Developing Students' EFL Writing Skills by Enhancing their Oral Interactions

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between composition exercises and oral interaction amongst Saudi university students while working in groups, with a particular focus on the methods that develop writing skills. The participants, 50 in all, were Saudi university EFL first year students belonging to three different groups according to their English proficiency. The data came from two research instruments: 1) written responses to open-ended questions regarding students' experiences and attitudes towards writing, and 2) transcripts of audiotaped interactions between students. The findings suggested that integrating writing and oral interaction enabled students to realize the way writing works, and that there are, in the first place, many different strategies available to aid in the process of composition. Students were able to look at the process of writing more comprehensively rather than focusing on particular points of grammar, spelling, or punctuation. In addition to this, by building on the structure of group work, students acquired interpersonal skills vital for learning: listening, speaking, personal organization, and providing constructive feedback. Teachers should note some problems associated with oral discussions, including the quality of discussion, the time consumed in talking, and intermittent lapses into the mother tongue. This study concludes with some implications for pedagogy and further study.

Keywords: Writing skills; oral interactions; group work

1. Introduction

Writing is a complicated skill of language which requires much effort and practice from students, plus systematic instruction (Myles, 2002). In the writing process, the writer engages in "a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and continuously developing text" (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987, p. 12). Writing is a recursive activity in which the writer goes back and forth through different stages to produce a written text (Hedge, 1988).

Teaching writing in ESL settings has increasingly become a focus of attention for researchers (Craig, 2012, Lee, 2003, Evans et al. 2015). It is seen as integral to achieving communicative competence for any learner acquiring any language. According to Myles and Mitchell (2004), communicative competence has been widely recognized as the ultimate goal of second-language learning since 1970. It is specifically more important in academic settings where students' performance is assessed through written exercises: quizzes, tests, assignments, and projects. Besides, it is essential for students who want to pursue their studies in English-speaking countries, or participate in academic conferences and publish their works. Professional writing is needed by employees writing job reports or formal letters to their supervisors. However, writing ability is most commonly learned in more formal instructional settings where teachers take students gradually from the easy to the difficult, exposing them to several integrated skills. As walking precedes running, students cannot learn how to write a paragraph without first knowing how to compose a sentence. Students should be equipped with the tools they need to become part of the written world (Standish, 2005).

The integration of different language skills underlies the communicative language teaching approach, which emphasizes meaningful interaction among learners as a way to learn the target language in a more natural way (Richards and Rodger, 2003).

Research confirms the efficacy of integrating writing with other language skills. For example, on the one hand, many researchers observed the close relationship between writing and reading, and recommend the integration of the two while teaching (Krashen, 2004, Spack, 1998). On the other hand, although writing and speech are different in many aspects, speech can facilitate writing in several ways (Elbow, 2012). Elbow suggests that the process of reading aloud can improve writing when the writer reads sentences aloud several times, until they sound good in the mouth and the ear. Although print and speech both convey information, writing notably lacks contextual clues. In oral communication, verbal and nonverbal communications combine to get the message across (Bruning and Horn, 2000). For this reason, Mercer and Dawes (2008) point out the importance of oral interaction in the classroom amongst students who work together.

In first language acquisition, Kroll (1981) discusses the interrelation of speech and writing, and asserts that the full benefit to the teaching of writing cannot be achieved unless we recognize the four phases of relationship between oral and written language. These phases are: preparation, in which children learn the basic skills of handwriting and spelling; consolidation, in which they learn how to write as they speak, expressing themselves and talking about what they already know; differentiation, grasping the differences between speech and writing and the distinctive features of each; and integration, or learning to systematically control both oral and written language, and producing better writing by focusing on the audience and the purpose of writing. Kroll (1981) asserts a strong relationship between writing proficiency and speaking proficiency in both L1 and L2. In contrast, Krashen and Terrell (1995) argue that when second-language-learners interact in meaningful tasks, they are able to comprehend language that's a step above their level, and thus progress with their language development.

