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Scaffolding Writing Competence through Process Writing and Error Correction

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the efficacy of process writing and error correction as scaffolds in improving writing competence among 32 college students who were enrolled in an English writing class. As a narrative-descriptive action research, the study used error analysis to account the errors committed by the learners in grammar, lexis, mechanics, and syntax, described how writing process and error correction become relevant in scaffolding writing competence, and evaluated the writing competence of the learners on their final draft. Error Analysis, the Writing Competency Rubric by Archibald, et al. (2013), and Focused Group Discussion were employed as instruments. Error analysis revealed that there were a total of 363 errors in the 176 composition drafts produced by the respondents. Grammatical errors accounted the highest frequency of errors at 47.45%. Verb, pronoun, and preposition errors occurred frequently. In terms of mechanics errors, spelling and misuse of the comma recorded the most number of errors. Meanwhile, lexis errors were particularly concentrated in the first draft. Last, syntax errors were mainly developmental and ambiguous statement errors, both being attributes of local errors. In a comparison between error frequencies across drafts, it was found out that process writing and sustained error correction were effective in reducing the incidence of errors in the succeeding drafts. Based on the FGD, the respondents divulged that the scaffolds were effective in improving their writing competence, however the routine activities were exhausting and time consuming. Finally, based on the Writing Competency Rubric it was found out that the overall competence level of the respondents was proficient. Furthermore, they were also found to be consistently proficient in all rubric outcomes: Central/Controlling Ideas, Development, Organization, Style, Mechanics, and Audience Awareness. As a conclusion, scaffolding writing competence through process writing and error correction was proven effective.

Keywords: Error Correction, Error Analysis, Process Writing, Writing Competence, Teaching Writing

Introduction

Writing is often any student's Waterloo. According to Hjortshoj (2001), it is natural for beginning writers to encounter "writing block" which is a form of mental block whenever they write. On this point, Bracewell (1979) confirmed that writing is "a very complex activity" even to native users. In fact, in an ESL classroom the western model of writing could in itself increase anxiety among learners (Armendaris, 2009). Thus, it is commonly felt

among writing teachers that there is the need to reduce the students' anxiety and to improve their writing competence through guided writing activities and corrective feedback.

Based on the premise that "practice makes perfect", aspiring writers must be provided the venue to continually develop their competence. Process writing, as an approach to teaching writing, is certainly laborious, but it allows gradual development of the written text and the learners' writing abilities through the series of drafting and re-writing activities and corrective feedback. Moreover, because it is a guided form of writing, the approach enables learners to consult with their teacher privately in the office or publicly in class, and to collaborate with their peers through editing and critiquing activities. In effect, error correction complements naturally with process writing.

The Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to find out the efficacy of process writing and error correction as scaffolds (Bruner, 1977) to improve writing competence among college students.

Research Questions

The study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. Based on the collected drafts, what is the error profile of the respondents, in terms of the following error categories:
 - a. Grammatical;
 - b. Mechanics;
 - c. Lexical; and
 - d. Syntactic?
2. How would the respondents improve their writing competence through the scaffolds, as revealed in the:
 - a. Error Analysis; and
 - b. Focused Group Discussion?
3. What is the overall writing competence level of the respondents based on their final draft?

The Theory

To sustain the students' interest to write and pursue proficiency, the theory of scaffolding by Bruner (1977) was utilized in this study. It accounted the role of adults and supportive social interaction in language acquisition. By principle, an effective scaffold is one that is able to (1) identify the activities and skills to be learned, (2) expect errors to occur in the process, (3) apply dynamic and skill generative scaffolds, and (4) extend learning beyond the cognitive domain by including the emotive and affective domains (Rosenshein and Meister, 1992). In this study, process writing and error correction served as scaffolds to improve writing competence.

Nunan (1991) related process writing to the steps in creating a written masterpiece, however imperfect, yet allowing the writers to come close to perfection when they constantly produce, reflect, discuss and rework several drafts of their writing. On the other hand, Ferris (2004, in Ghabanchi, 2011) stipulated that error feedback forms an integral component to process writing instruction.

Literature Review

Any Writing teacher thinks about what approach could optimize the learners' writing competence. However, being too product or output-oriented often leads to disappointments. Among students, it is unrealistic to expect a well-written composition given only less than an hour to write in the classroom. Considerably, students need time to come up with a plan or strategy in developing a topic (Kroll, 1990). Also, being second language learners, they need time to process language itself. According to Chin (2016), writing is effective when writers plan and revise their drafts.

