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Giving grammar the place it deserves in process writing

Abstract

This paper reports on the effectiveness of a 14-week writing improvement workshop at tertiary level focusing, with two emphases, on grammar use: (1) to deal with grammar explicitly in class with teacher supervision; and (2) to read widely for a broad exposure to the language system. In alternate weeks, students read newspaper and magazine extracts, completed a corresponding reading/writing worksheet, and answered a quiz on common errors they revised on their own in the previous week. The teacher gave feedback immediately after sentences were made, and a cloze was completed in the worksheet. In lessons following reading/writing worksheets and common errors quizzes, the teacher gave feedback on the extended writing submitted at the end of the previous lesson, and students practised process writing on a topic. Results showed that though there was no significant improvement at the sentence level in terms of production, students developed an awareness of correct grammar forms and were more able to recognise the correct versions of sentences. It was also suggested that in extended writing, they could write with greater readiness and more mature syntax in terms of longer average T-units, more accurate T-units, and more complex sentences.

Introduction

Traditional approaches to the teaching of ESL writing have been concerned with usage, structure or accurate form of the written product. However, influenced by discussion of L1 process writing in the 1970s, some ESL writing researchers and teachers began to criticise the focus on the production of accurate grammatical sentence structures in writing. This ‘obsession with the final product … is what ultimately leads to serious writing block’, impeding the composing process (Halsted 1975: 82). Reid’s (1993) overview of ESL composition discussed in detail the shift of ESL writing pedagogies from the implementation of language-based writing classes in the 1970s to the introduction and gradual development of writing programs involving the process concept in the 1980s. Since then, despite debates about the value of process approaches in writing instruction, many ESL writing teachers have accepted the philosophy of process writing and implemented the approaches associated with it. Instead of solely emphasising form and correctness, they begin to explore the process of writing. Pre-writing becomes an essential area of instruction, which helps students explore and develop topics for
writing through brainstorming of ideas, free association or mapping. This pre-writing preparation is then followed by quick-writing and steady-writing of drafts, and multiple rounds of peer editing and individual revising.

In Susser’s (1994) explanation, process-based writing pedagogies are concerned with the ‘writing process’ or ‘the act of writing’ (p 32), and process approaches help students become more aware that writing is by its nature a process and that there are different processes for different kinds of writing (see also Liebman-Kleine 1986). Susser further stated that writers have different processes and differ from one another as they do different things at different points during writing. Though in some situations writers have a careful mental plan of what they want to say before writing, writing is often a process of discovery in which ideas are generated and not just transcribed. Students with an understanding of writing processes can then choose a process that is appropriate to their writing style and different writing strategies that suit the particular writing task they face.

Over the last two decades, however, acceptance of the process concept in all kinds of writing instruction has not been universal. Horowitz (1986a, 1986b) was one of those who criticised the process concept and he questioned the uncritical acceptance of it. While admitting that it offered insight into teaching, Horowitz seemed to view the process concept as a single approach which had been ‘miscast as a complete theory of writing’ (Horowitz 1986a: 141). Specifically, he attacked the process approach for not being able to prepare students for some kinds of academic writing tasks, for instance, examination writing. In a more recent review of process approaches, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) pointed out that several researchers have addressed the difficulties involved in the typically simplistic application of a process approach as a set of procedures for all writing tasks with a disregard for formal aspects of writing and problem-solving skills required by different genres of writing. In this sense, a major criticism of process writing is that it does not provide sufficient guidance or support for second language students, and, therefore, does not help them develop control of the rhetorical patterns and grammatical patterns of a range of genres. In particular, Australian researchers such as Cope and Kalantzis (1993) and Martin (1989, 1993) argued that genre-based pedagogy emerged as a reaction against certain process writing pedagogies which de-emphasise direct instruction about text form. Genre is presented not as an end for instruction but as a means to understand meaningful content (see also Hyon 1996 for a review of the genre literature, especially the Australian genre theories; Reid 1987 for an overview of the genre versus process debate).