Some students learning English as a second or foreign language are better speakers than writers, while others are better writers. In this study, students are presumed to be better speakers than writers of English because they come from a tradition which gives more privilege to oral skills over written skills as a cultural inheritance (Shannon, 2003, Javid and Khairi, 2011). The way they communicate in spoken English can empower them to communicate in writing. Weissberg (2006) points out that L2 writing instruction should introduce spoken and written language to students in a balanced way to encourage students to use their strengths in one area to support their weaknesses in another.

2. Literature review

2.1 Models of writing instruction in L1 and L2

There are many approaches to teaching academic writing in different contexts. Jordan (1997, 164), explains, "Sometimes these depend upon underlying philosophy, sometimes upon the starting point of the students, sometimes upon the purpose and type of writing and sometimes simply on personal preferences."

Writing instruction to students in L2 settings has historically gone through different phases. In 1980, much of the teaching practices of L2 writing pedagogy were based on L1 writing research despite a variety of profound strategic, rhetorical, and linguistic differences between the two (Silva, 1993, Hinkel, 2006). According to Marco (2005), fewer EFL studies focused on writing than on other language skills such as reading, listening, and speaking, because communicative approaches to language learning give priority to oral communication over written communication. Reid (1993) adds that as late as the 1970s, writing was not considered a separate skill like listening, speaking and reading but rather a support skill in language learning. Reid (1993) points out that the teaching of L2 writing has had three main approaches. First, in the 1970s, the "product approach" was dominant, where the focus was on building grammatically well-formed sentences by students in imitation of models provided by teachers. Second, in the 1980s, there was a shift to a new process called "process approach" where students were guided rather than controlled in the process of writing by using various writing skills such as planning, reviewing, and writing drafts. Barnett (1989) advises teachers to view writing as a process by allowing students to be more involved in editing their own work. Barnett maintains that making writing a student-centered learning approach is beneficial both to teachers and students because it can improve writing skills, increase students' motivation, and saves grading time. Flower and Hayes (1981) went a step further, claiming that students need to be involved on a higher level of thinking about the various cognitive processes that support writing. Flower and Hayes substantiate that the focus on pre-, during-, and post-writing stages describes physical processes in writing but does not really help in revealing the strategies and methods used by students to fulfill written tasks. For this reason, it is essential to integrate the process approach with the product approach to allow students to know the target of the written text after their involvement in the writing processes (Jordan, 1997).

Now in the twenty-first century, writing has come to be viewed as a communicative social act which combines both teacher-centered and student-centered approaches to teaching academic writing. In this approach, writing takes a step further to include the social act besides the linguistic and cognitive acts (Santose, 2010). Many researchers observe the value of social interaction in the L2 writing classroom as a phenomenon that can be used to improve the quality of writing among students (Weissberg, 2006).

2.2 Collaborative learning and writing

Collaborative learning is considered an effective learning method which promotes active learning, critical thinking, a high level of student satisfaction, and long-term retention of classroom materials (Johnson and Johnson, 1989, Nunan, 1999,). Dillenbourg (1999, p1) defines collaborative leaning in its broadest sense as "a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together".

Collaborative writing is one type of collaborative learning. Classroom community is essential for this approach when judging students' writings because they need to work collaboratively under the guidance of teacher to evaluate each other's work. Bruffee (1984) highlights that collaborative writing enables students to produce better texts than working alone. Harmer (2014) observes the benefit of writing as a cooperative activity for students that can motivate students and deepen their learning. When students are involved in the process of writing by working together, they can generate more ideas and come up with new solutions for writing problems. As collaborative work is seen as useful in teaching writing, the integration of writing with other language skills to improve writing ability is beneficial as well. Research on collaborative writing has shown positive findings in both L1 and L2 settings. For example, collaborative writing enables learners to receiving immediate feedback on the language and to be involved in different aspects of writing (Storch, 2005), allows students to gain shared knowledge and employ writing and social skills that foster a sense of

accountability (Lin and Marrof, 2013), and helps students gain greater control over their writing (Bush and Zuidema, 2013).

