Teaching Writing Through a Reading-Based Method to Improve Student's Academic Achievement

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Abstract

The aims of this article is to investigate the teaching of argumentative writing through reading texts adopting the genre approach, and examines the relationship between the use of connective expressions and the students' achievement in writing with regard to their scores. Pearson correlation coefficient test shows that there is a positive relationship between the use of connectives and the students' marks (quality of texts). The results of Cohen kappa coefficient test show negative results, namely, that there is a discrepancy between the scoring of the different (two) raters.

KEY WORDS : Connectives, genre, reading, argumentative writing, academic achievement.

Résumé

L'objectif de cette article est d'étudier l'enseignement de l'écriture argumentative basée sur la lecture de textes on adoptent l'approche de genre, et elle examine la relation entre l'utilisation d'expressions conjonctifs et le rendement des étudiants dans le module de l' écrit à l'égard de leurs scores. Pearson test de coefficient de corrélation montre qu'il existe une relation positive entre l'utilisation de connecteurs et les notes des étudiants (qualité des textes). Les résultats du test de coefficient Cohen kappa montrent des résultats négatifs, à savoir qu'il ya une différence entre la notation des différents évaluateurs (deux).

MOTS CLÉS: les connecteurs, genre, la lecture, l'écriture argumentative, la réussite universitaire

ملخـــــــص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى التحقيق في تدريس الكتابة الجدلية من خلال قراءة النصـــوص و باعتماد نهج النمـط النصي، ويدرس العلاقة بين استخـدام أدوات الوصل و نوعية الكتابة لدى الطلبـــة و التي تعكسها نتائجهـــــم. أظهرت نتائج اختبار معامل الارتباط بيرســــون أن هناك علاقة ايجابيــــة بين استخدام أدوات الوصل و علامـــــات الطلاب في الكتابة [جودة الكتابة]. و أظهرت نتائج اختبار معامل

كوهين كابا نتائج سلبية فيما يخص التوافق بين المقيمين، يعني أن هناك اختلاف كبير في إعطاء النقاط من طرف المقيمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية : حروف الوصل، النمط النصي، القراءة، الكتابة الجدلية، التحصيل الأكاديمي .

INTRODUCTION :

As a language skill, writing is very important especially in EFL contexts. Many EFL students face problems in producing acceptable and communicative stretches of discourse. The aim of this paper is to discuss the use of a method for teaching the skill of writing on a reading-based level adopting the genre approach to teaching the argumentative text-type. The reason behind that is our belief that texts differ from each other in the way they are written and in the linguistic features writers use to produce communicative texts that are acceptable and convincing to a given discourse community. The main linguistic feature that characterizes argumentative writing is the use of connective expressions such as "and," "however," "although," "but," "because," "so" and so on, to show the flow of information and the logical relationship between ideas, to show the writer's moves through her/his text, and above all in order to achieve coherence. Accordingly, we argue that the more the students use connective expressions in argumentative writing in a correct and appropriate way, the better the quality of their texts will be, reflected by the teacher's assigned marks.

1-INTEGRATING THE READING AND WRITING SKILL :

According to Kranz (2007), writing is one of the most important language skills and competencies. Grenville (2002) maintains that nobody was born with the knowledge of how to write , but rather, writing is a skill that we can all learn. The more we practice it, the more competent we become and the easier the task of writing will be. The skill of writing is closely related to the notion of literacy which, according to Stern (1983), refers to one's ability to read and write. Stern (ibid.: 171) states that, "Reading and writing are intrinsically linked, complementary processes. Writers are their own first readers, and their ability to read closely is essential to their ability to write coherently". Besides, in the act of writing, writers go through cognitive processes which promote a sensitivity to language, making, thus, analytic reading and interpretation possible for the reader (Stern, 1983; McCarthy, 1991).

Taught together, reading and writing are said to enrich the students' language and thinking capacities since they are the hallmarks of a literate person. The integration of reading to writing will help teachers to get the best of each language skill. That is why in many books about reading and/or writing, there is a call to connect reading to writing in EFL contexts and to teach them together (Dierking, 2007; Cole, 2008; Johnson, 2008; Gallagher, 2011).

