# Developing Writing Skills Using Innovative Activities and Enhanced Teacher Feedback

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## Abstract

This Exploratory Action Research report involved 35 seventh-grade students (aged 12-13) at a private school in urban North-West Delhi, India. The teacher-researcher found that even though her learners had been studying English from the beginning of their schooling, they were unable to express themselves in writing and often resorted to copying from each other. In the exploratory phase of the study, a variety of data gathering tools were used to find out why learners preferred to submit neatly laid out and apparently error-free work without displaying much of their own thinking and understanding. The analysis of the data showed that the learners were concerned about the judgements of the school administration, the teachers and their parents, and felt more secure when they resorted to regurgitating prefabricated answers. The intervention phase involved various writing strategies as well as detailed and constructive teacher feedback. Almost four-fifths of the learners showed improvement in writing creatively and their feedback confirmed the usefulness of the new-style writing tasks. The report also provides a detailed account of the contribution that mentors of classroom-based research can play when they provide consistent support to teacher-researchers by carefully guiding them through each and every step of Exploratory Action Research.

**Keywords:** Exploratory Action Research, writing tasks, improving written expression, process writing, feedback on written work

## Introduction

The Exploratory Action Research (EAR) project presented below was accomplished in the course of a 10-month investigation from May 2018 to February 2019 into how writing skills of a group of teenage English language learners in a private school located in New Delhi could be improved. After describing the context and the background in which the project was carried out, the teacher-researcher, Nishtha (Author 1), and the teacher-research mentor, Vanita (Author 2) provide a detailed account of how the two phases of EAR, namely, the exploration phase followed by the action phase, were conducted. In line with Action Research (AR) type studies conducted by classroom teachers (Clark et al., 2020), a concise literature review is followed by a statement of the research questions and the methodology that was employed to answer those questions. The data gathering tools (instruments) were designed in such a manner

that they could best provide an explanation for the puzzle (Hanks, 2017) that the teacher-researcher and their mentor encountered:

> What are the underlying reasons for a lack of creativity in written expression of language learners who have been receiving instruction in English starting from the early years of their education?

The analysis of the results led to the designing of an action plan which focussed on the way writing tasks were designed and assessed. A second round of data gathering, which was carried out during and after the action phase, aimed at examining if the introduction of new-style writing tasks could lead to any improvement in writing skills. The analysis and discussion of the results is based on the assessment of writing tasks accomplished at the beginning of the project and after the intervention. The closing section contains some observations and reflections by the teacher-researcher and the teacher-researcher's mentor related to their experience and the outcomes with regard to their mutual development as reflective classroom practitioners and mentors (Farrell, 2022).

## Context and Background

The language learners of the present EAR project come from working- or middle-class families of North-West Delhi, where the parents are mainly involved in small business enterprises. English is not spoken as a mother tongue in these families. However, some parents do speak some English. It is perceived as an aspirational language (Patel et al., 2023) and is treated as essential for the students' further education and good job opportunities. Many students have been learning English from their early childhood. Nevertheless, based on their test results and after having conversations with parents and past teachers, Nishtha found that those learners who come from homes where English was not spoken much struggled to express themselves in written English in spite of studying in an English-medium school from a young age (for about 9 years).

Nishtha is an English-medium educator at a private school situated in an urban sector of New Delhi, the capital city of India. She has been teaching English since 2017 and is trained in storytelling, which she uses widely in her teaching. Her school follows an 'all English pedagogy' approach, in which all formal and informal interactions within the school, beginning with the preschool grades, are conducted in English. Nishtha's class comprised 35 students: 22 boys and 13 girls. As mentioned above, Nishtha's students belonged to families of modest means; they anticipated getting employed in jobs where English language skills are required. Be it in local administration, office work or business life, the aspiration of the parents and the understanding of the students involved were that English is an essential 21st century skill, and this includes being able to express their ideas freely and creatively in writing as well.

