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Online and Face-to-face Peer Review: Measures of Implementation in ESL Writing Classes

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Bio Data

Mehrdad Moloudi, an Assistant Professor in TESL lecturing at Islamic Azad University and director of MLA Educational and Training Consultants (15222) in Iran, has taught English in several colleges and universities in Iran and in Malaysia since 1999. He has conducted several nationwide and some international workshops for teachers and learners in computer and network applications in teaching of ESL writing.

Abstract

This paper is an attempt based on the author's experience and feedback as an ESL teacher teaching Writing for Academic Purposes at Universiti Putra Malaysia. This paper reviews the theoretical background behind peer review in both Face-to-Face and Online formats. With the advent of the cutting-edge Internet technology, practitioners have presented intriguing techniques to improve efficacy of ESL learning. Online Peer Review (OLPR) is a modern peer review format which takes place in computer labs and participants can synchronously share a soft copy of their writings with their peers online in a networked computer lab to mediate with their peers about their writings. On the other hand, Face-to-face Peer Review (FFPR) is the conventional type of peer review which takes place in ordinary classrooms and participants take turns to discuss their writings face-to-face. In this paper, the pros and cons for OLPR and FFPR formats are presented and discussed as well as their implementation procedures in writing classes; furthermore, the teaching implications of peer review are shared with the readers.

Keywords: Online Peer Review (OLPR), Face-to-face Peer Review (FFPR)

Introduction

Based on what can be inferred from the peer review literature from early 1990s to this date and the author's observations as an ESL tutor teaching academic writing at tertiary level, ESL students perceive Face-to-face Peer Review (FFPR) embarrassing as they did not feel comfortable to converse in English with their peers mainly due to lack of confidence in speaking English as their second language; therefore, code-switching took place frequently between peers as it was observed. However, when transferred to a computer lab, participating students turned to be more motivated and productive in Online Peer Review (OLPR) format. As the literature suggests, the difference in the performance can be attributed to context cues such as skin color, gender, and age which tend to privilege some students over others during FFPR (Braine, 1998). Some researchers believe that students' characteristics and cultural differences (Rollinson 2005; Carson & Nelson, 1996) and difficulties in oral production in L2 classes (Zhu, 2001) are the main causes of unequal participation and less productivity in FFPR (Warschauer, 1996).

In tertiary level writing classes, it is a noted fact that due to time constraints of FFPR (Rollinson, 2005) it cannot be fully implemented and practiced. Like any other normal semester-long writing class, the frequent complaint made by students is that they do not know how accurate and how effective their writing is. To overcome this problem, in some classes, teachers elect one student randomly to review his/her writing in front of his/her classmates using LCD projector. In this teacher review scenario, the student whose writing is being reviewed usually feels uncomfortable, embarrassed, and probably discouraged as it seems that the teacher review can be intimidating. Implementing FFPR in writing classes is also time-consuming; therefore, it is essential to find whether OLPR can be a viable technique in providing ESL undergraduate writers with the feedback required to improve their writing quality as, unlike classic FFPR, it does not involve physical attendance of peers.

From the pedagogical point of view, the cycle of process oriented writing approaches can be only complete if revision and editing takes place in the cycle. The efficiency of revision and editing can be maximized especially if the writer's writing

is reviewed by a real reader.

Overall, OLPR and FFPR can be used at least for three purposes in ESL context: (a) to increase autonomous writing, (b) to improve writing proficiency, and (c) to complete the cycle of writing process. Therefore, in order to help other ESL teachers and practitioners, this paper is written to share how peer review in its modern and classic formats can be implemented successfully in writing classes at tertiary level.

Peer Review: Background, Variations and Formats

As inferred from peer review studies (e.g. Schultz, 2000; Zhu, 1994; Nystrand & Brandt, 1989; Spear, 1988; Nystrand, 1986), consistent with Vygotsky's perspectives on learning, a real dialogue about writing to get assistance from real readers is viewed as constructive. In such an activity, students discuss their writing with each other and exchange their oral and/or written comments usually based on the guidelines and/or task sheets given to them.

The strongest conclusion which can be drawn from literature is that peer group approaches vary in their effectiveness depending on the extent to which: (a) students are persuaded that such approaches will lead to writing improvement, (b) students are trained to provide peer group feedback effectively, (c) students have clear goals and guidelines for peer group work, (d) peer group members held accountable for their feedback, and (e) when the feedback provided by them is reviewed by the teacher (e.g. Reid 1993; Spear, 1993; Holt 1992; Leki 1992; Stanley, 1992; Elbow & Belanoff 1989; Golub 1988; Spear 1988).

The main stream of peer review studies were initiated in the late 1980s (Berg, 1999). Many of these studies agreed that peer review is an important component of writing classes, and plays a key role wherever writing is taught based on the process-oriented approaches. Today, peer review is "nearly ubiquitous" as a composition-class activity (Paulson, 2007, p. 306). It is commonly used in L1 and L2 composition classes to enable students help each other improve their writing (Berg, 1999; Hu, 2005; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992). At tertiary level, peer review has received a prominent position in college composition courses and it is one

of the most widely used and pedagogically vexed practices in first-year college composition courses (Lu & Bol, 2007; Paulson et al., 2007).

Classic Peer Review

Various reasons account for the popularity of using peer review in writing classes according to the literature: (a) students find peers' feedback as a valuable source of information and a supplement to teacher's feedback (Hu, 2005), (b) students find teacher's feedback general, vague, incomprehensible, and authoritative (Zamel, 1985) compared to peer's feedback which is perceived more specific (Caulk, 1994), (c) it helps teachers "to escape from the tyranny of red pen and explore an activity that can complement her own feedback to her students' writing, collaborative peer group response is a potentially rewarding option" (Rollinson, 2005, p. 28), (d) the response and revision process contributes to more effective revision and critical reading (Rollinson, 2005; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Mangelsdorf, 1992), (e) it provides a real audience for students' writings (Rollinson, 2005; Suprajitno, 1998; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), (f) it encourages collaborative dialogue in which two-way feedback is established (Rollinson, 2005; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), (g) learning is facilitated through peer review process (Harris 1992; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Spear, 1988; Gere, 1987), (h) a sense of tolerance and acceptance towards peers criticism is developed (ibid.), (i) it improves confidence (ibid.), (j) it helps to develop a sense of community (ibid.), (k) it leads students to consider alternative strategies (ibid.), (l) it allows them to be exposed to a variety of writing styles (Berg, 1999; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Harris, 1992; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Spear, 1988; Gere, 1987; Zamel, 1985; Chaudron, 1984), and (m) while reviewing, students benefit cognitively by articulating explanations to their peers (Wooley, 2007). These benefits are the frequently-cited merits of peer review regardless of its format.

However, despite the potential benefits of peer review, in its conventional format, concerns remain with the quality of peer review (Lu & Bol, 2007). FFPR is plagued by some weaknesses such as (a) time constraints (there is usually not enough time to allocate for peer review in writing classes) (Rollinson, 2005), (b) student

characteristics and cultural differences (for example in some cultures like Chinese, students shy away from criticizing their peers' writing face-to-face (Rollinson, 2005; Carson & Nelson, 1996), (c) teachers' inability to monitor each group simultaneously (Rollinson, 2005), (d) unequal participation (Warschauer, 1996), and finally (e) difficulties in oral production in L2 classes (Zhu, 2001).

Modern Digital Peer Review

Despite the usefulness of traditional FFPR, it is time-consuming and it seems difficult to reconcile FFPR with course content (Rollinson, 2005). Therefore, OLPR can be a viable alternative; one reason might be that they can save more time in the classes for other activities which can be done outside the classroom by leaving students on their own. Moreover, OLPR is not confined to physical and time constraints.

To alleviate the concerns associated with conventional face-to-face peer review, many researchers propose digital and electronic formats of peer review to increase the quality of peer review. In fact, with the popularity of networked computers, online peer review has become common in university writing classes (Guardado & Shi, 2007; Liu & Sadler 2003). Peckham (1996) acknowledges that today OLPR is as inevitable as computer-mediated instruction. Wooley (2007) maintains that "Robust online peer review systems for student writing now offer solutions to many of the problems that have impeded peer review activities in the past" (p. iv). Subsequently, some researchers have already accepted OLPR and have ventured further to experiment different types of OLPR (e.g. Lu &Bol, 2007).

There are several studies indicating that the modern digital format of peer review is advantageous to its classic conventional format. To cite a few, Suprajitno (1998) has observed that conducting peer review via email, (a) accelerates peer review process, (b) gives an opportunity to compare one's work with another as they are all available on the discussion board, and above all (c) it gives the possibility to seek teacher's advice and peer's guidance online simultaneously (also cited by DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001). Some (e.g., Xu, 2007; Liu & Sadler, 2003; Warschauer, 1996) claimed that comments and revisions made in OLPR groups outnumber FFPR.

Warschauer (1996) found that there was a tendency toward more equal participation between peers in OLPR. His study also revealed that students used a more formal and complex language in terms of lexis and syntax while peer reviewing online. Schultz (2000) said that during OLPR students offered more suggestions to improve content and organization. Investigating students' affective perception, DiGiovanni & Nagaswami (2001) found online peer reviewers were more motivated and committed as observed by their teachers. Elsewhere, Liu and Sadler (2003) found that asynchronous interaction is generally found to be more constructive and effective in peer review activities. DiGiovanni & Nagaswami (2001) said that after OLPR sessions, students could save or print their digital interactions so they did not have to depend on their memory to revise their drafts merely based on what they could remember from their peers' oral comments. Reporting that some of their students found OLPR easier because of using the keyboard, Figal, et al. (2006) suggest that "Enriching the online version with communication possibilities allows tapping the full potential of the online version and benefiting from rich discussions among teams" (p. 12).

However, OLPR did not remain safe from criticisms. Some research findings dispute the merits of OLPR and warn practitioners to be more cautious in using OLPR (Peckham, 1996). Schultz (2000) observed that while interacting online, students tend to veer off the topic and they seemed less serious compared with FFPR. Unlike focus on organization, Schultz (2000) found that students in OLPR group ignored grammar and style. Suprajitno (1998) noted that sometimes students were so over-enthusiastic that they gave and received trivial and unnecessary feedback.

Some studies reported pros and cons for each format. For instance, Figal et al. (2006) maintained that students highly appreciated many aspects of OLPR using special software; however, they stressed that they missed valuable discussions in live FFPR. Whereas some studies indicated an overt preference of FFPR (Yong & Lee, 2008; Schultz, 2000), others disagreed (Xu, 2007; Liu & Sadler, 2003). This in turn led the researchers to propose a combination of conventional and modern formats of peer review to optimize the efficiency and benefits of peer review (Yong & Lee, 2008;

Schultz, 2000; Peckham, 1996).

Setting It up Right: Implementation Procedure

To enhance efficacy of peer review, Rollinson (2005) stresses that peer review should be set up properly in the class; "Failure to establish proper procedure or to engage in pre-training, is quite likely to result in less than profitable response activities" (p. 24). Therefore, this paper showcases and documents a systematic and successful implementation of OLPR and FFPR in tertiary level academic writing classes. The importance of progressive writing through peer review needs to be emphasized and how writers can benefit from their peers, as a more available resource, to improve their writing.

