



Nurturing Writing Proficiency through Theme-based Instruction

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Abstract

This paper explores the effectiveness of theme-based instructional (TBI) method as a means of honing the writing skills and the motivation for writing of 36 pre-degree ESL learners in a Malaysian tertiary institution. The method which focused on development of language skills through discussion of themes provided the teacher a direct and effective way in guiding the learning processes the learners underwent in terms of how information was shared and kept and how the outcomes were ensued in pursuing writing. What surfaced as the semester progressed was that most learners had developed enthusiasm due to the empowerment entrusted to them and were more competent in writing due to the amount of research, reading, reviewing and conferencing they had done. Thus, this article discusses the concept of theme-based instruction and presents some remarks gathered from six selected students.

Keywords: Nurturing, Writing proficiency, Theme-based instruction

1. Introduction

After teaching English as Second Language (ESL) for almost thirteen years, it is disheartening to see many of the learners detached from the teaching and learning process, not knowing what they are learning and what they have learnt. Since the affection for learning is diminishing, ESL educators need to take a closer look at an alternative instructional method. It is because success in language learning will be achieved only if learners are required to use the target language in a meaningful way and are empowered some form of autonomy (Little, 2005).

Effectiveness is assured when language learning and content of subject matter are brought together within the Content-based Instruction (CBI). CBI which refers to the concurrent teaching of academic subject matter and second language skills (Brinton, 1989) emphasises the learning of content while simultaneously developing language skills. According to Davies (2003), CBI focuses on how information and meaning from meaningful content are utilised in texts, on the integration of skills of the target language and on their involvement in all activities. Grammar is a component of all language skills and language is used for a purpose which is to communicate meaning.

The term ‘content’ comes in a variety of definitions. Crandall & Tucker (1990) define it as ‘academic subject matter’. Meanwhile, Chaput (1993) and Genesee (1994) are more lenient in their definition by suggesting that content ‘...need not be academic; it can include any topic, theme or non-language issue of interest or importance to the learners that contributes to the students’ understanding of language in general, and the target language in particular’. Such content when exposed to learners can provide a motivational and cognitive basis for language learning as learners find it interesting and valuable to them (Brewster, 1999) and people learn a second language best when the information they acquire is perceived as interesting, useful and leading to a desired goal (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Due to its thematically organized materials which are easier to learn and remember, its coherent and meaningful information, its relationship with learner motivation and interest and its ability to develop learners expertise in a topic through a sequence of complex tasks (Rivers, 1992), CBI is deemed significant.

Of the three models of CBI, the model proposed for the study is theme-based. Stoller & Grabe (1997) suggest that theme-based language instruction lies close to the language-driven end of the continuum. Thus, teachers extract language activities which follow the content material. As an illustration, learners in CBI are supposed to ‘read, take notes, listen, write a summary or respond orally to things they have read or written’. Since the essence of is exploiting the content and using it to the maximum for the teaching of skill areas, learners will become more familiar with the topic and the meaning of the topic. It is through this method that Brinton, Snow & Wesche (1989) believe learners

will develop the mastery of vocabulary, grammar, paragraph structure, communication skills and types and styles of writing (Shang, 2006) and also writing skills (Kavaliauskienė, 2004). Shih (1986) shows that CBI can be effectively used to teach writing as learners are supposed to write something related to the topic they have read or heard in class and the writing should focus on ‘synthesising and interpreting’ the input.

One of recommended strategies for the implementation of TBI is cooperative learning which allows learners to learn from other capable learners, and this supports Vygotsky’s notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Wu, 2007). Since the better students know the language, the more easily they can learn content through it and assist others with the content and language. Findings from 25 studies show that cooperative learning is more effective than traditional ones (Slavin, 1980). Aspects such as structure, individual accountability and group rewards increase lower level learning outcomes, and that higher level learning outcomes improve by the components of autonomy and group decision-making. Despite Randall’s (1999) debate on the ineffectiveness of cooperative learning, Troncale (2002) experience that when learners are given responsibility; they enthusiastically take on the opportunity teach and learn from each other. Finding by Wu (2007) proves that when less capable learners collaborate with more capable learners in group learning activities, the learning outcomes can be greatly enhanced.

