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Title	How to enhance students' writing skills?
Publisher	British Council
Publication date	2023
Download date	2026-05-15 19:32:07
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14069/702

Chapter 4

How to enhance students' writing skills?

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Teaching experience

9 Years

Area of interest in teaching

Communicative Language Teaching

Introduction

Based on Thailand's national strategy 'Thailand 4.0', education and human resource development have gained increasing attention in the movement to create a sustainable future. Similarly, English language is no less important because it directly impacts on the economy, industry, science, medicine, education, information and technology, and communication of the country (Kitjaroonchai, 2012). As such, low English proficiency levels have a negative impact on employability. In particular, Thai students should leave the education system with English communication skills. Written communication is just as important; however, few students can confidently write in English. In fact, most English as a Foreign Language learners in Thailand have great difficulty in writing effectively. My study focused on student writing and was conducted in Mathayomwatsing School, a rural school containing approximately 3,200 students on the border between Bangkok and Samut Sakorn Province. This study aimed to improve the English writing skills among 45 students in Grade 12 (17–18 years old).

Method

Various tools and methods were used to conduct the exploratory action research. The first step was an exploration stage, comprising four research questions:

RQ1: What kinds of tasks do my students prefer in the writing class?

RQ2: Why do my students commit errors/mistakes in constructing sentences in written form?

RQ3: How do my students feel when they share their experiences in written form?

RQ4: How do I extend support to my students to write accurately?

Three main data collection tools were used for the exploration research questions: 1) questionnaires; 2) peer observations; iii) reflective journals (the focus group mentioned later was held after the revised lessons). Three of the research questions given above

(Nos. 1–3) were in the questionnaires. The other research question (No. 4) was used in the teacher/peer observation and the reflective journals. The questionnaire was administered to 45 students; a teacher/peer observer observed classes over a three-week period; and I made six entries into respective reflective journals to better understand the classroom teaching problem. Finally, a focus group was held at the end of the process.

The total duration of collecting data was three weeks, divided into two phases. The first phase was teacher/peer observations of three lessons (each lasting approximately 50 minutes of classroom teaching). The reflective journal was written after every class and there were six such journals (because I taught English writing twice a week). The second phase included the questionnaires, which had an open-ended format so as to get answers from the students' perspective. In total, the exploratory stage lasted almost a month.

From the questionnaires, the findings showed that the students preferred writing tasks which relate to their lives, such as telling real life experiences, story writing, and even a few formal writing tasks to enhance their writing skills. Additionally, the students had difficulty in recognising how to use vocabulary and syntax. Furthermore, they did not know how to spell new words and stated that they were not motivated to pay attention during the teaching process. According to the students, individual feedback is not a feature of classes and not all students felt able to improve their writing in the classroom. The students also had no time to practise the things I presented in the classroom. Peer observer feedback revealed that the students had not been given individual error correction at all during class. Therefore, they still did not know how to revise their written mistakes. However, the feedback from peer observation and my own reflective journal suggested that students were highly motivated to share their viewpoints and perspectives on their contributions generally. The task was to write about 'Good Deeds for Myself', 'Good Deeds for My Parents/Family', and 'Good Deeds for My Country'. In summary, after all these stages and steps, the data informed me that students need: 1.) more vocabulary support, 2.) more practice, and 3.) detailed feedback.

Introduction

The culmination of this procedure led to the need to act, based on the following question: 'What approach can I implement to improve my students' accuracy when writing in English?' This question led to the decision to employ a process-writing approach. I hoped that this approach could not only improve students' written content but also written accuracy. I implemented the approach for two periods a week for 4-5 consecutive weeks. It contained the following four steps to facilitate the students' learning of how

to construct and edit writing tasks, including sharing their written pieces individually with other students or in groups with the whole class.

1. Pre-writing stage: brainstorming and mind mapping.
2. Draft stage: focusing on content.
3. Revision and editing stage: peer checking.
4. Final draft and sharing stage: sharing and collecting progression as a portfolio.



The following describes what occurred in the class at each stage:

- Pre-writing stage: the students were encouraged to generate ideas on the topic by using strategies such as brainstorming and mind mapping. After brainstorming, looking at some pictures, or watching videos, the students were asked to share with the larger group using the technique of mind mapping. Key vocabulary was represented and displayed on the board/word wall board. In this stage, the students were triggered to learn in-use

vocabulary through brainstorming, and then to use the same words when they wrote their first draft.

- Drafting stage: the students practised vocabulary in context mainly through the use of videos and pictures. When they were stuck, they would be shown a picture and questioned about it to elicit the word. When I wanted them to write about a topic, I played some video clips containing the language focus with the support of English subtitles, so as to help the students to recognise key words and the correct use of grammar.
- Revision and editing stage: the students had more time to practise and learn the syntax. They were instructed to check content for the first time with their peers and group members. After content checking, the peers and group members identified syntax and asked the students to check and correct it. Most of the students were given feedback to be able to improve their friends' contents. They proofread each other's work, focusing on sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, and use of tense. When the students were not able to find grammatical errors/mistakes, the teacher researcher scaffolded the process for them. Before presenting and submitting their work, the students felt more confident when their writing tasks were re-checked to improve their writing.
- Final draft and sharing stage: the students' final work was put up in the class and they were encouraged to share their final drafts individually with other students or as group presentations for the whole class. The final drafts were submitted to the teacher and then added to students' portfolios.

My new approach lasted for a month with classes held twice a week during that period. The students had four topics to write about for the process-writing approach: 'About Me', 'My Good Deeds', 'My Funny Story', and a free writing topic. Students went through a process of pre-writing, drafting followed by a revision and editing, and lastly a final draft and sharing stage. To evaluate the above actions, I used two tools to analyse the results.