2.3 Studies on writing

Writing is especially challenging to Saudi students because they encountered many problems when completing different writing tasks in the different levels of their studies (Jahin and Idrees, 2012), (Javid and Umer, 2014). Al-Khairy (2013) laments that undergraduate English majors in Saudi universities are weak in writing skills and cannot construct a simple sentence without committing basic errors.

Although students know different writing strategies, they are often handicapped it comes to implementing them.

In the Saudi context, Faqeeh (2014) used two reading tests to examine the effects of journal writing and reading comprehension practice on improving the academic writing of EFL university students. The results revealed no significant difference between the two instructional techniques on students' writing performance. Al Asmari (2013) investigated the use of writing strategies to reduce writing apprehension, thereby improving writing achievement, among EFL major students. The study concluded that students who implemented more writing strategies were less anxious and therefore did better in writing, and those using fewer strategies were more anxious and were worse writers. Aljafen (2013) did a similar study, to identify the causes of writing anxiety among university students majoring in science. The study concluded that students' anxieties were rooted in their previous personal experiences, although they blamed it chiefly on deficiencies in their past English education, also citing a personal lack of confidence in writing and fear of teachers' negative evaluation. The role of affective factors such as attitudes and motivation and their relevance to proficiency was ascertained by Jahin and Idrees (2012), who observed that despite positive attitudes toward English as a foreign language, students had low proficiency in writing and low overall English language proficiency. They also discovered a significant correlation between students' writing proficiency and their overall English language proficiency. Mahmoud and Mahmoud (2014) examined how group work developed the writing skills of Saudi university students, leading them to score higher on post-writing tests than on pretests. Rajab (2013) is among the few studies of students' speaking and writing skills being improved by learning the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). The findings showed that phonological awareness of the written symbols enables students to pronounce and spell words well, and to write better. McMullen (2009) focused on the effects of strategy based instruction (SBI) on improving students' writing skills. Students worked as independent learners by using varied language learning strategies. The study concluded that students were able to improve the organization, coherence and mechanics of their writing through the explicit and implicit use of strategies.

In international settings, there have been many studies on the improvement of writing ability in classrooms. For instance, Standish (2005) conducted a comparative investigation on the effects of collaborative reading and direct instruction on sixth-grade students' persuasive writing skills and general attitudes toward writing tasks. Students were divided into three groups with differing levels of engagement, and the first group showed that a positive attitude led to better writing when learners were more engaged than in the other two, less engaged, groups. Landstrom and Baker (2009) considered the possible effect of peer review on students' writing, and found that students who gave peer reviews to others made more significant gains in writing ability than those who only received peer feedback. In another study, Khabiri and Marashi (2016) planned a course to teach proposal writing collaboratively to graduate students. Results indicated that collaborative work improved students' writing, increased their motivation to write and helped them to see the benefits of working collaboratively as well as competitively.

This brief survey of extant research hints at the variety of possible investigations into student writing, the causes of problems, and the many ways to increase students' writing proficiency. However, the body of research does not include a single investigation of improving writing through oral interactions. The aim of this study is to explore how oral interactions can improve students' writing skills.

4. The study

4.1 Statement of the problem

Like other aspects of teaching, writing can be problematic for students and it affects their educational outcomes. Of the four language skills reading, writing, listening, and speaking, writing is last and least: the last one to be mastered and the skill students can least practice outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, specifically at the university level, students learn rules of grammar and can produce many well-formed sentences with correct spelling. Yet, students still complain of making writing mistakes even at the sentence level. Most of these mistakes are related to the ability to generate ideas, lack of using appropriate words and lack of coherence. This can be seen clearly when comparing different types of writing tasks--descriptive, narrative, discursive--which are assessed differently by teachers. Teaching writing strategies is a great help in improving students' writing skills and their ability to handle writing difficulties (Graham and Perin, 2007). Teachers seldom dwell on writing instruction and much of their time is spent marking papers and proofreading students' written assignments. There is frequently greater emphasis on correcting mistakes than on providing students with strategies for improvement. This can lead to negative attitudes toward writing (Dvorak, 1986) and also leads to writing anxiety, because in this manner teachers come to be seen as givers of negative feedback (Barnett, 1992).