In spite of various arguments against process writing, different studies of writing programs confirm the value of process approaches to writing. Zamel (1976) was among the first ESL researchers to stress the value of process writing and made the first step to apply L1 composition research to ESL composition. She emphasised that writing instruction should be related to ‘the expressive and creative process of writing’ (p 74). Her studies (1982,
1983) proved that writing was a process through which students could explore and discover their thoughts and ideas, and that when they went through the process of re-reading, they were constructing meaning while assessing it at the same time. This reinforced Sommers’ (1982) view that as students came to appreciate the purposefulness of revision, they learnt that it made less sense to pinpoint errors in first drafts, since these first papers might undergo substantial changes once they had been read and responded to. To borrow Judy’s words (1980, cited in Zamel 1982: 206), ‘form grows from content and is inseparable from it’; so the issues of content and meaning must be addressed first, and ‘language is of concern only when the ideas to be communicated have been delineated’ (Zamel 1983: 183).

In the 1980s, Raimes was also among the strongest voices calling for process writing pedagogies. In her textbook, Exploring through writing, she explained process writing as giving students ‘the opportunity to explore a variety of systematic methods of discovery while they read, write, and talk to teach to each other’ (1987: vii). Perl’s (1980) case study similarly revealed that process approaches helped writers discover the direction of their thoughts. ‘Through the act of seeing their ideas on paper, students are enabled to reflect upon them and develop them further’ (p 24).

In terms of the effects of introducing the process concept in writing instruction on the quality of the students’ writing, Tsang and Wong’s (1992) case studies of six Hong Kong students and their writing indicated that substantial improvement was evident at the discourse level. The six students participated in a 16-hour intensive English writing program which was built upon the perspective of seeing writing as a process. This program helped them improve the content and organisation of their writing but no average gain in the sentence-level features of vocabulary, language use and mechanics was recorded, and little difference in terms of syntactic complexity was noted.

As Tsang and Wong (1993) later studied the effectiveness of the intensive English writing program, they found that their investigation did not support Judy’s belief that ‘form grows from content and is inseparable from it’ (1980, cited in Zamel 1982: 206). No major improvement was noted at the sentence level of the students’ writing. Casanave’s (1994) study of a group of Japanese students’ language development and progress in English over three semesters of journal writing showed no noticeable improvement in grammatical accuracy either. One of the reasons attributed to this, as suggested in the study, was that as students became more relaxed and wrote more fluently and thoughtfully, the grammatical accuracy of the writing of some of them decreased. An important notion Casanave put forth in her study was that the improvement in fluency and risk-taking students gained, possibly at the expense of error-free English, might be a far greater gain than perfected grammar. Writing that needed to be linguistically correct could be revised as many times as necessary throughout the writing process. Along similar lines, Fathman and Whalley’s (1990) study showed that the mere
act of rewriting even without any teacher feedback could lead to some improvement in students’ writing. Casanave (1994) implied that linguistic errors seem inevitable and that, even without language instruction, improvement was evident in students’ writing over time if language growth was viewed from a broader perspective other than a mere gain in grammatical accuracy. Though researchers and teachers generally agreed that linguistic errors should not be focused at the beginning of the process, ‘attention to process is ... necessary but not sufficient’ (Raimes 1985: 250). As ESL students may still be in the process of acquiring language skills, a totally grammarless approach ‘can lead to the development of a broken, ungrammatical, pidginized form of the target language beyond which students rarely progress’ (Celce-Murcia 1991: 462). While not downplaying the important role that writing processes play in writing instruction, researchers in Australia such as Christie (1985) and Maclean (1989) recognised language form as an important component in writing development as it reflects genre and writing purpose.

When engaging students in the process of composing, ESL composition teachers should not eliminate their obligation to upgrade the students’ linguistic competencies. To balance what students should learn in a writing class, important features of writing such as syntax, vocabulary, and rhetorical form should be taught as means, if not as ends, with which to express one’s meaning in a better way. As Arndt (1987) suggests, all L2 writers, no matter what their level of skill in writing, need to enrich their knowledge of linguistic resources in L2. There should therefore be a two-fold aim for the teaching of L2 composition: improvement of writing strategies and expansion of linguistic knowledge in L2. This need for attention to L2 rhetorical and linguistic features is reinforced by Connor’s (1987) research on academic rhetoric and by findings of Jones and Tetroe (1987) that a lack of L2 linguistic knowledge may interfere to some degree with L2 writing performance.