For college students, it is commonly agreed that the acceptable writing competence level is between basic to proficient. While students with advanced writing competence are rare occurrences in the writing classroom, it seems that many students, especially those coming from socio-economically challenged communities, have minimal to deficient writing competencies (Dela Seña, 2003 in Araya, 2006). Thus, more often than not, the job of most college writing teachers is centered on students' re-learning writing.

Rimes (1983, in Idris and Lincoln, 2015) stressed that the teaching of writing must be focused on process as well as conveying meaning, constructing forms, and selecting vocabulary. Further, Idris and Lincoln (2015) agreed that feedback from the teacher is essential especially among second language learners. Thus, a shift happens on the role of the teacher from simply correcting errors to helping students develop their writing skills in a more proactive way.

Traditional process writing often restricted a teacher from influencing students on what topic to write and how to write it. At the end of the writing sessions, the teacher checks the writing without much intervention in the actual writing process (Stanley, 2004). However, Porter (1986) suggested that individuals use language in constructing reality and that this shaping of reality happens with the influence and/or motivation from a discourse community. Thus, this study therefore sustains the argument that the audience is a co-creator, and that writing, being a form of discourse, functions as a means to communicate certain social situations between writer or creator and audience (Hyland, 2003).

In a study by White and Arntd (1991, in Stanley, 2004) it was revealed that teachers who focus too much on structure, that is on checking language errors, do not improve grammatical accuracy or writing fluency among learners. However, Ferris (2002) claimed that error treatment is a necessary step in helping students develop their writing skills and acquisition of the target language. In relation, McMartin-Miller (2014) as cited in Idris and Lincoln (2015) added that error correction makes students conscious about their errors, and thus, engages them to actively participate in the process. However, Ferris (2002) further cautioned that teachers need to know which errors to treat and how to effectively treat them (Idris and Lincoln, 2015).

With regard error tolerance, in a study by Janopoulos (1992) it was found out that teachers are more favorable and tolerant of errors committed by non-native speakers than that committed by native speakers. This finding may imply high empathy among teachers on the struggles of second language learners.

Moreover, Idris and Lincoln (2015) pointed out that discussions on error treatment were spurred as a result of Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) and Canale and Swain's Output Hypothesis (1984). These hypotheses asserted that teachers have the responsibility to correct pervasive errors that learners commit in their writing to be able to expect improved performance and proficiency in skill. Ferris (2002) suggested that error should be categorized between local and global errors.

In relation, Acraman (2003) as cited in Araya (2006) made a study on the writing of selected students. She found out that her respondents produced more local errors. As

expected, student writers, especially non-native users of the language, cannot perfect their writing in one session alone, but the attempt to communicate or express ideas was there. Local errors are incorrect grammatical structures that are not familiar to readers, but in general do not hinder the understanding of text, otherwise, it is called global errors. Global errors often lead to failure in communication, and thus require a keen eye from a teacher for an objective diagnosis and treatment. Further, as an initial step to error correction, it is suggested that teachers assist students in communicating their ideas and expressing themselves.

On the other hand, Bartholomae (1980, in Araya, 2006), posited that students have to be able to master the conventions of language to be able to write effectively. And so, it emphasized the teacher's role as facilitators of learning, and not merely as editors of students' writing. In comparison, based on the Newfoundland and Labrador curriculum guide for learners of English as a second language (2012), which may be reflective of the Philippine context, suggested that error correction has to be done only when it hinders communication and that by doing so, learners are benefitted.

Language – being the driving force behind all forms of discourse – same as in the process of writing, negotiation of meaning (Krashen, 1985 in Ellis, 1994), that transpires between writers (the creators) and audience (the co-creators), is an essential element in the interaction, as both groups attempt to form a foothold on the meaning of that which is being shared. In a sense, the discourse mirrors the perception of both communicators, one adjusting to the other, in one dynamic community (Bizzell, 1982) as they patch communication gaps (Bower, 2011). Thus, corrective feedback, according to Bower (2011) proved to be very potent among learners as they grope in the target language.

