

Basic Level School Students' Letter Writing Proficiency

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Abstract

Letter writing is one of the most important aspect of teaching and learning activities. When the students become competent in letter writing, they can communicate with different firms and institutions. This study proves that the task of letter writing for basic school students in English is a challenging task. The study employed descriptive survey research design. It explores how basic school students perform their level of proficiency in writing letter of apology studying in four schools of Pokhara valley. This study found out that the students of basic school are not instructed well to follow the standard pattern of letters writing during teaching and learning process. The average mark of the sampled schools' students was 10.48 which showed that the proficiency level of the basic school students' was not found better. The majority of the students scored below average marks in this study which reveals that both students and teachers need to be trained well to develop the letter writing proficiency of basic school students.

Keywords: *proficiency, average marks, letter writing, coherence, marking scheme*

Introduction

Letter writing is a process in which writer creates and reformulates ideas as s/he tries to generate the meaning. It can be viewed as problem solving activity rather than a simple act of communication (Dierks, 2011). In approaching letter writing as well as the other writing tasks, writers search for solutions to a series of problems like formulating ideas, solving the problems and creating the meaning of writing letters (Harmer, 2008). Therefore, writing letter is a complex cognitive activity comprising a number of process and strategies. The use of strategies in the letter writing process is crucial to successful writing. Process approach of writing letters promotes the ability of using language: brainstorming, group discussion, and writing activity can be developed by the use of process approach whereas, for developing writing proficiency model texts like formal letters can be given to the students to read, to draw students' attention for writing letter. Paudel (2021) found that teachers also need to focus on process approach for developing writing skills So, to facilitate the students in writing,

teachers needs to adopt process approach to writing. Lyons (2017) stated that since the late twentieth century socio-linguists, social historians, and literary scholars have become progressively interested in the letter as genre and letter writing as social and educational practice in the field of language teaching and learning. Letter writing practices are the key aspects in academic world. The academic interest in writing letters has resulted not only in scholarly studies, but also in the publication of letter collections (Camiciotti, 2014).

Language learning comprises learning four different but interrelated skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing (Harmer, 2008). These four language skills are integrated both in learning a foreign language and acquiring a native language. Among them, writing is productive and a powerful medium of expression. Writing is a medium of human communication that represents language and emotion through the inscription or recording of signs and symbols. It is an important medium of expressing oneself by way of written words as authors and poets (Harmer, 2008). Ur (2006) found that at the 'micro' level specific written practice forms at the level of words or sentence (handwriting or typing, spelling, punctuation) which puts the emphasis on content and organization of writing letter.

The goal of teaching/learning writing is to improve the students' writing skill. The prime objective of writing is to express opinions, ideas, messages, etc. which the writer wants to convey to the readers. Writing is the expression of the content. But the writer needs to pay some attention to the formal aspects of writing such as neat handwriting, correct spelling, punctuation, grammatical structures, appropriate use of vocabulary items and so on (Harmer, 2008).

Letter is a written message that we send to persons who are far away from us and we want to convey our message to them in a clear and forceful manner. Writing letter follows the systematic process and it has different elements like address, date, salutation, body and ending. Normally, we write letter to a friend, letter of invitation, letter of thanks, letter of congratulation, letter of sympathy, letter to the editor, job application letter and so on. Here, the research has focused in letter writing proficiency of grade eight students in writing a letter of apology.

Review of Literature

Writing is a systematic process which follows a system of writing to develop a meaning making text in a specific subject matter to a target group of the readers. Sider (2013) stated that writing manipulates the mechanics, letters and structures into sensible words, sentences and paragraphs that provides a meaningful piece of information. Writing makes use of graphic symbols to represent spoken sounds. Richards et al. (1985) found "Writing is a system of written symbols which represents the sounds, syllables or words of language which have their written form, use graphic symbols that represent the spoken sounds" (p. 313). Similarly, Byren (1993) found "The symbols have to be arranged, according to certain convention to form words and words have to be arranged to form a sentence" (p. 113). Writing is a cognitive process which starts from understanding of tasks. Writing helps the individual to develop his/her insight and career. The essentials of writing are the spelling and pronunciation, sometimes also known as mechanics of writing or graphological resources.

