

TEACHING WRITING SKILLS IN ENGLISH: INVOLVEMENT OF STUDENTS IN THE ASSESSMENT AND CORRECTION OF THEIR OWN ERRORS

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ABSTRACT: *The paper reports on a small study in teaching of writing skills conducted in a classroom of an undergraduate course offered in a college at Mumbai, India. It was an attempt to sensitize the students to their own writing by training them in analyzing their errors themselves, followed by revision/rewriting, in order to improve their writing skills.*

KEYWORDS: Teaching Writing Skills, English-Involvement, Students, Own Errors

INTRODUCTION

No one ever fully 'masters' the skills involved in writing; there is no identifiable agreed threshold which a beginner writer has to reach in order to be recognized as a skilled practitioner. Improvement and development are realistic goals for even the most able and talented writers Colin Peacock(1986)

The non-native speaking students of the English language do need constant opportunities for improvement and development at every stage of learning how to write. It is partially true of the second language learning situation in India, that 'teaching' writing skills is an ongoing developmental process. The researcher teaches Business Communication at F.Y. level of B.Com degree course affiliated to the University of Mumbai. With most of the students in class belonging to the regional medium background and the syllabus of Business Communication being writing skills oriented (drafting of business letters, reports etc. form a major part of the syllabus), the main objective remains developing their writing skills in English. Keeping in view Colin Peacock's words mentioned above, the researcher decided to sensitize the learners to their own writing by providing training in error analysis by the students themselves, followed by revision/rewriting, in order to improve their writing skills. Since tutorials are an integral part of the syllabus, and involve smaller class size, the researcher planned to utilize the tutorial sessions for this purpose.

The students were asked to write a small passage (they were expected to write not more than two paragraphs) on “How I Spent the Last Weekend”. They were requested not to copy from each other’s drafts which is otherwise a normal phenomenon with students sitting next to each other. The role of the teacher at this time remained that of the observer instead of the one who intervenes or at least helps wherever necessary while they are writing. Peacock (1986), in his *Teaching Writing*, discusses this issue of the involvement of the teacher in such an exercise. He says that there are differences of beliefs and practices among teachers as regards helping the students while they are actually involved in the process of writing. According to him, there are teachers who believe that it is necessary to allow learners an uninterrupted space of time so that they can write in silence while the teacher is with a different task. He further adds that many of the learners seem to dislike the presence of the teacher hovering in the background or peering over their shoulders as they write. He then mentions his own experience suggesting that it is likely in such situations in mixed-ability classes that the students would seek help both from their peers and from the teacher.

In case of this experiment, however, the researcher, to her great surprise, found that responding to her request, the students wrote their drafts on their own, without seeking help either from the teacher or from their peers. The researcher accredits the sincere attempt of an open, informal and friendly communication with the students at the beginning for this motivation of the students.

The students were asked to write their roll numbers/names and submit it to the teacher at the end of the session. The expected errors in these drafts were related to:

1. Vocabulary – spellings, prefixes and suffixes in case of words and phrases like ‘wake up’ etc.
2. Grammatical constructions – tenses, appropriate use of tense for a particular kind of draft(e.g. report writing, proposal etc.), use of auxiliary verbs, use of articles, the general structure of subject + verb + object etc.

Of course, problems at more complex levels such as organization of ideas, coherence and cohesion were also likely to occur, but for the purpose of this study, the researcher decided to focus on aspects of grammaticality.

The researcher then went through all the passages after the class. The drafts were full of all kinds of errors in terms of the aspects mentioned above. However, remarkably, with an exception or two, the students had followed the request not to copy from each other’s writing very sincerely. The researcher listed down the errors in these essays, but was willing to concentrate on only one of the above aspects, i.e., grammar. Some of the errors found in the drafts were:

1. Subject-verb agreement: singular/plural; for example, an expression like ‘we was’ instead of ‘we were’ and ‘both festival is’.
2. The form of ‘to be’ was wrongly associated with the simple past tense of the verb in an active voice sentence, e.g., “I was enjoyed”, “we were ate” or “we were celebrated”, “I

was searched” instead of “I enjoyed”, “we ate” or “we celebrated” or “I searched”. This was a common error found in many of the essays.

