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The Effect of Explicit Writing Instruction on a Taiwanese Engineer's Writing Development

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Abstract:
The purpose of this case study was to investigate the effect of a modified cognitive writing instruction with a purposeful focus on explicit teaching on the English writing development of a Taiwanese engineer. The participant, an engineer working for one of the companies listed on the Taiwan Stock Exchange, was a less-experienced writer and aimed to achieve at least a score 6.5 or higher on the IELTS test in order to study overseas. The data of this study included field notes based on tutorial sessions, semi-structured interviews with the participant and writing assignments, collected throughout about a six-month period. The findings of this case study suggested that this explicit writing instruction, shifting purposefully from a controlled, less-controlled, to authentic writing context fostered Chu's growth in English writing by providing him helpful schemata of essential reading, writing, and problem-solving strategies. Chu's progress in the development of his rhetorical knowledge, composing strategies, and English proficiency could possibly exemplify that this type of instructional approach that integrated both declarative knowledge of the commonly required writing conventions and procedural knowledge within an authentic, meaningful context could help inexperienced EFL writers develop their English writing abilities. That is, learning to write via this kind of modified cognitive approach with a purposeful focus on explicit teaching might help mediate or even internalize inexperienced writers' writing development. However, the results of this case study, due to the limited scope that this case study could investigate, can only be applied to reflect the teaching of English writing for this case.

Keywords: explicit writing instruction, English for specific purpose, scaffolding

1. Introduction

In Taiwan, English is becoming an increasingly important "tool" that people of most professions need to use it for communication at work. Today, many people start learning English since the third grade from primary school or even earlier, but it is common to find people need help to improve their English writing abilities for pursuing advanced study overseas or communication for occupational purposes. This means that after learning English for more than ten years, many Taiwanese still need to attend courses from cram schools in order to use English as a language to express one's ideas in writing. Why is English writing really difficult for a surprisingly large number of Taiwanese students? What kind of writing instruction can help equip these people with necessary writing skill in order to survive today's professional world?

1.1. Product or Process?

Product-focused writing instruction tends to focus on studying, labeling, and evaluating other writing models, so such instructional approaches cannot guide students to automatically develop necessary concepts to write well in an academic or professional settings. That is, this type of pedagogical approaches focus on declarative knowledge, not the procedural knowledge. In contrast, Hillocks (1995) clearly states that the process-oriented writing instruction includes natural process and environmental mode; both teaching methods emphasize the importance of the general writing process though the environmental mode emphasizes the importance of "task-specific" declarative knowledge of form and procedural knowledge of form and content.

1.2. Explicit Teaching

Krashen (1984) believed that explicit teaching could be dangerous since students might assume this is the only structure for writing in English and lose their agency. Freedman (1993) questioned if explicit teaching could be possible since most writing teachers do not the tacit disciplinary knowledge. However, Mike Rose (1983) proposed that less-experienced student writers need writing teachers to teach them clearly what coherent and cohesive writing should be like, guiding them to learn the organizational patterns in academic discourse through explicit teaching. If not, he worried, these less-experienced writers might have few opportunities, if any, to develop "mature schemata of the expected academic discourse." Writing researchers from the camp of social constructivism, or the so-called environmental mode in the book by Hillocks (1986; 1995), believe that knowledge is constructed in different social contexts, not transmitted. The statement that "Learning is in advance of development," by Vygotsky (1978, p. 89) emphasizing the important role of

learning in the process of one's internal development of concepts. From the perspective of social constructivist, teaching is to provide learners with necessary scaffolding to achieve their ZPD (zone of proximal development). But how specific should writing instruction get in order to help less-experienced writers achieve their ZPD in writing for academic or professional purposes?

