Research in Writing Instruction and Assessment:

Current and needed research to improve student writing

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Abstract

Discussions among educators at almost any level will invariably result in one point of agreement: students at all levels are under-prepared in writing skills. Unfortunately, this is a conclusion that also predominates much of the research literature on the improvement of student writing as well. Despite the importance attached to high-stakes academic writing skills, research has contributed little insight about the challenges students face with academic writing tasks. Llosa, Beck, and Zhao (2011) point out that the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges found that this lack of understanding of the writing process was so significant that they identified writing as, the "Neglected 'R' (National Commission on Writing, 2003; Llosa, Beck and Zhao, 2011). In the following paper, authors Caldwell and Outcault Hill present a broad review of the areas of research into the writing process and assessment of writing and suggest areas where further research is needed. Their discussion focuses on 1) Research related to the influence of Cognitive function on the writing process, 2) Research into teaching various genres such as exposition, argument, narrative, analysis, and creative writing, 3) Research on the assessment of writing, and finally, 4) Research on alternative teaching methods.

Introduction

Educators widely accept the notion that there is inherent value in providing detailed corrective feedback to learners to improve their composition skills. As a result, they invest an inordinate amount of time error-checking student compositions and writing sometimes extensive comments to help students improve their writing. In fact, many instructors have based a large portion of their teaching/learning model on an elaborate system of detailed, sometimes immediate and personalized feedback to students that they believe will facilitate the improvement of writing (Becker, 2014). In addition, many schools and universities provide extensive online and faculty resources to students such as spell checkers, grammar checks, online tutorials, and even faculty tutoring to assist students in improving writing skills. Many students, unfortunately, fail to take full advantage of these resources, particularly instructor feedback, simply because they do not have command of the skills to effectively review and evaluate corrected assignments and study the instructor's heavily time-invested feedback (Persky, Daane, & Jin, 2003).

Another issue prevalent in the discussion of writing improvement is the validity of the undue emphasis on a grammar and mechanics correction approach in feedback. Researchers such as Truscott (1996) have been heavily critical that the reliance on the correction of grammar and mechanics as a sole means of feedback to improve writing is both ineffective and even harmful; and should therefore be abandoned for other more meaningful methods.

In response to this type of criticism, an extensive research base currently exists that has looked at every aspect of feedback to students, e.g. direct, explicit written feedback; peer feedback, and even no feedback at all. What many of these research studies find, however, is that feedback of any type will not be effective if it is not used effectively by learners to improve their construction of language, stimulate the formation of ideas, improve analysis and evaluation skills, and provide opportunities for the expansion of ideas (Outcault Hill, 2014).

Contributing to this research base, researchers such as Ferris (2004) have investigated the effects of various types of feedback models: 1) direct, explicit written feedback; 2) student–researcher 5-minute individual conferences; 3) direct, explicit written feedback only; or 4) no corrective feedback at all. Ferris (1999) also experimented with 53 adult migrant students on

three types of errors (prepositions, the past simple tense, and the definite article) which resulted in improved accuracy in new pieces of writing over a 12-week period. The study found significant positive effects for the combination of written and conference feedback on accuracy levels in the use of the past simple tense and the definite article in new pieces of writing, but no overall effect on accuracy improvement for feedback types when the three error categories were considered as a single group.

A growing body of empirical research studies are now investigating the agenda proposed by Ferris (1999). Significant variations in accuracy across four pieces of writing support earlier Second Language Acquisition (SLA) discoveries that second language learners, in the process of acquiring new linguistic forms, may perform them with accuracy on one occasion but fail to do so on other similar occasions.

One significant research question addressed in this paper, therefore, is which methods of instruction and types of assessments have researchers discovered, or are proposing for further research, to be most effective in improving writing instruction and evaluation? A preliminary review of this research indicates that there are many dimensions to this broad question that involve complex processes. For example, when researchers search for the answer to the question, "Which methods seem to improve writing?", they are faced with the equally complex issue of what types of writing are educators seeking to improve: expository writing, argumentative writing, narrative, factual, analytical, or creative writing? To date, most research seems to focus on generic approaches without recognizing that varied genres have their own unique characteristics which might need to be addressed in the instructional process and have research done on them in isolated cases (Outcault Hill, 2014).

For the purposes of this article, research studies related to improving writing instruction and assessment are organized into five general areas: 1) Research related to the influence of process on the writing process, 2) Research specific to how to teach various writing genres such as exposition, argument, narrative, analytical, and creative writing, 3) Research on the assessment of writing, 4) Research on alternative instructional methods.