The author has experimented and studied the effectiveness of FFPR and OLPR in a public university in Malaysia where English is spoken as a second language. In that study, students reviewed their peers writing during one-hour sessions throughout a fourteen-week semester. To ensure consistency, all the briefing and training sessions were conducted by the author/tutor. The participants were given sample scripts, adopted from TOEFL, to review face-to-face or online depending on their group assignment. The guidelines were designed in a self-study concept so that the students could easily read them and understand about the process. Moreover, during the one-hour tutorials, the author/tutor frequently highlighted reviews which were constructive as an indication of successful peer review; this was to ensure that peer review was performed by the participants correctly. The objectives of pre-training, according to Rollinson (2005, p. 24), are:

> … awareness raising (the principles and objectives of peer response); productive group interaction (collaboration, supportiveness, tact, etiquette); and productive response and revision (basic procedures, effective commenting, reader-writer dialogue, effective revision).

Some pre-training activities are as follows (ibid.).

(a) the propaganda phase (explanation of peer review value versus teacher

feedback, students' concerns, sharing teachers' experience with students), (b) non-threatening practice activities (modeling and discussion of adequate and inadequate commenting, and (c) discussion of effective revision (how to use peer's comments to revise effectively).

To facilitate the peer review process, two different sets of peer review guidelines (Appendix) developed by Schultz (2000) and DiGiovanni & Nagaswami (2001) were used with major modifications to facilitate the peer review process. To train peer reviewers, guidelines deemed necessary to enhance the peer review procedure. These guidelines were modified to suit the purpose of the study and the context of the study. The validity of the guidelines was established through the panel of experts. The result was two sets of parallel guidelines, one for FFPR and one for OLPR, each comprising of an introduction, execution manual, and set of thought-provoking questions regarding the components and quality of the participants' writing in English. The guidelines were identical but they were different in their instructions as one was given to instruct FFPR and the other OLPR. Additional language required by the reviewers during the process was attached to the main guideline. This part was adopted without any modifications from Tompkins (1990, p. 86). As it is shown in the Appendix, the instructions given in the guidelines (part one) help the reviewers to learn about the peer review procedure and the protocol step by step as explained thoroughly in the guidelines. One plus point of these guidelines is that they are written in simple language to ensure that the reviewers at all levels can make sense of it to fulfill their tasks. The second part of the guideline provides in-depth and detailed questions initially on global aspects and finally on local aspects of the students' scripts. These questions, prod reviewers to think critically about their overall impression of the essay, the appropriateness of the introduction and thesis statement as well as the topic sentences, supporting sentences, and conclusion. Then it moves to the quality of the content, organization, cohesion and more local aspects including the quality of vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

The interactions can easily take place via Yahoo! Messenger because of its one-to-one messaging system which allows users to collaborate synchronously or

asynchronously and its availability and popularity.

To gauge the success of the project, three perception questionnaires were developed and used by the author. The questionnaires were adopted from Schultz (2000) and DiGiovanni & Nagaswami (2001); they were adapted to the context of this study to find out the affective perception of peer reviewers.

In the third phase, week three to week twelve, the lectures and peer review sessions were conducted concurrently. During this period of ten weeks, the participants received their normal lectures about the writing process, writing paragraphs, analyzing paragraphs, and analyzing organizations as prescribed in the course synopsis during the two-hour sessions. Concurrently, they reviewed their peers' writings during one-hour sessions which were all facilitated by the author/tutor. During these sessions, the author/tutor chose one of the participants' writing randomly from the assignments given to him and displayed it anonymously on the screen using a video projector. Then the author/tutor and the participants spent 15 minutes to review the essay and give their comments to improve the essay. Next the participants were paired to review their essays in 15 minutes each, together 30 minutes. The participants were allowed to choose their own peers for their convenience (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) and were requested to remain with their peer throughout the semester unless their peer was absent. In addition, they were given the choice to type their assignments or write in manuscripts. The participants in FFPR groups peer reviewed face-to-face and those in OLPR groups peer reviewed online. During the one-hour sessions, the author/tutor took field notes from his observations. Figure 1 depicts the peer review procedure the participants were instructed to follow. The solid line boxes show tutorial classroom activities.

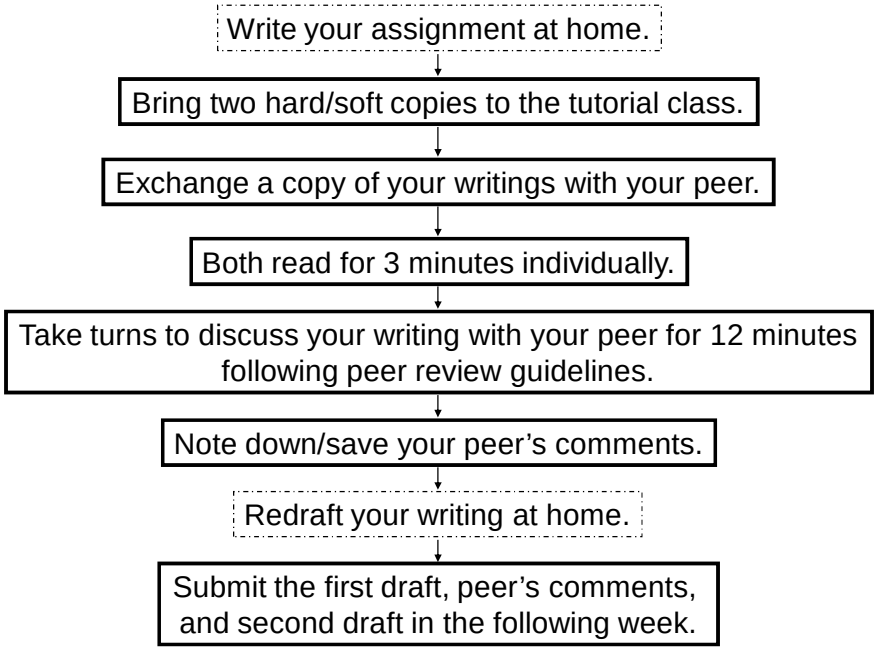

Figure 1. Face-to-face and Online Peer Review Procedure

A Positive Response

The quantitative findings of the author's study revealed that peer review was extremely effective in the improvement of the participants' writing in English. The summary of the findings is presented in the following table. Generally, both face-to-face and online formats of peer review affected the proficiency of ESL undergraduates' writing in English significantly. Moreover, the content, organization, cohesion, vocabulary, grammar, punctuation, and spelling of their writings in English were enhanced significantly after they reviewed their peer's writings for a week.

In addition to the quantitative findings of the study, the qualitative findings showed a positive response from the observer ESL tutors and the participants regarding their experience with the peer review experiment in its both formats. The observers described peer review as a "good", "challenging", and "necessary" activity to "improve their essay writing skills" in a "communicative approach." One of the observers called peer review "a brilliant idea." Actually, it was difficult to find out exactly what format of peer review the observers find more effective in improving different aspects of the participants' writing in English as they all observed pros and

cons for each format. Although an observer finds FFPR more encouraging to classroom communication, she believed that it can be "threatening for less proficient students" as "it requires rapid feedback and eye contact from both sides." Unlike FFPR, she observed that the students seemed to be:

> … more confident and relaxed during the OLPR sessions due to the fact that their egos are less threatened by face-to-face communication, lack of proficiency in speaking, and giving or getting feedback directly to or from their partners.

As of the related literature, the combined format of face-to-face and online is suggested by many researchers (Yong & Lee, 2008; Guardado & Shi, 2007; Figal et al., 2006; Liu & Sadler, 2003; DiGiovanni & Nagaswami, 2001; Shultz, 2000).

Participating students generally commented positively on peer review. Almost the same number found their partner's comments useful. In total, the majority of the participants agreed that peer review helped them revise better. The interviewed participants viewed peer review helpful in nature. Mainly they asserted that peer review helped them to "generate ideas" and improved their "grammar." Moreover, it engaged them in a fruitful discussion after the writing itself; thus, they realized writing is not ended on paper but it cycles and matures throughout a discussion with the peers to review the initial drafts. Intriguingly, they revealed that teacher review can be embarrassing and they shy away from discussing their writing with their teacher. On the other hand, they felt comfortable sharing their writing with their peers enjoying the sense of openness with them. However, some believed that peer review is not "effective" if they were paired with a peer of much lower English competency. They suggested that the teacher should choose peers and he should pair them with more competent peers to ensure effectiveness of the peer review process. They did not mind the teacher pairing them with any competent classmate in the class and they said personal problems between peers did not affect the quality of their task. Some preferred to choose their own peer, though. Regarding the peer review instruction, they agreed that it was much needed to help them have a clear idea of peer review. They said that when the teacher reviewed an anonymous writing in the class, it improved the quality of their own writing. Finally, some were concerned about the

workload; they said that one essay to write and review per week is “just enough.” Based on the participants’ positive evaluation, the author concluded that the ESL undergraduates found both of the peer review formats (FFPR and ONPR) extremely effective and helpful in improving their writing in English.

Pedagogical Implications

One of the implications is to take into account student behavior in planning the peer review sessions. For example, when the discussion is unfocused and the comments not specific enough, teachers need to intervene and prod students to explain what they mean. They, for example, may benefit from a pause in the oral session to write down all their comments before they move on to the next point. Or, perhaps only oral peer sessions should be conducted and the writers can jot down what they feel is relevant. The sessions need to be geared to the students' needs.

Another implication is that there is a need for a combination of teacher and peer feedback as well as self-directed feedback (Jacobs et al., 1998) especially with intermediate learners. When teachers find problems during peer negotiations, they should intervene and facilitate more productive discussion among students. After negotiations between peers, teachers can answer students’ questions. Students with lower language proficiency should also be given more help with the construction of their sentences and other grammar problems. Self-directed feedback is a realistic option for the better students.

Although the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study as well as the literature all acknowledged the significant effectiveness of peer review, there are certain issues that may threat the effectiveness of peer review which tutors should bear in mind:

a) Peer review sessions should not be very long. Usually discussion for a single script takes 10 to 20 minutes depending on the proficiency of the peers and the length of the script.
b) Students should be given the choice to find a peer with whom they are more comfortable.

c) Continuous feedback from peers can expedite more effective peer review discussions in the class and in the net.
d) The students should not be overwhelmed by many writing tasks.
e) Peer review training and introduction of proper guidelines should proceed peer review sessions.
f) When FFPR is feasible, it should proceed OLPR for the aforementioned reasons.
g) Teacher's role should not be taken for granted in any of the peer review formats. It is observed in this study that teacher's role is vital in the effectiveness of the peer review process.

Conclusion

In short, the teaching of writing, especially in an ESL context, ought to be accompanied with peer review to facilitate and accelerate revision and editing process, to ease writing teachers from the burden of evaluating their students' writing, and spare their time for more fruitful tasks for the benefit of their students.

Appendix

Instructions for Face-to-face Peer Review

Bring a copy of your previous essay to the classroom. Choose your partner and exchange the copy of your essay with your partner. Sit face to face with your partner. Agree who is the first reviewer. If you are not the first reviewer, be prepared to react to your partner's comments and stop reading here.

If you are the first reviewer, proceed reading these instructions. Read your partner's essay once to the end to get the general feeling for the topic (three minutes). On the second reading begin to discuss the essay. Please give very specific comments to the questions following these instructions. Always begin with a positive comment. Then be more critical because the objective is to help your partner to improve her/his essay.