## Conceptual Framework

Exploratory Action Research, which guided the present project is a type of teacher research (Kostoulas, 2023) that is carried out by teachers, for teachers and the benefit of their students and other stakeholders (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018). It can be divided into two phases (exploration and action), with steps that can be represented as a staircase (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, p. 27). The exploration steps are 'plan to explore', 'explore' and 'analyse', and the action research steps are 'plan (to change)', 'act', 'observe' and 'reflect'.
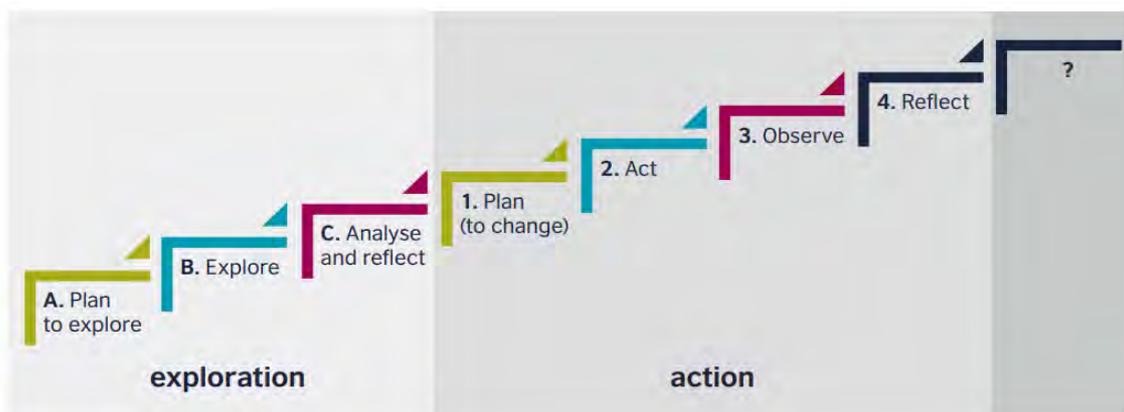
**Figure 1.**
**Steps of Exploratory Action Research**
(Source: Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, *A Handbook for Exploratory Action Research*, p. 27)

Smith and Rebolledo (2018) contend that even when one is a successful teacher, there can be challenging situations and resolving those requires that the classroom practitioner searches for information (data) related to the issue encountered. They also believe that it might be useful to explore the situation before rushing into action because, on occasion, the teacher's assumptions about the problem could be unfounded and, as a result, the attempt to resolve it may not be appropriate. Furthermore, it does not serve the purposes of such an exploration to have a large, general topic, such as student motivation. The teacher-researcher needs to design their own, specific exploratory questions that would, ideally, need to be SMART: study-oriented, measurable, accurate, realistic and topic-focused (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, p. 40).

The issue that the teacher-researcher (Nishtha) and her mentor (Vanita) decided to explore was why so many of Nishtha's 7th grade students resorted to copying each other's homework. Before describing how the exploration unfolded, a brief overview of recent literature related to teaching and learning writing in English as an Additional Language (EAL) is provided in the next section.

## Literature Review

Learning writing skills is a must for anyone's formal education to be successful. Educators seem to agree that teachers should create adequate conditions for students to develop these skills, bearing in mind that writing activities should be meaningful (Karakuş, 2023) and that teaching writing should be done progressively focusing on the process rather than the product in order to decrease anxiety in students (Bayat, 2014).

Even though a lot of academic work has been carried out on improving language learners' writing skills (Hyland, 2022; Mott-Smith et al., 2020), research studies in ELT have relatively rarely focussed on investigating the issues related to the enhancement of writing in everyday classroom settings. Lee (2022) conducted a state-of-the-art review on classroom-based research on L2 writing. She looked at the 349 articles published in the flagship journal of the field, the Journal of Second Language Writing (JSLW) and found that between 2001 and 2020 only 75 were classroom-based. Lee contends that "Given the insight classroom-based research can produce to guide pedagogical practice in real-world contexts, there is a need to understand … how it has informed classroom teaching and learning, and what further issues merit research attention" (p. 552). The authors of the present report hope that their own

experience in a naturalistic classroom context will reflect the dynamics of real classroom environments and help better understand how L2 writing instruction can be improved.

The teacher researcher and her mentor's main concern was finding ways to spark the creativity of Nishtha's students in their writing. The introduction of creative writing activities that help learners' authentic self-expression in an additional language has come to the fore in recent years since the teaching and learning of the so-called four C's of 21st century skills (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication) have gained ground (Hummel, 2024). Based on numerous research studies in the field, Fitria (2024) emphasises that teachers need to create a fun and engaging atmosphere, which can be achieved by "allowing ample space for students to explore their ideas, offering positive and constructive feedback, and presenting writing challenges and contests to spark their interest and motivation" (p. 7). Next we turn to approaches and methods that appeared to be both appropriate and effective in the authors' localised context: the application of story maps, process writing and art (drawing).

One of the methods that can help the exploration of ideas before writing is using story maps (Nuraini et al., 2022), which can be employed as a collaborative activity as well (Polat & Dedeoğlu, 2024). Story maps include key elements, such as the setting and the time of the story, the main and the auxiliary characters and some of the main ideas of the story line. Learners can focus on important elements of the story and generate ideas while creating a piece of narrative text. In their research study, Rahmawati et al. (2018) found that the approach was more effective than the conventional method of writing notes.

