

IMPLEMENTING WRITING WORKSHOP WITH EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Writing Workshops are an integral technique in process writing, but their application to EFL higher education classrooms has received little attention. The present study aimed at investigating the effects of the writing workshop in the advanced composition classes. The results of this research provided encouraging results, as students' writing levels improved, and most students shared positive writing attitudes, and an understanding of Writers' Workshop. Finally, the merits and weaknesses of such training are discussed, and questions for further research are raised.

Key words: Workshop approach, EFL composition course, EFL University students

Introduction

In the English Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, especially at the university levels, teachers are always challenged how to improve writing skills, so that the students will be better prepared for their proficiency. Indeed, writing in the academic community is paramount; a student can't be successful without a certain level of academic writing proficiency. Essay writing is an integral part of the writing module of the Language practice course in the Department of English Philology at Plovdiv University. As a teacher in the writing module my main objective is systematical development of personal and academic writing skills (Samalieva 1999, 2006).

Background

Early approaches to teaching ESL writing had relied on the "current-traditional" rhetoric which advocated the five-paragraph essay. Prompted by research and practice in English as a First Language (L1) writing, process writing seemed to take over with a greater emphasis on pre-writing, drafting, and revision, and less on structure, form, accuracy, and mechanics. This was in line with the general climate change in ESL/EFL toward communicative language teaching. In the process approach, writing is an act of communication between a writer and a clearly-defined audience, in which meaning is primary (Silva, 1990; Samalieva, 2000; Atkinson, 2003). Although process writing has been described as "the dominant approach to L2 writing in the last part of the 20th, and the beginning of the 21 century" (Atkinson, 2003, p. 4), the most developed process writing technique, which answers many of the criticisms of process writing in ESL and has been applied at all levels of L1 teaching, is the writing workshop (Shaw, 2001/2002, Routman, 2005). However, writing workshops in the forms described by these authors rarely, appear in ESL textbooks, journals, or handbooks. A notable exception is a paper by Peyton and her colleagues (1994) on adapting writing workshops for ESL classes at grades K-6 and a paper of Caplan and Pearson (2007) for high-beginning and low-intermediate level students enrolled in an intensive English program. Somehow, writing workshops were left out of the description of process writing in EFL University students Prospective Teachers at advanced level.

This paper, then, reports on an adaptation of the writing workshop technique for EFL advanced composition classes and to what extent does English writing instruction using a Workshop approach enhance EFL students' writing.

Course Background

Participants. In the experiment participated 38 BA students learning English as a foreign language at advanced level of proficiency. The writing course consists of 28 contact hours, which are divided into 14 blocks of 2 hours and is taught on a weekly basis.

Workshop description. During the last year, I successfully implemented a writing workshop in my classroom. Structure of my writing workshop, which I present is a modified version of writing workshop program applied by Peyton et al., (1994), Dorn and Soffos (2001), Jennifer (2006), Caplan and Pearson (2007), Oszakiewski and Spelman (2011).

In 14 weeks, students will take 3 papers completely from every genre through the writing process. Ideas for writing topics will be explored through the students' use of journals in response to class curriculum. Ideas are then drafted into papers and worked through the entire process committed to Writing Workshop. Final drafts are reflected upon, and they end up in the students' portfolios.

The first assignment for their portfolios will be a highly-structured, all-class assignment that should take 3 to 4 seminars to finish. The entire class walks step-by-step through the writing process (drafting, responding, revising, editing, and publishing) with this first paper, so they can independently repeat the process two more times. All topics after the first assignment are to be chosen by the students.

Three different genres will be represented in each student's portfolio at the end of this process, and the portfolio papers will be scored using a 6-traits rubric. Mini-lessons on the different genres and the 6 traits will occur throughout the semester.

Process. On the first day of the course, as I talk through the syllabus, I introduce students to the writing workshop project which will synthesize the course. My workshop worked this way: one/two units, we wrote in our journals. Our journals were places to begin interesting idea development through writing. I challenged students with journal writing time to either a) write what was on their minds or b) write their ideas on a topic of relevance to what was going on in class itself. I needed student journals to be seen as places to not only write freely but also to write about the big picture ideas from my lessons.