Components of Writing Skills

Writing is not an easy task, a writer should have some specific strategies and skills to make a particular piece of writing meaningful. According to Gurey (1954), the teaching components of

writing skills are as follows:

- Teachers must develop the learners' ability to write correct and appropriate sentences with the rigorous practice only after that a student can produce meaningful piece of writing.
- Mechanical skills: Teachers need to develop the learners' ability of using punctuation and spelling correctly while teaching letter writing, only after that the students may develop the skill of writing letter following the proper format.
- Treatment of a content: Teachers must help the learners to think and express correctly in writing.
- Stylistics: Teachers must help the learners to manipulate sentences using language effectively
- Judgment skill: Teacher must help the learners to write in an appropriate manner.

Characteristics of Good Writing

To be a good writer, students must consider following elements of good writing:

Coherence

Good writing deals with one topic at a time. Narayanswami (1979) states that in a good piece of writing, all the sentences are closely related to the central idea.

Clarity

Good writing should be clear. It must be absolutely free from ambiguity. There should not be room for different interpretations or misinterpretations in the writing. Idea should be presented in a clear, orderly, readable, understandable and informative style. The writer should have the idea of how to sequence what is said and how to express the subject matter.

Complete

Good writing must be complete. A good piece of writing completes the topic it deals with. Good writing should avoid exaggeration and hyperbolic and self-contradictory statements.

Continuity

Continuity of thought and natural link of ideas are important features in writing. There must be continuity of thought from one word to the following word, from one phrase to the next phrase, from one sentence to the other sentence, from first paragraph to next paragraph and from first chapter to next chapter.

Unity

Writing must have unity. Words make up a sentence, sentences make up a paragraph. A sentence cannot be called a good sentence if it does not contain one main thought. Likewise, paragraph cannot be called good if it is not constructed as to deal with only one main topic or theme.

Economy

Good writing must be brief. A writer writes something according to his/ her capacity to express his/ her ideas briefly and effectively. Good writing is like a gold coin, small in compass but great in value.

Simplicity

A good writing must be simple. It means that reducing complexities, unnecessary expressions, and unnatural way is the best characteristic of good writing.

Free from Error

Good writing must be free from error. It must be accurate. Every written piece has to be

free from orthographic errors, semantic errors, grammatical errors, idiomatic errors, factual errors, punctuation errors and others.

Dimensions of Written Communication

Written communication contains the ability to communicate message in different ways, to heterogeneous audiences through the medium of written communication (Markle et al., 2013). Written communication develops the communicating skills among the students. Sparks et al. (2014) stated that written communication is the expansion and expression of thoughts, feelings and live experiences in the form of writing. Written communication involves learning to work in many genres and styles. Rhodes (2010) found that written communication contains various writing strategies and mixing texts, data, and images. Written communication involves five dimensions. Context and purpose for writing, which includes considerations of audience, purpose, and the circumstances surrounding the writing task(s). Content development, the ways in which the text explores and represents its topic in relation to its audience and purpose.

Letter Writing in English

Letter writing is an art which is the means of communication between friends, relatives and organizations who are at a distance. Letter writing is viewed as a social practice, evaluating the content, the participants, the activities and the facts in their social contexts (Barton & Hall, 2000, p. 2). Letter writing is taken as a social practice that informs about the various social matters that happens in the society. A letter consists of written communication specially addressed one or more recipients, and identifies the senders and conveys a message; even if it is just to say that the message to the target groups or individuals. (Camiciotti, 2014). The information imparted by the letter is required to be clear and natural. For instance, a personal letter is written in informal style which has colloquialism, slang and dialects as well. On the other hand, a business or an official letter is written in a formal and impersonal style.

Types of Letters

Letter writing is a way communication which conveys the messages to carry out the particular function in their daily activities (Al-Khatib, 2001). Similarly, Gupta (2016) has mentioned basically two types of letter that are formal and informal letters.