As a matter of fact, TBI provides teachers and students with a rich source of information to refer to when doing writing tasks. When the teacher and learners are involved in continual discussion, analysis and evaluation in the processes and progress as writers (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005); the materials and the pieces of essay they write can be reviewed and revised. Such reflection is a key concept in learner-directed learning (Park, 2005) that will help develop their proficiency and skills, particularly writing.

Since the effectiveness of TBI method on the development of writing skills has not been widely explored in Malaysia, it was put to practice with the purpose of determining whether:

- 1) it would improve Malaysian tertiary learners’ writing proficiency in the language and
- 2) it would make learners more motivated to write in the target language.

2. Methodology

The action study was carried out throughout fourteen weeks, which made up a semester. During the instructional period in the experimental group, TBI was used. The study aimed at gathering insights on how TBI enhanced learners’ writing skills and also their motivation in writing. Thirty-six students who participated in the experiment were all in the third semester of their three-year pre-degree studies and they had been studying English for almost 12 years. Data was gathered from a specific six respondents of three different proficiency levels; weak, average and excellent and the teacher’s feedback. The characterization was made by adopting a Malaysian University English Test (MUET)-like trial speaking test.

2.1 Building coherence in TBI

TBI is normally implemented by adopting the Six-Ts Approach as put forward by Stoller & Grabe (1997).

2.1.1 Themes

Themes are the major ideas around which the units are organized and are determined by taking learners’ interests, needs and likes, relevance and institutional appropriateness into account. Giving them choices during the learning process is strongly advocated by theme-based instruction. Therefore, to ascertain learners’ interest, the group was given a list of ten themes which were thought to be important for them. The students were also asked to write any missing topic(s) they like. Then they were asked to rank each of the topics from 1 to 10 or any other numbers based on the total number of topics that they had according to their order of preference. The results revealed that the theme that they wanted to learn most is ‘social ills’, followed by ‘health’ and ‘environmental issues’. Since one of the objectives of theme-based CBI is to tap students’ existing schemata, the students’ schemata on the theme was checked. After letting them know that the first theme was ‘health’, we first checked whether they had any idea about health in general and then tried to build up the necessary information through the discussion on possible sub-themes.

2.1.2 Topics

Subunits of themes are topics. A theme may subsume several topics. Topics are organised by building one topic on the other. These were generated through discussion two weeks before each theme was supposed to be discussed. Examples of sub-themes of ‘health’ are dimensions of health, tips on maintaining good health, preventive measures of bad health etc. and each of the groups was in charge of one.

2.1.3 Texts

Language in classroom is presented in meaningful texts. Stoller & Grabe (1997) claim that students’ interest, relevance, and instructional appropriateness, length, coherence, connection to other materials, accessibility, availability, and cost are important. To make learning meaningful, learners were empowered some form of autonomy by getting them

gather authentic materials from various sources such as the Internet, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets and a few others at their efforts, aside from the materials distributed by the teacher throughout the TBI during the semester. Each learner was required to keep a file to house all the materials together with the course syllabus and past semesters' examination papers. This was done with the purpose of ensuring that each student would have all the materials /texts intact for present and future references, especially for process writing and prepare them for continuous and also final assessment.

2.1.4 Tasks

Students can develop valuable study skills, such as note-taking, summarizing, and extracting key information from texts through tasks. They may also develop skills in synthesizing, problem solving, and critical thinking.

As for the study, learners experienced the processes of conferring, assigning duties, decision making, problem solving, gathering materials, reading materials, synthesising information, preparing materials and visual aids for presentations and doing cooperative process writing. They were also provided practice in listening and/or speaking, writing and reading and language by the teacher. They were given one week to do preparation for the first task – oral presentation; which came in the form of academic presentation, forum, drama and so on and the discussion of each theme through various activities took up three weeks. Audience was encouraged to do note-taking during the presentation as the points included in handouts may be too brief for them to understand the meaning of the topic. Question and answer session was also held after each presentation. Any pluses and minuses of the presentation, language and content were tabled after each presentation.