4.2 Participants

The participants of this study were fifty men from a Saudi university enrolled in an orientation year in medicine. The study divides them into three groups by English proficiency level, according to their scores on a university English placement test.

4.3 Research question

The intended study answers two questions:

1. What are students' experiences and attitudes toward English writing?
2. How can oral interaction improve their writing skills?

4.4 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected based on two research methods. The first is a written survey consisting of open-ended questions developed by the researcher, to elicit a detailed picture of students' writing in English. Open-ended queries invite fuller answers about students' writing habits and their attitudes toward writing. Certain themes are prevalent in the responses: previous writing experiences, feelings toward writing failure, and the students' writing skills and strategies. The second data collection came from transcriptions of ten lessons which were audiotaped. Analysis revealed the ways students used verbal interactions to complete the writing tasks and which writing strategies they often used. For data analysis, the open-ended written responses were categorized by the prevailing themes that emerged from the students' interactions; the three categories of themes used were cognitive, linguistic, and social acts, as used by Santos (2010).

4.5 Tasks and procedures

Students were trained to view writing as a three-stage process (before or pre-writing, during writing, and after or post-writing stages) focusing on the social communicative act when working together. The teacher assigned a topic for the students to write about, and encouraged the whole class to spark new ideas through brainstorming, and to share their experiences about the topic. After that, Students worked individually for two or three minutes on the given topic. Then students worked in groups of five to prepare outlines of a plan for writing. They assigned a group leader to run the discussion and report the answers. Students completed the first draft after class and handed it in to the teacher, who returned the first draft in the next class. For the second draft, students sat together and discussed the teacher's feedback and looked for ways to correct their mistakes. Finally, students worked on the final draft at home before submitting it to the teacher. During the group discussion, the teacher quietly walked around the groups, monitoring how the students interacted and providing any needed help and guidance.

5. Results and discussion

This study seeks to find the effect of oral interaction on improving writing skills. To find supporting details, the classroom observations were triangulated with the written questions prior to the study. The findings were also compared to relevant literature to find supporting or disconfirming evidence. The main research findings follow, in the analyses of open-ended questions and oral interaction.

5.1 Analyzing responses to open-ended questions

The following account gives an answer to the first research question: What are students' attitudes toward English writing?

Students expressed different views regarding their writing experiences before enrolling in the college. The majority claimed limited experience in English writing. Therefore, they saw writing as a very difficult skill to master, but they held simplistic or naïve beliefs about learning it. For example, all students defined writing as knowing grammatical rules or knowing how to spell words; none of their responses referred to writing as a complex process which incorporates many skills and strategies. Perhaps the respondents mentally defining writing as nothing more than the methods their teachers had used to teach writing, i.e., learning to string together grammatical sentences spelled correctly. One student responded, "my experience about English writing was mainly related to academic writing at schools. I have to write grammatical sentences and correct spelling." This indicated that students were not much interested in learning any more than necessary about writing, or using it for other purposes such as personal interests. A few students were in the habit of writing short English sentences via social media like Twitter and Facebook to communicate informally.

Their stories of previous writing experience corroborated what they said about their motivation to write in English. While they stated that writing was important for them to express themselves or get a better job, and they needed it badly for their studies, they all agreed that getting high marks was the only motivation to write in English. This was influenced by fear from some students that if they did not write well they would be unable to pass their examinations and pursue their studies as medical students. One student cited future examinations as his sole reason for learning: "my study force me to write in English and everything will be assessed based on my writing especially in the final exam." Evidently their competitive academic environment deprived students of seeing the value of writing outside of school, or seeing writing as something worthwhile per se. Students would be involved in writing only to get a reward. Without a clear academic payoff, students would not be engaged in the process of writing. Such replies suggest that students lack a truly intrinsic motivation to write.