Cumming (1986; 1995) suggested that writing teachers should avoid language manipulation practice or controlled composition, and the focus of their instruction on holistic modeling at the rhetorical level of text discourse can help equip students with necessary norms of their discourse communities. This type of explicit teaching can provide students with helpful strategies in making "suitable" decisions about their writing goals, writing representations, uses of their existing knowledge, and other necessary decisions during the composing process.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this case study which lasted for about six months was to investigate the effect of a modified cognitive writing instruction with a purposeful focus on explicit teaching on an EFL student's writing development. In order to collect information for this study which lasted for about six months, I chose to tutor an engineer, Chu, who had a Master degree in chemistry and was working for one of the companies listed on the Taiwan Stock Exchange and intended to pursue his post-graduate degree in United Kingdom, so he was required to take IELTS (The International English Language Testing System) test. He had been studying English since elementary school, but obviously he was not good at English, particularly in writing and speaking. The data of this case study included field notes based on the tutorial sessions with Chu, semi-structured interviews with the participant and Chu's writing assignments, collected throughout this six-month period of time.

3. Results

3.1. Writing Instruction

Very often, many Taiwanese students can achieve high scores on many English tests which only include reading and grammar, but they very possibly have trouble with listening, not to mention writing and speaking. This has a great deal to do with this fact that Grammar Translation Method has had a tremendous impact on the teaching of English in Taiwan. First, English has been taught, in most cases, as a subject in order to prepare students for entrance exams for high schools, colleges, and even some graduate programs, so rote memorization were commonly used to be one of the most useful strategies to prepare students to translate sentences or short passages as well as multiple choice questions. Today, Taiwan has had a number of educational reforms, including the exam of English as a subject; students are required to demonstrate that they can use English as a language to access to information about certain important issues nationally and internationally. Hence, solely relying on rote memorization cannot work any longer. However, many people, young and old, still firmly believe in the need of "controlled" learning style, which has to do with the concept of knowledge transmission that memorizing new words, phrases, and even sentences as well as doing grammatical exercises diligently should be what they should do to prepare for English tests for academic or professional purposes. But, apparently this kind of strategies, focusing mostly on declarative knowledge, cannot work for many of today's English proficiency tests, even including entrance exams in Taiwan.

What were the writing problems that my participant, Chu, needed to cope with in order to get a writing score of 6.5 or higher on an IELTS test? Like many Taiwanese students, he had no trouble understanding English texts he needed to read in his field, but this was not the case in English writing. We started our tutorials which lasted for about six months with his writing problems, similar to many others, which included three main aspects: English expressions, content information for writing, and organization. In terms of English language expressions, he had trouble due to limited vocabulary bank, limited control over sentence-level grammar, and limited control to upgrade his sentence structure. Next, getting enough, relevant, interesting ideas was another headache for him since he admitted that he seldom wrote even in Chinese, rarely going beyond the length of a text message. Like many young people, he often did not talk or write for communication with others; instead, he used simple phrases or pictures to share with people around about what is new in his life. He has been trained as a chemist, so in Taiwan this means he does not have much, if any, "training" to learn to express his ideas on certain issues although he is pretty competitive in his profession. But he has no trouble with his organization skills.

To improve his English writing, I adopted a modified cognitive approach with a purposeful focus on explicit teaching, intended to equip him with helpful schemata of the more general norms of expository writing; that is, I chose explicit teaching to integrate both reading and writing skills, moving from controlled, less-controlled, and finally authentic writing tasks.

First, based on an end-goal approach, I shared with him The Diederich Scale, a common scale used to grade English writing, which helped him to get a clear understanding of what good writing, in general, looked like, before chatting with him about what his weakness were and what strategies to use to take care of them. And, to help him become more aware of his process of learning to upgrade writing, I explained to him about the complex nature of a writing process, compared to the other language skills, which has quite a bit to do with the challenging cognitive load. Managing "reasonable" cognitive load is one of the reasons why following certain steps of the writing process could help Chu, a less-experienced writer, to learn to manage the challenges during the composing process, especially in detecting and solving problems. Like many less-experienced Taiwanese English writers, Chu's writing problems were derived from "multitasking" during the writing process, really busy or very possibly cognitively overwhelmed. Since he did not have the habit of developing an outline before writing, when he wrote, he needed to generate enough ideas for writing, look up new words, if necessary, correct sentence-level grammar, and possibly go back to reread or do more readings to collect enough information for writing. He usually wrote slowly with a large of dose of frustration, thinking that English writing was hard, anyway. He used to believe the root of his writing problems was mostly related to limited vocabulary bank and limited control over sentence-level