3. Use of ‘will’ (which is an auxiliary verb for the future tense) as a prefix to the simple past tense of the verb , e.g. , ‘will celebrated’ instead of ‘celebrated’.
4. Use of modal auxiliary verb ‘could’ followed by the simple past tense of the verb, e.g. , ‘could tried’ instead of ‘could try’ or ‘would forgot’ instead of ‘would forget’.
5. Auxiliary verb ‘didn’t’ followed by the simple past tense of the verb, e.g. , ‘didn’t celebrated’.
6. Use of form of ‘to be’ as a prefix to simple present tense of the verb, e.g. , ‘was goes’ instead of ‘went’ or ‘goes’.
7. Two verbs in a sentence in two different tenses, e.g., “I woke up early in the morning and goes to college” instead of “I woke up early in the morning and went to college”.
8. Wrong use of punctuation marks or no use of it, e.g., “Afterwards I went home and I was started my homework given by the college teachers. and afternoon I goes for the tuition” instead of “Afterwards I went home and started my homework given by the college teachers. In the afternoon, I went for the tuition.”
9. Wrong use of articles like ‘a independence day’ or use of article ‘a’ before ‘every month’.
10. Use of present or future tense while reporting on their activity in the past instead of using past tense.

The drafts were returned to the students in the next tutorial session without any corrections or remarks on it. Knoblauch and Brannon(1981)(as cited Ilona Leki, 1991) have cited studies contrasting responses of praise with responses of criticism, contrasting the effect of oral responses with that of written responses, contrasting end commentary with side comments, contrasting copious response with brief response, contrasting outright correction of errors with naming errors and with offering rules and contrasting suggestions for change with implicit suggestions for change wherein the researchers were forced to conclude that none of these different ways of responding to student writing produced significant improvements in students’ subsequent writing. Ilona Leki, in the same paper, cites Hillocks’ conclusion of many of his reviews of research findings. Hillocks (1984) has mentioned that the results of all those studies strongly suggested that teacher comment has little impact on student writing and that teaching by written comment on composition is generally ineffective.

Leki (1990) has also referred to a survey of native speaker students by Burkland and Grimm (1986) wherein they have reported that a grade on a paper has a negative impact on these students as “they read the grade and simply discard the paper, often in disgust at the injustice of receiving a low mark for an essay they had worked on.”Leki says that many researchers have even concluded that native English speaking students often simply do not understand the meaning of comments on their papers.(King 1979; Hahn 1982 as cited by Leki) She further refers to a report by Sperling and Freedman (1987) on their ‘good girl’ writer wherein they conclude that though she made alterations in response to teacher annotations correctly, she had no idea what the principle behind the teacher’s directive might have been and therefore was unable to correct the same type of error in another part of her paper.

The researcher, basing her strategy on insights from this body of literature in the field, discussed with them how it is very common with the students like them who belong to the regional medium background and for whom, English is a second language, to commit grammatical errors while writing and speaking in English language. She even talked to them about the rationale behind this common problem with the students in countries like India who are the non-native speakers of English language. She discussed how a lack of exposure to the language in their day-to-day life outside the classroom proves to be a barrier to their acquisition of the communication skills in English and how it was important to have some kind of encouragement to read and write at home and an exposure to detailed conversations with people in the family and neighborhood or peers.