My big idea for them was a three-paper portfolio. The first paper was a well-explained, step-by-step walk through the writing process. For three weeks, we shaped an idea based on a mutual class assignment. We talked about the shape of our ideas with each other. We learned how to take and make suggestions based on 6-trait mini-lessons throughout those three weeks. Even the reluctant revised. As a class, we edited, and we created a final draft of the idea that had begun as a simple writing prompt on the first units. In revision we followed the same order. After finishing the first paper, I told them it was time to begin the same journey again. I told them they'd be taking this journey two more times as the semester progressed, and the product at the end of their explorations would determine the majority of their grades for the class. They were to go back into their journals and find some smaller idea they'd written about and attempt to turn it into a more profound piece of deeper thought. All this would be done through writing. We created portfolio folders to hold their first papers, which were graded using the traits as criteria, and prepared space for the next two papers to come. During the first units, they learned the routine: a) check-in with teacher by telling him where you are in the writing process with your current portfolio assignment and b) be able to show that you've made it to the next step in the process by the end of workshop.

Thoughts moved in and out of my classroom as the students took their portfolio responsibilities to task. Ideas to write about were discovered both independently and from classroom discussions. My students approached journaling in a different way. They began to understand that the five to ten minutes I gave them usually to write their ideas had an important purpose. They liked their journals. They saw them more authentically.

Teacher Response during Writing Workshop: I chose to trust my students to make quality suggestions to one another when responding to each other's ideas. Eventually, I trained my students to also serve as competent editors to each other.

In the early days of writing workshop in my classroom, I chose to not read all three of the students' drafts. At most, I was willing to read two, and I usually chose to be their editor instead of their responder, and their final evaluator; they began to trust me most as a reader of their second drafts, and they came to trust my competent editor's eyes. And so, my students had to get their first responses from each other; after revising, they could present the paper to me for editing. They had to indicate on their second drafts where they had put most of their revision ideas or else I would neither accept nor edit their paper; this kept them from simply copying their rough drafts neater...or printing it with bigger font to make it look longer.

When editing, I fixed errors that I suspected they would not know. I *highlighted* those sentences that contained spelling or conventional problems that I felt they should have knowledge on, at the very least because of my classroom mini-lessons. I informed them that highlighted sentences needed to be fixed, but they had to talk to each other to discover what the error of the highlighted sentence was.

I also made trait-based comments on the whole paper, giving them suggestions on something that would impress me if they attempted to better it in their final draft. In addition to editing, I liked to give students trait-based suggestions for improvement as they prepared to publish their papers for their portfolios.

Portfolios in my Workshop: The greater part of my students' grade was based on the pieces that made it to their portfolios.

Not just the pieces were evaluated, but the steps of their writing process. I was teaching my students to use writing as their means to build deeper thinking. Writing was their primary means to prove they were thinking about classroom topics. Writing Workshop became less about the writing process and more about the importance of voicing thinking through writing.

In my class, our workshop was their time to honor their independent thinking and each other's independent thinking. Along the way came my independent thoughts about their attention to all six of the writing traits, so writing was learned...but mostly it was about the thinking.

Their thinking didn't stop when they polished their second drafts into final drafts and dropped them in my box to have their entire process graded. After I had given them their summative grade, they reflected back on their process and recorded commentary in their portfolios. This commentary was talked about before the student began working on the next piece for the portfolio. We used portfolio checklists (see Samaliev, 2006) to keep them focused on the bigger goals.

