Collaborative research in academic writing classes

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ABSTRACT
As colleagues teaching parallel classes on the same first year university writing course, we decided to experiment with different ways of teaching the same content. Our question was whether direct teaching or discovery learning approaches would lead to better mastery of specific aspects of essay writing. From week to week we alternated our teaching methods with the students, who were second-language speakers of English. This article describes the process, the results, the pitfalls and the benefits of our collaboration.

Planning collaborative action research
Two threads, one collegial and the other pedagogic, underpinned the context-specific action research described in this article. First, as teachers of the same course, we were aware that our professional contacts were often quite superficial, relating to organisational matters such as assignment dates and assessment procedures. By setting up a collaborative project to monitor the effects of different teaching-learning strategies with the same materials, we hoped to have more in-depth discussions. Second, there was the pedagogical purpose. Our academic writing course had been running for several years using only slightly modified materials and methods each semester. We wanted to combine the development of new materials with an investigation of effective ways of using these materials.

McDonough and McDonough (1997: 27) list four features of action research: it is ‘participant-driven and reflective … collaborative … lead[ing] to change … [and] context-specific’. The advantages of the collaborative aspect are expanded by Wallace (1998), who suggests that collaboration increases the amount of data that can be collected, allows for investigation of a problem from different angles, and is motivational for the teacher participants.

The focus of our comparison was the difference between deductive and inductive approaches in teaching particular aspects of academic writing. In deductive learning, ‘rules’ are taught by modelling the process or by analysing the product or simply by stating principles. In inductive learning, examples
are provided and learners are given opportunities to discover the ‘rules’. Hammerly (1975) advised teachers to select a method on the basis of which grammar point best suits which method. He believed that ‘certain structures are most amenable to a deductive approach while others – many others – can be learned very well by an inductive approach’ (Hammerly 1975: 17). Would our study lead to the same conclusion, namely that some features of academic writing are better taught directly while others are better taught inductively?

Another view of deductive and inductive approaches is that certain ways of learning are preferred by certain groups of learners. Ballard and Clanchy (1991) discuss cultural and social approaches to learning in terms of a continuum in which the teacher may be either the main source of knowledge, a questioner or a collaborator in the search for new ideas. An academic writing class often includes all these elements. There is some direct input by the teacher through modelling and giving ‘rules’; the teacher’s questions encourage students to make discoveries during task work, and thirdly, the teacher moves round the room during individual writing time collaborating with students by making suggestions.

Studies of classroom talk illustrate these different elements. Weissberg (1994), for instance, identified five types of talk by teachers and students in university ESL writing classes. The teacher’s instructional talk included rule statements and suggestions; in text-generating talk the teacher spoke a text just before or while writing it on the board or for an individual student; text-analysing talk came from either the teacher or students and was based on samples of writing produced as models; text-reading aloud of students’ or other texts was also done by students or teacher; and finally, text-exploring talk involved discussing ideas for the content of the writing which was about to be done. Of these types, Weissberg found that the two most popular were instructing and analysing and that in every case except text-generating, teachers had by far the higher percentage of talk time.

As mentioned, one impetus for our study was to motivate ourselves (Wallace 1998), and the other was to monitor the effects of different types of teaching and learning on specific points (Hammerly 1975). This second motive was the focus of our actual research question:

What are the comparative effects on specific features of students’ essay writing of direct teaching and of discovery learning?

The study

The study took place over five weeks in a one-semester academic writing course in which the two teachers were the researchers. One teacher was also course coordinator. The two parallel classes lasted two hours on each of two
days (one on Monday and Tuesday, the other on Thursday and Friday) but, for simplicity of reading, they are referred to as the Monday class and the Thursday class. They were similar in ethnic composition, age range and learning stages. A majority of students were from Asia (Hong Kong, Korea, the People’s Republic of China and Taiwan) but there were one or two each from Africa, Europe, the Pacific and the Indian sub-continent. Almost all were under 30 years of age and were spread from the first to fourth years of their degree programs. Each class included a minority of students who had completed some secondary schooling in New Zealand. In both classes males outnumbered females, with the male–female ratio slightly higher in the Monday class. Students decided which stream to attend according to their timetables and personal preferences. However, once a class was filled, some had to attend at a less popular time. Thus the 2–4pm Thursday–Friday group filled first while the 8–10am Monday–Tuesday class was the second choice for some of the students in it.

During the semester new materials were developed by one of the teacher-researchers to complement an existing course book. The need to choose fresh materials was partly teacher-driven (teachers tire of using the same materials year after year) and partly student-driven. The new materials consisted of models of parts of an expository essay: the introduction, topic sentences, paragraphs in the body of the essay, and the conclusion. These were written by one of the teacher-researchers. Over five weeks, using the same text with each class on each occasion, the two teachers alternated teaching directly (DT) and guided discovery learning (DL). That is, the Monday class had direct teaching on how to write an essay introduction, while the Thursday class had discovery learning and so on. Table 1 summarises the program.