To discuss face-to-face (12 minutes), give your comments orally to your partner one by one. You should discuss the essay orally with your partner face-to-face. Please follow these steps:

- Read the questions to respond one by one.
- Give your answers orally one by one.
- Listen to the response from your partner before you give your answer to the next question.
- Answer all the questions. If you have no comment for any question, just say "No comment for number X."

Please be reminded that all discussions should take place in English face-to-face. While you review your partner's essay, remind her/him take note of all face-to-face discussions on an A4 sheet and write her/his name and date on the top of the paper (e.g. Steven Richards 20 July). Your partner should take home the notes after the class and consider your comments to redraft her/his essay.

Now you should respond to partner's comments (second reviewer) about your essay. Finally, next session submit a copy of the notes written on A4 sheet, first draft, and second draft of your essay to your tutor.

Instructions for Online Peer Review

Bring a copy of your previous essay to the computer lab. Choose your partner and exchange the copy of your essay with your partner. Do not sit close to your partner. Agree who is the first reviewer. If you are not the first reviewer, be prepared to react to your partner's comments and stop reading here.

If you are the first reviewer, proceed reading these instructions. Read your partner's essay once to the end to get the general feeling for the topic (three minutes). On the second reading begin to discuss the essay. Please give very specific comments to the questions following these instructions. Always begin with a positive comment. Then be more critical because the objective is to help your partner to improve her/his essay.

To discuss online (12 minutes), sign in to Yahoo! Messenger, type and send your comments to your partner one by one. You should discuss the essay with your partner online. Please follow these steps:

- Read the questions to respond one by one.
- Type your answers and click SEND one by one.

- Wait for the response from your partner before you send your answer to the next question.

- Answer all the questions. If you have no comment for any question, just type "No comment for number X."

Please be reminded that all discussions should take place in English via computer. After you review your partner's essay, remind her/him to click the SAVE bottom to save all online discussions on her/his thumb drive and name the file with her/his name and date (e.g. stevenrichards20july). Your partner should take home the file after the class and consider your comments to redraft her/his essay.

Now you should respond to partner's comments (second reviewer) about your essay. Finally, next session submit a printout of the online discussion, first draft, and second draft of your essay to your tutor.

QUESTIONS

The Whole Essay

1- What did you like best in the essay, and why?
2- Did you enjoy reading the essay, or did you find it hard to follow the ideas? Explain why.
3- Is there any part in the essay that was confusing to you? If yes, point to the paragraph and ask your partner to explain it to you.

Introduction and Thesis Statement

4- Do you think the introduction is inviting/ interesting? Explain why.
5- Are the sentences in the introduction clear and linked well? If not, suggest how it can be made more effective.
6- Are the thesis statement and blueprint clear, focused, and relevant to the main topic? If not, suggest how they can be made more effective.

The Body: Topic Sentences

7- What is the topic sentence in the second paragraph? Is it related to the thesis statement and main topic? Is it clear? Do you have any suggestions to improve the topic sentence? Be specific.
8- Answer the question 7 for the third and fourth paragraphs.

The Body: Supporting Points and Details

9- How has the writer developed the second paragraph? Has he/she used examples/quotations/facts/statistics? Are the details adequate to support the topic sentence of the second paragraph? If not, suggest what other details the writer can use.

10- Are there any parts of the paragraph that do not support the topic sentence and should be left out? If yes, point to the paragraph and ask your partner to remove or revise it.
11- Answer the questions 9 and 10 for the third and fourth paragraphs.

Conclusion

12- Is the conclusion appropriate to the topic? Does it give a summary or general statement, look to the future, or express a final or related thought that grows out of the body? If not, suggest how to make it more effective.
13- Generally, is the essay convincing and enjoyable to read? Why or why not?

Content

14- Is the essay a relevant and adequate answer to the task? If not, suggest how to make the content more relevant and adequate to the main topic.

Organization

15- Are all the paragraphs logically developed and organized? Has the writer used appropriate transitions to signal clearly different paragraphs? If not, suggest whether the writer has to add a few more transitions, or change the ones he/she has used.

Cohesion

16- Are the sentences appropriately connected together by connectives? If not, show the paragraph and the inappropriate connective, and suggest appropriate connectives.

Vocabulary

17- Are there any words that could be replaced so that ideas become clearer, stronger and more effective? If yes, please point at them and give your suggestions to replace.

Grammar

18- Are there any grammatical inaccuracies? If yes, please point at them and advise your partner to correct them.

Punctuation

19- Are there any punctuation inaccuracies? If yes, please point at them and advise your partner to correct them.

Spelling

20- Are there any misspellings? If yes, please point at them and advise your partner to correct them.

Adapted from Shultz (2000) and DiGiovanni & Nagaswami (2001)

USEFUL LANGUAGE EXPRESSIONS

To discuss with your partner, you can use the following expressions:

To express your compliments, you can use these sentences to start as reviewer:
I like the part where …
I'd like to know more about …
I think your main idea is …
You used some powerful words, like …
I like the way you described …
I like the way you explained …
Your writing made me feel …

As a writer, you can ask these questions from your reviewer:
What did you learn from my writing?
What do you want to know more about?
What part doesn't make sense?
Is there a part I should throw away?
Can you tell what my main idea is?
Did I use some words I need to change?
What details can I add?

Here are more questions to comment and suggest as a reviewer:
What is your favorite part?
What part are you having trouble with?
Do you need a closing?
I got confused in the part about …
Could you leave this part out because …
Is this paragraph on one topic?
Could you combine some sentences?
What do you plan to do next?

Extracted from Tompkins (1990, p.86)

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ASIAN EFL JOURNAL
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The Impact of Phonetic Instruction on Iranian Students' Listening Ability Enhancement

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BioData

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to see if phonetic instruction followed by the learners' checking of their pronunciation by the use of phonemic transcription would enhance Iranian students' listening ability. Since random assignment was not possible, the nonequivalent group, pretest-posttest design was employed to study two classes of third grade high school students as control and experimental groups. Both groups were exposed to the same listening activities; however, only the experimental group received the treatment regarding the phonetic symbols and phonemic transcription. A 30-item listening test was developed by the researcher based on the BBC listening materials to measure students' listening ability. The reliability of the test was estimated 0.69 through KR-21 formula. The results of the independent samples t-test analysis from the posttest administration indicated that the experimental group who received phonetic instruction had a better performance than the control group who did not receive it. Thus, the findings suggest that phonetic instruction and learners' phonemic transcription can facilitate the process of listening enhancement.

Keywords: Phonetic instruction, phonemic transcription, pronunciation, listening

Introduction

Although human beings have developed a writing system, oral language is still the main channel of gaining information. However, listening seems to be an overlooked dimension in language acquisition in EFL contexts like Iran. According to some researchers (Jahangard, 2007; Hosseini 2007; Razmjo & Riazi, 2006), students' aural and oral skills are less emphasized in the Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks. They are not tested in the final exams during the three years of senior high school and one year of pre-university education. Teachers put much less, if any, emphasis on oral drills, pronunciation, listening, and speaking abilities than on reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary.

Iranian students usually study the English language for seven years in Iranian high schools and pre-university centers, but very few of them leave the system with the ability to use it communicatively. Famous Iranian language testing and teaching specialists, such as Farhady, Jafarpoor, & Birjandi (1994), have already confirmed that even Iranian students at the university level are not able to use the English language for communicative purposes as they are expected to.

According to Hosseini (2007), oral English language teaching in most of the Iranian academic situations seems to be ineffective and impractical as a result of strong examination washback. Little attention is given to oral language in the final examinations. Almost all Iranian English teachers are aware of the fact that the instruction of oral English in the school system faces major problems. The dominating influence of the exams, which hardly pay any attention to oral skills and pronunciation, has contributed to a failure to produce students who can use the language well enough for purposes beyond the exam (Kamyab, 2008).

According to Ostovar Namaghi (2006), three forces control and steer teachers' work in the Iranian educational context. First, since teachers cannot choose a textbook which is in line with their students' needs, the input is controlled by the prescribed curriculum. Second, the output is controlled by the mandated national testing scheme so that teachers cannot develop tests which have a positive backwash on teaching and learning. Third, since high score is culturally equal to higher achievement, the process

of teaching and learning is controlled by the grade pressure from students, parents, and school principals. He argues that teachers are pure implementers of the prescribed initiatives and schemes surrounded by cultural constraints, which prevent them from using their own professional knowledge and experience. Many English conversation institutes and language teaching centers out of the formal educational system throughout the country are in operation. They owe their existence to the very weakness of spoken English instruction in the formal education system. Even in these institutes, practicing lots of listening via using extensive level-appropriate material is supposed to be the only method to improve students' listening ability.

According to Okita (1999), many English teachers in Japan still adhere to the pronunciation practice dominated during audiolingualism. Stevick (1982) argues that mimicry memorization activities are thoroughly unpleasant and purely mechanical leading to students' monotony. Scholars have suggested different techniques to help students improve their listening ability. Wilson (2003) refers to "discovery listening" in which teachers help students focus on their listening problems and their causes. Students are guided to see the differences between their reconstructed text and the original so that they can discover the reason for their listening problems. He strikes a balance between meaning and form by arguing that top-down processing (listening for gist) should not be used at the expense of bottom-up processing (sound and word recognition). Moreover, Dalton (1997) believes that if the English language sounds are not received clearly, the learners' mind converts them into the closest sounds in their native language.

In spite of the fact that the positive effect of phonetic instruction as a teaching method on students' listening ability has been reported by some researchers, little research has been carried out in this regard in the Iranian context. Similarly, in an attempt to provide an effective way for enhancing high school students' listening skill in Korea, Chung (2005) taught English pronunciation and found that it had a positive effect on their listening ability. Also, Shimamune & Smith (1995) conducted a study on the relationship between pronunciation and listening discrimination in which Japanese students were taught to pronounce and discriminate English words that

contain unfamiliar phonemic contrasts (e.g., rock and lock). The results of their research indicated an interaction between pronunciation and listening discrimination. Teaching pronunciation was found to be easier than teaching listening discrimination.

On the one hand, due to the washback effect of the exams, little attention has been given to the teaching of pronunciation and the development of effective strategies to address the problem and, on the other hand, many English phonemes do not exist in Persian. That is why Iranian students have difficulty in learning English pronunciation. Since the pronunciation clues in the orthographic system of the English language are rather unpredictable, phonemic transcription can describe the oral form of the words to reduce the confusion related to symbol-to-sound relations. According to Wells (1996), transcribing a word or an utterance in a language such as English, whose spelling is conspicuously irregular, illustrates a direct specification of its pronunciation and enables the language learner to obtain precise and explicit information on pronunciation from a dictionary. It is a good method to reinforce what the learner may have received imperfectly by ear. That is, it provides a good aid to correct misperceptions.

