Developing Contextually Sensitive Free Writing Pedagogy: Transitioning from a Product Approach to a Process Approach

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In an attempt to design a free writing course for less proficient EFL learners, models for process writing were used as a possible solution to the problems identified in a preliminary student needs analysis. The course included prewriting activities, different types of teacher feedback, and two revisions. The concluding questionnaire survey revealed that presenting models before writing can alleviate students' mental pressure when writing and, with appropriate conditions, can help them save time. The currently proposed method may serve as an EFL writing model.

　自由英作文指導法の構築に向けて、予備アンケートの結果をもとに、プロセス・ライティングの枠組みの中で、モデルを利用した指導を、習熟度が高くないEFLの学生に行った。授業ではプレ・ライティング活動、教員からのフィードバック、2度の書き直しを行った。事後アンケートの結果から、モデルの使用は執筆時の学習者の精神的負担を軽減するとともに、適切に利用されれば時間の短縮にもつながり、EFLライティングのモデルとして活用できるという可能性が示唆された。

Introduction

Background

Japan has been reforming English language pedagogy. Since 2011, foreign language activities have been introduced in elementary schools and foreign languages will become an official subject in 2020. Furthermore, high school and university entrance exams commonly have English writing sections and an increasing number of English proficiency tests now contain writing sections (e.g., TOEIC, the Eiken Test in Practical English Proficiency). However, current classroom practices may not be fulfilling learners' needs. According to the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), over 90% of junior high school and over 55% of high school English Expression classes include some form of output performance test in their curricula (MEXT, 2016). Although this should have increased the amount of class time spent on writing output tasks, this has not occurred because

many secondary school teachers are not confident about teaching writing (Murakoshi, 2012) partly because of insufficient teacher training (Mulvey, 2016). Also, due to the new course of study, which was implemented in 2011, all high school English textbooks were revised. However, Kawaijuku (2013) reports that the three most popular English expression textbooks adopted by 59.9% of high schools were edited by referring to a grammar-based syllabus, starting from the five basic sentence patterns just like old writing textbooks. The five sentence patterns are as follows: Subject-Verb (SV), Subject-Verb-Complement (SVC), Subject-Verb-Object (SVO), Subject-Verb-Indirect Object-Direct Object (SVOO), and Subject-Verb-Object-Complement (SVOC). This could have resulted in traditional teacher-centered instruction solely focused on particular grammatical items at the sentence level rather than on how to construct short texts (Mulvey, 2016). This is obviously insufficient for developing students' writing skills. Students should be instructed in how to write short texts in addition to sentence level composition before proceeding to tertiary education. To improve this situation, a model writing course should be made a prerequisite for post-secondary education.

Preliminary Questionnaire

Before creating a new course, it is important to understand the learners' difficulties. Different students will have different needs and if the course does not match said needs, it becomes counterproductive (Lee, 2008). Therefore, a preliminary questionnaire was conducted before developing the course, which elicited the learners' confidence in various skills and their learning experiences (particularly in writing). Overall, the students were not very confident with their output skills but wanted to be able to speak. They had little experience with free writing, had trouble beginning texts, and would like to write more fluently. Given these needs, a course that would allow them to write short texts was initiated.

The Course Design

Prewriting activity, feedback, and revision

In terms of teachers' intervention, written feedback may first come to mind. In L2 writing, there is abundant research on feedback's effects on accuracy, which some have claimed to be positive (e.g., Van Beuningen, De Jong & Kuiken, 2011) while others found negative effects (e.g., Truscott, 2007). However, both teachers and students appreciate the feedback process (Lee, 2008), and revision is often considered an indispensable part of improving one's writing (Oikawa & Takayama, 1981). For these reasons, this course adopted feedback and revisions for draft 1 and draft 2, and provided error correction (as shown in the procedures section). Also, a prewriting activity was utilized due to its reported positive effects (Ling, 1998). Furthermore, as Liu and Brown (2015) assert that it is not realistic to expect any changes after a single treatment, the instruction was provided throughout an entire semester.

The role of models

Model usage is highly contested. As Eschholz (1980) summarized, presenting models before students start writing can be unwarranted, inhibits writers' original expressions, and ignores the standard writing process. Indeed, in the traditional product writing classes, models were presented before writing for writers to imitate. It was often suggested that models should be presented after learners had finished writing and serve as a resource for process writing; as such, the problem with models was not the model itself but rather how it was presented (Watson, 1982). Later, Hanaoka (2006) revealed that 75% of the students' problems were solvable by delaying the introduction of native speakers' independent models. Models therefore can have a positive impact on students' writing as feedback if used appropriately. However, other challenges persist. Hanaoka (2006) reported that anything not included in the models cannot be covered and if the models are drastically different in style and content from what the learners wrote or wanted to write, the models may not work as well. To address how a single model only covers a limited number of items, five independent models were adopted in the initial writing stage of this study to increase the range of problems addressed, as well as to help students develop ideas and learn how to write. This study aims to investigate how novice EFL writers feel about a free writing course that includes models, feedback, and revision.