Formal Letters

A formal letter is one written in a formal and follows a certain stipulated format. Such letters are written for official purposes to authorities, dignitaries, colleagues, seniors, that has formal relation between the sender and the receiver. Formal letters are normally short and clear. Official letters, business letters, letters of application, letters to the editor are the examples of formal letters.

Business Letters

The purpose of the business letters is to establish relationship between two firms and companies. Such letters deal with some subjects of ordering, request, booking, complaint, apology, inquiry, transfer of money, etc. Thus, these letters are used to keep the legal records of the transactions between the firms and institutions involved.

Letters of Employment

The letters deal with the acquisition, acceptance, rejection or confirmation of a job and so on

are called the letters of employment. For instance, letter of application for a job, letter of appointment, letter of acceptance, letter of refusal and so on.

Letters of Reference and Recommendation

The letters that recommend somebody or something with some factual references and information to someone for a special purpose are known as the letters of reference and recommendation (Leising, Erbs, & Fritz, 2010). The person who recommends someone should be responsible for the information imparted by his letter.

Letters to the Editor

The letters written addressing the editor of a newspaper or magazine or any publication are called the letters to the editor but the main aim of these letters is to inform, convince or persuade the readers or concerning people. These letters should be clear and to the point.

Informal Letters

Informal letters are personal letters which are sent from one person to another such as relatives and friends who are normally close or known to each other. Personal letters are written in friendly and informal language but the formality of the language is not given importance.

Letters of Sympathy/Condolence

Letters of condolence or informal condolences are written to give consolation to a family on the demise of their relatives or friends. They are written in the form of personal letter. Letter of sympathy is written when someone, i.e. our relative or friend has lost something but letter of condolence is written addressing at the demise of someone else.

Letter of Apology

A letter of apology is written to apologize for a mistake which was done unintentionally and reassuring the authority about not to repeat that mistake. One of the most important interactions in human life is offering and accepting apologies which has the power to heal humiliations and grudges that helps to remove the revenge and develop the feeling of forgiveness on the part of the offended parties (Lazare, 2005, p. 3). The result of apology develops the reconciliation and restoration of broken relationship of the people in their life. So, letter of apology has the great importance in building the disturbed relation of the people also.

Methodology

To explore letter writing proficiency of basic school students, the researcher employed survey research design. To investigate and address the large scale educational issues as well as the common field of study, survey research is used and this type of study also helps to obtain information describing characteristics of a large scale study (Ponto, 2015). To explore the letter writing proficiency of basic school students, the researcher set a question to write letter of apology with the weightage of 15 full marks as the research tool, based on curriculum of basic level school that could be asked in the basic level examination as stated in the grid. Four Schools and sixty students were randomly selected (15 students from each school) by the reference of the subject teachers for the study. The researcher visited the selected schools to build the rapport with the head teachers, subject teachers and students after taking their consent the researcher distributed the question to the informants and asked to write the letter of apology in about 30 minutes. Then, he collected the answers sheets written by the informants.

The researcher did the same in the four different schools in the process of collecting primary data. The informants were the students of grade eight who were studying in the four schools of Pokhara valley.

After completing the collection of data, the researcher evaluated the answers written by the informants and analyzed based on the average score then interpreted the result descriptively. The researcher gave pseudonyms to the selected schools to maintain the ethics of the research.

Results and Discussion

This research entitled Evaluating Letter Writing Proficiency: A Study of Basic School Students tries to explore proficiency of the students studying in the same grade. After marking letter written by the informants, the researcher started to analyse the data. Here, in this study, the researcher analyzed and interpreted the result on the basis of the following criteria:

- Students' total proficiency in letter writing
- School-wise Letter Writing Proficiency of Students
- Marking scheme based analysis and interpretation

Students' total Proficiency in Letter Writing

Students' total proficiency deals with average score of the selected informants of the four schools of Pokhara valley. Altogether there were 60 informants, finally, their marks were analyzed comparing the marks obtained by the students of the sampled schools calculating their mean score. Then, the researcher listed the proficiency level of letter writing in table 1.