Introducing learners to process writing is another option for improving writing skills because it enables students to first brainstorm ideas and then improve their drafts in several rounds (Serra & Grisolía, 2020). The approach involves reviewing by peers, which can enhance learners' confidence and reduce writing anxiety. Along the same lines, Yeung (2019) stresses the utility of the process writing approach as a pedagogical tool that fosters learner autonomy and supports emerging writing skills. Clearly, the final outcome of the writing process (product) is important, but a high-quality product is, more often than not, the result of several rounds of re-writing with the help of one's peers and the language teacher (Zhang, 2022).

Finally, a short reference to using visual arts for the scaffolding of learners' writing skills. Superable (2020) employed an Action Research design to explore how effective the utilisation of visual arts might be to support creativity in writing tasks. The author concludes that the use of visual arts as instructional materials for writing activities can facilitate learning as well as serve as authentic references connecting writing tasks to learners' real-life experiences.

Adoniu's article (2012) is specifically related to one of the tools employed by the authors of this report, namely, the use of drawing to support the writing development of English language learners. The author emphasises the positive effect that drawing before writing had on her young students for whom English was an additional language. Drawings proved to be useful planning tools that allowed children in her class "to attend to essential details, and to then apply this in their writing" (p. 8). Even though in Nishtha's class students started with the text and then provided the visual representation of the images emerging in their minds, it seems to be the case that drawing as an activity can be a useful tool for the demonstration of understanding and can be perceived as "a part of the continuation of a social construction of knowledge" (p. 14).

## Statement and Significance of the Problem

Students' written English expression was a major skill that the school Nishtha was teaching at focused upon and aimed at improving. Therefore, developing her learners' English writing skills was a key objective for Nishtha at the time when the EAR project took place. She agreed with authors who emphasised that living in the 21st century with an expanding technological environment that requires expressing oneself in writing, fostering effective communication, including the written word, has become a priority (Klimova, 2012).

It, thus, became imperative to ensure that the written expression of the students was developed. Writing allows the ordering of one's thoughts and makes it possible to present them in a structured way. Expressing their ideas effectively in writing does not only help learners in their academic pursuits but also supports them in their future lives as employees or business owners. If a student has good writing skills, it will help them to obtain good grades and also prepare them for the professional world. It will further help them to improve their analytical, rational, and critical thinking skills (Bora, 2023). No wonder, therefore, that developing reading and writing has always been a key concern for educators. In this regard, Nishtha and Vanita were hoping that by carrying out their EAR project, they may come up with some answers and solutions that other teachers might be able to apply in contexts that could be perceived as similar.

## The Exploratory Phase

The issue that Nishtha found puzzling (Hanks, 2017) was that despite having a lot of ideas and good test results, her students, who happily contributed to classroom activities orally, submitted written assignments that were largely copies of each other's work. Nishtha was able to trace the original work back to 4-5 students from among which three were girls. These students usually submitted their work on time and were confident in their written expression. Moreover, these were also the students who usually were at the top of the class academically and were actively involved in extracurricular activities. Apparently, the rest of the students were not confident enough in their written work and looked to these students whenever the teacher did not provide detailed, preformulated answers for the whole class.

The students, who had studied English since primary school, that is to say for nine years already, seemed reluctant to write down their own understanding of the chapters and poems that they were reading and even now, in middle school (Grades 6-8) wanted teachers to dictate the so-called correct answers. The fact that students resorted to copying from each other seemed puzzling, because verbally they were prepared to voice their opinions. The conspicuous gap between oral and written performance prompted Nishtha to want to explore the reasons behind her learners' reluctance to express themselves freely and creatively in writing.

It was at this point that her mentor, Vanita, introduced Nishtha to the Action Research Mentoring Scheme (ARMS) opportunity sponsored by the British Council. Vanita was assigned as a mentor to support five teachers to conduct Exploratory Action Research in 2018–19. She was free to choose teacher-researchers to work with, and that is how she approached Nishtha and offered to mentor her. Regular interaction between the mentor and mentee took place in both online and face-to-face meetings. It is important to point out that while Nishtha was carrying out the project, she was also a 'learner' of practitioner research. Some of the excerpts that follow describe her reflections as a budding teacher-researcher of EAR.

## Designing the Research Questions

To arrive at relevant research questions, the teacher-researcher and their mentor engaged in a conversation in which Vanita asked Nishtha specific questions regarding her current classroom practices, the ideas she held in relation to English language teaching, and teaching writing skills, specifically. Nishtha remembers this stage as follows:

> *"When we got together, we had an interesting dialogue where Vanita asked me specific questions about the concerns regarding my classroom. She gave me specific tasks from Smith and Rebolledo (2018) to arrive at things we were not sure about. Under her guidance, I was able to come up with the following research question, which helped me explore my classroom struggles: 'Why do my students hesitate to express themselves in writing tasks?'"*

During the process of delving deeper into this research topic, Nishtha and Vanita collaborated to elucidate and refine Nishtha's underlying ideas (Smith, 2020. pp. 43-47). In EAR, research questions may go through several evolutions, and this happened in this instance, too. Ultimately, the process resulted in a further general question that would later become the basis for the action plan: 'How do I enable my students to express themselves through writing tasks?'