Students were able to identify their feelings about writing difficulties, and used words such as "sad," "frustrated," "depressed," and "worried" to describe their inner turmoil. For example, one student wrote, "I feel frustrated when I keep trying to organize my ideas because I know a lot but I cannot express that in writing". Another frustrated student seemed to have given up hope: "actually I do not see the value of studying English here as a school subject; the only way to improve my English skills is by travelling abroad." This sentiment is typical among students who failed to solve writing problems. The English level of students in general might be an important factor affecting the way they feel. This can be seen in one answer "my English is not good. I need to improve my English before writing." This specific result is supported by other studies in the area especially in the Saudi context (Aljafen, 2013, Jahin and Idrees, 2012).

There was clearly a shortage of useful problem-solving strategies for writers. Students reported that when they encounter writing difficulties, "I search the net," "I ask my friends or one member of my family," "I ask the teacher but not always," or "I ask my classmates." Being corrected in front of the class carries a heavy stigma; students would much prefer to see their mistakes written on papers rather than serving as a public example. The idea that students are willing to ask others for help and the fear of being corrected in front of the whole class relates to one important characteristic of working in groups. Working collaboratively could be the key for such students who are willing to ask questions but wish to avoid embarrassment, because it gives students an opportunity to learn from each other and to work at their own pace in a relaxed mode. One possible reason students lack good strategies is overreliance on poor ones. This was most clearly stated by one student who described his greatest strength and weakness in writing: "I use Google Translator when I am stuck; I write sentences in Arabic to be translated into English." Another student followed an age-old method: "I use my dictionary to look up difficult vocabulary or check spelling."

Students' answers indicated many problems in writing compositions and a general ambivalence toward writing. Some of these problems were solved and others were not. Students were also uncertain of the best writing strategies to be employed or how to utilize other language skills to improve their writing abilities.

5.2 Analyzing students' group work oral interaction

This is an account of the second research question, "How can oral interaction improve students' writing skills?"

To answer this question, oral interactions were discussed according to instances of learning bearing in mind the cognitive, linguistic and social acts of writing (Santos, 2010).

First, oral discussions improved students' writing skills in several ways. The following excerpt is an example of how students interacted while generating ideas about a specific medical topic:

S1: What do you think? Shall we start with reasons and then treatment?

S2: Better to define it first, and then give three reasons and treatment.

S1: Can we make the topic more specific?

S2: How, hypertension with smokers. Smokers get tired quickly, look at smokers.

S1: Yes, and they have severe headache.

This excerpt clearly shows how two students helped one another to find the best way to start the topic. When S1 suggested a way that seemed good to him, S2 partially disagreed with him and recommended starting by defining the health problem first. Then S2 proposed narrowing the focus of the topic to make it more tractable, and gave an example for that. Moreover, S2 drew on his experience with the learned material, which turned the discussion to in a more active direction. When students were given enough time to examine ideas, they discovered better ways of presenting the topic by the way they organized it and by connecting their experiences with the existing literature. This confirms the assertion by Harmer (2014) and Storch (2005) that collaborative writing can provide substantial advantages to students while they move through the writing process.

The preceding example illustrates how two students tackled broad organizational aspects of writing. The next example shows students working out problems related to the specific details of grammar and word choice.

S1: Why the teacher [sic.] underlined this word?

S2: Because you cannot use "but" here.

S1: Why? The sentence is grammatical.

S2: "But" means to show something different while [sic.]. You have to use "however" to add information and tell about something unexpected.

The transcripts showed that students spent more time when negotiating meaning and less time dealing with grammatical and textual mistakes. That was not surprising because the latter areas were more mechanical: spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Besides, teachers usually do not give exhaustive feedback related to ideas on students' papers. Typical comments in the margins are "not clear" or "rewrite the sentence." This is similar to the condition described by Zamel (1985), who found that ESL teachers misread students' pieces of writing and provide vague, unhelpful comments. Collaborative review enables students to develop their writing and to broaden their perception of writing beyond mere knowledge of grammar and spelling such as they reported in the interviews. However, group work discussion is time-

consuming (Harmer, 2014). Students spent a long time discussing things and generating ideas. It is preferable that teachers ask students to prepare at home for the new topic and come to class with some starting ideas already developed.