Based on the above concerns, the present researchers designed a writing improvement workshop, as reported in this paper, focusing on the process of composing while at the same time targeting grammar use. While the students were given the opportunity to explore the process of composing, extra work was built into the workshop to help improve their writing at the sentence level. Basically, the workshop adopted the three suggestions of Tsang and Wong (1993):

1. to deal with grammar explicitly in class with teacher supervision
2. to design a longer course duration to allow more intensive reading/writing practice work
3. to read widely for a broad exposure to the language system.

In this workshop, apart from practising process writing, there was additional input at the sentence level: a filling-in-the-blanks section on reading/
writing worksheets; in-class sentence-making and immediate feedback; in-class common errors quizzes. Furthermore, taking into consideration Krashen’s Input Hypothesis (1980, 1982, 1985), which states that the key factor determining acquisition of competence in a second language is exposure to large amounts of L2 input material which is meaningful, interesting, or relevant, the present workshop included newspaper and magazine articles to be read in class. This was done in conjunction with Smith’s (1981) belief that it is wide reading rather than writing alone that allows one to become familiar with all the systems that must be acquired in written language. Reading input can therefore serve to provide the students with a set of linguistic models which may in turn be used as a basis for their subsequent productive use of the target language (Hafiz and Tudor 1990).

Research questions

The present study aimed to find out whether explicit treatment of common errors, in-class sentence making, and regular reading input affect performance in sentence correction and extended writing. A test was administered twice, at the beginning and end of the writing improvement workshop, to compare students’ performance before and after participating in the workshop. Three questions were thus posed in this study.

1. Will participants improve in sentence correction as measured by multiple choice items?

2. Will participants improve in extended writing as measured by Jacobs, Zingraf, Wormuth, Hartfiel and Hughey’s (1981) ESL Composition Profile?

3. Will participants improve in extended writing as measured by objective scales of writing length, syntactic maturity, and accuracy of expressions?

The alpha level for all statistical decisions is set at p < .05, which may be described as liberal yet acceptable, since this study is exploratory rather than experimental.

Method

Participants

The 11 participants who constituted the entire population of the workshop were learners of ‘English as an auxiliary language’ (Luke and Richards 1982: 55). In other words, their use of English is severely limited in daily activities when they are outside school. These students were Year Two students of a BA program in Teaching English as a Second Language offered by the Department of English at the City University of Hong Kong. In the last semester of Year One, they took a course on writing skills, which was a required course. They all obtained a C grade for this core course, generally equivalent to high intermediate proficiency levels. In Year Two, they were recommended to the present writing improvement workshop.
Materials
With the aims of building in a grammar focus, allowing more intensive reading and writing practice, and encouraging wider reading, the following materials were used in the workshop:

1. Authentic materials extracted from various newspapers — the *South China Morning Post*, the *Standard*, the *Mainichi Daily News* — and the *Newsweek* magazine
2. Reading/writing worksheets (sentence-making, sentence completion, and extended writing) based on the above reading extracts
3. Selected topics in *Collins Cobuild student's grammar* (Sinclair 1991)
4. In-house materials: Common Errors Study Sheets and Quizzes.

Procedure
The workshop lasted 14 weeks. It met once for two hours a week. This longer course duration as compared with the eight-week intensive English writing course of Tsang and Wong's study (1993) allowed for more in-depth treatment of the writing problems which undergraduate learners of English in Hong Kong might generally face. Reading/writing worksheets plus common error quizzes alternated with process writing practice.

Every fortnight, the students were given newspaper or magazine extracts to read in class. Afterwards, they had to complete a worksheet on the reading extract which consisted of filling-in-the-blanks and sentence-making exercises, and which focused on the grammar points selected for take-home review during the previous two weeks. These grammar points were selected from the Cobuild exercises and covered similar topics to the common errors study sheets which students had to review at home. As the grammar focus was similar each time, the Cobuild exercises and the common errors study sheets reinforced each other.2

The reading extracts served several purposes: (1) introducing students to a type of wide reading practice; (2) providing grammar input (a grammar focus which matches Cobuild grammar work and Common Errors Study Sheets and Quizzes); (3) acting as a basis on which sentence-level practice is built (sentence-making with vocabulary items students selected from the extract; cloze sentences). In addition to these sentence-making and filling-in-the-blanks exercises, the students completed an extended writing exercise which was the final section of the reading/writing worksheet as further writing enhancement work in that lesson. For each extended writing task, the teacher explained to the students the conventions and requirements related to typical task types (a letter to the editor, an introduction to a health pamphlet, a short feature article, and so on) and briefly brainstormed with them ideas and vocabulary.