Vanita asked Nishtha a variety of probing questions to pinpoint the areas of uncertainty for which she was not sure she had the answers. The questions Nishtha decided to explore were as follows:
1. What kind of approaches do I use to enhance my students' expression in writing tasks?
2. What kind of activities do my students prefer for a writing task?
3. What kind of feedback is provided to the students' writing?
4. What are my students' responses to innovative tasks in writing?

## Methodology
### Participant Recruitment

As is often the case with classroom research, Nishtha opted for convenience sampling for her project. She chose the participants for her mixed-methods research based on accessibility and availability. Therefore, the participants were learners that she was teaching at the time of the research.

The participants comprised 35 seventh-grade students, aged 12-13 years, who were enrolled in a private English-medium school located in urban North-West Delhi, India. Among the chosen participants, there were 22 females and 13 males. The exploratory phase took place from May 2018 to June 2018, while the action phase lasted from July 2018 to February 2019.

### Data collection

Since this project was Nishtha's first hands-on experience with classroom research, her mentor, Vanita, supported her throughout the process of data collection, such as selecting and designing the research tools. Vanita also suggested that Nishtha read the stories of teacher-researchers from Smith & Rebolledo (2018). This helped Nishtha choose the qualitative and

quantitative tools that matched her research questions. She decided to employ various instruments to collect data in both the exploratory and action phases of the research.

## Data gathering instruments

To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the information, Nishtha used a wide range of data sources and data gathering tools. Despite Exploratory Action Research being primarily qualitative in nature, Nishtha made sure to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative tools to enhance the validity of the research. The tools used in both the exploratory and action phases are as follows:

**Journal (Field Notes):** Nishtha regularly kept a journal to document her observations and wrote field notes, which proved to be a valuable source of qualitative data. Nishtha jotted down notes and made entries in a diary that she always kept close at hand.

**Observation notes by the Head of the Department:** Observation notes by the Head of the Department offered a fresh perspective on the teaching and learning experience in Nishtha's classroom, ensuring an unbiased view of the qualitative data.

**Feedback from colleagues:** This was a valuable tool for qualitative data analysis because it supported and confirmed the findings of other qualitative methods.

**Informal interviews with the students:** Nishtha used this tool to gather qualitative data from the learners' perspective, adding significance to the entire research project. Nishtha gained valuable insights into the learners' thoughts about the tasks through one-to-one informal interviews. These interviews also shed light on the impact, if any, that the tasks had on the students' writing ability.

**Focus Group Discussion:** Nishtha utilised focus group discussion, a qualitative research tool, to gain insights into the learners' perspectives. It made it possible to gauge the views of students who were uncomfortable having one-to-one conversations.

**Rubrics:** Nishtha used rubrics as a quantitative research tool to assess writing skills and track any improvements. The information provided Nishtha with concrete data that she could use to measure and evaluate tangible outcomes.

## Analysis of the data obtained during the exploratory phase

The processing of the qualitative information gathered provided Nishtha with an opportunity to delve into learning about how to analyse and interpret the data she obtained and, more specifically, the use of thematic analysis (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, pp. 62-65; Xu & Zammit, 2020).

Here is Nishtha reflecting on how she began to notice certain patterns evolving:

*"We were asked to look at the data to see any common patterns emerging. The data collected from my students, colleagues, and supervisor gave me multiple perspectives of the class, which helped me notice the students' fear of bad marks and judgement."*

After analysing the data by identifying codes in the students' feedback and informal discussions with different stakeholders, Nishtha realised that her students, though confident in expressing their thoughts orally, were hesitant in expressing themselves in writing because they were used to being spoon-fed with standard answers by the teachers of different subjects. This meant that past teachers and teachers of other subjects in 7th grade dictated the 'correct' answers and students had to memorise those without any chance of expressing their own opinions. The students were, therefore, not motivated to create anything original since they got used to the way tasks were assigned and assessed without any meaningful feedback. Moreover, since the school regularly collected the students' notebooks for supervision, they were also afraid about the image they would create in front of the supervisors and their parents if they did not give the 'right' answers.