There were three weeks of peer observations, and 35 students of mixed ability were selected for focus group interviews.



Findings

The students could gain more vocabulary at the pre-writing stage. Furthermore, they were motivated to retrieve vocabulary by brainstorming things related to the topic and then sharing with the class. When the students were stuck, they would be shown a picture and questioned about it to help them guess the word. When I wanted them to write about the topic, I played some video clips containing the language focus with the support of English subtitles to help the students recognise key words and the correct use of grammar. From the interview responses, the students preferred watching music videos with English lyrics; such videos involved the relevant topic and inspired them to remember the content to be written during the draft stage. After brainstorming or looking at some pictures/videos, the students were asked to share with the whole group using the mind mapping technique. Key vocabulary was represented and displayed on the board/word wall board.

Doing the pre-writing stage supported the students in retrieving and remembering vocabulary or language focus in a stress-free manner. The writing activities — especially the pre-writing and drafting stage, and the revision and editing stage — prompted the students to use classroom time to practise vocabulary and sentence construction. During pre-writing, the students were triggered to learn in-use vocabulary through brainstorming and then to use the same words when they wrote their first draft. Besides this, the drafting stage encouraged the students to practise vocabulary in context through the use of videos/pictures and other media. When they were asked to write without concerning themselves with grammar, they were able to come up with good


sentences. The students initially started writing sentences with focus on content and then they focused on different aspects of grammar, such as spelling. In the revision and editing stage, the students had more time to practise and learn the syntax. They were told to check the contents for the first time by their peers and group members. After content checking, the students were asked to check and correct the syntax used by their peers and group members. Most of the students received feedback on how to improve their friends' content. They proofread each other's work, focusing on sentence structure, subject-verb agreement, and use of tense. When the students were not able to find grammar errors/mistakes, I demonstrated how to do so and extended my support through scaffolding. They felt more confident when their writing tasks were re-checked, which allowed them to have the best version of their writing before presenting and publishing.


From the steps taken, the students appeared to benefit most in terms of vocabulary acquisition, especially at the pre-writing stage. Doing this stage supported the students in retrieving and remembering vocabulary or language focus within a stress-free environment. They were motivated to retrieve vocabulary by brainstorming things related to the topic, and then sharing with other students in the class. From the interviews, students preferred watching music videos with English lyrics as a reminder during the drafting stage. The students initially started writing sentences with a focus on content and then focused on different aspects of grammar, such as spelling. When students were asked to write without worrying about grammar, they were able to form sentences more readily.



EXPLORATORY ACTION RESEARCH

How to enhance my students' writing skills





Context/Background
45 students from grade 12 (17-18 years old) from Mathayomwatsing School-rural setup

1. Exploration

Research Questions	Data Collection Tools
1. What kinds of tasks do my students prefer in the writing class?	Questionnaire
2. Why do my students make errors/mistakes in constructing sentences in written form?	Questionnaire
3. How do I extend support to my students to write accurately?	Observation and Reflective journals
4. How do my students feel when they share their experiences in written form?	Questionnaire

4. Action Research Question

What approach can I implement to improve my students' accuracy when writing in English?

6. Evaluation Tools

- Three weeks of peer observations
- 35 students of mixed ability for focus group interviews

This approach was implemented for two periods a week for 4 weeks

2. Data Collection Procedure

- 3 rounds of observations
- questionnaire for 45 students
- 6 reflective journals

5. Implementation of Action Plan

Process-writing approach contains 4 stages

1. Pre-writing stage
 - Brainstorming and mindmapping
2. Draft stage
 - focusing on content
3. Revision and editing stage
 - Peer checking
4. Final draft and sharing stage
 - Sharing and collecting progression as a portfolio

7. Final Result

1. My learners are able to write confidently by using vocabularies learned in the class.
2. Students are motivated to write more accurately during peer checking.
3. Peer support and the teacher's feedback make them feel confident to share their work.
4. All students express themselves without hesitation.

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Figure 4.1. Poster Presentation

Discussion

The classroom action plan enabled my students to write with more confidence by making use of vocabulary learned in the class. After I implemented the action plan, in the pre-writing stage, it was found that supporting vocabulary acquisition by encouraging students to brainstorm and share can provide more vocabulary knowledge, which can then be used in writing the content. Drafting was the stage in which the students made use of the vocabulary learned through brainstorming and mind mapping, and this enabled them to write with confidence. Moreover, focusing on content encouraged the students to enhance their personal expression, and getting feedback from their peers had an impact on their writing achievement. Finally, reporting their progress by collecting their written tasks as a portfolio made students more proactive in writing, giving them not only a sense of audience and purpose but also allowing them to always keep better writing in mind.

To sum up, the action helped me in how to improve my students' writing. This depended on vocabulary sufficiency, repetitive practice, and feedback. It prioritised content over grammatical accuracy through peer checking to reduce foreign language anxiety when receiving feedback from the teacher. When the focus is on English grammatical competency, students are not able to write and/or deliver effectively because they are anxious or worried about being corrected. Conversely, when students are allowed to express their own ideas,

experiences, or whatever they want, they can make English content. Furthermore, encouraging students to take the lead in sharing their ideas using topical content and receiving grammar correction by peer checking and feedback can make students feel more comfortable. Letting students have chances to find and correct their own errors first, then letting them check their friends' work and vice versa, as well as receiving teacher-led feedback, will support them in attempting to recognise and use the grammar or language focus of the lesson.

References

Kitjaroonchai, N & Kitjaroonchai, T. (2012) 'Motivation Toward English Language Learning of Thai Students Majoring in English at Asia-Pacific International University', *Human Behavior, Development and Society* (7)1, pp. 21–38