errors and sentence checks, Manoj's self-alteration process included a rewritten paragraph which gives out better comprehension of ideas. While Draft 1 carries ambiguous words like "major portion, major

people”, the final essay showcases a specific choice of words that gives out an introductory passage with clarity of meaning.

Draft 1

Teaching is a profession chosen by major portion of the population all over the globe. Many people believe that experience makes a teacher perfect while others believe that attaining training skills are essential for the best outcome from a teacher.

Final Essay

Teaching is a profession chosen by a large number of people all over the globe. While mainstream opinion defines experience as a leading trait of teachers, some stress the importance of training as well.

Another significant improvement evident in Manoj’s final essay from the previously written ones is accurate use of punctuation. Through consistent grammar workshops and self- revisions for the activities prescribed in the course, he was able to bring in a natural awareness of punctuations. The example given below illustrates the same.

Draft 1

Thus experienced teacher can be differentiated from a teacher who is a fresh graduate

Final Essay

Thus, an experienced teacher can be differentiated from a newly appointed graduate.

In the next example, Manoj shows a varied understanding on phrasing of the clause, uses strong verbs to present a more coherent way of presenting sentences.

Draft 1

Hence I would argue that to be a good teacher, both training as well as experience is needed.

Final Essay

Re-evaluating the above-mentioned arguments, I would like to argue that both training and experience is a prerequisite for being a good teacher

Participant 3: Divya Lakshmi Narayan

Revisions	Successful	Unsuccessful
Surface changes		
Grammar, Spelling Checks	2	0
Sentence Structure	1	1
Capitalization	2	0
Meaning Changes		
Clarity and Coherence	1	0
Deletion of Material	1	0
Addition of Material	2	1
Total changes made	9	2

The third participant Divya Lakshmi Narayan taken for study shows the least amount of revisions as per the number equivalent in the table with a total of 9 (5 surface and 4 meaning changes). She attempts certain surface changes such as spell checks and finds more appropriate words to suit meanings in the first example

Draft 1

Tough there are certain disadvantages such as less social interactions and distractions at home, telecommuting benefits the individuals both economically and personally.

Final Essay

Though there are certain disadvantages such as fewer social interactions and distractions at home, telecommuting benefits the individuals both economically and personally

While the second example elucidates a detailed final essay, which is information specific; the third example deals with rewritten sentences to avoid ambiguity and provide clarity of thought.

Draft 1

The rapid pace in development has led to changes in the working environment.

Final Essay

With the internet taking over the world, start-ups and brands flourishing online, there has been significant changes in the working environment.

Draft 1

Despite of the individual benefit the company or the employer is benefited as there is no requirement for large office spaces to accommodate employees.

Final Essay

Apart from the individual benefits of work from home, it spares the employers the requirement of finding large office space

Although Coomber's method helps us understand the extent of revisions done by each candidate with numerical equivalents, it does not seem to extrapolate the language efficiency instilled in each one. What this study does is fathom how different techniques induces a space for self-alterations, essential for learning writing. Through feedbacks, rubrics, oral presentations, the learners were able to identify, understand and correct their errors. Some of the changes in writing include grammar, tense changes, punctuations, sentence structure and paragraph revisions. While one learner emphasised on more surface changes, other tried meaning changes, the third one balanced out on surface and meaning changes. Sometimes, too much focus on alterations deviated them from arriving at intended meanings. Hence, the study puts forward feasible methods by which tutors can effectively contribute to the learner's language efficiency by helping them tap into reflection and self- alterations.

V. CONCLUSION

The research paper intends to look at how tutors can induce different techniques and method to their process approach methodology that encourages learners to consistently better their writing skills. Feedback and reviews although essential are external, while self- alteration is an intrinsic quality that stays and benefits long term. Such approach to teaching focus on both acing the exam and language learning as well. What this essentially does is increase self-efficacy by identifying mistakes, understanding patterns, tap into a zone of auto-correction. This helps learners develop an objective approach to learning that carves into a discipline for success. Activities like oral presentations, cue cards, writing rubrics promote re- readings, revisions also adding the fun element to learning. As Suzuki (2012) proclaims that participants in his study committed fewer errors in the revised version than first essay, these activities tend to activate an awareness towards language learning. However, further research can be done in developing novice strategies that suit learners in cultural context or in stages of varying language efficiency.

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