2.1.4.1 Cooperative learning

TBI was implemented by having learners to work together as a group. Grouping was determined based on a trial speaking test, and the scores were used to form heterogeneous (mixed-ability) groups. Once the first theme with its sub-themes was assigned, learners started conferring and searching for materials at their own time continually. After presenting their respective themes, learners wrote essays in the cooperative group.

Such experimentation was to promote learner-centred and self-directed learning. We wanted the students to take greater responsibility and to have ownership of their learning and of their abilities to communicate ideas in English. In other words, we wanted to empower our students as real learners of English.

The criterion that made the TBI different from other approaches is the emphasis given to cooperative learning. In our study, the students were encouraged to work and present their materials in pairs and most of the time in groups. This was done through role-plays, discussions and sometimes through materials, one pencil or one worksheet per group and through roles assigned to them in their group work. Students were asked to share their products and views with their classmates. By this way, the students were provided the chance to learn from their classmates and to develop their social skills.

2.1.4.2 Cooperative process writing

Writing in a cooperative manner was implemented because of the two distinct but complementary roles of writing. First, it is a skill that draws on the use of strategies (such as planning, evaluating, and revising text) to accomplish a variety of goals, such as writing a report or expressing an opinion with the support of evidence. Second, writing is a means of extending and deepening students' knowledge; it acts as a tool for learning subject matter (Keys, 2000; Shanahan, 2004; Sperling & Freedman, 2001). Because these roles are closely linked, it is recommended that language teachers use content-area texts to teach reading and writing as this coincides with the principle of theme-based instruction.

Cooperative writing requires learners to work together to produce quality writing. Writing quality is defined here in terms of coherently organized essays containing well-developed and pertinent ideas, supporting examples, and appropriate detail (Needels & Knapp, 1994). It involved peers writing as a team in planning, drafting, revising and editing their compositions. A higher achieving student was assigned to be the Helper (tutor) and a lower achieving student was assigned to be the Writer (tutee). They were instructed to work as partners on a writing task. The Helper student assisted the Writer student with meaning, organization, spelling, punctuation, generating ideas, creating a draft, rereading essays, editing essays and evaluating the final product. They would transfer the information they had obtained from earlier discussion into the essays. Thus, it made the essays more comprehensive, as they contained more facts and were worth reading.

Throughout the intervention, the teacher's role was mainly monitoring, prompting and praising the students and addressing their concerns (Yarrow & Topping, 2001).

The grammar details were not left out though it was not the main concern. For the first writing assignment, the teacher discussed the nine essays submitted by highlighting the problems and errors committed. For the following assignments, students were required to do peer review. Grammatical error identification was done by referring to the list of errors given by the teacher. They would read through another group's essay and checked for the cohesion and

coherence of the essay and also the errors the group had committed. The teacher would then be the second reviewer. The marking process that required them to identify the cohesiveness of an essay and the language errors had empowered them some form of autonomy also allowed them to improve their writing skill in a very practical way.

They were also told to keep all the drafts that they had worked on. This was to provide evidence of the process they had gone through and as a license to enable them to move on to the next draft

The principles adopted by the teacher when giving feedback on learners' assignments were:

- Not correcting more than a paragraph or two
- Giving rules or strategies for language errors (by referring to the 'list of common errors in writing essays')
- Distinguishing language issues from comments on the substantive issues about the assignment
- Giving feedback anonymously to the whole group highlighting common problems, rather than to each individual

2.1.5 Transitions

Curricular coherence is provided by transitions. Topics and tasks are linked smoothly by transitions. Since TBI is about integration of skills, a theme which took two to three weeks to finish encompassed activities which were grounded on listening, reading, oral and writing besides grammar, vocabulary and language (Klenowski et al., 2006). Tasks began with reading and writing, followed by speaking and listening before they finally proceeded to process writing.