Table 1

Overall Letter Writing Proficiency of the Students

Score (f)	Number of students (x)	fx	Percentage (%)	Grade	Mean Score
9	10	90	16.67	G	10.48
12	8	96	13.33	E	
13	4	52	6.67	E	
8	9	72	15	S	
11	29	319	48.33	VG	
Total	60	629	100%		

Table 1 depicts the individual marks obtained by the sampled students. Only 4 students secured 13 marks, 8 students scored 12 marks, 29 students scored 11 marks and 9 students scored 8 marks out of total 15 marks. It indicates that there has variations of letter writing proficiency among the basic school students. The total average mark of the informants is 10.48 but 31.67% i.e. 19 students scored below average marks. Whereas, 68.33% i.e. 41 students obtained more than average marks. This analysis found out that the majority of the students are found good at writing letter of apology. Although the marks obtained by the students can't seem satisfactory, so extra teaching efforts is required to develop better letter writing proficiency among the basic school students.

School-wise Letter Writing Proficiency of the Students

Table 2 presents the letter writing proficiency of Mt. Kailash School.

Table 2

Letter writing proficiency of Mt. Kailash School

Code of the Students	obtained marks	Average marks
I	9	10.53
II	9	
III	12	
IV	12	
V	13	
VI	13	
VII	8	
VIII	8	
IX	8	
X	11	
XI	11	
XII	11	
XIII	11	
XIV	11	
XV	11	

The average mark of Mt. Kailash School's students is 10.53. It is above the total students' average marks. While analyzing the average marks, here, I can say that the students from Mt. Kailash school are good in writing letter of apology in comparison to the total average marks of sampled students of four basic schools in Pokhara Valley at writing letter of apology. Only 10 students scored above average marks of the total students and 5 students of Mt. Kailash School scored below average marks of the total average marks of the sampled students. Here, the students did mistake in originality in sentence organization. Overall, the students' proficiency level in writing letter of apology of Mt. Kailash School seems good.

While comparing the result of table 2 with table 3, Mt. Saipal School's students scored 10.73 marks in average which is the highest average marks among the total average marks of the sampled students. It shows that students of Mt. Saipal School are also found good in writing letter of apology. While analysing the obtained marks of this school 2 students scored 8 marks, 2 students scored 9 marks, 6 students scored 11marks, 4 students scored 12 and only 1 student scored 13 marks. This shows that the students of Mt. Saipal are also found good in writing letter of apology. The proficiency level of writing letter of apology of this school is not found as expected in this research. Since this school is an English medium school for about three decades, students are found not instructed well in writing letter of apology.

Table 3

Letter writing Proficiency of Mt. Saipal School

Code of the Students	obtained marks	Average marks
XVI	9	10.73
XVII	9	
XVIII	12	
IXX	12	
XX	12	
XXI	12	
XXII	11	
XXIII	13	
XXIV	11	
XXV	8	
XXVI	8	
XXVII	11	
XXVIII	11	
XXIX	11	
XXX	11	

Table 4

Letter writing Proficiency of Mt. Annapurna School

Code of the Students	obtained marks	Average marks
XXXI	9	10.26
XXXII	9	
XXXIII	9	
XXXIV	8	
XXXV	8	
XXXVI	12	
XXXVII	11	
XXXVIII	11	
XXXIX	11	
XL	11	
XLI	11	
XLII	11	
XLIII	11	
XLIV	11	
XLV	11	

The statistical analysis of table 4 showed that the average score of the students of Mt. Annapurna School, is below average of the total sampled students. Among the 15 students 2 students scored 8 marks, 3 students scored 9 marks which is found the below average marks of the total sampled

students of the research study. 9 students of this school scored 11 marks and only 1 scored 12 marks. We can't find competent students in writing letter of apology in this school.