One of Nishtha's learners described this as follows: *"...the notebooks are required to be neat as it will go for inspection and untidy notebooks will make him lose marks. So, it is better to submit correct answers from (Topper's) notebook."*

Another learner put it this way: *"The teachers in other subjects give us the correct answers and if we don't write the same they mark it as incorrect... it makes it easier that way instead of redoing the entire thing again."*

## Action Stage

After analysing the data gathered during the exploratory phase, Nishtha proceeded with the action phase. As she reflected, the results of the exploration had *"motivated me to provide the students with a more comfortable environment along with varied activities catering to the different proficiency levels of the students"*. She planned lessons that included a variety of writing tasks that gave the students space for creativity (see Table 1). She used several drawing techniques, story mapping, and cue cards as instructional support for her students. Using a diverse range of writing tasks in combination with the above-mentioned resources enabled the students to express their creativity (Rini & Cahyanto, 2020), while Nishtha was also able to simultaneously cater to their various cognitive abilities.

For example, while teaching William Wordsworth's poem 'Daffodils' (see Figure 1), the students made drawings to serve as a tool to convey their comprehension of the poem (Adoniou, 2012). The learners were assigned several stanzas of the poem in groups of four, which they depicted through drawings. Subsequently, they were asked to explain what they had drawn to elaborate upon their interpretation of the stanza. At the end of the lesson, they demonstrated the ability to independently provide a comprehensive explanation of the poem.

Story maps (Usman et al., 2020), which worked as a guided form of brainstorming, also helped the students organise their thoughts into meaningful elements of the story. Organising their thoughts in such a manner before finally writing the stories ensured that the students did not struggle with a lack of vocabulary and coherence in the write-up. It also reduced the frustration of not being able to think of what they wanted to write. This acted as positive reinforcement in the safe environment for writing that Nishtha desired to create.

Beyond the above, an environment that was free from the fear of bad marks and judgement was created by regular conversations with the students. Nishtha started giving detailed feedback for every task, highlighting both positive areas and areas that could be worked upon (see Figure 2). The students seemed to be positively motivated to read the

feedback and, in fact, even looked forward to reading it. Avoiding the use of 'ticks' and 'crosses' gave an assurance to the students that there can be multiple perspectives on the same question and they thought that the school administration inspecting the notebooks would also appreciate their efforts.

**Table 1.**
**Some of the Writing Activities in Class**

| No. | Topic and materials | Activities | Purpose |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Story writing | Story maps | Story maps proved to be a valuable tool in guiding the students to express their ideas in a coherent manner. It assisted them in gathering their thoughts and generating imaginative and unique narratives. |
| 2 | Articles | Process writing | Introducing the process writing approach to the students helped them realise that their writing can always be enhanced. This approach also made it easier for them to revise and improve their initial drafts. It also made them more receptive to constructive feedback. |
| 3 | Poems | Supplementary drawings | Adding illustrations to express their comprehension of the poems offered an enjoyable and imaginative avenue for the students. It shifted the attention away from the mundane analysis of the poem. Instead, the students utilised the vivid mental images evoked by the poem to enhance their comprehension and incorporate it into their written assignments. |
| 4 | Book chapters | Thought bubbles | Thought bubbles were a valuable tool for students to express their thoughts during the chapter readings. Thought bubbles can be filled with a range of responses, including emotions, doubts, questions, or personal experiences that resonate with the text. Once it was introduced as a way to express thoughts rather than a task to be completed immediately after reading a chapter, it has become much more manageable. |
| | | Group discussions | Group discussions proved invaluable in helping students gain a broader understanding of the tasks they needed to tackle. It also assisted them in gathering a wealth of information to create a polished piece of writing. |

Process writing (Serra & Grisolía, 2020) was also included in the lessons; this approach enabled students to revisit their work and make changes. This was conducted in four stages. In the first stage, the class worked as a whole to collate and brainstorm ideas for their writing task. In the second stage, the students wrote their first draft, followed by peer feedback in the third stage. In the fourth stage, students worked on their peer feedback before the final submission, following which they received the teacher's feedback. Peer feedback built a lot of confidence in the students to put forward their views independently of the teacher's approval. Through this approach, students came up with write-ups that were quite original.

**Figure 2.**
**Student's work - Use of drawing to express understanding of the poem 'Daffodils'**
*Note: Published with student's permission*



**Figure 3.**
**Student's work - Process writing: Getting comfortable with receiving feedback**
*Note: Published with student's permission*

**Data Collection and Analysis in the Action Phase**

In the action phase, data was collected in order to find out if the intervention had any impact on the students' writing skills. Data collection was carried out by using various tools and involving different stakeholders, for example, observation notes by the Head of the Department, journal entries (field notes), rubrics and other tools mentioned above.