Not only has the instruction of pronunciation been the Cinderella of language teaching in Iran for many years, but also little research has been conducted in this regard. According to Brown (2007) and Nunan (2004), task-based language teaching has gained worldwide popularity. In line with this recent trend, the researcher developed a model in pronunciation teaching in which the students become aware of the phonological features of the English language. Investigating the impact of phonetic instruction and phonemic transcription on students' listening ability regardless of the washback effect of the exams so as to achieve the long-term goals of improving English language education in Iran is greatly needed. Thus, this study was carried out to fill this gap. As pointed out by Saito (2007), phonetic instruction would make students more aware of their pronunciations in EFL situations where English is contextually reduced and students do not have access to real-life communication with native speakers of English.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the following question: Does phonetic

instruction enhance Iranian students' listening ability?

To achieve the purpose of this study, the following null hypothesis was formulated: Phonetic instruction has no significant effect on Iranian students' listening ability.

Research Design and Subjects

Subjects were third grade high school students in Bojnord, the capital city of Khorasane Shomali province in the north east of the country. Since random assignment was not possible, the nonequivalent group, pretest-posttest design was employed in this study. That is, subjects were tested in existing groups. The following diagram summarizes this quasi-experimental design in which the dotted line represents non-equivalent groups. Both groups are measured before and after treatment. Only one group receives the treatment. In this diagram GA and GB stand for experimental and control groups respectively. O1 and O3 stand for the tests before applying the treatment. O2 and O4 stand for the tests after the treatment and X stands for treatment.

GA O1 X O2

GB O3 O4

The two intact groups included two third grade classes (A = experimental group and B = control group) in a National Organization for Development of Exceptional Talents (NODET) school where the researcher is an English teacher. The 20 subjects in group A (the experimental group) were given phonetic and phonological instruction along with listening training, while the 25 subjects in group B (the control group) were given listening training only.

Admission to NODET schools is based on a comprehensive nationwide entrance examination. Every year thousands of students apply to enter the schools, from which less than 5% are chosen for the 99 middle schools and 98 high-schools within the country. All applicants must have a minimum GPA of 19 (out of 20) for attending the

entrance exam. The entrance exam gets very competitive in larger cities, especially in Tehran, in which 400 students are accepted out of over 50,000 applicants. http://www.nodet.net/about/Paziresh.asp

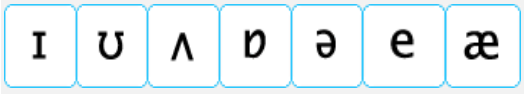
Instrument

The materials used in this study as treatment include the following chart which is a system of symbols for writing the sounds of English, a guide to these symbols along with videos to show how to pronounce each of the sounds, two exercises (schwa and sound-spelling), and five quizzes all of which developed by Alex Bellem who has a PhD in Linguistics (See BBC Website / BBC Learning English / Pronunciation Tips). At the time these videos were made in early 2008, Bellem was working as a Pronunciation Linguist in the BBC's Pronunciation Unit. Six items from each of the above-mentioned quizzes were used by the researcher to develop a 30-item listening test to measure students' listening ability before and after the treatment. For the pilot test, 23 subjects similar to those of this study responded to the items and helped the researcher establish the reliability of the test which was estimated 0.69 through KR-21 formula. The related information has been tabulated as follows:

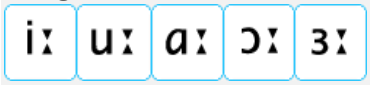
$$R = \left(\frac{k}{k-1}\right)\left(1- \frac{X(k-X)}{kS}\right) R = \left(\frac{30}{29}\right)\left(1- \frac{14.60(30-14.60)}{(30)(22.97)}\right) = 0.697$$

where R = test reliability, k = number of items on the test, X = mean of the raw scores from the total test and S = variance of the raw test scores from the total test.

Short vowels



Long vowels



Diphthongs (double vowel sounds)

ɪə	ʊə	aɪ	ɔɪ	əʊ	eə	aʊ	eɪ

Voiceless consonants

p	t	ʧ	k	f	θ	s	ʃ

Voiced consonants

b	d	ʤ	g	v	ð	z	ʒ

Other consonants

m	n	ŋ	h	l	r	w	j

Pretest, Training Sessions, and Posttest

After the listening pretest was administered to each group on the first day, the training session was held for 10 weeks from October 1, to December 15, 2009. Each of the one-hour classes met one day a week. The subjects in the experimental group received half an hour of instruction on pronunciation activities, such as phonetic symbols, schwa exercises, sound and spelling exercises, and phonemic transcription. Then, they listened to the related material audio for the next half hour. They were assigned to have a pocket dictionary each session. The phonemic symbols were taught within two sessions using the videos in the Pronunciation Tips section of the BBC site presented by Alex Bellem, a Pronunciation Linguist in the BBC's Pronunciation Unit.

The students were required to look up certain words and check their phonemic transcription in their dictionary in the following sessions. The researcher would explain the articulation of specific phonemes to the subjects and ask them to repeat after him. Then, the subjects were asked to pronounce the words using their transcription, and the researcher would try to help them if necessary. After dealing with all phonemic symbols, the final step was to listen to the audio again in order to enhance listening ability. The subjects in the control group only listened to the same audio exercises without spending any time on pronunciation activities for an hour. To see the significant effect of the treatment, the same 30-item test of listening was

administered to both groups as the posttest at the end of the last session. The pretest and posttest were identical but the arrangement of the items was different in the posttest. Since there was an interval of two and a half months between the two tests, the posttest was less likely to be influenced by the subjects' memory.

Statistical analysis and results

The computer software Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS v.15) was used to analyze the data in this study. Paired-samples t-test was used to see whether there was a statistically significant difference in the mean scores for Time 1 (prior to the intervention) and Time 2 (after the intervention) of the same group. Independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the possible differences between the means of the experimental and control groups based on the gain scores from the pretest and posttest. The following table indicates the summary of independent-samples t-tests vertically and paired-samples t-tests horizontally.

Table 1. The summary of independent- and paired-samples t-tests

Row = Independent-samples t-tests		Control Group	Experimental Group	Sig.
Pretest	Mean	16.36	16.45	P = 0.934
	Standard Deviation	3.51	3.73	
Posttest	Mean	21.72	25.80	P < 0.001
	Standard Deviation	3.58	2.80	
Posttest - Pretest	Mean	5.36	9.35	P < 0.001
	Standard Deviation	0.700	1.34	
Column = Paired - samples t-tests	Independent- & Paired-Samples t-test	P < 0.001	P < 0.001	Sig.

After transforming the data based on the results from paired samples-t-tests to neutralize the extraneous differences, an independent samples t-test was conducted to see whether there was a statistically significant difference in the posttest mean scores of the experimental and control groups. An alpha level of 0.05 was established before testing the significance. As recommended by Pallant (2007), the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances was checked. If the Levene's Test is significant (p. < .05), the

two variances are significantly different. If it is not significant (p. > .05), the two variances are approximately equal. Here, since the Levene's test is significant (p. = .01 < .05), it can be assumed that the variances are not equal. Therefore, the assumption of equal variance has not been met. Next, the results of the t-test were checked. If the variances are approximately equal, the top line is read. If the variances are not equal, the bottom line of the t-test table, which refers to Equal variances not assumed, is read. Based on the results of the Levene's test, it was known that the two groups had not equal variances, so the bottom line was read.

As indicated in Table 2, there is a significant difference between the gain scores for the experimental group (*M = 9.35*, *SD = 1.34*) and the gain scores for the control group (*M = 5.36*, *SD = .70*; *t* (*.27.07*) = *.12*, *p<.05*). This result suggests that the experimental group who received phonetic instruction had a better performance than the control group who received only listening instruction. Since there is a significant difference between the means of the two groups, the null hypothesis (phonetic instruction has no significant effect on Iranian students' listening ability) is rejected.

Table 2. The t-test for the experimental and control groups

Group	N	Mean	Std Dev	df	t	Sig.
Experimental	20	9.35	1.34	27.07	12.00	.000*
Control	25	5.36	.70			

*Sig. p < .05

Conclusion

The results of the independent samples t-test analysis from the posttest administration indicated that the experimental group who received phonetic instruction had a better performance than the control group who did not receive it. Thus, the findings suggest that phonetic instruction and learners' phonemic transcription of different words benefit the subjects in learning the sound system of the English language more accurately. Since this teaching method seems to have facilitated the process of

listening enhancement, its application can be suggested to analytically reinforce the information that students may receive imperfectly by ear. However, due to the limitations of this study, the results should be interpreted cautiously. In fact, the application of phonetic instruction and phonemic transcriptions in the classroom as a teaching method is worth further research.

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Hedging in College Research Papers: Implications for Language Instruction

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Abstract

Commitment and detachment in one's claims are linguistically manifested in the use of hedging and boosting devices. How novice writers show their confidence in or detachment to their proposed ideas has been the focus of analysis in this study that used Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric theory to examine 144 pages of introduction and conclusion sections in the randomly selected research articles of five different courses from both the arts and sciences disciplines investigated. Using Mojica's (2005) and Hyland's (2004) categorization, it was found out that hedges and boosters were almost equally used in the introduction and conclusion sections of the research articles sampled. Writers across all disciplines investigated exhibit preference for type 3 hedging device. Differences in showing commitment and detachment were apparent between the two disciplines: Psychology writers appear to be more detached while mass communication writers seem more committed. The topics of RAs apparently influenced the commitment and detachment of these writers. These findings suggest the need for awareness raising on the usefulness of hedging and boosting devices in mitigating claims despite the seeming sensitivity of the research article topics or its affect on the writers. In the end, these research articles are academic papers that must adhere strictly to writing conventions of impersonality and formality.

Introduction

Research articles are avenues for researchers to publicly propose new ideas which are likely to support or contradict findings of other scholars; hence, writers employ cautious language as the acceptance of their research contributions depend largely on how these are presented to the academic community. Using cautious language means mitigating the strength of a proposal by increasing or decreasing its illocutionary force through hedging and boosting devices (Vassileva 2001 in Mojica, 2005) which, according to Salager-Meyer (1997, p. 106), serve three main rhetorical functions: (1) threat minimizing strategies … to signal distance and to avoid absolute statements; (2) strategies to accurately reflect the certainty of knowledge; and (3) politeness strategies… between writers and editors.

The growing interest on hedges is apparent in various research investigations spanning hedging in speaking (Lakoff, 1972; Scarcella, R. & Brunak, R., 1981; Stubbs, 1986; Coates, 1987) to hedging in writing (Hyland, 1994; Cabanes, 2007). Scholars have explored frequency and functions of hedging according to genre and different rhetorical sections of scientific papers (Myers, 1989; Hyland, 1995, 1996; Meyer, 1997; Salager-Meyer, 1997). In the Philippines, Mojica (2005) extended the study on hedging in research articles to examine how Filipino authors use this academic discourse feature in introduction, discussion, and conclusion sections. She found out that there was significant difference in the two groups of authors' ways of showing commitment and detachment to their proposed ideas: Engineers boost more while linguists hedge more. She attributed this difference to the highly technical discussions in engineering as well as to its writing conventions which may not be as rigid as that of the linguists'. Mojica further suggested that the engineers' use of hedging despite the probable absence of academic writing training could be influenced by the Filipino culture, known for its politeness. Despite this interest however, there has been little attention to what hedging and boosting devices are and how these are used in research articles (RAs) of Filipino college writers. This present study extends Mojica's 2005 study to investigate how undergraduate ESL writers show their commitment and detachment to their ideas as revealed in RAs.