Third, with regard to the quality of students' talk, I observed that when students came to discuss things related to their ideas, some of their discussions became unproductive. According to Mercer and Dawes (2008), exploratory talk is the best for learning outcomes where students engage critically and constructively to articulate their ideas and reflect on them. Mercer and Dawes classify talk into three types: 1) disputational talk in which short answers are given uncritically, 2) cumulative talk in which ideas built on each other's talk but in a critical way, and 3) exploratory talk in which ideas are shared critically and constructively. The first and second types are considered unproductive whereas the third is regarded as productive and helpful in critical reasoning (Mercer and Dawes, 2008).

Fourth, the transcript data showed that students tend to hold their conversations in Arabic, which was helpful for translation and definition of words, as well as being the language in which they can best express themselves and avoid misunderstanding. But thinking in Arabic and then translating to written English is problematic. The following shows a problem arising from overuse of "and" in discussing the bad effects of using electronic devices:

S1: Electronic devices are indispensable.

S2: Yes, but what about the bad effects?

S3: It can affect human health, and our memories, and lead to addiction, and cause fire……… (said in Arabic).

N.B. In Arabic it is very common to use the coordinate conjunction "and" to produce longer sentences while in English it looks like rambling. The problem of translation became evident when some students wrote this sentence in the outline sheet in one English sentence bristling with "ands."

Another benefit of group discussion in a relaxed environment was that students improved another skill beyond writing. They improved their interactional competence, described by Tikunoff (1985) as the need of students to learn particular patterns while interacting. This confirms earlier findings that students' writing anxiety might spring from insufficient strategies or the fear of negative evaluation from teachers (Al Asmari, 2013, Aljafen, 2013).

While working in groups, students provided one another with good feedback, which included more than just stating their answers. They suggested different writing strategies to deal with the written tasks. Ur (2003, p.110) defines two kinds of feedback:

> In assessment, the learner is simply informed how well or badly he or she has performed. In correction, some specific information is provided on aspects of the learner's performance: through explanation or through elicitation of these from the learner.

The second type, correction, is more effective and positive because students can learn from it.

S1: You said, "Electronic devices cause fire"; is it correct?

S2: Yes, that is right.

S1: How I could [sic.] know, can you give me an example?

S1: Because you should handle properly while charging.

S3: Or if you use bad battery also.

In this excerpt, it is clear that students had multiple opportunities for feedback. They also received justifications for evaluating their work in such a manner.

This excerpt shows two characteristics of good feedback, starting with S1 asking a very specific question. S2's feedback was constructive because S2 offered two supporting examples. Group work enabled students to develop interpersonal skills such as listening, speaking, organization, empathy, providing constructive feedback.

6. Conclusion and implications for pedagogy

The results of this study have shed some light on the impact of incorporating oral group interactions into writing instruction among Saudi university students.

The findings of the written questions before the intervention indicate that students' experiences in writing were limited and they regarded writing as a school subject, almost a necessary evil. The teaching practices of writing classes at their schools had been cumbersome, as can be seen in the way they define writing and deal with writing problems. Also, students' motivation to write was extrinsic because they engage in writing activity solely to get a good grade. Although students indicated that they implemented different strategies to write, they lacked some important strategies needed for writing. Results gained from collaborative writing revealed that working in groups allowed students not only to learn from their mistakes, but also to benefit from the mistakes of others, by avoiding such mistakes themselves. It also allowed students to evaluate their own production and progress by learning more writing strategies. By building on the structure of group work, students were able to learn interactional skills beyond their writing skills, which are important for effective language learning and lifelong learning.

Nevertheless, the integration of oral interactions with writing is not without its problems. Training students to work together and benefit from oral interactions is a long-term process that requires time and effort from both teachers and students. Finally, because of the limitations of the results, further research is needed to investigate the efficacy of oral discussions in enhancing students' writing skills in ESL/EFL contexts. Researchers might start by using larger samples with different groups at different academic levels, and integrate writing with different language skills mainly speaking.

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