Intensive reading is a type of reading that is used by many teachers in EFL contexts. Ferris and Hedgcock (2009) argue that the intensive approach to reading is the most predominant approach to ESL/EFL reading instruction. It is based upon

the assumption of reading entire texts whereby the overriding goal is to build the students' skills, mastery of linguistic features, and strategies for reading authentic text. This is clearly explained by Nation (2008:25) who states that "Intensive study of reading texts can be a means of increasing learners knowledge of language features and their control of reading strategies".

A very important goal of intensive reading is that of determining the language features of a particular text to draw the students' attention to them in the teaching course. According to Nation (ibid.), teachers adopting this method in teaching writing have the language features characterizing each text-type as the main focus of syllabus for their course.

Focus on certain grammatical features can be determined by both type of text and topic, thus, giving rise to the use of certain salient language items rather than others. Accordingly, we claim that the teaching of writing can be better improved if it is directed towards the text-type and the linguistic features which are specific to it. Nation (2008:25) makes that point clear by stating that "If intensive reading is to be done well, the major principle determining the focus of the teaching should be that the focus is on items that will occur in a wide range of texts".

As a salient linguistic feature that characterize different types of texts, connectives lie at the heart of grammatical cohesion in English (Halliday and Hassan, 1976). This particular linguistic feature has gained much importance and received great attention because of the significant role connectives have in expressing meaning relations, showing discourse organization and the writer's moves, and creating coherent text.

2-THE GENRE APPROACH TO TEACHING ARGUMENTATIVE WRITING :

The notion of genre was established by Swales (1990), and the introduction of genre pedagogy was a reaction to the widespread emphasis on the process approach to teaching writing (Caudery, 1995; Harris, McKenzie, Fitzsimmons, & Turbill, 2003). This over-emphasis on the process approach was at the expense of teaching the different types of texts and raising the EFL students' awareness to the necessary linguistic resources used to communicate effectively in different social contexts. Understanding how language is structured and what language features are used to achieve different social purposes in given contexts of language use is a central focus in the genre approach (Corbett, 2003; Knapp & Watkins, 2005; Bruce, 2008).

Genre pedagogy appears to be more promising for learners' benefits since they take into consideration language, content and the context. The same can be said for teachers because they also benefit from adopting it in their teaching; this teaching represents a good means for making it explicit to the learners how writing works in real-life contexts in order to communicate effectively (Hyland, 2007).

All in all, the genre-based teaching pedagogy shifts the teaching focus from implicit and exploratory teaching of writing to explicit teaching and 'conscious manipulation of language and choice', by providing teachers with useful knowledge of appropriate language forms and features. This, Hyland (2007) argues, requires a good knowledge of language on the part of teachers in order to be able to make appropriate linguistic choices, an appropriate organization of their topics and so

forth. Knowledge and focus on grammar, for instance, is necessary since it gives learners the ability to codify meanings in different and recognizable ways (ibid.).

3-ASSESSMENT OF WRITING :

Developing the writing skill of EFL students is considered as one of the most challenging tasks for language teachers. Students' poor proficiency in writing can affect other content areas which need this language skill such as linguistics, grammar, translation and so on, especially if demands for an adequate level in writing is increasingly required from level to level. Given the importance the writing skill has in academic success, concerns in determining sound methods of writing assessment are also said to form a challenging task for the classroom teacher (Benson & Campbell, 2009).

In the present study, the holistic method of assessment is the method adopted for scoring the students' texts; it is this method that is usually used by teachers in the English department at the university of Constantine 01. In holistic assessment, raters usually follow a set of criteria (content, coherence, organization , grammar, and so on), by which writing samples are judged and scored. Holistic assessment is based upon the assumption that compositions cannot be divided into several segments such as form, content, grammar and so forth. Accordingly, it has been adopted in the present study in scoring the students' written essays (Speck, 1998; Hibbard and Wagner, 2003).

1.RESEARCH QUESTIONS :

The research questions that guide the present study are:
-Is there a relationship between increasing reading-based tasks, adopting the genre approach to teaching Written Expression to EFL students, and the students' writing proficiency with regard to the use of connective expressions (quality of texts)?
- Does the teachers› method of assessment meet the covered area of content teaching?

2.RESEARCH HYPOTHESES :

- Teaching writing on a reading-based method and adopting the genre approach will develop EFL students› writing proficiency in terms of the use of connectives and will improve the quality of their texts.
- If EFL learners are to perform well in their Written Expression exams and improve their academic achievement, course-content, teaching method, and method of assessment have all to be aligned with the overall objectives of instruction since achievement is claimed to be a by-product of careful curriculum.