Furthermore, it aims to examine the differences in the use of hedging and boosting in five courses from the arts and sciences. Skelton (1988 in Swales & Feak, 2004, p. 125) wittily remarked that student-writers must learn the importance of being "confidently uncertain" in making claims. It is hoped that an analysis of how undergraduate writers confidently or detachedly present their ideas could be beneficial to English subject curriculum developers, research textbook writers, as well as to teachers of college academic writing.

Framework

Kaplan's contrastive rhetoric (1997) informed the discussion on how novice writers from five different disciplines show commitment and detachment to their proposed ideas as revealed in their use of hedging and boosting devices. Sciences and the arts have always been seen as opposite poles in its academic orientation. The latter is characterized by subjectivity, while the former is known for its rigid adherence to objectivity. While the sciences tend to be exact in its analysis, those in the arts tend to be relative. This difference could be inferred in the way a certain phenomenon is discussed in each discipline. For example, scientists might use observable, quantifiable data to explain the changing patterns of climate whereas most of the arts would tend to rely on perception and value judgment. Still, each discipline within the arts might vary in its approach and method of analysis given the same topic. Analysis from the point of view of philosophy and literature for example would differ in various ways from communication and linguistics. Given this nature, the writing of research articles which imposes strict adherence to its conventions, on top of field-specific conventions, may pose as potential challenge to undergraduate writers who may not be as exposed to as many articles and consequently to the conventions of writing in their academic community as their professional counterpart in the same field. Hyland (2005) acknowledges the importance of context familiarity and repeated use of conventionalized forms to the choice of language and adherence to expectations from academic writing.

Language proficiency may yet be another significant factor in the students' choice of linguistic features. Hyland's study (2005) has revealed that academically advanced students use more hedging devices while 'weaker' students employ more boosting devices. Still, another factor to consider in the analysis of student writing is the culture that may dictate how students express commitment and detachment to ideas they propose. Skelton and Allison (in Hyland, 2005) observed that EFL writers are more inclined to using direct and unqualified writing. Furthermore, they tend use more direct and authoritative tone, simple sentence constructions yet stronger modals that convey stronger commitments to statements.

Hedges and boosters

Categorization of hedges and boosters in the present study was adapted mainly from Mojica's 2005 study as well as Hyland's 2004 study on dialogic features. Mojica's type 1 modals/probabilities and type 2 semi-auxiliaries/epistemic verbs were combined in this study as a cover term for tentative verbs and modals (type 1). This includes modal and lexical verbs like *may, might, could,* introductory verbs like *seem, suggest, appear,* and phrases that use any or a combination of these like *it may seem to appear, it might be suggested*. *Should* is taken as a booster as in Mojica (2005). Type 2 includes tentative adjectives and adverbs like *possibly, likely, probably.* Adjective as well as adverbs like *certainly, definitely* are treated as boosters as they are used to show confidence in the claim/s. Also under type 2 are nominalized verbs like *The treatment of homosexuals in the films…* (Instead of the stronger verb forms like *The society treats homosexuals… in the films as…*). Type 3 includes distancing phrases which may vary from citing authority to using impersonal third person and unnamed agents. Rhetorical questions, imperatives (which in Mojica was labeled grammatical/stylistic means) as well as solidarity features like *it is known, it is a fact, as we all know* are grouped as type 4 engagement markers (Hyland 2004) together with second person pronoun *you*, and any explicit reference or direct address to readers. Type 5 self-mention includes any reference to the researcher/s which includes pronouns *I, we,* or nouns *researchers, writers* even when a verb follows it

like *this researcher believes, we argue*. In this last category that makes use of a combination of tentative verbs and modals together with self-mention, the device is considered a hedge when the claim seems to have been mitigated: it is a booster when the claim is strengthened like in the example, *the researcher strongly believes* which made use of a tentative verb but was made certain by the use of the adverb *strongly*.

Method of Research

This study examined thirty undergraduate theses in English or 144 pages of selected RA sections written by randomly selected students of the Institute of Arts and Sciences of Far Eastern University. These students are arts majors in English Language, Political Science, Mass Communication, and Science majors in Biology and Psychology. These participants were chosen as they are cross sections of disciplines which are said to exhibit variation in writing conventions. Selection of theses was limited to those written and submitted in school year 2007-2008, totaling six theses per course, i.e., six introduction and six conclusion sections per college course. Only those which have more than 2 pages of introduction and 1 page of conclusion sections were selected.

Only the introduction and conclusion sections of these undergraduate theses in English were examined as prior studies by most researchers have shown that these are the sections where writers usually use hedging and boosting devices. These devices were analyzed and coded using an adaptation of Mojica's (2005) categorization as well as Hyland's (2004) as discussed earlier.

This study is descriptive in nature. A simple frequency count was used, making this study a qualitative research. Determining differences in hedging and boosting devices use in the two rhetorical sections of research articles of writers from five courses was accomplished employing Kaplan's theory on contrastive rhetoric.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows the different means by which college writers show their commitment/ detachment to their claims.

Table 1 Total number of hedges/boosters per course

Course	Type 1 Tentative Verbs & Modals		Type 2 Adjectives Adverbs & Nouns		Type 3 Distancing Phrases		Type 4 Engagement markers		Type 5 Self-mention		Total	
	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B	H	B
Biology	7	6	2	5	9	0	0	3	0	3	18	17
English	6	29	0	5	42	0	6	1	0	9	54	44
Mass Communication	13	31	0	1	20	0	5	5	0	17	38	55
Political Science	13	11	1	9	20	0	3	5	0	16	37	41
Psychology	34	15	8	11	21	0	0	2	0	21	65	48

As can be seen, psychology writers hedged close to four times as much as biology writers who used hedging least among all writers from five different courses. Although psychology and biology are both sciences, the former may be said to belong to the "soft" sciences as interpretation of the human mental processes and behavior might not be presented precisely as it heavily relies on perception or personal judgment. It appears that type 3 distancing phrases are preferred across all courses, having been employed almost 53% of hedges in totality. One possible reason for this choice can be gleaned from directions in research textbooks that pound on students to cite authorities and remain as impersonal as possible by using passive voice of the verb (e.g. Plata, et.al., 2006). Not surprisingly, type 1 hedges ranked second among the top choices of hedging devices. Citing Vassileva, Mojica (2005) suggested that modals and probabilities *may* in particular, is a favored form of hedging. Although the samples in this study are not comparable to Vassileva's nor to Mojica's studies for a number of reasons, it is interesting nonetheless to note that modals and probabilities are favored among the five types of devices by the sampled RA writers in the similar way the writers in the mentioned authors' study favored the said devices. On the contrary, none of the writers showed detachment using type 5 device. Perhaps, when students mention themselves, it is when they are certain about their statements or when their statements contain ideas that they personally believe to be true; hence, they

seem to be more committed to their claim as can be seen from the sample *the researchers argue that even though it is the mandate of this commission to....*

Type 2 and type 4 appear to be the least preferred hedging devices as each accounts for less than 1% of the total hedges used. The somewhat limited use of type 4 device in the sampled RAs may be attributed to the students' desire to comply with the writing conventions that caution writers to use these devices sparingly whereas type 2 devices were probably unexhausted as they may not be commonly employed or it may be due to students' "unsophisticated knowledge of rhetorical... features" (Hyland 2002 in Mojica 2005, p. 512). Type 3 hedges used by most writers reached almost thrice as much as type 3 hedges employed by psychology writers. The latter seems to favor type 1 using more than 50% more of this device than any of the remaining four types of hedges. Not surprisingly, the writers showed commitment as much as they showed detachment: the number of boosters employed almost equaled hedges. Hedges exceeded boosters only by a marginal difference of seven hedges or 0.6%. The top three choices are type 1, type 5 and type 2 boosters. Type 1 is used 92 times, almost 3 times as much as type 2 while type 5 is almost 16% less than type 1. Consistent with previous studies (Skelton, 1988; Bloor & Bloor, 1991, in Hyland, 2005), this study suggests that novice Filipino writers, like their counterparts in other countries, show tendency to be more direct and committed to statements. Hyland (2005) attributed these tendencies to the writer's limited range of devices and unsophisticated communication skills; in this study however, the topics could have influenced the use of more boosters. Mass communication RAs were on gay stereotyping, abuse on women, gay rights/discrimination- these topics border on controversial yet these being chosen suggests that these could be issues that in some way directly or indirectly affect the writers. Perhaps, the research articles on gay stereotyping or gay rights were written by gay men or women; hence, the inclination towards using stronger language resulting in stronger claims. As the analysis of the corpus further reveals, mass communication writers tend to boost the most, having employed as much as 26% boosters in a total of 205 boosters or 16% more boosters than hedges, showing mass communication writers may be more confident about their

claims for reasons mentioned earlier. On the other hand, biology writers used only one hedge more than its boosters. All throughout, biology writers tend to be more reserved in their use of hedges and boosters. This may be partly due to the relatively fewer number of pages of the biology RAs or it could be because of the technical nature of their research articles, being experimental and reliant on observable data. These tendencies of science articles could have possibly influenced the writers to use the least hedges and boosters.

Table 2. Frequency of hedges/boosters in selected sections

	Introduction		**Conclusion**		**Total**	
	H	B	H	B	H	B
Biology	9	7	9	10	18	17
English	35	24	19	20	54	44
Mass Communication	30	22	8	33	38	55
Political Science	19	10	18	31	37	41
Psychology	57	46	8	2	65	48

Table 1 shows how many hedges and boosters are used in the introduction and conclusion parts of the RAs. As can be seen, writers across five courses tend to show both commitment and detachment in the introduction part of the RAs. Hedging in the introduction part is almost twice as many hedges in the conclusion part. On the other hand, conclusion has 13 boosters less than in the introduction.

It is possible that the use of hedging in novice writers' articles may not be just because of their want for acceptability but perhaps a genuine representation of tentativeness or uncertainty. In addition, the writers might not be thinking of positioning as much as they are thinking of complying with the requirements of the course. Perhaps, the writers may have never thought of their work being published or even read by others but the research subject teacher; hence, there were no thoughts given on other researchers refuting their claims.

The marginal difference of 0.6% of hedges from boosters suggests that writers are

comfortable in showing commitment perhaps because the topics i.e., political issues like *crime prevention, analysis of government efficacy, performance of optical media board, performance of the anti-graft, and corruption commission* and the like are mostly sensitive issues on which they probably have held strong opinions on even before the writing of the RAs. Another factor that could account for almost the same number of boosters as hedges is the need for the writers' to persuade their readers to continue reading the RAs. Probably, their desire to persuade the readers of the importance of their topics motivated them to use stronger affecting words which consequently showed stronger commitment.

It is also noticeable in the introduction part that type 5 self-assertion almost typically follows type 4 engagement markers. For example, …*we must be aware of, all of us must*… are likely to be followed by *..the researchers aim to…, the researcher conducted.*.. This style could probably be these writers' way of occupying the niche and urging the readers to see the importance of their study. It seems that appealing to the readers to see the need for this research is a strategy to assert their identity as well as the possible contribution that their study could make.

Another factor that may account for the occurrence of more hedges and boosters in the introduction section could be the relatively longer introduction part. In most RAs, conclusion section is no longer than one page.

