What Happens When ESL Students in an Intensive English Language Program Practice Process Writing?

by Maki Nakayama

In my country, Japan, English education has faced a great shift and teachers are interested in how to improve students’ output skills. This paper discusses a research study of a writing class that used process writing. My research questions are:

1. How do students’ writing skills progress through the process writing cycle?
2. How can the teachers help the students’ writing?

Methodology

I conducted a research study at an intensive English language school in an affluent suburb of New York City. I chose to focus on a Chinese student—Student A—an intermediate learner. During the four-week session, two hours each day from Monday through Thursday, this student wrote on three topics: food, biography, and city description, going through at least three stages for each topic: drafting, revising, and publishing. The teacher held both a mini-lesson about common mistakes and a one-on-one conference every time students handed in their papers, in which students received feedback orally and in writing. Students used their dictionary and computer to search for more information to write about. They wrote their first and second drafts by hand and typed the final draft. I collected all of Student A’s work and analyzed it.

Literature Review

Process writing is a current, and popular, method of writing instruction. One of the major studies in ESL writing, error correction/feedback, started with Truscott’s work (Truscott, 1996, 1999), in which he denied the efficacy of error correction. Ferris (1999 & 2004) sided with the positive efficacy of feedback and concluded that more research studies were required. In another study of feedback, Evans, Hartshorn, and Strong-Krause (2011) researched the effectiveness of dynamic written corrective feedback (WCF). They concluded that students who received “constant, meaningful, and manageable feedback from [the] teacher on a timely manner” performed better, especially in accuracy (Evans et al., 2011). As for other research studies for language learning, students’ first language can be transferred both positively and negatively (Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Saville-Troike, 2012). Based on these studies, I present here my findings for Student A’s writing.

Findings

Challenges of Student A’s Writing. Student A’s major challenges were verb tense and run-on sentence usage. She often wrote the verbs in the present tense when past tense was required. This happened because her first language was Chinese, which usually does not have past tense. Instead, Chinese speakers keep the tense present and put the word “le,” which indicates the past, at the end of the sentence to explain the things in the past. Another challenge was run-on sentence usage. Student A often wrote long sentences that combined many ideas. From my interview with TESOL students who were born and raised in China, I learned that the use of run-on sentence in Chinese was acceptable. Here, I realized that A’s Chinese language writing was transferred inappropriately to her English writing.

Strengths of Student A’s Writing. Student A revised her drafts based on feedback from her instructor. In her first draft, she wrote “hand” when she described a scene where Helen Keller learned the word “water” by touching it. In her later draft, she acquired, through her
dictionary, the word “palm,” which described the scene more specifically. Also, there was evidence where she modified her errors based on a one-on-one conference and mini-lesson. In her first draft, she wrote “a very important moment of Helen is know what’s water.” In her second draft, she wrote “a very important moment of Helen’s life is known as what is water.” Student A demonstrated her ability to modify the prepositional phrase and the verb form after she received the teacher’s feedback.

**Development of Conclusion Paragraphs**

Through the process writing cycle, Student A’s conclusion paragraphs showed a substantial development. In the first draft of her Helen Keller biography, she wrote only two sentences, for a total of 22 words. In the final draft of the paper, she wrote six sentences, for a total of 137 words. The content also became stronger. Student A described how teachers supported Helen Keller as well as discussed how her life influenced people today.

**Conclusion and Implication for Teachers**

From this study, I can confirm that process writing both benefits students’ writing skills and increases their consciousness as independent writers. Teachers should realize the objectives of each process writing cycle and let students complete all the cycles, from prewriting to publishing. This is key for students to improve their revising and editing skills. Then, it is important that teachers understand students’ first language and their writing styles because it will help them predict the errors that students are likely to make and thus provide more effective feedback. In addition, providing both explicit and implicit feedback for the same issue is essential. This will help raise students’ awareness of their mistakes and enhance their writing skills. The study of second language writing as well as its feedback has just started, so more research studies in various settings are required. I would like to explore further in this field and contribute to my future students as well as my colleagues.

**References**


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