The data collected was analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively during the monthly mentoring meetings and teleconferences. For the qualitative analysis, Nishtha and Vanita used codes to highlight keywords from Nishtha's own observations, the supervisor's feedback, and the students' reflections (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018, pp. 62–65). The codes related to the parameters of motivation, feedback, and confidence. These codes were then grouped into broader categories, thus facilitating the process of deriving meaningful findings, such as the impact of feedback, the importance of a stress-free environment, and the effect of using a variety of writing activities.



**Figure 4.**
**An excerpt from the qualitative analysis of students' reflections using codes and labels**

To assess any change in students' actual performance, the authors compared the scores students had achieved on six writing tasks accomplished at different stages of the Exploratory Action Research process. Work was graded according to the following criteria:

1. Content: Focusing on original ideas and information in the write-up
2. Organisation: Focusing on the coherence of the write-up
3. Vocabulary: Focusing on the use of new words in the write-up
4. Mechanics: Focusing on sentence structure and grammar

**Findings of the Action Phase**

Figures 4, 5, 6 and 7 allow us to compare the students' performance at the outset (in May, 2018) with their performance after four months of intervention, based on various criteria:
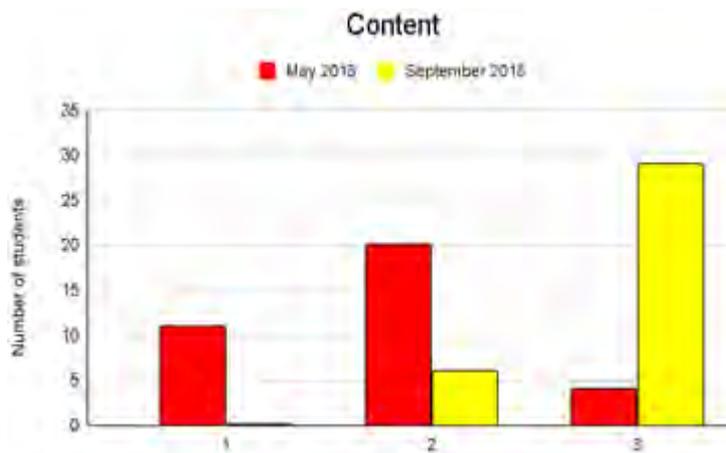
**Figure 4.**
**Students' performance based on content**
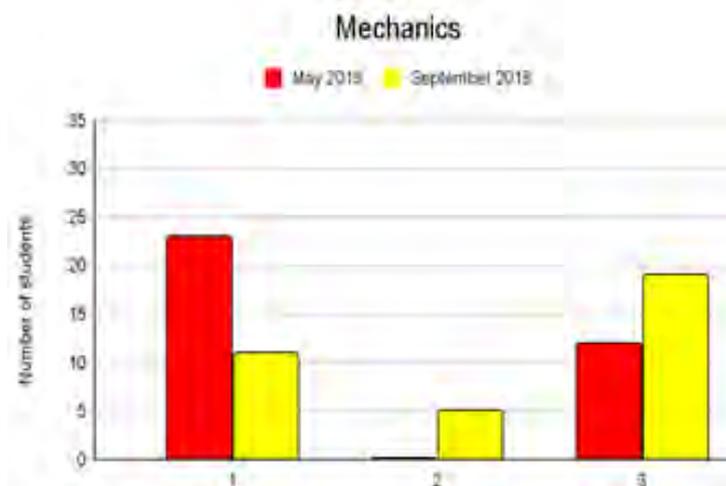*Note: 1 is lowest score, 3 is highest score.*



**Figure 5.**
**Students' performance based on mechanics**
*Note: 1 is lowest score, 3 is highest score.*



**Figure 6.**
**Students' performance based on organisation**
*Note: 1 is lowest score, 3 is highest score.*

**Figure 7.**
**Students' performance based on vocabulary**
*Note: 1 is lowest score, 3 is highest score.*

There is a noticeable difference in the academic performance of students between September 2018 and May 2018. Upon reviewing the content quality of the students at the initial phase of the research, it is evident that their performance was not focused on content. Out of the students assessed, 11 scored 1 (31.4%), 20 scored 2 (57.2%), and 4 scored 3 (11.4%) in the rubrics. The work produced lacked originality. Following the intervention in the action phase (September 2018), the students demonstrated a significant improvement in their write-ups. A total of 29 students achieved a score of 3 (82.9%), while 6 students achieved a score of 2 (17.1%). Notably, none of the students received a score of 1 in the rubrics. From a structural (mechanical) perspective, we have evidence that in May 2018, 23 out of 35 students received a 1 (65.7%), and 12 received a 3 (34.3%). After the intervention in September 2018, there was an apparent rise in performance. 11 students achieved a score of 1 (31.4%), 5 students achieved a score of 2 (14.3%), and 19 students achieved a score of 3 (54.3%). The students demonstrated significant progress in their write-up organisation, as the number of students scoring 3 increased from just 3 in May 2018 to an impressive 23 by September 2018. There has been a significant improvement in the vocabulary usage in students' writing. In May 2018, all 35 students received a score of 1 in the rubrics (100%). However, as of September 2018, there were 21 students who achieved a score of 2 (60%), while 9 students achieved a score of 3 (25.7%).