grammar, so his coping strategies very often included about memorizing more English words, phrases, and doing more grammar exercises. Chu commented he was taught to believe working hard was the only way to improve his English, so that was what he had been doing to prepare himself for the challenging English proficiency test, especially the tasks of speaking and writing. But he admitted it was not enough.

His issue with clarity was one of the typical writing problems shared by many others. That is, he very often had trouble generating enough ideas for his English writing which in many cases was too short to clearly convey his messages. His grammatical errors, found in his writing, included both "developmental" errors and careless mistakes (Ferris, 2011), which he should have been able to correct if he had made additional effort to take care of grammatical errors, such as subject-verb agreement, spelling, capitalization, word forms, and so forth. This type of mistakes might suggest that habitually he did not proofread his writing, but to upgrade his English writing, improving his control over grammatical issues was inevitable.

I explained to him about the "big picture" of my teaching plan to help him become more aware of the process of his writing development and accomplish required exercises or activities more smoothly. And, this sharing might encourage him to utilize helpful reading and writing strategies to solve problems when necessary as much as he could.

3.2. Improve Control over Sentence-level Grammar

To help him develop more control over sentence level grammar, I started with more controlled exercises. We reviewed the use of clauses by reading and understanding sentences of a paragraph. Since one develops receptive skills before productive skills, I explained to him that, at the initial stage, he should make sure he understood what the sentences mean when reading, not to push himself to memorize the sentences in order that he could write sentences of this type of structures yet. That is, comprehending what a sentence in reading occurs before being able to write this kind of sentences. After a quick review of clauses, we worked on sentence combination to improve his control and confidence in sentence-level grammar and add variety to his use of sentence structure. Also, we studied paragraphs in order to review grammar and get familiar with a paragraph structure, in general. I asked him to study a paragraph by following four steps. First, he was asked to read the paragraph, sentence by sentence, paying attention to what the paragraph was mainly about and highlighting all the unknown words or phrases. Second, he needed to look up new words in a dictionary. Third, he needed to study each of the sentences again, making sure he understood each of them. We discussed "good" sentences need to be precise and concise. Reading sentences of paragraphs helped him to develop more concrete ideas about what precise, concise English sentences should like. Then, possibly, he would have a better idea about how to adjust his sentences from the sentence combination practice. That is, this could help empower him" to develop a better idea about when and how to get rid of "lengthy" or "awkward" English sentences which tend to have many clauses. Last, he needed to identify the topic sentence, important details, and concluding sentences, if any. This could help him get a stronger idea about what a well-developed, well-supported, and well-organized expository paragraph looked like. Such practice could possibly help those inexperienced writers who had trouble elaborating their supporting details in the paragraph writing. In this case, it is more related to what information is relevant and what kind of supporting details can be included to elaborate the main idea of a given paragraph.