Table 1: Teaching-learning strategies over five weeks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Monday class</th>
<th>Thursday class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>essay introduction</td>
<td>DT:T analyses model</td>
<td>DL: SS sequence sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>expand a topic sentence into a paragraph</td>
<td>DL: SS sequence sentences</td>
<td>DT:T analyses model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>write a topic sentence to support the main essay thesis and expand it into a paragraph</td>
<td>DT:T analyses model</td>
<td>DL: SS match and then sequence 1/2 sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>essay conclusion</td>
<td>DL: SS match and then sequence 1/2 sentences</td>
<td>DT:T analyses model</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>write one topic sentence for each paragraph</td>
<td>DT:T thinks aloud while modelling the writing process</td>
<td>DL: cloze activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As the table shows, the direct teaching (DT) was either analysing a model on the overhead transparency or modelling the writing process by writing on the board. The discovery learning (DL) involved the students (SS) in text manipulation: matching and sequencing the model in pairs or small groups while talking about the process, and then a cloze exercise which was completed individually before being discussed. In terms of Weissberg’s (1994) classroom talk categories, the Direct Teaching sessions involved text-analysing talk (almost entirely by the teacher) when the model was provided, and text-generating talk when the teacher modelled the process. The Discovery Learning sessions also involved text-analysing talk but with the majority of the talk by the students. In both cases there was also some instructional talk as the teacher summed up what had been taught and/or learned.

Following this part of the lesson, students were asked to do a piece of writing of the type just studied. All the writing from both classes was marked by the same teacher-researcher. (This research formed only part of the two-hour lesson. A number of other topics were completed and the related writing was marked by the actual class teacher.)

The first learning point was the essay introduction. In the Monday class a model introduction for an essay entitled *Reasons for the rural–urban shift* was put on the overhead and analysed by the teacher, with the occasional question to students. The function of each sentence was explained to the class as follows:

1. provide background information
2. add more specific details
3. state the essay thesis
4. announce the essay structure.

The Thursday class was given the same introduction but with the sentences cut up ready to be sequenced as a group task, with the instruction to consider the function of each sentence. Following this task these functions were elicited from the whole class. Each student then wrote the introduction for an essay on *Reasons why students go to university*. One mark was given for including each of the four functions. On this and on all the other occasions, marks were deducted for sentence-level grammar errors only if they interfered with the meaning.

Week 2 continued the same essay topic but this time the focus was on developing a paragraph for the body of the essay by expanding the topic sentence. The model sentence started *One further reason why people move from the country to the city is …* The functions were:
1 state the reason (2 marks)
2 give details (2 marks)
3 write a concluding statement (1 mark).

This time the Monday class did the group ‘jigsaw’ task of assembling the sentences while in the Thursday class the teacher analysed a model of the same paragraph. All students then completed a sentence One further reason why students go to university is . . . and expanded it into a paragraph.

In Week 3 the learning point continued the ‘cause and effect’ theme with a paragraph for the body of an essay on Reasons for traffic laws. The Monday class had direct teaching, while the Thursday class worked in groups to match sentence halves and sequence them into a paragraph. Students then wrote a paragraph on why something had been invented or on a ‘reasons’ topic from their other university studies. The difference between this and the Week 2 task was that students had to write their own topic sentence. Marks were allotted for:
1 completing the topic sentence logically (1)
2 adding relevant support (2)
3 using appropriate cohesion (1).

On the fourth occasion students learned how to write the essay conclusion for the topic from Weeks 1 and 2, Reasons why people move from the country to the city. The Thursday class had direct teaching through the teacher’s analysis of a model conclusion, while the Monday class took a discovery learning approach working in groups sequencing the sentences of the same paragraph, using both linguistic and content clues. The following functions for a conclusion were made clear:
1 link the conclusion with the rest of the essay
2 summarise the main points in different words from the introduction
3 make a final, original comment
4 use appropriate cohesion.

Students then wrote the conclusion for an essay on Why do students come to university? for which they had already written the introduction and one paragraph. One mark was allotted for each of the three functions and one for general coherence.

In the fifth week the task was to develop a series of topic sentences, one per paragraph, for an essay on the topic Causes of world hunger. The examples were:
One obvious cause of hunger in a particular area is natural disasters such as
drought, floods or earthquakes, to name three …

However, nature does not account for all world hunger. The way humans use
the land can also lead to crop failure and therefore to hunger …

A further cause has been suggested for world hunger. This relates to the way
rich nations waste food …

This time the Monday class had direct teaching as the teacher ‘thought
aloud’ while writing on the board, while the Thursday class had a discovery
learning approach. First they completed a cloze activity using the same
sentences, and then talked about the features of each sentence which made
it suitable as the topic of a paragraph. The writing task for all students was
then to develop three topic sentences, one for each paragraph in the body of
the essay on the topic What makes English a difficult language to learn?
Marks were given as follows: one mark each for a sentence that developed
the essay thesis (3) and one for using a range of cohesive devices.