In the same lesson, the teacher gave out quizzes on common errors which students prepared on their own in the preceding week when they...
completed the Collins Cobuild grammar exercises and reviewed the common errors study sheets at home. After each quiz, the teacher gave feedback to the students.

Every week following the reading/writing worksheet and common error quizzes, each student worked on an expository topic of his or her free choice and practised the process approach in class. Students were free to choose their own topic so that they could write on a discussion topic in which they were really interested. Some of the topics chosen included housing problems in Hong Kong, the place of women in the modern world, and organ donation. Students were required to write about 1,000 words in their final draft. They went through the pre-writing stage when they brainstormed ideas and generated topics for their writing. Then they had a non-stop quick-writing of the first draft, after which they steady-wrote the second draft. When they had completed two drafts, they edited their work collaboratively in small groups of two or three for content and organisation. This was then followed by the writing of the third draft and further peer editing for language use and accuracy. Revision was again made, and the fourth draft was developed after improvement. So during the course of the workshop, the students experienced multiple rounds of re-reading and revision for improvement, and practised the basics of the process approach.

At the beginning and end of the workshop, the students took a test. The same two-part test was administered twice as a measure of the effectiveness of the workshop. The students did not get any feedback on the test. Section I of the test was Sentence Correction as measured by multiple choice items. Section II was Extended Writing on an expository topic as measured on two scales. First, the essays were graded impressionistically on five analytic scales (content, organisation, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics, which constitute an impression total) by two independent raters\(^3\) to ensure blind rating and inter-rater reliability. The papers were randomised. The raters had no information as to which paper was written in the pre- or post-test. The paradigm used was Jacobs et al’s (1981) ESL Composition Profile with a total score ranging between 34 and 100 points.

The researchers then assessed the essays objectively by combining a total of ten criteria as applied in Hafiz and Tudor’s study (1990) and Hunt’s study (1965):

1. Spelling (rate of accurately spelt words;\(^4\) both American and British spellings were considered acceptable)
2. Writing length (total number of words written)
3. Syntactic maturity (average clause length in words, number of clauses per T-unit;\(^5\) average T-unit length in words, number of T-units per sentence; and average sentence length in words)
4. Accuracy of expression (rate of error-free clauses, rate of error-free T-units, and rate of error-free sentences).
Results

The Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) design was employed to investigate the effects of the workshop on test performance in sentence correction. Significant differences between pre- and post-tests were found. The Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) design was employed to investigate the effects of the workshop on test performance in extended writing measured by Jacobs et al’s (1981) profile. Results showed no significant differences between the pre- and post-tests in terms of the analytic scores.

The ANOVA design was again employed to investigate the effects of the workshop on test performance in writing length as measured in the extended writing section. Significant differences between pre- and post-tests were found.

The MANOVA design was also employed to investigate the effects of the workshop on test performance in various aspects of extended writing. No significant differences were found in the MANOVA results on any grouping of variables except those on T-unit measures.

Discussion

The answer to the first research question posed was in the affirmative; the second was negative, whereas the third was partially in the affirmative. These answers are stated below according to the findings of the study.

1. Post-test performance in sentence correction was significantly better than pre-test performance as measured by multiple choice items, suggesting an improvement.
2. There was no significant difference between pre- and post-test performance in extended writing as measured by Jacobs et al’s (1981) ESL Composition Profile, showing no improvement.
3. Scores in writing length and T-unit measures in the post-test were significantly better in the post- than pre-test, suggesting some improvement. However, there was no significant difference between the two tests in terms of other objective variables considered otherwise individually, in groups, or as a single mega variable, indicating no improvement.

All statistical decisions were made at p < .05. In other words, there is only 5 per cent probability that the observed differences were due to chance only.

Post-test scores were significantly higher than pre-test scores in sentence correction. The students were more able to recognise the correct versions of sentences. Although a transfer of these sentence correction skills at the recognition level to the production of error-free sentences is not evident among the students, it does suggest the explicit grammar treatment in the workshop was an effective measure to familiarise the students with correct grammar forms.
The post-test analytic scores in extended writing did not attain the significance level; but they showed obvious numeric gain and indicated positive development in content, organisation, vocabulary, and language, as well as mechanics (cf Tsang and Wong 1992, 1993).