Discussion

1) Research related to the influence of process on the writing process

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A question which has been given extensive treatment in current research is the long-ignored recognition of the role cognitive process plays in the writing process. In research conducted by Llosa, Beck, and Zhao (2011), for example, the authors write, "…to construct effective arguments, students must be able to analyze relationships and choose among reasons in support of a position, interpret information, or initiate action. Doing so requires learners to transform knowledge from a source text or from a live experience to suit an argumentative structure." (p. 258). Similar studies from Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) indicate that such transformations require attention to stimulating the learners' cognitive processes of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation rather just attention to the knowledge and comprehension levels; and, as a result, have been found to distinguish novice writers from experienced and expert writers.

While many studies on how to improve writing, instruction fail to consider the role played by the cognitive aspects of writing, other studies have considered how writers go about constructing their work through observation of how other writers address the background of their readers as well as transform their own experiences into the written page. Notable among these studies, as noted above, is the work of Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia (1987) whose research on cognitive process has clearly shown differences between beginning and expert writer's characteristics. Additionally, research by Flowers and Hayes (1981), Cumming (1989), and Sasaki's (2000) consider writers in their cognitive planning of verbal practice and written words on paper to demonstrate that certain types of learners "self-regulate" through a verbal to written process.

2) Research specific to how to teach various writing genres such as exposition, argument, narrative, analytical, and creative writing

A second area of research interest to those seeking to find ways to improve writing, is directing the focus of writing on genres rather just general composition. The research of Llosa, Beck, and Zhao (2011) looks at frameworks for understanding the challenges students face in writing at the secondary level. In studying writing genres rather than a holistic approach in writing, the researchers use the selection of genres as the basic premise for their investigation. Writing genres are classified into three phases: "personal, informational, and analytical". Llosa *et. al*. (2011) builds on the work of Schleppegrell (2004 who found that personal categories are

divided into narrative and recounting an experience. Informational categories are divided to be explanation, exposition, and historical account. Llosa *et. al.* (2011) also chose to address "attention to both macrostructure and sentence-level features of writing". Categorization of writing is a feature of the Llosa *et. al*. (2011) study which reports on methods of writer's classification of the writing process.

3) Research in the Assessment of Writing

Another area that Llosa *et. al.* (2011) have studied is the role of assessments in the evaluation of writing. Their research concludes that existing writing assessment tools are not sufficiently diagnostic in nature; the researchers state, "Simply evaluating writing using holistic measures or an analytical scale as a rating will only measure certain aspects of writing such as mechanics and the use of only a few genres".

A final dimension of the Llosa *et. al*. (2011) studies was that they questioned students about their difficulty in writing. English Language learners (85%) particularly, found translating to be the most challenging, followed by 48% finding generating language to be the most difficult followed by 1) memory, 2) interpreting task demands, 3) addressing audience needs, and 4) revising.

4) Research on Alternative Instructional Methods

Research literature abounds with suggestions and experiments with alternative teaching methods. The following are only a small representative sampling of the type of methods being used in American schools. One method developed by Townsend, Nail, Cheveallier, and Browning (2013) used a strategy entitled the Online Writing Partnership. The authors refer to research conducted by Applebee and Langer (n.d.) in reviewing the kind of writing that middle and high school students might need. In their research, the authors selected 20 students and found that the students' writing was mainly for the purposes of practice for standardized tests; and, therefore, lacked in quality as good writing. Townsend *et. al*. (2013), on the other hand, noted that writing corrections and support from teachers must be present, and must be rich in detail and examples if the quality of writing was going to improve. They also concluded that standardized testing practice has replaced opportunities for writing and feedback as an interactive student and teacher experience in the classroom.

Another alternative method of writing instruction is reported by Townsend et. al. (2013) whose research focused on secondary level/local community college dual enrollment programs where essay feedback was based on grammar and mechanics alone. A qualitative research study performed by Browning (2013) conducted interviews of high school students enrolled in the dual programs and found that the students were often confused about instructions, did not find the topics engaging, and the feedback the students received was filled with difficult and confusing language.

In response to the issue of high school students' difficulties in navigating through weak writing feedback, Browning (Townsend, Nail, Cheveallier and Browning, 2013) instituted a project using graduate-level students attending teaching methods classes who got involved in the correction of the high school student writing. The project evolved to emailed papers using the comment feature on Microsoft Word. The element lacking in the project, however, was personal social interaction since the written responses were often open to misinterpretation and possibly "hurt feelings" among the high school students. As a result, the college students began an interactive online community using Moodle, described as "…a free, open-source management system that includes a variety of tools for distance education". Those tools are further described as chat rooms, discussion boards, personal profiles, blogs and wikis. These types of internet learning tools developed an interactive partnership between writing evaluation and the writer that gave strong indications of positive results.

The Online Writing Partnership involved the development of student teachers engaging in their college teaching programs as well as high school student writers that work together at the process of teaching/learning writing, High school students evaluated their student teacher mentors, offering feedback on the scaffolding of writing offered by the students in the college education program.