3.RESEARCH METHODOLOGY :

3.1. Subjects :

The subjects of the study are two groups of third-year-LMD (Licence/Master/Doctorat) students enrolled in the English Department, of the University of Constantine 01, during the academic year 2010-2011. Each group consists of 28 students who were tested before any teaching intervention for their proficiency in writing with regard to the use of connective expressions as textual markers speci-

fic to the argumentative type of writing. Both groups received the same teaching intervention (quasi-experiment) and then they were tested again (post-test) for connectives' use and the quality of their texts, as reflected by the assigned marks.

3.2. *Materials :*

The study discussed in the present paper is based on a corpus of students› compositions. The texts were obtained from the students› first and second semester exam in Written Expression. The corpus used for the analysis consists of 112 argumentative essays written by third-year students attending a three-year degree course in English. The participants are all Algerian students native speakers of Arabic.

3.3. *Methodological Procedures :*

To test the research hypotheses, a quasi-experimental study was carried out. As such, two different methods of teaching Written Expression were used: the standard method and the new one. The standard method differs from the new method in terms of the teaching content, the teaching focus, and the method of assessment. The new teaching method is based on reading texts adopting the genre approach in teaching writing. In the first semester, students were taught with the standard method of teaching with given focus on different aspects such as structure, writing conventions, and so on. This method of teaching involves teaching writing in a theoretically-based way, involving information delivered to students and with few exercises for demonstrating language use. Even if students were given texts to read, the focus of teaching was very broad and put mainly on the essay structure such as thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting details and so forth. This method of teaching is the one practiced in the English department at the university of Constantine 01.

The new method of teaching writing, which differs in terms of teaching focus and teaching approach, was introduced and the subject of writing was taught on the basis of reading texts, adopting the genre approach. Besides other aspects of writing such as essay structure, language features, the main focus of teaching was on the use of connective expressions as markers of discourse structure, discourse moves, and coherence. As such, the tasks, activities and method of assessment were determined by, and dependent on, the objectives of the teaching content (argumentative writing).

The method of assessment that was used in the study is holistic assessment. The reason behind choosing this particular method of assessing writing is due to the fact that this is the major method used in the English department of the university of Constantine 01. It is also because from a communicative point of view, texts are seen as conveying whole messages and for communication to be successful, focus should be placed on the text as a whole and not as component parts with each one being considered separately from the others.

3.4 - RESULTS :

-Quantifying the Association between Two Variables: Correlation Coefficient :

Test	Mean (X) conjunc-tion	Mean (Y) score	Std. Deviation (X) conjunc-tion	Std. Deviation (Y) score	Correla-tion (R)
Pre-test Gr.1	31.571	9.767	9.025	1.709	0.09
Pre-test Gr.2	37.964	10.651	10.675	1.752	0.15
Post-test Gr.1	10.178	7.793	1.810	1.810	0.31
Post-test Gr.2	30.285	10.133	11.482	1.740	0.39
Total N of Cases	28				

Table 01: Correlation between the score and connective expressions' use .

Pearson moment-product correlation coefficient test is used to measure the strength of a linear association between variable (x) and variable (y). The correlation coefficient (r) value in the first pre-test of group 1 is 0.09. This value reflects a positive relationship. Though this is a very small association between variable (x) which is the number of connective expressions and variable (y) which is the overall grade the student got in her essay, the relationship is nevertheless positive to some extent.

The results of Pearson moment-product correlation coefficient test in the second pretest (group 2) is 0.15. The (r)value here reflects also a positive associa-tion between the dependent variable (y) and the independent variable (x). The degree of association reflects also a weak, tough positive relationship, meaning thus that the association is not strong.

The correlation coefficient results in the first group posttest is 0.31, which means that the association between the two variables (the number of connective expressions and the final mark) is medium positive. The closer the (r) is to +1, the more positive the association is, and the closer the (r) is to -1, the more negative the association is. In this case, the association is considered positive. Compared to the results of group 1 pre-test, this result can be considered as being positive and there is a given degree of improvement with regard to the relationship between the use of connectives and the students' overall marks.

With the second group posttest, the value of (r) is 0.39, which means that despite being medium, the association between variable (x) and variable (y) is still positive. Compared to the second group pre-test, the results of the post-test show an improvement in the correlation between the use of connectives and the students' scores. In this case, the degree of positivity cannot be considered as significant, and hence we may conclude that the teaching intervention has brought A significant

effect on the students use of conjunctions and their overall marks.

