Improving Writing Skills through e-Portfolio

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1. Abstract

This research explores a simple approach to improve the English writing skills of pre-service teacher trainees through "e- portfolios" using a mobile platform. 30 teacher trainees from the Mahaweli National College of Education were the target group. A pre-test of their writing was carried out which revealed that their English writing skills needed improvement. This problem was addressed through the use of WhatsApp. First, a WhatsApp group was created in the class and mini groups of five members each were created. The intervention was done in two phases. In the first phase, a variety of writing activities were uploaded. Peer correction took place with the final version being uploaded to the main group site. The second phase was focused on academic writing such as essays, reports and interpreting graphs. After three months, every one submitted their final editing of all the activities to the lecturer through their personal WhatsApp thread. The writing activity had become popular among the teacher trainees and they actively engaged in it. The post-test showed that their writing skills had been greatly improved in this period. Further, the feedback provided by the teacher trainees revealed that the activity significantly affected their motivation to improve their writing skills.

2. Sub-theme

The research that was carried out to improve teacher trainees' writing skills was based on e- portfolios through WhatsApp in mobile phones, hence this paper is presented under the sub theme "Digital trends."

3. Story

Literature Review

The approach was based on the literature review. The advantages of ICT in education have been revealed in the literature. Brush, Glazewski and Hew (2008) state that ICT can be used as a tool for students to discover learning topics, solve problems, and provide solutions to the problems in the learning process. ICT makes knowledge acquisition more accessible, and concepts in learning areas are understood while engaging students in the application of ICT. Chai, Koh and Tsai (2010) argue that ICT develops students' new understanding in their areas of learning. Further, ICT provides more meaningful solutions to different types of learning inquiries. Koc (2005) argues that using ICT facilitates students to communicate, share, and work collaboratively

anywhere at any time. For instance, a teleconferencing classroom could invite students around the world to gather together simultaneously for a topic discussion.

Background

The main objective of this study was to develop a user-friendly approach based on Information and Communication Technology (ICT) to improve writing skills of the teacher trainees. The Mahaweli National College of Education trains teachers of English for government schools in Sri Lanka. Linguistics and the four skills of English language are essential components of their studies. The trainees are typically not very interested in improving their writing skills despite their performance not being at the desired level. This fact was further confirmed through analyzing their end-semester examination marks and from the pre- test. The teacher trainees were however very interested in using smart phones. They often used social media such as WhatsApp, Viber, and Facebook. Hence, a simple activity was designed using the WhatsApp platform to improve their writing skills.

Methodology

A pre-test, similar to the final examination including an essay, was conducted to evaluate the current state of writing skills of trainees. The pre-test marks were considered as the baseline. The intervention process consisted of two phases as follows. The class consisted of thirty trainees. First, a WhatsApp group was created, and all the trainees joined the group creating a cover page with their profile including a photograph. Then they were asked to form mini groups consisting of five members in each. First, a variety of writing activities starting with simple write ups such as paragraph writing, picture description, guided writing, autobiographies etc. to the WhatsApp group were uploaded each week. During the class, the trainees were taught how to build a cohesive paragraph with a thesis statement providing many examples. They also learnt discourse markers and their use in the context. Then the trainees were asked to write a paragraph on a given topic. Within the first week everyone sent their first write-up to the mini group and during the session in the following week, they were asked to select one write-up from their mini group, peer correct it and add their suggestions and ideas to their peer's write-up. Every trainee got the opportunity to read and correct a different write-up from their group members and then they were asked to send the corrected write up to the common thread and get feedback from another peer from the other groups as well. After the second editing, each write up was stored in their personal WhatsApp thread.

The error correction codes used were as follows:

- G- Grammar mistakes
- S-Spelling mistakes
- WO-Word Order
- GI-Generating Ideas

The second activity was based on a picture description. It was done in a very novel way. A simple method called "SALUTE" was used which was introduced by the writer James Clanton in the English Teaching Professional magazine in May in 2019. SALUTE stands for

S-Size (How many are in the picture)
A-Activity (What do they do)

L-Location (Where is the place)
U-Uniform (What are they wearing)
T-Time (What time is it, day, month or season)
E-Equipment (What equipment is being used)

This simple but effective guide was used by the trainees to write a picture description. The pictures were selected by them. Finally, guided writing and autobiographies were used to complete the first phase.

In the second phase, academic writing was focused on through editing sample essays, writing reports and interpreting graphs. At the end of three months, the final editing of all their writings was sent to the lecturer. Moreover, the trainees produced hardcopies of the same.

Finally, the post-test was held in order to evaluate their improvement in writing skills.

4. Lessons and /or Recommendations

This study was carried out with the intention of improving writing skills of the pre-service teacher trainees through a simple mobile app, which is a workable source in the classroom. The post-test showed that there was a significant improvement in their writing skills when compared to the pre-test.

The feedback from the trainees on this assignment revealed that it was interesting and helpful to improve their writing. It helped the trainees increase their intrinsic motivation through this extrinsic motivational tool. Hence a variety of activities can be applied through e-portfolios to motivate the trainees and gain better performance in writing skills. This research showed that a considerable number of trainees lacked grammatical knowledge. Writing errors cover three language areas - syntactical, morphological and orthographical. The following findings and recommendations can be made to help improve writing skills: -

1. An E- portfolio on WhatsApp can be used as an effective tool to improve the sub skills of writing.

2. An E- Portfolio on WhatsApp can be implemented to empower learners' self-autonomy.

3. Mobile apps can be used as a teacher-learner friendly tool in classroom set up.

4. E-Portfolio can be used to promote social interaction among teacher trainees.

One of the limitations of the study was the unavailability of data in students' mobile phones. There was also no guarantee that every student would possess a smart phone. Also, there were certain drawbacks that may have affected the findings of this study. In collecting data for the investigation, a questionnaire could not be used. in fact, written feedback from the trainees was collected after the intervention process. Had another data collection instrument been available, then the findings would have been stronger. Also, a control group could have been used to do a comparison between WhatsApp and a more traditional method. More studies need to be done to compare the methods.

This research on "e-portfolios" was carried out in order to improve the writing skills of Pre-service teacher trainees in National Colleges of Education. Although this study had a small target group, it came out with some noteworthy findings. If systematic and methodical planning is implemented in par with technical know-how, it is not a challenge for a teacher to improve the English writing skills of the learners.

5. References

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For a list of the activities used in this study please contact the author.

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