Results and Discussion

Qualitative analysis: The results from classroom observations revealed that EFL students' confidence toward writing English essays was increased and their writing performance made great progress through writing workshops. Group discussions decreased EFL students' sense of fear toward individual works; namely, their sense of achievement for learning writing was promoted in group works. Peer assessments provided EFL students with substantial and constructive feedback from others, further enhancing their writing skills. The above findings unfolded a successful instructional practice that created a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom to motivate students for writing and reduce students' fear toward writing. Applying a Workshop approach to writing instruction, the teacher helped students eliminate the feeling that they could not be successful and helped them overcome the barriers of learning English writing. With the aid of the Peer Feedback, the teacher found out students' problems writing in English, which rendered students to focus on their learning processes and allowed them to see their progress. As a whole, obviously students' word craft was improved by the instructional design adopting a Workshop that

offered a supportive environment so that students were likely to expand their voices for written production and take risks in learning writing.

Quantitative analysis:

Findings from the collection of artifacts uncovered that the majority of EFL students in this study had great progress in English writing.

The Grading Rubric Form designed by the teacher utilized to assess students' essays. The criteria of Grading Rubric Form consisted of four items: thesis/focus/main idea (30% of the grade), organization (30% of the grade), development (30% of the grade), and syntax/diction/mechanics/MLA style (10% of the grade). Based on her writing assessment criteria, levels and grades of essays of ESL students would be evaluated with an overall consideration of writing skills encompassing content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Also, the teacher made some constructive comments in the margins of the Grading Rubric sheets and essay sheets to point out the errors of students' essays.

In addition, examining students' progress of writing abilities, the researcher compared two-essay grades recorded on Grading Rubric Forms. One was the first-week explanatory essay titled "Why I Chose Trip to another country" the other was the final-week argumentative essay that each student chose a topic from the textbook. The results on the comparison of two essays are illustrated in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of first and final draft of the essays average scores (n=46)

Average Mark		
First draft of the essays	Final draft of the essays	Difference
80.6	94.8	14.2%

As illustrated above, all students made great progress in writing. The average grades on the first and second essays were 80.6 and 94.8 respectively. The amount of progress reached at 14.2%. This result obviously confirmed that the writing instruction using a Workshop approach positively affected the learning outcomes by promoting students' competence to write English essays.

In addition to classroom observations and collection of artifacts, students' positive responses in interviews conducted after the completion of the target course verified the effectiveness that a Workshop brought to writing instruction in the English Composition course. Excerpts from the responses of ESL students are displayed in the following.

The interview question was "How do you feel about your English writing after completing this ESL Composition course?"

"I learned the hook, topic, introduction, paragraph, thesis statement..."

"Now I am good at making the main ideas."

As stated above, findings again proved that ESL students had greatly advanced in English writing. Teaching with a Writing Workshop, indeed, the teacher succeeded in improving students' writing skills and elevating their self-confidence towards writing essays.

Most important of all, writing workshops built up the bridge between the knowledge and practices in English writing for ESL students and solved their problems in learning writing.

Conclusion

The results of this study can be attributed to the effectiveness of the writing workshops in developing the students' writing abilities. This effectiveness is the result of many aspects of the proposed methodology. These aspects were represented in the features of the new approach that contributed to developing basic writing skills of the students. For instance, the systematic instruction provided in the curriculum based on the writing workshop had a substantial effect on the quality of writing. In addition, the help provided by the teacher during the sessions time and the

exchanges that took place between the teacher and the students as well as among the students themselves were influential in improving students' writing. Furthermore, the classroom environment as a whole was of a crucial importance in improving the students' writings.

Analysis of basic writing components revealed that there are significant differences between the subjects in the pre and post test essay. These differences are in favor of the subject's post test scores in all components. As for the process writing component, the subjects exhibited a significant gain in the content area. This gain in this area might be attributed to the systematic instruction and training in observation skills. The participants were trained in using the various writing stages and also using each stage techniques as the prewriting techniques. Also, those students were provided with many chances in which they experienced with varied topics, both pre assigned topics and topics of their own choice. Moreover, the ideas-generation techniques, such as brainstorming, free writing, and journalist's questions, were very effective in providing the students with the required details. Furthermore, the concentration of the researcher throughout the different stages of each session on the idea that students can benefit from each other and add to or improve their ideas at any stage resulted in the overall richness of the content of their pieces.

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