Townsend *et. al*. (2013) recommend, based on their informal research results, that writers need the following for improved writing success: 1) knowledge of a clear audience and purpose for writing, 2) opportunities to learn how to choose and develop writing topics of personal interest, 3) emphasis on quality on early drafts, including praise and encouragement, questions,

and suggestions; and, finally, 4) many opportunities for revision in response to feedback from evaluators who are truly interested and engaged in the writing they are evaluating.

Another method that resulted in improved writing was a project conducted by Mansilla, Duraisingh, Wolfe, and Haynes (2009). In their study, the researchers offer what they call the "Targeted Assessment Rubric". The authors propose a rubric that addresses the assessment of multi-disciplinary programs of study. The rubric had four areas: purposefulness, disciplinary grounding, integration, and critical awareness. The qualitative levels are: naïve, novice, apprentice, and master. The rubric also describes clearly an interdisciplinary work, a related assessment framework, and recent scholarship on disciplinary writing.

Mansilla *et. al*. (2009) define *rubric* use by noting first the reason for assessment, which is tracking "quality of student learning." Their research leads them to the conclusion that rubrics are fairer and more consistent than holistic methods because the assessment criteria are made explicit and instructors clearly describe different levels of performance. They also suggest that the use of a well-defined rubric provides value for student self-assessment for reflection and clarity in writing.

The authors quote Goodrich-Andrade (2006) and Hubba & Freed (2000) stating in defense of rubric criticism that there is misinterpretation with the use of rubrics' use include interpreting rubrics to be "tools for grading rather than supports for understanding". And furthermore, the rubric captures the aspects of writing that denote quality and determining what to assess is a challenge in the educator, as well as focusing on core objectives for learning, particularly on an interdisciplinary level.

Mansilla *et. al.* (2009) define "interdisciplinary" to mean addressing the work of the individual bridging of work of two or more domains or areas arising from several disciplines addressed at their crossing of work. Furthermore, the authors describe a teacher's analysis of the student work as a support for further growth in subject understanding. Their research questions examine what is meant by understanding a problem in interdisciplinary fashion, what are the aspects of interdisciplinary work, what qualities can be to students as interdisciplinary work that is of quality. The framework is a system for planning various interdisciplinary student work including presentations and papers.

Mansilla (2009) and his team describe their framework in steps. First, the framework denotes quality interdisciplinary knowledge as building, extending, and updating information with commonly accepted and validated standards. The authors suggest a careful reading of student work to note first, levels of interdisciplinary intuition and views as integrated and leading the work. Second, assessing integrated qualities of the work should identify points where disciplines intersect, and intuitive knowledge emerges. Third, a clear purpose is demonstrated by the student regarding engaged inquiry into the process of evaluation and criticism when he states that "the framework as applied exposes necessity of student explicit purpose as well as self-evaluation" (Mansilla, 2009).

The approach proposed my Mansilla *et. al.* (2009) has been tested on papers and findings were that the papers grew longer from freshman to senior and that the rubric could be used to score a range of essay topics and discern evolutionary differences in writers. The authors suggest sharing the rubric with students and utilizing the assessment tool as an approach to grading interdisciplinary papers. The result of the study was less than enlightening beyond the key points of validating the rubric for its intended purpose.

Conclusion

The results of the foregoing discussion indicate hope for improving both writing instruction and in the accurate assessment of student writing. However, in the words of Llosa, Beck, and Zhao (2011), "…despite the high stakes currently attached to students' performance on assessments of academic writing, we still know little about the challenges students face with academic writing tasks". To further compound the situation that learners in America's schools suffer from a significant need for improvement in writing performance at all levels, researchers at The Education Alliance (Devaney, 2005), a department at Brown University, indicate that English Language Learners (ELL's), face even more significant challenges from state-mandated writing assessments. Data collected from extensive research indicate that these learners do not fare well. The Alliance's reasons for this are that most research has focused largely on postsecondary and international student populations, with little focus on U.S. resident and immigrant middle and high school students. In short, several significant factors make writing instruction for ELL's a potent and pressing issue for policy makers, teacher educators,

professional development specialists, researchers, funders of writing and literacy research, and practitioners.

While the answers to questions that the Alliance's research found are complex and extensive, they cannot be summarized in this short article; their report, however, is readily available and should be carefully studied by those interested in the education of ELL's in writing instruction.

A conclusion is that far more research needs to be done on how writing is assessed and how the data from the assessment can be used to improve the writing process. Such research is being proposed by researchers Outcault Hill and Caldwell regarding several significant factors that make writing instruction effective for English Language Learners (ELL's) for the benefit of policy makers, teacher educators, professional development specialists, researchers, funders of writing and literacy research, and practitioners. The need for analysis into International Writing Instruction Methods for ELL Student would shed light on the challenges facing the above-mentioned stakeholders in the teaching and assessing of writing in the higher education field.

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