Significant improvement in the post-test is also found in the objective measures in extended writing: longer writing, longer average T-unit, higher rate of error-free T-units, and fewer T-units in a sentence. The gain in writing length suggests that the workshop helped improve the students’ readiness for writing, possibly through overcoming writing blocks (Halsted 1975) and discovering and developing ideas in the process of writing (Perl 1980; Zamel 1982, 1983). Additionally, the gain in T-unit measures may be interpreted as a sign of the students’ increased capability to handle more complex sentence structures. More accurate language as reflected in a greater number of error-free T-units and more mature syntax as reflected in the smaller number of T-units per sentence resulted.

While writing length and T-unit measures indicated a significant gain, other objective measures, such as spelling, clause measures and sentence measures, however, did not attain the significance level. Numerically, a drop was recorded in the spelling measures; but the drop was minimal and non-significant. The clause measures and sentence measures did show a slight gain, which suggests growth in the students’ syntactic maturity and accuracy, although the significance level was not attained.

Overall, the students’ writing performance in the workshop was satisfactory and confirmed the effectiveness of the two focuses built into the program — to deal with grammar explicitly in class with teacher supervision and to read widely for a broad exposure to the language system. Despite the fact that there was no significant improvement at the sentence level in terms of production, the workshop helped the students to develop an awareness of correct grammar forms and write more readily with more complex sentence structures than before. These benefits are probably attributable to frequent writing practice in forms of sentence-making and brief extended writing in class with teacher feedback. The lack of sentential improvement may be due to the time factor: time to develop life-long reading habits and time for skills to transfer from recognising to actually producing correct grammar forms. As Liebman-Kleine puts it, ‘writing must be continually reinforced and practiced [sic]’ (1986: 787).

In striking a resonant note with the work of Raimes (1985), Celce-Murcia (1991), Arndt (1987), Connor (1987), and Jones and Tetroe (1987), the present findings make a case for the value of focusing on grammar in writing programs. Besides, the generally positive results obtained lend support for wide reading in writing programs (Krashen 1980, 1982, 1985; Smith 1981). Participants’ lack of sentential improvement in this study, however, calls for the following modifications for future writing programs:

1. Lengthen program duration while reiterating the importance of using meaningful, interesting or relevant input; or introduce a follow-up
workshop for consolidation and for development of more advanced writing skills.

2. Have students practise extensive reading or pleasure reading and ultimately form reading habits so that they can maximise their exposure to the systems in the written language.

When there is no provision made for a separate writing improvement workshop like the present one, it remains important to give grammar the focus it deserves by making materials which draw attention to correct language forms, for example, common errors study sheets and quizzes described in this paper, self-accessible for learners.

Notes

1. It is a departmental policy to recommend students who failed to obtain a B grade or above for the writing skills course to take the writing improvement workshop in a subsequent semester.

2. The topics covered in the Cobuild exercises matched with the grammar focus in the common errors study sheets, and they are listed below:
   1. noun and verb forms
   2. prepositions
   3. passive and active forms
   4. countable and uncountable nouns
   5. plural forms and the article ‘the’
   6. comparisons
   7. agreement of tense
   8. infinitives and gerunds
   9. determiners
   10. verb tenses
   11. conjunctions
   12. relative clauses and questions
   13. confused diction and sentence structures
   14. modal verbs and present and past participles
   15. general grammar review.

3. The two independent raters in the present study are the same two involved in Tsang and Wong’s study (1993). Both raters majored in English in their Postgraduate Certificate in Education at the University of Hong Kong. They have been teaching English in local secondary schools for 11 years and nine years respectively. They were also official markers for the Hong Kong Examinations Authority between 1985 and 1990. In 1993, they were trained to use Jacobs et al’s profile, while in the present study, they were re-trained before rating the papers concerned.
Following Andersen and Johnson (1973), a word in the present study was defined as any orthographic unit bounded by spaces. It included proper nouns and acronyms.

A T-unit (Hunt 1970) is a main clause plus all subordinate clauses and non-clausal structures attached to or embedded in it.

Interested readers can contact the researchers at entsanwk@cityu.edu.hk for more details of the statistical analyses done in this study.

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