According to Dorn (1996), even in writing tasks, the functions of verbal discourse at a socio-cultural level are indispensable. In a study, Hosseinpour and Biria (2014) pointed out the positive effects of collaborative learning. Their study was able to reveal the improved competence among learners on the areas: content, organization, grammar, and vocabulary. In another study, Lienemann and others (2006) found out that there was improved writing performance among learners when there is instruction from a teacher. Instruction, in their study, was evaluated based on multiple baseline-design. Results of their study specifically pointed to better text quality, in terms of length and completeness, as produced by their students.

Furthermore, Urquhart (2005) recommended frequent writing activities to her students in Aurora, Colorado after diagnosing that most of them lack writing competence. Likewise, Sun (2014) discovered based on studying her Chinese writing students that among other reasons, lack of opportunity for writers to revise their work, is a culprit to poor writing performance. Thus, she emphasized the activation of the schema. She pointed out that the schema, which refers to the existing body of knowledge or experience of an individual, has to be stimulated by certain activities. And by enumerating, she mentioned teacher and peer feedback as an alternative schema activation mechanism. In relation, Yalvac, among others (2007) believed that based on their study in promoting higher writing skills of their students, student and community-centered tasks enable student writers to overcome problems that stand in the way of developing targeted competencies. Thus, follow-up consultations and incidental grammar discussions between drafts are important feedback mechanisms to be initiated by the teacher. Teachers, then, become part of a student's struggle to find coherence and meaning in his or her writing (Schmuhl, 2000).

Marzban and Sarjami (2014) while not denying the importance of teacher written feedback, were able to statistically test the efficacy of collaborative negotiated feedback in improving competence among learners. Also, Heydari and Bagheri (2012) postulated that

learners would reflect more intralingual errors the more that they are exposed to the rules of the target language. As a recommendation, they suggested that teachers find strategies which they think would best help their learners explore the target language.

Methodology

The study involved 32 students who were enrolled in a writing class. Within the semester, they were asked to compose a narrative-descriptive essay about their hometown with multiple drafts. Before engaging writing their first draft, they were made to form small groups to brainstorm for a possible organization of their essay. After the brainstorming activities, a general class discussion was moderated by the teacher to consolidate their ideas into a general workable outline. Their first draft brought about a series of other drafts which were corrected and error analyzed by the teacher and criticized by their fellow classmates. Besides the written comments and corrections, class discussions and one-on-one consultations were also conducted to arrest persistent grammar errors as found in the drafts, to check vocabulary, and to guide over-all essay development.

Alongside the initiated error correction through oral and written feedbacks, the researcher also conducted error analysis across drafts. Furthermore, six respondents were called for a focused group discussion on how they perceive process writing and error correction helped in improving their writing competence. Finally, to determine their competence level after the series of drafting and rewriting, their last draft was evaluated by three experienced writing teachers using the writing competency rubric by Archibald, et al. (2013).

Findings

Grammatical Errors, as shown on Table 1, accounted a total of 255 errors, which was gradually reduced from 47.45% on the first draft to 1.96% in the final drafts. Verb errors that relate to misuse of verb, tense and subject-verb agreement tallied as the most frequently occurring error subcategory with 18.03%, followed closely by pronoun errors with 16.68% of the total errors found. Preposition and singular/plural errors accounted 13.73% and 10.98% of the total errors, respectively.

Table 1
Taxonomy of Grammatical Errors

Grammatical Errors	Frequency					Total f	%
	Draft 1	Draft 2	Draft 3	Draft 4	Drafts 5-8		
Reported Speech	-	-	3	-	-	3	1.17
Preposition	18	11	4	2	-	35	13.73
Article	12	-	2	2	-	16	6.27
Singular/Plural	16	3	2	6	1	28	10.98
Adjective	4	3	-	-	2	9	3.52
Adverb	11	3	-	1	-	15	5.88
Pronoun	21	11	6	1	1	40	16.68
Verb	35	5	4	1	1	46	18.03
Possessive Case	3	2	1	-	-	6	2.35
Conjunction	1	1	1	-	-	3	1.17
Total	121	36	23	13	5	255	100.00
%	47.45	14.11	9.01	5.09	1.96		100.00

Note: The symbol (-) suggests no error found or error was tolerable enough to be ignored.

Based on Table 2, there were a total of 97 recorded mechanics errors with spelling errors recording 29.89% and followed by wrong use of the comma with 27.83%. As observed, the semi-colon was rarely used. Meanwhile, syllabication errors dramatically appeared in the third and fourth drafts, thus supporting an evidence for the students' exhaustion in compliance to process. But, the error was easily corrected not to appear again in the latter drafts.