So, the results of the correlation coefficient test show in both groups (pretest and posttest), that the relationship between the use of connective expressions and the essays marks is positive, but the strength of association between the two variables (variable x and variable y) was not strong enough in the pre-test. In the posttest, there was a remarkable improvement with regard to connective expressions' use and the students' marks. The strength of (r) ranged ranges between 0. 9 and 0.15 in the pre-test and between 0.31 and 0.39 in the posttest. In the pre-test the result of (r) reflects a small strength and in the posttest the strength of (r) is medium. All in all, the results of the post-test are considered as positive and the teaching intervention brought some improvement though this latter is not strong enough.

3.5. *Results of Cohen's Kappa Coefficient Test :*

Since reliability of test scoring lies at the heart of any kind of assessment, Cohen's kappa coefficient was used to test the degree of agreement between the two raters who scored the essays in the present study. The following table shows the results of the two groups of students in the pre-test and the posts-test, respectively.

Test	Cohen's Kappa Weighted
Pre-test group 1	0.52
Pre-test group 2	0.24
Post-test group 1	0.59
Post-test group 2	0.16

Table 02: Results of inter-rater reliability test .

The results of Cohen's kappa show that there are some discrepancies between the two raters with regard to the scores attributed to the students' essays. In holistic assessment, issues of subjectivity usually occur and the reliability of holistic methods of assessment was always questioned. In the present study, the results of Cohen's kappa are considered as medium in some cases and weak in others. To be considered as reliable, the rater's agreement should be closer to 0.80.

Besides that, despite using the holistic method of assessment that the majority of teachers in the English department use, and despite being given some guiding criteria (focus on structure, ideas, grammar, use of connectives, coherence and so on) to follow in scoring the essays, the teachers seem to be scoring texts according to their own conception of what constitutes a good text. Another important reason for this difference in scoring essays using holistic assessment might also be the fact that teachers do not have a deep understanding and knowledge of the assumptions underlying holistic assessment and its key features.

Conclusion

The present paper discusses a study which is based upon the assumption that students' writing proficiency with regard to the use of connectives in argumentative writing can be improved if writing is taught on a reading-based method and adopting a genre approach to writing, with emphasis being placed on connective expressions as textual such as 'because,' 'however,' 'but' and so on. The students involved in this study were tested before and after the teaching intervention, and the results of the pretest and the posttest were compared for possible association between the use of connective expressions as textual features in the argumentative type of writing and the students' writing proficiency reflected by the score they received for their essays.

The results of the correlation coefficient test in the pre-test and the posttest showed that there is a positive association between the use of connectives and the students' writing proficiency in both experimental groups. Improvement was noted especially in the posttest in relation to the use of connectives and the students' achievement in Written Expression (marks). Accordingly, the first hypothesis upon which the present research was based, namely, that increasing reading-based teaching of writing and adopting the genre approach will improve students' proficiency in using connective expressions and improve their academic achievement, was hence confirmed.

With regard to the second research hypothesis about whether assessment is related to the content of teaching, the results of Cohen's kappa show weak results of agreement between the raters. If this is to mean anything, it is the fact that raters did not follow the scoring criteria (content, form, grammar, coherence, use of connectives and so forth) and took into consideration other matters related to other language aspects such as grammatical features. Three major points need to receive a great deal of attention and interest on the part of researchers and teachers in the first place. The first point concerns the fact that holistic assessment is a kind of assessment that takes into consideration the text as a whole and does not place a central focus on one aspect and neglects the rest. The communicative approach to teaching reflects a tendency to prefer the holistic method of assessment because, if appropriately used, holistic assessment will yield important information about the students' ability to communicate in writing.

The second point that should receive great attention is the training of teachers. Teachers' training should not only be directed to teaching, but to assessment as well. This involves knowing what to assess and how to assess it, especially if we, as teachers, aspire to achieve better academic results and contribute to the students' success. The third point concerns the alignment between course content, method of teaching and method of assessment. Differences in scoring might also be attributed to the fact that teachers may have placed the focus of their teaching on something and in assessing they may have focused on other matters such as punctuation, capitalization, grammar and so forth. In this case, this would mean that there is a lack of alignment between what is taught and what is assessed.

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