Results and discussion
As Table 2 shows, we found that one class scored consistently higher on four
occasions and once the results were equal. The picture is the same whether
we look at the median or the average. Furthermore, on two occasions the
median for the Thursday class was the highest possible mark, while the
Monday class median never rose above 3.

Table 2: Summary of results in Weeks 1–5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marks</th>
<th>DT1 Mon</th>
<th>DL1 Thur</th>
<th>DT2 Mon</th>
<th>DL2 Thur</th>
<th>DT3 Mon</th>
<th>DL3 Thur</th>
<th>DT4 Mon</th>
<th>DL4 Thur</th>
<th>DT5 Mon</th>
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<td>4</td>
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<td>Median</td>
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<td>2.5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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<td>Average</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.6</td>
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<td>Students</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>15</td>
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Since the teaching method (DT or DL) did not account for the differences between the classes, we had to keep thinking of reasons for our results.

One obvious explanation would be that one class were better writers at the start of the course. As mentioned earlier, because the afternoon was a more popular time than the early morning, the former class filled up sooner. Did this mean a difference between well organised and less organised students? The assumption that being organised equals being a good writer seems rather subjective. A more objective measure would have been to assign students randomly to the two classes. The university enrolment system for parallel classes would not have allowed this; students simply enrol electronically until a certain class is full. Alternatively we could have conducted a pre-test and taken this into account in judging the results. With hindsight this was a mistake.

A second explanation is also linked to the class times. While students in both classes had a practice of arriving late, the problem was worse with the Monday group. The combination of the end of the weekend and the dark cold mornings meant that some straggled in up to half an hour late. Although the ‘experimental’ part of the lesson never started right at the beginning, it is possible that more Monday than Thursday students missed some of the lead-up to the writing. In a more tightly controlled study their paragraphs could have been removed, but this would have been organisationally difficult, taking time from the rest of the lesson.

A third explanation relates to the design of the study. Five occasions are far too few to draw conclusions. If we had continued for another five weeks, as originally planned, doing the same process with the next phase of the course (the argument essay), we would have had a better base for generalising our results. Our decision not to continue the experiment was partly an affective one: the results were starting to look repetitive. Another design point is the timing of our assessment. We tested results immediately rather than considering long-term mastery of a particular point. Monitoring a number of other possible variables was not possible in the context of a regular classroom.

One further consideration is that perhaps we did not really separate our two methods. Perhaps one of us tended to be more didactic even during group tasks while the other might have elicited more student participation even during the direct teaching. Our interpretation of the two ways of teaching may not have been as distinct as the research question suggests. Having an observer in the class would have been one way of checking this.

A different research question could have investigated progress within one class rather than comparing performance by two groups at the same point of time. It was suggested to us that converting to a percentage the number of students gaining three or four marks in each class would show a
picture of rapid improvement by the Monday class until Week 3 and so on. We chose to remain within our original research question.

We have left to last the possible explanation that one of us was a better teacher. This could have been tested by changing classes for part of the research so that the same point was taught by the same teacher to different classes each time. We might consider this for a future project, although the possible disruption to students would have to be taken into account.

Reflection

One of our purposes for doing this research was to promote professional discussions and collegiality. As Wallace (1998) predicted, we benefited from the process in that at least twice weekly we had conversations which we would not otherwise have had about class activities. We enjoyed discussing the new materials and our teaching. However, it is not difficult to imagine a negative effect from such collaboration when one teacher’s class consistently does better. If the collaboration had been between teachers with different lengths of professional experience or with less mutual trust, would the results have had a negative effect on their working relationship? Collaboration does not mean competition but it is easy to see how this element could creep in. It seems that in collaboration involving comparisons it needs to be kept in mind that one colleague might appear in a worse light than another.

The other purpose of our action research was to investigate teaching methods with new materials. The results of this investigation were inconclusive. We know no more than we did at the start about the effects of direct teaching and discovery learning on academic writing, although using the new materials certainly increased the interest level of the lessons for us. Had we sought learners’ opinions about our methods, we might at least have had affective data to answer our questions, but having studied students’ responses in the past, we were interested this time in something more objective.

Despite the inconclusiveness of the results, we shall probably plan another project for the next semester because we found the collaborative aspect worthwhile. A number of possibilities come to mind. We based our results entirely on an analysis of the students’ writing. Another comparison, as noted above, would be of students’ preferences. Perhaps we could involve more colleagues and compare our planning and interactive decision-making given the same materials. This would also allow the marking of each class’s work to be done by a third party.

To summarise, in terms of the McDonough and McDonough (1997) criteria we were able to reflect on our teaching and we enjoyed the increased collegiality. However, our findings will not lead to any change in our teaching
since we are unaware of why one class scored consistently better. We consider that two positive results constitute a reasonable outcome and we recommend the collaborative research process to others provided it is voluntary and that participants have some choice of collaborator.

REFERENCES