The students utilised the safe space created in the class as a forum for self-expression, and by taking part in a range of activities, they achieved an improvement in their writing skills that yielded intricate and innovative written compositions. The process allowed them to freely present their own viewpoints and receive meaningful feedback to act upon. As one student said at the end of this phase:

> *"Whenever I submit my notebook, I am always eagerly waiting to get it back, and my first step is to open the notebook and read the feedback. Earlier, we used to write the answers after ma'am dictated them to us, and even if we wrote them ourselves, we would just get a remark 'good' or a question mark. Now, we get to know where our writing actually lacks and where we need to improve."*

Another learner put it this way, *"Different activities make the classes interesting."*

Yet another learner emphasised that

> *"It was a different experience creating summaries of the chapters with our friends without any adult help. Also, getting feedback on our write-ups from our friends before making the final submissions takes away some of the hesitation of writing something on our own."*

## Results and Discussion

After analysing the collected data, Nishtha revisited her research questions to guide her in interpreting the results.

### What kind of approaches do I use to enhance my students' expression in writing tasks?

To understand how to improve her students' expressive abilities in writing, Nishtha examined her initial teaching strategies and approaches through her journal and feedback from colleagues and the Head of the Department. She realised that her focus had been predominantly exam-oriented, limiting students' opportunities for creativity and free expression. However, by September 2018, her approach had shifted significantly towards fostering students' creative written expression and encouraging them to explore the reasoning behind their thoughts in their writing.

### What kind of activities do my students prefer for a writing task?

Through informal interviews and focused group discussions, Nishtha discovered that her students favoured writing tasks that allowed for creative expression. They enjoyed writing elaborate stories and preferred activities that integrated other elements like drawing, music, and games. Moreover, tasks that incorporated critical thinking aspects led to noticeable improvements in the students' written expression.

### What kind of feedback is provided to the students' writing?

Initially, Nishtha and her colleagues gave non-constructive feedback, primarily using ticks and crosses along with grammatical and spelling corrections. During the action phase, Nishtha shifted to providing more constructive feedback. She used feedback as a form of written communication, highlighting both the strengths and areas for improvement in the students' work. This approach made students more receptive to feedback and reduced their fear of mistakes.

### What are my students' responses to innovative tasks in writing?

Innovative writing tasks encourage students to produce meaningful and original content. Nishtha observed that her students were initially unfamiliar with such tasks. Throughout the action phase, she introduced various writing tasks, which resulted in increased student involvement, excitement, and expressiveness. Informal interviews and focus group discussions confirmed that students were open to and engaged with these tasks.

Through the combination of data from several sources (triangulation), the following conclusions can be made:

1. Nishtha's students had felt hesitant about expressing themselves in writing because they were in the habit of using the standard answers that they were provided with. The students were worried about their image in front of others (supervisors, teachers, parents, and friends).
2. Creating a safe and non-judgemental environment allowed students to express themselves and offered a range of activities resulting in positive outcomes. Students were able to come up with detailed and unique written work, feeling comfortable to share their own perspectives. Detailed and personalised teacher- and peer-feedback on the write-ups made students more confident in expressing themselves.
3. Brainstorming sessions and discussions in class gave the students opportunities to come up with vocabulary which they elaborated further in rough drafts and the final draft, involving working on both content and form.
4. The students' writing improved over the 4-month period because of the interventions that took place. The students moved away from lower thinking skills (remembering and applying) to higher thinking skills, such as organising and creating ideas (see Nugraha et al. (2024) on writing tasks and Bloom's taxonomy in a 7th grade class).

## Reflections and Implications

The Exploratory Action Research project conducted within ARMS helped Nishtha focus on two of the challenges that are often ignored in a regular classroom: copying and shying away from expressing personal opinions. The fact that Nishtha was receiving continuous feedback from her mentor allowed her to identify those aspects that hindered her students' writing and she found ways to address this issue. Additionally, during the project, the mentor, Vanita, helped the teacher-researcher to understand the importance of regular reflection on one's teaching. Nishtha realised that scoring good marks does not necessarily mean that her students are confident in expressing their views, and she came to understand that in order to truly develop her students' written expression, they should be given space to express their views instead of the teacher spoon-feeding the answers to them. Moreover, students should be exposed to a variety of activities and situations (like process writing, story maps, group discussions, drawing and crafts) to enhance their written expression. The teacher's detailed feedback also constitutes an important tool in developing writing skills.