2.1.6 Threads

Another curricular coherence is provided by threads. They are defined by natural linkages across themes. They help students to recycle content, use learning strategies, and to synthesize. Language skills, such as reading and writing as well as vocabulary and grammar were given in an integrated way. Once sub-themes were generated and each group had chosen one to work on, all groups started conferring. The outcome of meetings and conference sessions were handouts; the outcome of synthesising details to be distributed on the day of presentation and visual aids to assist them in the presentation. Next was the listening practice on the same theme before they were finally asked to write an essay in the form of report, article or speech. Since theme-based instruction advocates the whole language learning, the language skills were given in an integrated way at anytime necessary throughout the two to three weeks of the discussion of one theme.

2.2 Analysis

A qualitative inquiry method within a case study was adopted with the purpose of obtaining a detailed description from the respondents' perspectives. Patton (2002) asserts that qualitative inquiry method advocates 'voice, perspective and reflexivity'. Such a method conveys authenticity and worthiness.

This was done by requiring the six selected respondents representing three different proficiency levels to write logs on their progress throughout the 14 weeks of study. Oral feedback from the teacher was also gathered to illuminate the learners' perceptions regarding the change in their writing proficiency and their motivation when writing in the target language.

3. Results and discussion

The findings below were the gist gathered from the learners' logs in which they wrote comments on the TBI processes and progress.

3.1 Respondents' feedback

Candidates A, C, D and F: Absolutely Fantastic

Candidate A, who enjoyed the method claimed: Fabulous! I was allowed to include new knowledge in my writing. The best course in English so far!!

She described the whole working process to be smooth and absorbing. She had several ideas and was very keen to start working immediately. She went to the library to gather information about possible topics and then started processing the information. She credited the learner centred freedom and responsibility empowered by the cooperative TBI approach the reasons for her effort and enthusiasm. The following extract were her comments

- *First, I started to gather my group members. We were all excited to get started. We brainstormed a few sub-topics and each one of us was assigned a sub-topic to research. We met again from time to time to discuss the progress in work. We helped one another a lot.*
- *It was exciting to see a lot of us enthralled with the theme 'social ills'. We shared lots of examples and this theme is close to our hearts. We incorporated those ideas in our essays and even suggested to others to include them.*
- *It helped me to hone my writing skills.*

- *We couldn't wait for the next theme.*

They felt great being assigned the task of an examiner and given the room to express their thoughts of the essays and apply the knowledge they gathered from the presentations in evaluating the cohesiveness of the essays. Identifying the language errors made them see the context in which the language is used, to illustrate, the use of certain tenses, subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, verb form and various word forms.

Below are several remarks passed by students (Candidates C, D and F) regarding their proficiency in writing.

- *I could make my thought clear through writing.*
- *I become open-minded towards my mistakes and I can identify my weakness.*
- *I managed to correct my mistakes in grammar, sentence construction and usage of punctuation.*
- *I had never known about the use of perfect tenses before. I may have learnt but had no idea when to use them.*
- *I became wiser now than a semester ago.*
- *I realized there were many ways and chances to improve my English.*
- *Now I know what is subject-verb agreement.*
- *I had the opportunity to think about things deeply and express my thoughts in English. It was good.*
- *The planning stage help me overcome mental block.*
- *I don't rush into writing anymore. I planned what to write first.*
- *I enjoyed writing with group members. Never did this before.*

Candidate E: Agony

Among the six students there was one student (Candidate E) who clearly disliked the cooperative TBI approach but worked hard and responsibly. The cooperative process seemed to cause her considerable stress and anxiety throughout the whole course.

Throughout the working process the student felt that this kind of a working method was not for her. She was afraid that she would not be able to assume the responsibility and that her English was not good enough for independent work. Nevertheless, she started working immediately and worked rather systematically every week. Consequently, she completed all her work.

On the whole, the student was very discontented with her work.