Table 2

Taxonomy of Mechanics Errors

Mechanics Errors	Frequency					Total	%
	Draft 1	Draft 2	Draft 3	Draft 4	Drafts 5-8		
Comma	16	5	3	-	3	27	27.83
Period	7	1	-	-	1	9	9.27
Semi-colon	1	-	-	-	-	1	1.03
Apostrophe	9	3	-	-	-	12	12.37
Capitalization	8	1	1	1	-	11	11.34
Spelling	14	8	2	2	3	29	29.89
Syllabication	-	1	3	4	-	8	8.24
Total	55	19	9	7	7	97	100.00
%	56.70	15.58	9.27	7.21	7.21		100.00

Table 3 presents that in terms of lexis, there were 29 reported errors on poor word choice which were attributed to improper vocabulary or diction problem.

Table 3

Taxonomy of Lexical Errors

Word Choice	Frequency					Total
	Draft 1	Draft 2	Draft 3	Draft 4	Drafts 5-8	
Vocabulary/Diction	26	1	1	-	1	29
%	89.65	3.44	3.44	-	3.44	100%

Meanwhile, as presented on Table 4, among the syntactic error subcategories, developmental errors obtained the highest number of recorded errors with 46.15%, whereas ambiguous sentence errors recorded 28.20%.

Table 4

Taxonomy of Syntactic Errors

Syntactic Errors	Frequency					Total	%
	Draft 1	Draft 2	Draft 3	Draft 4	Drafts 5-8		
Developmental	6	7	3	1	1	18	46.15
Word Order	3	-	-	-	-	3	7.69
Ambiguous	8	-	1	-	2	11	28.20
Verbose	5	1	-	-	-	6	15.38
Fragment	1	-	-	-	-	1	2.56
Total	23	8	4	1	3	39	100.00
%	58.97	20.51	10.25	2.56	7.69		100.00

There were 363 accounted errors out of the 176 drafts as produced by the respondents in the series of drafting and re-drafting with an average of 5.5 drafts and 11.34 number of errors per respondent. As shown on Table 5, grammatical errors had the most frequency.

Table 5
Overall Inventory of Errors

Error Inventory	Frequency					Total	%
	Draft 1	Draft 2	Draft 3	Draft 4	Drafts 5-8		
Grammatical	121	36	23	13	5	198	54.54
Mechanics	55	19	9	7	7	97	26.72
Lexical	26	1	1	-	1	29	7.98
Syntactic	23	8	4	1	3	39	10.74
Total	225	64	37	21	16	363	100.00
%	61.98	17.63	10.19	5.78	4.40		100.00

The results of the focused group discussion with six respondents revealed that the use of process writing and error correction as scaffolds in improving writing competence was favorable. However, many of the respondents complained that the activities were time consuming and exhausting, but they were appreciative of the corrective feedbacks particularly those coming from the teacher.

Furthermore, it was also determined by the three hired evaluators using the writing competency rubric by Archibald, et al. (2013) that the overall competency of the respondents was 2.911 which can be interpreted as proficient competence. Specifically, they were consistently proficient in all rubric outcomes: Central/Controlling Idea (3.05), Organization (2.93), Development (2.96), Mechanics (2.84), Style (2.97), and Audience Awareness (2.77).

Discussion

Based on the focused group discussion with six respondents, it was construed that process writing and error correction have very positive influence on the respondents' perception of improving their writing competence. Most of them claim that with the guidance of their teacher, their writing skills were enhanced or developed which could eventually make them better writers. They shared about how much they have learned despite the challenges along way. The nature of scaffolding is focused on modeling and coaching from the teacher (Sawyer, 2006). With modeling from the teacher, the respondents were expected to follow corrections and feedback on how they may improve their composition. While in coaching, they were asked to have personal consultations with the teacher wherein advice was given. Sometimes their interactions involved working collaboratively with classmates or peers. But, because of the loaded schedule of activities, the respondents shared that they often felt exhausted.

On the other hand, as revealed, there was a dramatic decrease in the number of grammatical errors across drafts from 61.11% to 2.52%. This trend was consistent across the drafting stages. Mechanics errors showed a drop from 56.70% to 7.21%, lexical errors from 89.65% to 3.44%, and syntactic errors from 79.31% to 7.69%.

