

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This study is grounded in my experience of teaching writing to teacher trainees in Institut Bahasa Melayu Malaysia. The students often make so many surface level errors that their texts are sometimes not intelligible. In my attempt to improve writing, at least in terms of the surface level errors, I realised that neither formal grammar lessons from the grammar textbook nor the process writing approach alone can address this problem. Therefore, in this study, I investigated if this integrated sentence modelling approach can help the low proficiency students in improving the quality of writing and to what extent is this approach helpful.

Findings and Discussions

First, the consistent increase in the total scores in the second writing samples of all the four students indicate that these low proficiency students can improve the overall quality of writing if they model the sentence patterns integratively with speaking, listening and reading. The sequenced practices are designed to help low proficiency students understand and use these target structures correctly. The sentence patterns were 'input' (to use Krashen's term) and this provided the necessary structural information about the correct verb forms and punctuation. The increase in the number of more correct sentences that modelled the target structures in Writing Samples 2 of all the four students provided the evidence for such a claim. In other words, these low proficiency students need models to emulate so that they do not violate the conventions of the language, thereby improving the quality of writing. It

should also be noted that the number of different target structures used does not affect the quality of writing. More important, it is the ability to model the target structures that brings about an improvement in the quality of writing.

As the study focused on the integrated sentence modelling approach, the specially designed activities were geared towards helping the students model sentence patterns. The sentence modelling practice exercises thus enable the low proficiency students to focus on two aspects of writing, namely sentence level errors and sentence structure. Incidentally, this study demonstrated that the lower end of the low proficiency students benefitted most in terms sentence structure. When the students are exposed to rigorous exercises which are carried out integratively with listening, speaking and reading together, a knowledge of verb forms related to narrative writing enables the students to increase considerably the correct use of the form and the proportion of well-formed sentences they write. In fact, results show that almost half of the sentences written by the students were more well formed after the exposure to the integrated sentence modelling approach. These low proficiency students seem to have successfully internalized the use of the target structures that enable them to produce relatively successful samples. They are able to make drastic surface level and sentence structure changes. Hence, the sentence modelling practice exercises integrated with speaking, listening and reading are able to address the problems of sentence structure and usage, thereby improving the quality of writing.

These low proficiency students, however, cannot eliminate all these errors. Some surface level and sentence structure errors still exist in the final writing samples. This finding is agreeable with Weaver (1996) who argued that:

teaching grammar in the context of writing will not automatically mean that once taught, the concepts will be learned and applied forever after. On the contrary, grammatical concepts must often be taught and re-taught, and students may continue to need guidance in actually applying what they have learned. (p.17)

Besides, exercises integrated with a variety of language skills were more pleasurable for low proficiency students and thus can keep these students interested and more open to speaking and writing. Furthermore, such language skills enabled the students to verbalise the sentence patterns and subsequently internalise the target structures. This essentially motivates the students to make use of the target structures, thus removing the fear of making grammatical mistakes. This is particularly evident in the case of Students A and C who showed better gains in the total scores. Both of them apparently benefitted the most in terms of total scores because their motivation to improve their English proficiency provided the stimulus to enable them to actively practice the sentence modelling exercises. These students also indicated a strong desire for comprehensive and explicit grammar instruction, thus raising grammar awareness and indirectly improving writing competence. Thus, my findings, as well as those of Noyce and Christie's confirm and support Stotsky's argument that experiences which integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing promote growth in written composition.

An interesting feature is that Student B's scores for punctuation dropped, unlike the scores of the other three students. This finding concurs with Brown's (1980) observations that certain types of instruction may actually do more harm than good (cited in Teh, 1989). In view of this, students should be made aware that merely

memorising a decontextualised pattern in a drill may cause more errors. Also, the over enthusiasm to emulate the models could also generate more errors.

From the results above, it is essential to “directly address the issues of grammar” (Dickins & Woods, 1988 in Sweedler-Brown, 1993) with low proficiency students but through indirect instruction in the writing classes. Clearly, these students can improve their writing by modelling the target structures which focus directly on grammar. This is consistent with the findings of Noyce and Christie (1983) that “the teaching of complex syntax through informal activities in both receptive and productive experiences with model sentences yields dividends in writing” (p. 67).

Incidentally, the students agreed that the exercises designed to teach certain target structures were beneficial because it enabled them to detect a pattern after reading all the sentences. They felt that they could learn the rules of grammar indirectly and make generalizations, thus making learning easier for them, specifically regarding the target structures. This is in line with what Ellis (1993, p.11) says about teaching grammar in which the learners are provided “with a very structured input, structured in the sense that the input would have been manipulated to contain examples of the particular grammatical structure that you wanted to teach ”. Hence, the results of this study support and extend the claims made for indirect grammar instruction by previous research. For instance, Bateman and Zidonis (1966), Thompson and Middleton (1973), Stubbs (1995a) found that students who were taught some form of grammar would grasp the grammatical rules to proceed with writing (cited in Stotsky, 1975). In addition, grammar should be taught in the context of writing. My findings also concurred with Miller and Ney’s (1968) suggestion that writing exercises designed to

supplement oral drills on specific syntactic structures indicated that students gained significantly.

The finding that peer response did not seem to play a positive role in the improvement of surface structure problems is consistent with the observations of Bartlett (1982:23) that “children are not always able to recognize problems in their own writing and they are not always able to improve writing even when they recognize problems”. The findings therefore demonstrated that students need to possess a reasonable level of proficiency in the language before they are able to help in the revising processes required in the process writing. It is important to remember that process approach was originally developed in and for the L1 classroom and should be adapted accordingly for L2 teaching. For poor L2 writers, a process approach to teaching may be insufficient and therefore may need considerable adaptation because these students need help to develop and improve writing processes. Caudery (1995) notes that “relatively little seems to have been done to develop a process approach which is specifically oriented towards L2 writing” and therefore process writing should be adapted so that it can be an effective tool to help the low proficiency students. Moreover, a series of drafts in the writing process is important because it enables these low proficiency students to collect data and ideas. Hence, process writing alone may not work well with low proficiency students because their inadequacies in linguistic competence do not allow them to render help to their peers.