- *I have studied in English 12 years. Still I do not know the language. My works are very terrible.*
- *Every time the teacher corrected my work, I felt stressed and disliked being the attention of the class.*

All in all, the TBI approach did not seem to suit this student. She drudged alone, felt very stressed and worried about the responsibility and the quality of her work, and declined others' help. Moreover, the approach discouraged her enthusiasm to learn and use English:

- *This course makes me feel that I don't know any English, and I most probably will never even learn.*
- *I feel like I am getting worse.*
- *It's a waste of time. We have other work to do.*

Candidate B: TBI is Rubbish

Finally, there was a male student who did not like the TBI method, thus did not work very actively or responsibly.

- *Well, at the beginning there was chaos. We don't know what to do. It just didn't interest us.*
- *I was not a very hardworking person. I don't like being asked to write again and again.*
- *I spend so much time correcting an essay. I make the same problem again next time.*
- *Personally, it's not for me, I'm not a hardworking person.*
- *I don't really know whether I learn anything new. Perhaps my writing may have improved a bit.*
- *A complete waste of time. Students are forced to produce pieces of work when we have a lot of work to do.*
- *It seems that the teacher is not doing her stuff. I still don't know how to use tenses correctly.*

All in all, he preferred teacher directed teaching because the TBI approach simply was not to his liking:

- *This demands much too much work and still doesn't teach what I think we should learn. I prefer the traditional teacher directed teaching because I consider learning the language important.*

- *It is not by doing cooperative writing. There's so much work to do.*

3.2 Teacher's feedback

The teacher's feedback confirmed the feedback obtained from the participants. Enhancement in writing skills was noted in all six respondents, especially in terms of coherence and cohesiveness of texts. Even though the rate of improvement varied among learners, all of them managed to identify irrelevant ideas and rearrange misplaced ideas and use appropriate connectors to link the ideas. They were able to do this as they had understood the meaning of the themes and their subsequent topics through the thorough discussion done. They also realized having only one idea in a paragraph would make the writing easier to comprehend. Otherwise, the main ideas were to be separated in different body paragraphs. The ideas were then clearly and logically presented. They were reminded to use the new words that they had discovered during reading.

In general, the students considered giving and getting feedback very difficult, yet also helpful. The teacher also tried to monitor and comment on the students' work while it was in progress and provided immediate support to those who needed it. In terms of errors, they did not know exactly what to focus on during the first evaluation session; but the 'list of common errors' did guide them in identifying those errors. The errors included spelling, punctuation, tenses, subject-verb agreement etc.

Most of them claimed that when the evaluation was done as a whole-class process, they felt inhibited and rather defensive as they were not used to it. They were not used to having a review done publicly. But when the others' work was brought to attention and flaws were highlighted the same way, they felt much better. They took it constructively as they knew it would later develop their proficiency as a writer. Indeed, they had fewer difficulties in evaluating their own essay when writing on the subsequent topics.

However, Candidate B expressed his discomfort in hearing comments from peers on his essay. He believed that they were more or less of the same proficiency level, thus they might do more damage to the essay instead of repairing it.

4. Conclusion

Overall, the implementation of theme-based instructional method and cooperative process writing did to some extent improve the learners' motivation and proficiency in the language, mainly their writing skills as they learnt about writing, underwent learning processes of writing, assessed each other's writing, corrected the errors committed and were informed of their performance, and, in so doing, were encouraged to do their best. They were made to undergo a variety of phases such as brainstorming, outlining, planning, revising, and correcting together. This is important in the development of ESL students' confidence and attitudes towards their growth in learning English as a second language. This works in tandem with Little's approach that target language use is driven by learner involvement, learner reflection and self-assessment (2005).

This study highly recommends that secondary ESL teachers and ESL practitioners start inculcating the proposed theme-based instruction for the development of cooperative process writing. In most cases, process writing is not done as a result of integrated-skills learning, resulting in learners being lack of facts and vocabulary to be incorporated in the text. Doing it the theme-based way will generate learners' interest to find information and present it to others as they know the information will benefit them as activities/tasks throughout the few weeks revolve on the same theme. The best thing about theme-based instructional method is materials can be adapted and used in a variety of ways to meet the needs of learners. The sharing of materials helps learners overcome mental block in writing and help them write in a more organised manner. Thus, this may generate learners' willingness to get active and to be enthusiastic in the learning of ESL at large.

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