3.3. Paragraph Writing Practice

Next, we reviewed the steps of the writing process and we worked together to write a descriptive paragraph. The steps are as follows:
1. collecting information—brainstorming; reading; free writing
2. connecting information—making an outline = a writing plan
3. drafting= writing the first draft
4. proofreading —focus on content and organization
5. transition words: first, second, next, after this, before that, finally etc.
6. writing the concluding sentence
7. editing sentence-level grammar: use of clause (locate all the connectors); subject-verb agreement; verb tense, phrasal verbs (put in, put on, put off, put up with); use of prepositions; use of articles (a, an, the, X), word forms (v. n. adj. adv.); capitalization, punctuation, spelling
   a. sentence combination
   b. Wording and phrasing: word choice, word forms, adding adjectives, adverbs, phrases, clauses, or even sentences
   c. mechanics: spelling, punctuation, format (i.e. double-spaced)

During this writing process, I reminded him that the end goal of this writing assignment was to help him receive a high score, based on the Diederich Scale. That is, this assignment required him to integrate what he had learned so far about the organization of a paragraph, sentence-level grammar, and the steps of the writing process which composing strategies he needed to use to manage his cognitive load by focusing on one step at a time. During this stage, I also shared with him to focus on content and organization first, and then proofreading sentence-level grammar and using sentence combination and adding variety to his writing of more well-developed and concise sentences. And, I explained the important need to create a well-organized outline, which could mean an obvious difference for one to write more clearly and faster, especially for long essays or reports, in the future. His outline and the first writing were as follows:

TS: My bed room is small but comfortable
SS:
1. Bed (at the corner, single bed with storage headboard, there are many dolls on the headboard, a lot of clothes on it, messy but comfortable, watch TV, make me relax)

2. TV cabinet (in the middle of my room, old, film, video game)
3. Desk (iron, with two shelves, the top layer filled with reference books, and bottom layers filled with magazine and comic books, computer, play computer games, phone, talking to friend)

Descriptive Paragraph:

- My bed room is small but comfortable. My bed which is single bed with a storage headboard located at the corner of my room.
- I put many dolls on the storage headboard. On my bed, there are large amounts of clothes. Although it looks messy, it is convenient to me to reduce time to find the clothes easily before I go out. Besides, I always watch TV on my bed before
- I go to bed because it can charge myself and make me relax. In front of bed is a wooden, old TV cabinet, and there are many interesting films and video games in the cabinets' drawer. Beside the bed is an iron desk with two shelves. On the top layer of shelve is filled with reference books, and bottom one filled with magazines and comic books. On the right hand side of my desk is a telephone; I talk to my friends once a week. In the middle of desk is my computer, most of time, I sit there and play computer games. Although my bed room is not big, it is really warm and like a paradise to me.

Despite some minor grammatical errors, overall, the descriptive paragraph above showed it was a helpful start to encourage him to make use of composing strategies and rhetorical knowledge to write more. The following paragraph was his writing plan and the opinion paragraph on mandatory uniforms for work. This time, I only prompted him verbally during each step of the writing process; in other words, he wrote this paragraph more independently, marking a shift from controlled writing practice to a less-controlled assignment.

1) Agree

TS: I agree that people should wear uniform to company for the following reasons.

SS:

--more convenient life (no worries about what to wear, time saving before you go to the company, you have sufficient time go to company)

--reduce employee difference (rich, poverty people they wear same clothes, reduce t colleague pressure and discrimination, and have better working performance)

-- Save money (company would provide employee with free uniform, save money to buy other things)

Opinion Paragraph:

- Although it is flexible to wear clothes which you like in company, I agree that people should be enforced to wear uniform for the following reasons. Firstly, people would have more convenient life if they wear uniforms. People do not worry about what to wear before going to company, so they spend less time choosing clothes. Moreover, they can drive car or ride scoter carefully because they are able to avoid rush hour and have more sufficient time to go to company. Secondly, uniform make everyone equal. No matter how rich or poverty you are, people just wear the same clothes. Wearing uniform reduces pressure or discrimination from colleagues, and people could work efficiently and have better performance. Finally, it is an economical way for everyone to wear uniform because company would provide staff with uniform for free. Employee can save money and use this additional money to purchase the thing that they need. To sum up, wearing uniform might make people lose freedom, but I believe that the advantages of it outweigh disadvantages.