Thus it seems reasonable to assume that for low proficiency students, grammar should be dealt with at the initial level of writing but not through formal grammar lessons. When these low proficiency students are in control of various grammatical and

syntactic patterns such as subordinate clauses and past and present usage, then the process writing will deal with the quality of organization and paragraph development.

Although the approach may seem traditional in the sense that it assumed that writing entails grammatical accuracy and this grammatical accuracy is associated with writing proficiency (Zamel, 1976; p. 69), the teaching of syntax through informal activities such as speaking, listening and reading combined with the process approach has given this approach a new twist. It can be concluded that low proficiency students can learn the principles of grammar more easily if it is relevant to their writing.

Pedagogical Implications for Teaching and Research

These findings have important implications for both research and classroom practice. However, any pedagogical implications based on these findings should be treated with caution because of the scope of this study.

The results of this study showed that students can use a variety of *clauses* with the correct tenses and punctuation if they are taught integratively instead of the traditional way of textbook grammar. This finding suggests that teachers should help low proficiency students expand their lexical and syntactic choices by modelling options for them and by suggesting ways they could use adverbial phrases and prepositional phrases more effectively.

This study therefore, can provide a baseline for teachers who are faced with the linguistic problems of low proficiency students. As ESL teachers, we should be aware that the needs of our low proficiency students differ from other ESL learners in that they are incapable of writing comprehensible compositions, if left alone. Sweedler-Brown (1993) suggests that “we may be doing our students a disservice if we are not willing to become language teachers as well as writing teachers to our ESL students

particularly in post secondary academic settings". Hence, this exposure to integrated sentence modelling approach makes them aware that writing can improve steadily and also there is no one method that fits everyone.

This study also provides relief for teachers who feel guilty about using models as a valid means of teaching writing. The findings from this study can reassure these ESL teachers that models do provide "powerful input" (Carrel, 1987) that is much needed by low proficiency students (cited in Chelliah, 1993). And, this composing strategy that models target structures does allow for originality and not merely imitating and producing parallel texts. This contradicts what Eschholz (1980) sums about model-based approach, that is, the imitation of models is seen as "stultifying and inhibiting writers rather than empowering or liberating them" (cited in Watson, 1982).

Limitations

I need to make it clear that these claims must be presented tentatively because it is limited to only four students. Clearly, further research is needed with a large number of students and probably with students of various levels of proficiency to assess its benefits to writing. In addition, it is not possible to claim that the sentence modelling approach is responsible for the improvement in writing. It will take further research to measure the effect. Nevertheless, the persistently higher gain scores for Writing Samples 2 strengthen the contention that the sentence modelling approach to writing combined with some amount of process writing is the logical way to help low proficiency students in their writing.

Another word of caution is that readers may get the impression that sentence-modelling is a "cure-all" for every problem faced by writing teachers (Noyce and Christie, 1983). This sentence modelling approach should not be considered as the one

and only instructional writing programme in and of itself. There has to be a larger writing context in which a student can apply the skills that are being developed. Thus, it seems much more reasonable to approach sentence-modelling as a technique with a limited aim- namely, that of helping low proficiency students develop an “expanded working repertoire of sentence structures” (Noyce and Christie, 1983).

The analytic scoring guide is also an insufficient measure of overall qualitative gains because it only shows scores that model sentences affects, such as certain analytic components of writing like sentence structure or supporting details. Thus this could be dismissed as simply a function of what the experimental students were most extensively taught. But the holistic score should be able to capture the total effect through a combination of syntactic maturity gains such as organizational text, cohesion and content. Furthermore, the analytic scoring guide is too rigid in awarding points to the various components and therefore is not representative of the true situation.

One must also be heedful in drawing conclusions from the results because this study is limited to only one kind of writing, that is guided composition. While it was deliberately limited to guided compositions to narrow down the variables that affect quality of writing, subsequent investigations could demonstrate that sentence patterns could vary with the types of writing. It is impossible to assert that usage, mechanics and sentence structure should be the focus for study because of the complexities of writing. Further analysis is needed to determine how one segment of the language is linked to another before specific recommendations can be made.

Recommendations

These findings are encouraging especially to teachers who are concerned about their low proficiency students’ writing skills. Integrating sentence modelling approach

with process writing may be used as a way of motivating students to write and enjoy doing it. The following recommendations are provided to accomplish the main objectives of teaching writing:

1. provide follow-up activities so that classroom teachers can reinforce writing skills.
2. teach writing by integrating other language skills. The explicit teaching of structures using the integrated sentence-modelling approach is suggested.
3. perpetuate the process writing as a secondary activity to reduce anxiety of students by giving them the opportunities to discuss and allowing them to brainstorm to generate more ideas and vocabulary.

Conclusion

From the results reported above, it can be concluded that all the low proficiency students made progress in their writing although no causal claims can be made regarding the impact of sentence modelling. The results are consistent with the hypothesis that the integrated sentence modelling approach has a positive impact on writing quality. However, further research with larger sample of teacher trainees is needed to investigate the nature of the relationship between sentence modelling approach and writing quality. Further studies should also include additional rhetorical skills such as organizational text, content and coherence. These variables are of particular interest because once these low proficiency students can improve on surface and structure quality of writing, it is necessary to look into the association between these variables and writing quality.