Conclusion

The use of hedges and boosters in the RAs sampled despite the probable limited exposure of the writers to the genre and its conventions suggests that hedging – i.e. being polite -- may be culturally-inherent, the writers being Filipinos. The writers' tendency to use strong language to show commitment imply the need for the inclusion of lessons on hedging and boosting in the research writing subjects as well as the need for students to be more exposed to the conventions of research writing. It might be helpful to raise awareness among students of the usefulness of various devices, especially reader-friendly boosters, in mitigating claims no matter how controversial or how much their topics affect them. Hedging is an important discourse feature that

students must learn if they want their ideas to be taken seriously in the academic community. Training students to be "confidently uncertain" (Skelton, 1988 in Swales & Feak, 2004, p. 125) could prepare them for communicative situations that mostly require politeness. It could be a good preparation for writing research articles intended for publishing should the writers later on embark on graduate studies.

This small-scale study sought to examine the means by which novice writers use hedging and boosting devices to show their commitment/detachment to their propositions. Although results were drawn from the samples alone and could not be claimed to be conclusive, insights gained from this study can be used to enhance research paper module writing as well as the teaching of writing in general. Findings from comparing sciences and arts texts could sensitize research-writing teachers to the different writing styles of students and to their tendencies in writing. The latter would perhaps make teachers realize possible adjustments in pedagogy. Analysis of rhetorical sections of research papers might yield other interesting results if samples will be extended to include RAs from other universities. It might also be interesting to find if student writers from different Philippine universities would exhibit the same tendencies in showing commitment and detachment from their proposals.

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Using Improvisational Exercises for Increasing Speaking and Listening Skills

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Bio Data

Pamila Florea is a Lecturer at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and a former psychotherapist and social worker. Her main research interests are in spontaneous production skills, the use of creative writing, and the juncture where learning and joy meet. She has studied Improvisation with comedySportz in Philadelphia (USA).

Abstract

If language learners do not interact with the material they are learning, it is difficult for them to understand and integrate it. In classes where students are reluctant to speak, it is often helpful to integrate a stem or other structure to encourage this skill. Acting and Comedy improvisational exercises allow students of all abilities and interests to participate and make manifest grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation lessons in a fun and realistic way, right away. By using acting and comedy improvisational techniques, students not only are provided that structure but are encouraged to speak quickly and decisively, thus decreasing their reliance on their native language and allowing them to utilize the vocabulary and grammatical structures of the target language more naturally. This paper explores the philosophy of improvisational exercises as well as ways to foster spontaneous speech and increase listening skills for language learners. Multiple formats for specific patterns will be discussed including the use of nonsense words, stem completion, and cooperation. The writer will show how these techniques naturally require students to attend to listening as well as contextual cues as secondary benefit.

Keywords: Improv, games, listening skills, speaking skills, comedy, acting, spontaneous speech

Introduction

Speaking and listening are difficult skills to master when learning a new language, particularly in a teacher-based learning environment such as that found in Korea. As noted by Rusina (2009), students are generally expected to focus on the teacher who often teaches English grammar in Korean. The students are not expected to spontaneously produce and are thus low in their competency of productive skills. Confucian methods of teaching are based on a receptive student and a giving teacher. The teacher speaks, students take notes about the information without really interacting with it except via rote. As such, this method creates a gap for students. They are not confident with their ability to talk with a native speaker, do not generally exhibit confidence in their language ability, and often have years - even decades-old bad habits which have not been corrected because they have not been heard. In a paper regarding a similar culture, Japan, Nozaki (1993) notes that this quietness and passivity are considered positive traits for learners.

Why Improvisation Practice is Important

The researcher found that most students do not interact with the second language except to translate it into the native Korean and their responses back into English. This creates long pauses and frustration for both the listener and the speaker. For the listener, the pause becomes boring and makes the speaker seem less intelligent as noted by Pavlina (2005). For the speaker, the translation becomes difficult because of the complexity of the mother tongue and its inability to translate well grammatically. Vocabulary differences are also a problem with this method of communication (Cho, 2004).

Students need the opportunity to interact with the material in order to utilize the vast vocabulary they often have but do not know how to use. As educators, it is our duty to not just teach students the facts of the language, but also the skills in using it. This perspective can be likened to a doctor who has no clinical experience but is the top of the class in academic learning. Just as people expect competence in using tools from a surgeon, so too are second language learners expected to be able to use the

language they are learning in a real life situation. That is, they are expected to speak and to write, as well as to understand others who use the language.

Fleming (1995) noted that the three most common methods of student learning are visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. By using those modalities, the teacher facilitates better learning for the student. For example, the teacher writes and draws on the board for the visual learners, speaks for the auditory learners; and for the students who are kinesthetic, actions are the best method of instruction. The researcher has found that using improvisational exercises helps all three types of students to integrate the new material.

Using improvisational exercises, students of all levels were able to practice the language immediately upon learning the material. Although the value of exercises sometimes is questioned, Lee (1979) reminds us that the students themselves engage in using the language rather than thinking about the form of the language. The teacher can demonstrate the usefulness of exercises once or twice in the beginning to build rapport and trust with the students. Calling it an "exercise" can be helpful for resistant classes. These same classes may find it helpful to be told the main goals for practicing a specific improvisational exercise.

Improvisational exercises provide three main goals: student pronunciation improves, proper use of a grammatical structure is reinforced, and vocabulary practice is enhanced. It may be important to share with students these functions in order to engage them in speaking and to build trust so they will not lose face and will not fear making mistakes. Anecdotally, the researcher found that older students (business people and university students) report that they appreciate knowing that the exercise is more than just fun and that it is in fact a method of learning.

Practicing an improvisation exercise generally requires students to utilize a number of skills at once. Students must actively listen to their peers, be aware of body language and other contextual clues, maintain eye contact, and respond quickly, generally using a stem.

Language Activities

To teach students the value of using improvisational exercises, it is important to prepare them for the eventual activity by presenting the material, allowing them to interact with that material on a smaller scale via practice exercises and then finally they integrate a production portion. This portion includes the improvisational exercise.

How-to Teach Improvisational Exercises

Using a typical Presentation / Practice / Production pattern of language instruction (Maurer, 1997), the lesson is taught and then students receive a similar training for the exercise – that is the teacher presents the exercise (Preparation), the students practice with the teacher (Modeling), and then produce (Play). It is easy to integrate an improvisation exercise to the lesson plan. The teacher begins by presenting the necessary basic material, creates the opportunity for schema building and practice with gap fills, matching exercises, etc., and then allows for production exercises individually or in pairs / groups. Finally, the exercise is performed.

When teaching and performing the exercise, the teacher breaks the sequence into a few component parts: explanation, modeling, practice. A few adjustments will be added during the exercise as needed, and a mistake response will be used.

Some students, particularly those who have been brought up in teacher-based learning environments have difficulty with the aftermath of making mistakes (Brown, 1994) and are therefore reluctant to do the exercise for fear of failure. To eliminate the focus on the error, to maintain the rhythm of the exercise, and to keep the students engaged in the activity, it can be helpful to have a specific action that is done by all students in the event a mistake is made. For example, the teacher teaches the entire group of students an “error “activity” such as turning around and clapping three times before beginning the exercise again or putting hands out, heads down and calling out a nonsense syllable such as “moo” can create this change of focus.

Examples will follow for using improvisation exercises for grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

Grammar

Grammar lends itself well to stem completion exercises which are well utilized in improvisation exercises and games. Often a simple tweaking of an exercise's guidelines can turn the game into a speaking point for language learners.

Presentation

When teaching present continuous (S + to be + verb -ing), show the students the pattern on the board with a number of examples that are accurate in that moment.

I am teaching. / I am standing. / You are studying. / The wind is blowing.

Practice

Show a picture of a number of people / animals that are doing many different activities. Students can identify the verbs and use the pattern via a gap-fill.

Subject + to be + verb -ing

The bird is flying. / The cat is climbing. / The _____ is _____ing.

Production

The students can then in pairs or small groups put together a list of what is happening right then in the classroom or what is happening on the paper.

You are sitting. / The clock is ticking

The teacher teaches the question form for the present progressive including the spoken: What are you doing?

Preparation

Students can make a list of the verbs they know, and write them on the board in teams in the progressive form (I am singing, I am playing a guitar, I am combing my hair.) Being able to see the board allows more visually oriented students to have the support they need.

Modeling

Students are paired with each other. The teacher explains the exercise. The teacher tells students that this exercise is for practicing the grammatical structure.

To play the game / engage in the exercise, one person will begin any activity. For example, brushing your teeth (teacher mimics brushing her/his own teeth). And the next person comes up (teacher waves over one of the students who is more comfortable with speaking) and says, "What are you doing?" The teacher prompts the student to say "What are you doing?" while pointing to the question on the board. The student will generally understand s/he is to say "What are you doing?" If not, the teacher can whisper or further prompt the question. The student says "What are you doing?" The teacher then gives the next part of the activity by saying, "You can say anything EXCEPT what you are doing. NOT what you are doing. Let's start again." The teacher then mimics brushing her / his teeth, looks to the student who says "What are you doing?" The teacher says, "I'm reading a book – now you pretend to be reading a book." The student pretends to be reading a book. The teacher then beckons the next student to approach and the other line up to face the first student and prompts this student to say "What are you doing?"

Play

This sequence continues with the students in pairs and the teacher correcting until students understand the concept and have the ability to practice the stem. Students then begin to practice with their partners, changing partners at different intervals.

To practice other perspectives, the teacher can stop the exercise, instructing one student to continue and ask "What is s/he doing?" The students then can respond individually or as a group, "S/He is verb -ing."

Variations

This exercise can be used for pronunciation practice or to encourage the use of the target language. It can help develop both good pronunciation and to develop vocabulary proficiency. To assist students who have recently practiced the

pronunciation of the letter “l”, students can recycle by only saying verbs that begin with “l”. The examples can be “I’m listening to music,” “I’m laughing at a comedy,” “I’m letting the dog out.” As a secondary benefit, focusing on a beginning sound is one way to minimize translation and to decrease dependence on the primary language. The students must think in the target language rather than the first language.

Another variation can be the use of particular vocabulary. To recycle vocabulary from a previous lesson on travel, for example, the students can be instructed to use only verbs that are travel related “I’m buying an airplane ticket,” “I’m riding on a train,” “I’m drinking coffee in Paris.”

Pronunciation

At times teachers may need to teach pronunciation. It is helpful to have a basic knowledge of the mechanics of sounds. Teaching the difference between voiced and unvoiced, the teacher can later assist students with different sounds. Initially, teaching the difference between a sigh and an “ah” sound can be as simple as instructing students to place their hands at their throats and feel the difference – with and without vibrations to explain voiced and unvoiced sounds.

Presentation

In the Korean language, the /s/ sound is commonly used while its counterpart, the /z/ sound is unknown. By putting the unfamiliar sound into a familiar framework, it can be easier to remind students how to make the sound. When teaching the /z/ sound, use of the /s/ sound is usually helpful. If students have some difficulty with this, they can be instructed to place the tip of their tongue to almost touch their gum ridge behind their upper teeth and to blow through the hole that is produced (Williamson, 2008). This is an unvoiced sound. As pointed out by Azar (2000), many words in English that end in the letter /s/ actually have a /z/ sound.