Despite some grammatical errors he could have detected and corrected if he had made some more effort, his English proficiency, as shown in his word choice, sentence structure, and connectors, was better than the previous writing. During the writing process, he wrote it silently, which suggested that he had somewhat internalized the composing strategies.

3.4. Essay Writing Practice

Next, we continued to read and study expository essays of different genres, focusing on locating the essential elements in an essay, including a hook, thesis statement and so forth. That is, to understand the gist of each essay, he was prompted to locate the thesis statement, topic sentences, important details of an expository essay, and shortly he was able to sum up what the essay we studied was mainly about. After this, he started to practice writing essays at home; that is, he did the following writing on bullying on his own. This means that the writing instruction had switched to less-controlled assignment, even close to the context of a more authentic writing activity.

Bullying can take a variety of forms, from the verbal, being taunted or called hurtful names, to the physical, being kicked or shoved, and it might happen in every place, including social groups, work places and even school. Recently, the events of campus bullying are rising dramatically since young children gain more and more information and become more mature. However, some of them start to compare with their peers due to difference racism, gender or socioeconomic status, and behaviors of bullying occur. When young people bully others, the effects felt by the weaker student can lead to serious, even deadly, consequences.

Students who are bullied in the school tend to withdraw from society, and we may find this phenomenon especially in their behaviors. Admittedly, parents, teachers and peers play an important role in children's mind. When students are bullied, they would not to ask for help from their parents or teachers immediately since they would like to prove that they are mature, independent individuals. In addition, if bullied report the situation to their parents or teachers, their peers may have massive possibility to scoff those victims because they think that those students who are bullied do not have ability to protect themselves well. Therefore, bullied students may stop communicating with parents and friends. Moreover, the shadow of bullied experience may accompany with students, who are victims, a whole life, and they might breed mistrust of people. Once they bump into an embarrassing situation in future, they are more

likely to choose lying just because they would like to make themselves safe. Also, they might lose courage to try new events or activities which have to cooperate with other people.

Bullying may lead victims focus on negative aspects. While students suffer from bully, they may lose self-esteem and start questioning their own personalities, thinking that maybe they deserve this bad treatment. As bullying continues, victims start focusing only on bully, also, which might cause mental disease. Mental problems might make them lack confidence and become depression, hopeless on everything. Eventually, those bullied students would believe that their outlook on life may become darker and darker.

If teens become damaged by the bullying, they may do almost anything to get out of the situation. First, they may have misbehaviors and use the wrong ways, which are able to show their ability, to solve the problem. For example, in Taiwan, some of students, especially studying in junior or senior school, join the "Tong" and become a gangster to show off how strong they are, and they would not suffer from bully. Secondly, some of bullied students might think about a plan of revenge. The worst action is that some of victims of bullied commit suicide if they cannot stand anymore. Based on these consequences which victims do, parents and teachers should take the preventive measures. For example, parents understand their kids' life at school through daily communications. Also, in school, teacher should teach students correct attitudes, encourage good manners and punish bad behaviors, even some psychological counseling is necessarily to be carried on if students are bullied or have bully behaviors. Thus, the tragedy of bully is able to be prevented effectively.

To sum up, bullying is a negative problem and happens not only in our society but also in the school. Students who are bullied may escape from society, focus on negative aspects only, and have wrong behaviors. We should aware of young children's behaviors and feeling, and teach them what are right behaviors adequately.