Method

Participants

The participants were 30 first-year female college students from a writing class. All the participants were native Japanese speakers. Their general English proficiency was around Grades Pre-2 to 2 in the Eiken test, equivalent to A2 to B1 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The preliminary questionnaire confirmed that none of them had received regular free writing instructions before, which matches the profile of most Japanese students reported by Mulvey (2016). Considering their proficiency level and their past writing experience, they can be classified as novice EFL writers.

Materials

Writing topics and models

The participants wrote essays on six different topics during the 14 weeks in the first semester. The topics were not argumentative like in many English proficiency tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS). Instead, students wrote about their everyday lives to ensure they remain interested and could write about their own context. The topics and their models were taken from Shizuka (2014) and are as follows: (1) The things other people say or do that I hate, (2) The things other people say or do that I like, (3) My ideal job, (4) If I were to be born again, (5) One thing I am into lately, and (6) One thing I would like to try someday. Each topic was followed by five models, which had the same structure and length but different examples or reasons.

Procedure

The classes were conducted during the first semester of the 2015 academic year and each class was 90 minutes. Both the preliminary and the concluding questionnaires were written and answered in Japanese and were then translated into English by the author. Based on the preliminary questionnaire results, the course was designed and managed as follows. Before writing on each topic, a quick review quiz on the previous lesson and a prewriting activity were conducted (week 0). It often contained the instructor's introduction of the topic followed by paired or group discussions in their native language in order to elicit their ideas and knowledge on the topic. The students then read and analyzed the five model texts and read them aloud many times to become accustomed to the text type. Afterwards, the learners reviewed the lexico-grammar in class. After the class, the students wrote their first draft

and submitted it in the subsequent lesson. Although they were allowed to refer to the five different models, there were two conditions. First, the students were not allowed to copy the model's argument, examples, or explanations, but could copy the expressions. Second, their texts had to be longer than the model (at least 120 words, which is more than the 50-word models) to ensure the students did not write superficially and used examples to support their ideas.

The instructor collected the first drafts in the following class (week 1) and provided written feedback on each text. Feedback contained (1) personal comments on the content, (2) questions that elicited clarification or additional information, (3) suggestions for better expressions, and (4) grammar corrections (mainly direct and partly indirect (underlining errors)). In most cases, all types of feedback were provided on the first drafts, while feedback (1) and (4) were given on the second draft, which meant that the second draft could undergo more extensive content revision than the final one. The instructor's feedback was completed within two days after collecting the students' first drafts, and the students were asked to pick them up and revise them before turning in the second draft in the upcoming class.

In the next class (week 2), the instructor gave the students a handout that discussed general comments, common grammatical mistakes, and offered suggestions for better expressions. The students could also personally consult the instructor about their writing. This took about 15 minutes. After the second drafts were collected, the next topic was introduced. Again, the instructor provided written feedback on the second drafts within two days. The students would then revise their work and submit their final draft in the following week (week 3) along with the first draft on the new topic.

The students essentially completed one topic in three weeks with two revisions. This cycle continued for 14 weeks and in the final week, the concluding questionnaire was conducted. The results from this questionnaire were analyzed along with the data from the follow-up interviews, which were conducted after week 15 outside of class time to confirm students' questionnaire responses.

Results

Table 1 shows the results from the preliminary questionnaire describing the participants' general attitude about their English skills. Table 2 represents the results from the concluding question-

naire describing the participants' general attitude about their English skills, writing in English, and the course. It also addressed their feelings toward feedback, the amount of text in revisions, and the models.

Table 1. *Preliminary Questionnaire*

Item		N	%
(1) What is the English skill you are most confident about?	Reading	12	40.0%
	Listening	8	26.7%
	Writing	2	6.7%
	Speaking	3	10.0%
	Grammar	5	16.7%
	None of above	0	0.0%
(2) What is the English skill you feel least confident about?	Reading	2	6.7%
	Listening	3	10.0%
	Writing	4	13.3%
	Speaking	13	43.3%
	Grammar	8	26.7%
	None of above	0	0.0%

N = 30

Table 2. *Concluding Questionnaire*

Item		N	%
(1) What is the English skill you felt most confident about?	Reading	12	40.0%
	Listening	9	30.0%
	Writing	4	13.3%
	Speaking	1	3.3%
	Grammar	4	13.3%
	None of above	0	0.0%
(2) What is the English skill you felt least confident about?	Reading	0	0.0%
	Listening	6	20.0%
	Writing	2	6.7%
	Speaking	12	40.0%
	Grammar	10	33.3%
	None of above	0	0.0%