Table 5

Letter writing proficiency of Mt. Everest School

Code of the Students	obtained marks	Average marks
XLVI	11	10.4
XLVII	11	
XLVIII	11	
XLIX	11	
L	11	
LI	11	
LII	11	
LIII	11	
LIV	8	
LV	8	
LVI	9	
LVII	9	
LVIII	9	
LIX	12	
LX	13	

The mathematical analysis of Mt. Everest School's in table 5 depicts that the sampled students of this school also scored less than the total average marks and they aren't found competent in writing letter of apology. The average marks obtained by the students of Mt. Everest was 10.4 where the full mark is 15. Out of 15 sampled students of this school 2 students scored 8 marks, 3 students scored 9 marks, 8 students scored 11 marks, 1 student scored 12 marks and only 1 student scored 13 marks.

In the process of analyzing the proficiency of basic level students in writing letter of apology among the 60 sampled students of four schools in Pokhara valley 12 students got excellent marks, those students who got excellent marks have maintained coherence, clarity, complete, unity and as a whole they followed the format as well. 29 students scored very good marks, 10 scored good marks, 9 students obtained satisfactory marks and 19 students scored below average marks of the total students. In this study two school viz. Mt. Annapurna and Mt. Everest have scored the below average marks of the total average marks of the sampled students that happens because of their ignorance and the lack of proper knowledge in writing letter of apology. So, this study revealed that the students of basic school are not instructed well during their teaching and learning process. Although English curriculum has high focus on writing skills, the students are not found competent in writing letter. To achieve the better performance, an extra effort has to be made while teaching letter writing for the students.

Marking Scheme-wise Interpretation

The answer sheets were checked based on the certain and authorized marking scheme provided by the basic level examination board.

Format

In the process of evaluating answer sheets, the researcher examined on the format of an informal letter. The researcher found out that most of the informants were not well aware about the specific format. Based on the marking scheme format carries 5 marks although students' performance in terms of format was found satisfactory in writing letter of apology.

Subject Matter

In the process of evaluating answer sheets, the researcher examined based on the subject matter. He found that majority of the informants were able to present the subject matter, asked in the question. The mark given to this aspect is 3. Anyway, the presentation of the average students of the subject matter was found satisfactory.

Presentation

While evaluating the presentation of language, the students' presentation was good. The way of presenting their ideas were found appreciable since the message to be conveyed could be clearly understood. The researcher examined the presentation but marks was not provided separately though it carried 3 marks.

Coherence

Coherence is considered one of the most important elements of writing letter. There should be logical connection between the former and later sentence. Majority of informants in this research were not proficient in the organization and coherence of ideas. There was not good logical connection of the ideas. The mark given to this aspect is 2 but it is not provided separately while evaluating the answer.

Grammar

Analyzing the correctness of language in the process of writing the letter of apology, the students seemed weak. The sentence formation of the informants was found wrong. There found lack of punctuation marks. Some of the students committed error even in using capital letters and full stops. Majority of students spelt the words incorrectly even if the word is simple. It can be concluded that the average students' required proper guidance specially in using grammatical correct sentences.

Conclusion and Implications

From the result of the study, it can be concluded that letter writing is found as an important skill. If the students are proficient in letter writing, they can communicate each other effectively. This study found out that the majority of students' performance was good but the efforts made by the schools and teachers are not found sufficient in developing the letter writing proficiency of basic school students. The total average marks of the students of the selected schools was 10.48 but 2 schools (Mt. Kailash and Mt. Saipal) got slightly more than the total average marks. Here, Mt. Saipal School has got highest average marks of all i.e. 10.73 which is more than 0.25 marks of the total average marks. In addition, the remaining two schools got below the total average marks.

This study got the mixed grades in analyzing the letter writing proficiency of basic school, the students of Mt. Saipal School were found proficient in writing letter of apology in comparison to other three schools. Their answers were found grammatically correct, coherent and with proper format. They have scored more than total average mark. The students from Mt. Kailash School were found good since their average marks is more than total average marks. Students of basic schools were found good in writing the letter of apology. So, it needs to develop proper strategic plan by the schools and

teachers to achieve higher proficiency level in writing letters. The students should be provided with trainings and made aware about letter writing. The study also found that students are not frequently taught to write letter of apology and other types of letters since it is not asked often in the basic level examination. So, the study came to conclude that there should be specific attention of the students in letter writing.

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