Compared to his earlier writing before this series of tutorials, the essay writing which he independently completed at home above had showed impressive progress. He reported that it took him hours to finish this writing, but the progress he had made was really rewarding. This writing demonstrated his progress in terms of English proficiency, but he still needed to invest some more effort to more carefully take care of the grammatical errors. At this stage, obviously, he had become more experienced in utilizing composing strategies and rhetorical knowledge for problem-solving during the writing process though there was still room for him to exemplify further by adding more details or explanations in his writing. He told me that for his last IELTS test, he received 6.0 for the writing section; 6.5 was minimal score required by the graduate school he was applying. He looked excited. He also revealed that his spoken English had also improved, since he had learned to write to prepare himself for speaking. That is, he composed what he intended to express on certain topics for the speaking class in writing first; then he used the outline to practice speaking. He reported he had a better idea about how to prepare a short talk on certain topics in public, and this could prepare him to be ready for the oral test of the required proficiency test, too.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Due to the limited scope, this case study could examine, the results can only be applied to reflect the teaching of writing for this case. In Taiwan, that traditional writing instruction usually requires a certain level of English proficiency demonstrates writing teachers' common belief that development is before learning. That is, if one's English is not proficient enough to a certain level, he or she is not ready to learn to write yet. But, Chu's writing development in this case study suggested that learning is before development. Learning very possibly helped mediate Chu's writing development through the "scaffolding" that the writing instructor provided in this study, including instructional conversation, prompts, reading materials as "modeling" to increase his control over grammar, paragraph structure, essay structure, composing strategies as well as problem-solving strategies.

Very importantly, based on the specific task that Chu needed to learn to handle in order to get a score 6.5 or higher on the IELTS test, the lesson plan of this writing instructing might play an important role helping Chu developing better understanding of the commonly required declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge required to accomplish well-developed, well-supported, well-organized writing, free of grammatical errors. To help students improve their reading and writing abilities of a specific type of writing, Smagorinsky (1991) emphasized that the writing instruction in which writing teachers analyzed and designed "task-specific" writing assignments and provided students enough exposure to the "specific" type of writing within a meaningful writing task could be a rather effective, time-saving approach to improve students' writing strategies. Based on the specific task that Chu needed to learn to handle in order to get a score 6.5 or higher on the IELTS test, this writing instruction, shifting purposefully from controlled, the so-called presentational mode (Hillocks, 1995), less-controlled, to authentic writing context, could be one of the apparent factors, contributing to Chu's growth in English writing. Chu's case showed that learning to write in English could very likely help one improve his or her English writing but also possibly the English proficiency level. This was possibly related to the fact that the participant had a considerable amount of English contact from studying and reading intermediate and advanced authentic English paragraphs and essays for multi-purposes. This type of reading exercises was to assist Chu in developing essential schema about the general format of English expository paragraphs and essays of different genres; thus, such concepts could upgrade his reading skills since he would be able to locate the main ideas and important details more easily. Certainly, these reading skills would empower him by providing him the necessary schemata of what the general format of an English paragraph and essay would be like and helping him develop a more concrete understanding of what a well-developed, coherent, and cohesive writing looked like.

Although Chu's progress in composing strategies, rhetorical knowledge, and overall English proficiency could suggest the promising potential of explicit pedagogical approach in teaching English writing within an EFL (English as a foreign language) context, many other possible factors might contribute t Chur's growth in writing, including his motivation, anxiety level, learning strategies, and so forth. Since Chu is a very smart, working for one of the companies listed on the Taiwan Stock Exchange, a goal-getter and hard

worker with strong motivation to pursue his advanced study overseas, thus, it was not surprising that within less than six months he could make such impressive progress. The results of the text analyses showed that he tried to make good use of the strategies in improving his control over sentence-level grammar, reading skills, and writing abilities.

The results of case study might suggest that Chu was not confined within the scope of the knowledge-telling regarding expository writing format; instead, this modified cognitive writing instruction showed him the cognitive and social parts of composing (Cumming, 1995), providing him both with the declarative knowledge and the procedural knowledge of how to "construct" a so-called sound expository writing in a general sense. Hence, the explicit writing instruction did not "damage" his agency. On the contrary, this pedagogical approach empowers him to learn how to express his opinions via the more commonly agreed writing conventions. He had been clearly informed that the general structure of expository paragraphs and essays

was only one common way to organize one's ideas in writing, but not the only way. World English is not singular, but plural. He had been advised that different communities usually have different ways of communication with other members.

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