Exploratory Action Research, which was introduced to Nishtha by Vanita, gave her the push that she needed to abandon her illusion that good marks are equivalent to good teaching and learning. The following journal entry shows the change in her thinking:

> *"It was after looking at our data in an in-depth manner that we were able to come up with our final conclusions and were also able to come up with an action plan. It enabled me to understand that a good teacher needs to continuously reflect upon his/her teaching strategies to ensure effective learning in class. Through this project I was able to help my students to be confident about their written expression. The students started creating original write-ups expressing their perspective without much assistance from the teacher and a fear of bad marks."*

The EAR took up a lot of time as the teacher-researcher and the mentor had to think about practical and feasible interventions followed by drafting an evaluation plan. The

mentor's timely feedback at every stage coupled with sharing examples, reading chapters from the handbook mentioned above (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) and participating in the webinars given by the organising team, helped them complete both the exploratory and the action phases effectively and efficiently.

## Transference to Other Contexts

In line with the character of classroom research carried out by a reflective practitioner, we need to consider carefully how a project of this kind can be transferred to other contexts. As stated in the Methodology section, the investigation was based on convenience sampling (looking at one specific class where the issue seemed to be the gravest). Likewise, the modest number of participants makes it impossible to present statistically significant data. That said, developing writing skills by using creativity and focussing on the process rather than the end product are issues that teachers in other contexts might also be interested in contemplating.

The development in writing skills and the positive perceptions of the students related to the intervention show that in the microcosm of Nishtha's class, the quality of life in the classroom has indeed improved (Exploratory Practice Group, 2021). Hanks (2017), who is an eminent scholar of Exploratory Practice, argues convincingly that while not all classroom research may satisfy the highest standards of education research as laid out by, for example, Yates (2024), there is what she calls 'good enough research' which may not meet all the criteria but is still able "to contribute to understandings in the field, good enough to build upon, good enough to inspire others" (Hanks, 2017, p. 36).

## Future Explorations

By the time the research was finished, Nishtha felt confident as a teacher-researcher as she was now equipped with multiple tools and strategies to conduct Exploratory Action Research. The entire process proved to be a great learning experience and beneficial to exploring in depth the multiple problems a teacher faces in his/her classroom. Exploratory Action Research, thus, is not a one-time event but should be seen as part of every teacher's pedagogy, where they can adopt a continuous cycle of exploration, action and reflection. Furthermore, the project motivated Nishtha and Vanita to get into writing and publishing, as both of them started researching this topic further, in line with their different perspectives. Nishtha, inspired by Exploratory Action Research, started reflecting more on her ELT and classroom experiences in general. She conducted another piece of research in the following year when she faced multiple issues as the COVID pandemic hit the world. As we all witnessed, the barriers of classroom and home were blurred with the introduction of online classes during the pandemic. However, this new way of learning brought its own challenges, which Nishtha wished to explore. Nishtha thus moved forward with Exploratory Action Research trying to solve the problem caused by muted microphones during English classes (Kamboj, 2021).

## Conclusion

The EAR report described above aimed at solving a puzzle that the teacher-researcher was keen on deciphering. She and her teacher-research mentor embarked on a journey to explore the glaring discrepancy they could detect between the oral proficiency and the unimaginative writing output of the first author's young teenage students. The exploration resulted in an unexpected result: learners did not resort to stock answers and copying because they were

reluctant to put in more effort, but were concerned about 'losing face' in front of their teacher, their peers and the school management. Therefore, they felt it was safer to repeat the prefabricated answers or copy homework from their well-performing classmates. Once the teacher-researcher realised that the way forward was changing the way she set writing assignments and introduced some innovative writing activities, a creative space was opened up which the learners were ready to step into and use in order to express their unique ideas and produce surprisingly original and authentic pieces of writing. By providing meaningful and non-judgemental feedback that allowed multiple correct answers (interpretations) learners felt free to take on their individual identity as practitioners of an additional language.

The journey was that of both learning and teaching for all those involved. The teacher-researcher learnt how to conduct Exploratory Action Research, while her students benefitted from a fun and engaging atmosphere that led to deeper learning and self-expression. The teacher-research mentor was able to practise and hone her abilities as a facilitator of classroom research resulting in her becoming a more experienced reflective practitioner of mentoring.

The scope of the relationship between mentor and mentee described in this article has now broadened into being an informal, continuing arrangement, whereby a community of practice (CoP) has been established, one in which both Nishtha and Vanita will provide support to other teachers as well.

## End Note

The findings of the research project were presented as part of a dissemination event in Chennai (India) in 2019 through a poster presentation.

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## Declaration of Possible Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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We hereby certify that the submission is our own original work and is not under review at any other publication.