Item		N	%
(3) Do you think writing skills are important and why?	strongly agree	15	50.0%
	agree	13	43.3%
	neutral	2	6.7%
	disagree	0	0.0%
	strongly disagree	0	0.0%
(4) Do you feel your ability to write in English improved through this writing course?	strongly agree	5	16.7%
	agree	21	70.0%
	neutral	4	13.3%
	disagree	0	0.0%
	strongly disagree	0	0.0%
(5) Do you think the amount of text in the second draft increased? If so, why? If not, why not?	increased	24	80.0%
	no change	5	16.7%
	decreased	1	3.3%
(6) Do you feel the teacher's feedback was helpful? Why?	yes	30	100.0%
	no	0	0.0%
(7) Did the teacher's feedback on content and structure motivate you when you revised the drafts?	strongly agree	21	70.0%
	agree	7	23.3%
	neutral	2	6.7%
	disagree	0	0.0%
	strongly disagree	0	0.0%
(8) Did you use the samples when you wrote your text?	yes	27	90.0%
	no	3	10.0%
(9) Were the samples helpful?	strongly agree	9	30.0%
	agree	15	50.0%
	neutral	5	16.7%
	disagree	1	3.3%
	strongly disagree	0	0.0%

Item		N	%
(10) Did you feel the handout showing the common mistakes on your writing was useful?	strongly agree	15	50.0%
	agree	13	43.3%
	neutral	2	6.7%
	disagree	0	0.0%
	strongly disagree	0	0.0%
(11) What form of correction do you prefer? Why?	direct	22	73.3%
	underline	8	26.7%
(12) What was the average amount of time you spent on the first and second drafts?	The first draft	29.5	min
	The second draft	12.7	min

$N = 30$

Discussion

Comparing the results of the preliminary and concluding questionnaires, the number of students who answered that writing was the skill they were most confident about slightly increased. Over 93% of students believed writing was an important skill and over 83% responded positively toward improving their writing skills in the course. Part of the reason they answered this way could be that they had more opportunities to write texts, including multiple revisions, with teacher intervention.

Regarding how they reacted to teacher feedback, revision, and the amount of text in the revisions, 80% of the participants felt that the amount of text in their second draft increased. Judging from their drafts, this is because they omitted a lot of information in the first draft since they assumed readers would be from the same context. This also means that the students expected their audience to share not only the same cultural background or outlook but also similar experiences as the students. However, the readers are not always from the same background. Therefore, the instructor asked them to include more detailed information to ensure that individuals from different cultural backgrounds could understand the text. To address these highly context-specific texts, the instructor gave copious feedback including suggestions on how to form better expressions. The amount of text thus increased because the students responded to this feedback. All the participants responded that the teacher's comments were helpful mainly because they learned how to make exact improvements, how to

express their intended meaning, and learned some grammatical points. The concluding questionnaire and interview revealed that the comments of encouragement also motivated the students to write. Furthermore, 73% of the participants preferred direct feedback over underlining, which corresponds to Ogawa's (2015) finding that direct feedback allows students to understand the error immediately. Furthermore, some learners stated that they could not understand the underlined errors despite referring to reference materials (e.g., dictionaries). It may therefore be frustrating for students to edit their work using only indirect feedback, particularly if they are not proficient enough (Ferris & Roberts, 2001). It is actually reported that novice learners favor direct feedback (Lee, 2008). Additionally, 90% of the participants found the handouts were helpful. The students' comments revealed that they noticed not only their own mistakes but their peers'; they also became aware of the various kinds of mistakes they could make and of many new expressions,which they could use in the future. However, the instructor felt that the handout was not very effective unless he talked to the learners individually about their errors, since students tend to ignore the handouts.

Regarding the models, 90% of the students used them in some fashion and 80% responded positively towards their usefulness. Typical comments included that using models was helpful because they often had trouble with starting the text, it helped them start the text smoothly and they were able to write with no trouble after that, they understand how to expand the story, and they could understand how to conclude the text.

The models could also benefit teachers. Since students mimic models' structure, teachers could focus on examples and reasons students write, which could drastically save time and effort.

The average time the students spent on the first and second drafts respectively was 30 minutes and 13 minutes. They may have spent less time on the second draft because there were no drastic content revisions and because they simply responded to the feedback; this may be due to the extensive direct feedback use or how some students revised their texts without thinking very much (Aoki, 2006). Despite not having a control group, it is possible to posit that the models may have also helped the students save time.

Finally, there are several points to note as possible difficulties for the instructors. It could take time for non-native instructors to check students' grammar and expressions because they often have to refer to grammar books or other sources such as corpuses, concordances, or web pages to ensure clarity in the students' texts. Although native instructors may take less time to check grammar, they could take more time to comprehend students' intentions because students often use direct translations which can be incomprehensible. In addition, handwritten feedback can take more time than using a computer. For instance, it usually took me approximately 15 hours a week for the first drafts, and seven hours a week for the second drafts. Furthermore, students might have difficulties collecting feedback from the instructor's office due to other commitments or illness.

Conclusion

This research was intended to observe how learners feel about a writing course that included the use of models, feedback, and revision. The participants seemed to respond positively to the overall writing course, including the feedback and models. Presenting multiple models before writing may also be pedagogically effective as long as limitations are in place to promote originality. Models may also alleviate student mental burden in terms of the initial writing process, structuring, and time used. Instructors may also benefit from models as they can focus on correcting a few points instead of the whole text. This method could therefore bridge the gap between product and process writing approaches in classrooms with novice writers. In the future, utilizing technology could reduce the difficulties discussed above. Emails can be a convenient way for students to receive their texts and feedback and can reduce the required time for the instructors to provide feedback.

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