Practice

Practice is as simple as the students saying the words “zip, zap, zop”. Teachers can

also have a list of commonly used words that would relate to the lesson that can be used. For example, if the lesson is on animals or the teacher wants to recycle material from a former lesson, discuss words like zebra, zoo, zoo keeper, zealous.

Production

Students can read aloud short paragraphs to each other with the target pronunciation pattern using the target pronunciation pattern. Alternatively, students can practice the final –s which is a /z/ sound by pronouncing words that end in the /s/ after voiced sounds (/d/, /b/, /g/, and /i/) such as roads, lobs, rags, and cheese as well as plurals that follow the /ʃ/, /tʃ/, /s/, /z/ and /dʒ/sounds which lead to an additional syllable (wishes, riches, blouses, prizes, hedges).

Preparation

It can be helpful for the teacher to pretend to be holding a ball. Sometimes even describing the ball helps the students. "Do you see my ball? I have a red ball."

Modeling

To teach the exercise, explain to the students how it is done physically by saying it and acting it out. "I throw the ball and say 'zip'," and then pretend to throw the ball to one of the students. "Now you throw the ball and say 'zap'," and encourage the student to pretend to toss a ball to another student. With the next student, give the instruction to throw the ball and say 'zop'. The student does so, and then the instruction is given to toss the ball and say 'zip' again. Students are encouraged to look at the person they are "throwing the ball to" which encourages eye contact as well as clarity within the exercise.

Play

Generally, students pick this exercise up quickly. They practice tossing the ball and saying the target words. At times, the teacher may need to stop the exercise and remind the students of the /z/ pronunciation. Because this exercise can get very slow

or very messy depending on the class, it is helpful to make sure to keep the energy up and to utilize the mistake response.

Variations

The zip-zap-zop format can also be used to practice vocabulary lists – months of the year, the periodic table, lists of presidents, etc. Any list can readily be used for this exercise. Alternatively, creating a verbal "web" of words can be done with this exercise. One student says a word and the next student uses that word to begin another word – the last letter for example such as bent, truck, kite, everybody, yellow, when, and new. Specific vocabulary can be practiced as well. If a lesson was just given on hygiene products, each student has to say a new term and not repeat – such as shampoo, soap, conditioner, lotion, hairspray, perfume, etc.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary is another area where a number of improvisation games can be utilized. In particular, expressions of emotions can be practiced, action verbs, verb tenses, and modifiers are well suited for improvisation.

Presentation

As an adjective exercise, "My Grandmother's Cat" can be used with almost any level and with a mixture of levels. It can be used to reinforce new vocabulary or to recycle old vocabulary. It is also helpful when teaching a new pattern such as how to add certain suffixes like "-less" or "-ic" to reinforce the lesson.

Practice

Having pictures of different nouns can be helpful with this exercise. Upon teaching the target vocabulary, the teacher can write or have a student write the alphabet as a list on the board. Students then practice calling out adjectives that describe a person, place, or thing. Because this exercise presumes a certain level of vocabulary, it is not appropriate until the students have mastered that level. However, the level does not

need be very high. With lower level students, even opposites and colors can provide a fairly good resource from which to draw.

Production

Students can be grouped together and asked to make an alphabetical list of the new vocabulary and can use some words used in previous lessons. With lower level students, it is helpful to remind them of colors, opposites, and synonyms so that they can complete their lists. For higher level students, it can help them to teach something like this pattern:

Good → Great →Wonderful → Amazing → Mindboggling.

Pretty → Beautiful → Gorgeous → Breathtaking

Sad → Depressed → Despondent → Desperate → Suicidal

They can be encouraged to go to at least the third level for their words. If they write "old", the teacher can guide them to use a thesaurus or to think of other words for "old" – ancient, seasoned, elderly, etc.

Some letters have few adjectives that begin with them. These particular letters, such as x and z, can be the models the teacher uses by providing words like xenophobic, zealous, and zany. This can help keep students from getting stumped. For higher level students, the teacher can remind them of prefixes (dis-, pre-, un-, ir-) to help with their lists.

Preparation

It can be helpful to have a few of the words up on the board to assist the students in following the pattern. By writing the first few words that are used, the teacher can reinforce visually the pattern of this speaking / listening exercise.

Modeling

First, the teacher explains that the first student will fill in the blank and say something like, "My grandmother's cat is an active cat" The next student will repeat and add a "b" letter like this. "My grandmother's cat is an active and beautiful cat." And so on.

Play

The teacher can guide the first few students to use the pattern, and once the direction is clear, the game is begun again. Words can be left on the board to encourage reading, to assist visual students, and a student can be assigned to write the words on the board.

Students may sometimes forget that the pattern is alphabetical and may need to be reminded. It can be helpful for students to act out the adjectives – spreading their hands wide to indicate "big" or smiling to indicate "joyous" or scratching the face to suggest "confused" for example.

There may be times that a student may say a word that others don't know. In that case, writing the word on the board and eliciting understanding from the students is an important part of keeping students engaged. A known synonym can be given, or the student or teacher can act it out. With a large class, it can help to keep everyone engaged by on occasion – perhaps every 5^{th} person – have the entire class say the phrase with the adjectives. The teacher can also have them say the words as fast as possible. The teacher can also divide the class into smaller groups and have several rounds going at once.

Conclusion

This paper has shown a number of ways students can be engaged in speaking exercises that allow them to interact with the material using improvisational exercises. Many students do not know how to use vocabulary and grammatical structures they understand intellectually but which they do not actually use. Improvisational exercises can be a fun and rewarding way to engage students. Not only does it give them a grammatical stem that they can use, but it also allows them to interact with each other and to practice listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary. Improvisational exercises reinforce grammatical structures, and when students understand the reason for the exercise, they will usually participate well.

The researcher has found that in all classes she has taught that students – from elementary students to business people – generally enjoy the use of these types of

exercises. Anecdotally, some of the shyer students report that it takes the pressure off of them while some of the more outgoing students have spoken of an appreciation for having the opportunity to express themselves. Improvisation is an easy way to create an environment for students to interact with the language.

Improvisation exercises are a rewarding way to practice the lessons taught. Finally, improvisation is fun, and that is always a win!

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Looking at a Learning Styles Research Paper: A Critical Evaluation

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Bio Data
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Abstract
This report evaluates a major study of the learning styles of EFL students. This critical evaluation brings out some of the weaknesses and strengths of research in the area of learning strategies and shows how a technically correct methodology can still lead to somewhat bland results. The report makes recommendations for deeper probing and more precise questions when trying to learn about learning styles.

Keywords: learning styles, strategies, research evaluation

Introduction

This report examines a major empirical study of the learning styles of EFL students: *The Adult Migrant Education Service of New South Wales (AMES) Survey of Learning Styles* (Willing, 1988, pp.100-165).

Studies of variations in the ways students learn are common in all areas of education. In the field of second language acquisition, Skehan (1998) carried out a comprehensive study of learning styles. Segalowitz (1997) reviewed the general field of learner differences and O'Malley & Chamot (1990) gave a thorough introduction to research in learner strategies. In Japan researchers have surveyed learners' strategies (e.g., Watanabe, 1992; Nunnelley, 1993; Willis, 1996), and preferred learning styles (e.g., Ishikawa, 1996; Yamashita, 1996; Hyland, 1994).

A difficulty that confronts researchers in learner styles/strategies is that writers in

this field use several different definitions of learning strategies and styles (cf. Rubin 1987, Wenden 1987) and hence different lists have been developed to categorise styles and strategies (see Rees-Miller, 1993). Related to this, Chaudron (1988, p.110) notes: "it is difficult for classroom research to produce solid evidence of which specific learning strategies are the most fruitful ones to investigate." It might also be that because learning styles/strategies are more difficult to isolate than, say, motivation or anxiety, the results to date have not been impressive.[i] This does not mean that these studies are unimportant to language learning. Rather the field is primed for further studies that go beyond or build on those of the past. I hope that by critically evaluating a past study some of weaknesses and strengths can be brought out for the improvement of further research.

I chose Willing's study because it is large and well-documented, and is somewhat epitomic of surveys carried out in this area during the seventies to nineties. It was also research that was put into use. Willing used the study to develop a new training system at AMES and this became the basis for a later book (Willing, 1989). Moreover, several of my thesis students are interested in pursuing research into learning styles/strategies and I wanted to further understand potential problems with this area of research.

The Study

Outline of the study from commencement to completion

1. February to April 1984: (a) Planning, (b) Literature search, and (c) Preliminary interviews with learners and teachers
2. May to June 1984: (a) Generation of hypothesis, (b) Formulation of learning style questionnaire, (c) trialling questions and scales, and (d) Final choice of questionnaire
3. August to December 1985: (a) Administration of survey, (b) Provision of seminars to discuss results, and (c) Began writing up research

The study had a long lead up period before the administration of the questionnaire allowing Willing's to thoroughly research the topic and develop suitable hypotheses.

Hypothesis generation

Willing's reviewed relevant literature and based on this decided to use 'field dependence/field independence (e.g. Berry 1981, Leu 2000) as a way of interpreting the research. Field dependence/independence is a broad area but Willing specifically interpreted it to mean:

> *Those who tend to accept or rely upon the external environment are relatively more field dependent (FD), while those who tend to work on it are relatively more Field independent*. (1988, 41)

And:

> *Those who are more field dependent tend to accept social influence more and to be more competent in social relations; while those who are more field independent tend to be more independent of social influence and to exhibit less social competence.* (1988, 43)

He further (1988, p. 102) equated Field Dependent learners as being those with 'concrete' type learning styles and Field independent with 'analytical' learning styles.

In the initial stages of the research, Willing's interviewed twenty-five former and current AMES students. An advisory group of AMES teachers also contributed information and opinions. The results of these interviews contributed to the generation of the 'fundamental hypothesis' (1988, p. 103) that learners would "show a pattern of higher preference either for the analytical-type responses in his questionnaire or the concrete type options". Willing claims that his hypothesis 'represented a distillation of the predictions which might reasonable be made, on the basis of existing research" (1988, 103). He notes that the principle aim was to collect unprejudiced information about learner preferences with regard to six different: types of classroom activities; teacher behaviour; aspects of language which need emphasis; sensory-modality preferences; and self-study. To differentiate between the 'analytical' and 'concrete' learning styles in each of the six areas above, questions were included that ranged from highly analytical to highly concrete. The study had a subsidiary aim of comparing learners from different backgrounds and cultures and thus data about family and ethnic background were collected. Willing predicted that learners who

were (i) from a western background, (ii) well educated, (iii) from small families, and (iv) from a city background would show preferences for field independence (analytical) learning styles. As a preliminary to the study, Willing interviewed 40 teachers and 25 learners 'in depth, individually' (1988, p.27) about:

1) What the teachers believed were the learning style preferences of their students and

2) What the learners said their preferences were. However, the responses were so varied that 'it was impossible to generalise' (Willing1988, p. 28) and he decided that a broader instrument was needed and so opted for surveys for the final study.

Willing was now able to formulate individual questions by which he would be able to determine different learning styles.

Questionnaire Construction

The scale used for the first thirty questions was: *no, a little, good,* and *best.*

Willing (1988) decided on this after testing other options, which he found unsatisfactory. It is not clear, however, why this scale was eventually decided on. He notes that without detailed instructions "many learners would mark 'Best' to virtually everything" (1988, p. 111). Reid (1990, p. 336) found that Japanese students rarely used the extreme of a similar scale (opting almost always for the slightly negative or slightly positive responses whereas native English speakers consistently used the entire scale.