Among these drops in error percentage per draft across stages, lexical errors had a minor reoccurrence, however it was not alarming enough to sustain support on the positive influence of the interventions in improving the reduction of errors across drafts.

When the respondents were asked about what they did not like about the writing activities, majority answered that they do not like it because (based on their actual

description) it was time consuming, laborious, tiring, exhausting, brain damaging, and confusing. Two respondents articulated their dislike by saying “I think it is a waste of time because it’s hard to think about some ideas in my mind. Especially when I make a composition, my mind slows down.” Another respondent commented “What I don’t like about the activity is when I want to express something but I can’t seem to extract the right ideas from my mind, and when the topic is broad and the time is limited to think about more ideas, facts or issues for my topic.”

Based on the findings presented, and as reflected on the answers from the respondents, truly scaffolding writing through process writing and error correction is a love-hate phenomenon. On one hand, any aspiring writer would love it because of its instrumentality in opening academic and professional opportunities, and at the same time hate it, because to be able to acquire proficient writing competence, it demands hard work. Likewise, as a proactive activity, it reflects a humane support mechanism for writing students, albeit laborious and exhausting.

Limitations

The study was limited to 32 Filipino college students who were enrolled in a writing class. The series of activities lasted for almost five months. Initially, the basis for determining writing proficiency, and thus, the adoption of the process approach to writing was done through a teacher-made diagnostic test at the beginning of the semester. Meanwhile, an error analysis was done at the morpho-syntactic level with emphasis on grammar, mechanics, lexis, syntax based on the guidelines by Corder (1974) as cited in Ellis (1994). The five steps in error analysis include: (1) collection of a sample of learner language, (2) identification of errors, (3) description of the errors, (4) explanation of the errors, and (5) evaluation of the errors.

Three experienced writing teachers served as raters of the respondents’ final draft to determine their writing competence a week before the end of the semester. The evaluation was based on the Writing Competency Rubric by Archibald, and others (2013) which categorized the levels of competence, accordingly: Advanced (4), Proficient (3), Basic (2), Minimal (1), and Not Evident/Deficient (0). Further, the rubric emphasized the following outcomes: the composition’s central or controlling idea, organization, development, use of conventional mechanics, appropriateness in style, and audience awareness.

Unlike conventional process writing wherein students are given the leeway to choose their topics, in this study, the researcher controlled the topic to sustain its commonality. The topic was decided after a class discussion on narrative-descriptive paragraph development. Specifically, the chosen topic was centered on the respondents’ description of their hometown.

Finally, the scaffold which is primarily in the form of verbal discourse, such as in conversations (Smagorinsky, 2007) through student-teacher consultations and interactions, has been extended to include written corrective feedbacks, and generally to it relates to the entire writing process as a series of guided activities.

Recommendation

Rather than being a one-time product activity, any writing class should integrate scaffolds such as process writing and error correction to enhance the writing competence of students. It is by making students write multiple drafts that language teachers could proactively help their students reveal meaning in writing. Likewise, teachers may focus on drilling against persistent and unique errors based on student writing outputs, instead of the general structures of the target language to which most students cannot easily relate.

Among students and aspiring writers, it is imperative that they understand that practice and experience are keys to effective writing. In the long run, even without the scaffolds, they are expected to be able to competently write by living what they have meaningfully learned.

With regard language researchers, especially those engaged in research related to composition writing using process writing and error correction as scaffolds, should look into other associative factors which may influence a learner's writing development, such as culture, motivations, and attitudes of teachers and learners.

Conclusion

As shown by the findings of this study, process writing can naturally occur with error correction, whether in the form of oral or written feedbacks, as students write multiple drafts under the supervision of a teacher and motivation from their peers. Therefore, the scaffolds, in the context of this study, were proven to be effective in improving writing competence among college students.

Particularly, through process writing and error correction, errors at the morpho-syntactic level were significantly reduced from the initial to the final drafts. Likewise, based on their final draft, a three-rater evaluation using the Archibald, et al. (2013) rubric revealed an improved learner writing competency from basic to proficient.

However, the conducted focused group discussion revealed that many of the respondents have become exhausted as the activities progressed, but despite the hardship, they expressed appreciation for its positive outcomes. It was at this level that the learning process was made more meaningful by the scaffolds.

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