The objective behind this discussion was to reduce the fear, sense of inferiority and guilt for not being well-versed in the language and to boost the students' confidence in using the language without any inhibitions. Colin Peacock (1986) mentions that establishing a relaxed and informal classroom climate enables the students to talk to their peers and to the teacher with reasonable freedom and even makes them enjoy their work. The teacher was also willing to get them involved in the process of identifying their own errors than making it a teacher-controlled classroom activity so as to motivate them on the path of acquisition of the system of language, wherein, according to Krashen (1988), unconscious, natural processes underlying our ability to communicate are very active as opposed to learning which is a conscious process involving the teacher as an authority.

This discussion was followed by a detailed discussion of what kinds of grammatical errors are commonly observed in the written/spoken expressions of Indians in English, especially of those who are learners of English as a second language. The students were asked to go through their own drafts during this discussion and check if there were any errors of similar types mentioned by the teacher. Afterwards they were asked to rewrite the drafts correcting the mistakes/errors, if any, as discussed by the teacher and submit to her both the drafts stapled together. Instead of marking and correcting their mistakes which could have resulted in lowering their self esteem, the teacher intended to enable and motivate them to identify their own mistakes and correct the same.

It's obviously tempting here to refer to what Colin Peacock(1986) has said as he discusses the role of the teacher providing a model of editing and revising a draft and 'seeking to share his/her expertise with the inexperienced writer'. He says that in taking on an editorial role of this kind, the teacher provides a short-cut in a journey pupils need to make for themselves. "Although the teacher may well seek to demonstrate how a pupil's draft can be improved, the actual process of improvement needs to be carried out, in part at least, by the original writer so that the meanings to be communicated in the written text, its vocabulary and language structures, remain under his/her control."

The findings were very close to what the teacher had expected. The students had encircled their own mistakes in the first draft and had corrected it in the second one. This could be found in many of their drafts with an exception or two. Some of the students had even corrected the spelling errors even without having been referred to by the teacher in the

discussion. Some of them, however, didn't even identify or correct the errors discussed. Then the teacher talked to the students informally to know their response to such a methodology and how they found the session. Most of them found it helpful and motivating as they were involved in the process of identification of their own errors. Everyone was happy for having encircled his/her own errors themselves without any interruption of the teacher. It was undoubtedly a very positive result as the teacher could conclude that her strategy had worked. However, there still remain some questions unanswered.

First of all, the time span of the tutorial session is so short that a teacher cannot work on all kinds of mistakes mentioned at the beginning of this paper, e.g., vocabulary related mistakes. As a result, even after spending two sessions, the drafts of these students will remain full of errors with some exceptions. To what extent and how long should a teacher teaching at the level of the first year of degree college, then, spend his/her time (sparing from whatever workload is allotted to teach the prescribed syllabus) in improving the grammatical and other basic aspects of the language which the students are expected to have been well acquainted with, as this has already been a part of their process of education over the last twelve years before this. A question that keeps haunting the teacher is where to begin, in order to improve their linguistic competence. Moreover, while describing and discussing the grammatical errors found in the writings of non-native speakers, the researcher was in a dilemma about whether to introduce the grammatical/technical terminology or to talk to them about the direct instances of their mistakes so as not to make it too difficult for them to understand.

One more aspect of this method of teaching writing skills that concerns the researcher is whether this kind of success of the students in identifying and correcting their own mistakes would enable them to apply the rules of grammar in their daily life situations outside the classroom where they normally tend to commit such mistakes. According to Colin Peacock (1986), the pupils seem to be fairly willing and able to produce correct answers to single, isolated problems, especially when they are given the support of the teacher, textbook or worksheet but it is very difficult to persuade a child to apply what is learnt in isolation to the act of independent, continuous extended writing. This small scale study has been an attempt to facilitate self-monitoring, so that the students could apply this to language use outside the classroom.

Though merely representing the tip of the iceberg,, however, the study for the researcher at least, was extremely motivating, encouraging as the informal, sincere appeal made to the students received a positive response and could produce results which were very close to what was theorized and expected. It is hoped that this exploratory study would provide a basis for more detailed analysis of the use of self monitoring and revision as a strategy for teaching writing skills in the classroom.

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