Administration of questionnaires

All questionnaires were given out during class time. The majority were administered and supervised by the research team. Class teachers who were provided with an instruction sheet supervised those that were not. Willing notes that the amount of faults in the teacher supervised questionnaires was no higher than in the research team supervised ones.

Interpreters were used, when learners had insufficient English to understand the questions. The study seemed to follow sound ethical procedures with the purpose of the questionnaire was explained to students. Each participating AMES centre received

an analysis of the results as well as copies of the final study.

Analysis of individual questions

This section critiques some of the 45 questions of the questionnaire (See appendix for complete questionnaire).

1. *I like to learn by reading*

This is imprecise. Does it mean that the student is given a text and left to read silently or is the student asked to read aloud / perhaps the text is used as the basis for a communicative lesson?

2. *I like to listen and use cassettes.*

Does this mean that I use the cassettes by myself or does it relate only to the classroom?

4. *In class, I like to learn by pictures, films, and videos.*

Placing pictures with films and videos confuses the question. Pictures could mean flashcards or pictures out of a magazine. It would have been better to omit pictures from the question.

6. *I want to write everything in my notebook.*

Who would honestly write everything in their notebook? Nevertheless 21% of students circled Best for the question (1988, p. 117).

9. *I like the teacher to give us problems to work on.*

Not specific enough. What type of problems?

12. *I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes.*

Does this mean ‘let me find’ and then comment as to whether they were correct or to make no comment?

23. *I like to learn English words by doing something*.

I think it would have been preferable to be specific. For example “I like to learn English words by speaking them”.

32. *If something in English is too difficult for me, I try to listen to some part of it.*

I think most people would use this strategy. It is not specific enough.

33. *I watch people’s faces and hands to help me understand what they say.*

Again this strategy is so common that I think little can be learned from responses to it.

34. *When I'm reading, if I don't understand a word, I try to understand it by looking at the other words.*

Surely a very basic way of reading, even if some students are not particularly good at this.

37. *I think about what I am going to say before I speak.*

I think even native speakers do this very often. (Probably not often enough)

39. *When I am speaking English I listen to my pronunciation*.

Very normal behaviour. Is it really a specific strategy?

41. *If someone does not understand me, I try to say to in a different way.*

Again most students would do this.

44. *I ask myself how well I am learning English, and I try to think of better ways to learn.*

It would have more useful if the question was divided into different options, which were specific as to 'better ways'.

45. *I try to understand the Australian way of life.*

These are immigrants to Australia and it seems very likely they would all 'try to understand this. (This question had the highest positive response of questions 31-45).

As we see many of the questions were very general. Willing's study had the aim of uncovering traits that are at perhaps a deeper level than these questions reach. Johnson (1992), noting the difficulty of questionnaire construction, recommends using instruments that have been previously used and thoroughly evaluated. Willing's reason for not using an existing questionnaire is that the wording was too complex for students. However, as translators were available this should not have been such a problem.

The Results

Some of the responses to the questions may have been unrelated to whether the students favoured 'concrete' or 'analytical' learning styles. Willing concedes that "in the case of questions rated high, responses may be indicating a perception of inadequately met needs (rather than personal preferences". For example a question about pronunciation and sounds gained the highest rating of all questions but he attributes this to the lack of teaching in this area at AMES. Error correction was also rated highly by most learners but Willing thinks this was due to the AMES practice of giving minimal correction. Students were thus expressing a desire for more correction rather than because of any inherent learning style. It is, of course to Willing's credit that he discusses such results.

Other questions (not discussed by Willing) may also depend on current classroom activities, or lack thereof. The question "I like to study grammar" is an example. Student's perception of grammar depends on past experience and teacher presentation. For example, I sometimes conduct grammar attitude checks on new students. Sometimes they see grammar as being repetition of simple sentence based exercises – which it often is. However, if I make the effort to teach a grammar point in a context based situation they invariably rate the exercise highly. Another example is question 19: "I like to learn many new words" (1988, p120) Willing finds it significant that it had a very high rating and suggests that this indicates vocabulary development should be given high priority. However, the wording of the question is ambiguous. Does 'learn' mean that the words were acquired or that they were merely taught (and not necessarily acquired)? If the students thought that the question implied that many new words were acquired then the high rating could be related to this.

General Results

Willing writes that in "broad terms the basic survey hypothesis was confirmed" (that learners favour either analytical or concrete learning styles (1988, p. 154).

However, considering that he finds that only 10% of the learners actually fit into

each of these categories (1988, p. 157) this conclusion seems somewhat inflated.

Conclusion

I chose this study because it appeared to have excellent qualities. The number of students (507) studied, the thorough preparations, and lengthy planning are all signs of the care and extensiveness of the research. Furthermore, in the preparatory stages information was garnered from students and teachers. The questionnaire was trialed before final acceptance. The administration of the questionnaire was well done and included interpreters. He supplied a great deal of material about the actual study making it transparent to readers. Thus, as far as the technical procedures of conducting research, Willing's study is outstanding.

Despite this, I think its value lies with the indications it gives of general student preferences with regard to the popularity of pedagogical practices at AMES, rather than to insights into individual learner styles.[i]

The weaknesses of the survey

1. Many of the questions were not specific enough to penetrate the complex and deep-seated nature of learning style.

2. Willing was candid in discussing the lack of validity of some questions (see 1988, p.105). However, it might have improved the study if he had come up with improved questions where he had such concerns.

3. These different levels of learners is not addressed in the study. Messik (1984) noted that cognitive constructs might vary depending on the level of the learner. For example, at early stages students must work to acquire a basic vocabulary and grammar while at higher levels the application of specialised schemata may be required.

4. The usual approach in studies of this type is to allow respondents to use their native language unless they have an advanced level of English (See O'Malley & Chamot 1990, p. 92). Willing used only English for all the survey questions.

5. I am not convinced that questionnaires are the best way to investigate learning

styles. Surveys have the advantage of being readily analysed by statistical methods and hence give apparently solid results with clear and often generalizable patterns. A large amount of information can be obtained from hundreds of respondents with relative ease. For these reasons, survey is perhaps the most "commonly used descriptive method in educational research" (Cohen & Manion 1987, p. 97). While questionnaires have been popular with researchers in the field of learning strategies (e.g. Oxford, 1986; Politzer & McGroaty, 1985) I argue their value is limited when investigating such complex behaviour as learning strategies. Research like this seems only to tell us what we already know. Beebe (2001) notes that questionnaire-based surveys with generalized questions don't provide sufficient insight into learner behavior and strategies. The highly structured nature of questionnaires necessarily has a strong influence on the eventual data collected (See O'Malley & Chamot 1990, p.95, p.112, p. 221). This can lead to a skewed effect and to remedy this it is preferable that (See Cohen & Manion 2000) multiple data collection be carried out. I think Willing could have greatly improved the study by conducting in-depth interviews (with the help of translators). Interviews give a richness of description and students are likely to be more motivated to respond because of their pleasure in having someone take a direct interest in the way they learn. (See O'Malley &Chamot 1990, p.94).

The reason Willing's decided not to use interviews in the final study was because he found the results too variable. Perhaps, when looking into learner strategies we should expect the great variety that Willing found in the initial interviews and rather than trying to reduce this find ways to incorporate it into any research. I wonder if Willing was already mentally committed to a research based on field independence/ field independence and because of this was reluctant to look at other ways of analysis.

6. Field independence/ dependence was the guiding theoretical basis for the study; however, I doubt the validity of dividing such complex behavior as learning styles into this simple dichotomy. While Chapelle (Chappelle 1992; Chapelle & Green, 1992) has argued that field independence/dependence is worthy of further study. Ellis (1994), Skehan (1989), and Griffiths & Sheen (1992) have all suggested abandoning

further efforts to investigate field independence/dependence in relation to second language learning.

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Appendix

Student Questionnaire

Example:				
I like to learn by listening to songs.	no	a little	good	best

1. In English class, I like to learn by reading.	no	a little	good	best
2. In class, I like to listen and use cassettes.	no	a little	good	best
3. In class, I like to learn by games	no	a little	good	best
4. In class, I like to learn by conversations.	no	a little	good	best
5. In class, I like to learn by pictures, films, video.	no	a little	good	best

6. I want to write everything in my notebook.	no	a little	good	best
7. I like to have my own textbook.	no	a little	good	best
8. I like the teacher to explain everything to us.	no	a little	good	best
9. I like the teacher to give us problems to work on.	no	a little	good	best
10. I like the teacher to help me talk about my interests.	no	a little	good	best
11. I like the teacher to tell me all my mistakes.	no	a little	good	best
12. I like the teacher to let me find my mistakes.	no	a little	good	best
13. I like to study English by myself (alone).	no	a little	good	best
14. I like to learn English by talking in pairs.	no	a little	good	best
15. I like to learn English in a small group.	no	a little	good	best
16. I like to learn English with the whole class.	no	a little	good	best
17. I like to go out with the class and practise English.	no	a little	good	best
18. I like to study grammar.	no	a little	good	best
19. I like to learn many new words.	no	a little	good	best
20. I like to practise the sounds and pronunciation.	no	a little	good	best
21. I like to learn English words by seeing them.	no	a little	good	best
22. I like to learn English words by hearing them.	no	a little	good	best
23. I like to learn English words by doing something.	no	a little	good	best
24. At home, hike to learn by reading newspapers, etc.	no	a little	good	best
25. At home, I like to learn by watching TV in English.	no	a little	good	best
26. At home, I like to learn by using cassettes.	no	a little	good	best
27. At home, I like to learn by studying English books.	no	a little	good	best
28. I like to learn by talking to friends in English.	no	a little	good	best
29. I like to learn by watching, listening to Australians.	no	a little	good	best
30. I like to learn by using English in shops/CES trains	no	a little	good	best
31. When I don't understand something in English, I ask someone to explain it to me.	no	sometimes	often	
32. If something in English is too difficult for me I	no	sometimes	often	

try to listen to some part of it.

33. I watch people's faces and hands to help me understand what they say.	no	sometimes	often
34. When I'm reading if I don't understand a word, I try to understand it by looking at the *other* words	no	sometimes	often
35. When I am not In class, I try to find ways to use my English.	no	sometimes	often
36. I am happy to use my English even if I make mistakes.	no	sometimes	often
37. I think about what I am going to say before I speak.	no	sometimes	often
38. If I don't know how to say something, I think of a way to say it, and then I try it in speaking.	no	sometimes	often
39. When I am speaking English, I listen to my pronunciation.	no	sometimes	often
40. If I learn a new word, I try to put it into my conversation so I can learn it better.	no	sometimes	often
41. If someone does not understand me, *I* try to say it in a different way.	no	sometimes	often
42. I like the sound of English.	no	sometimes	often
43. I try to find my special problems in English, and I try to fix them.	no	sometimes	often
44. I ask myself how well I am learning English, and I try to think of *better* ways to learn.	no	sometimes	often
45. I try to understand the Australian way of life.	no	sometimes	often

[i] This problem is not limited to second language acquisition research. Leu (2000, p. 753,) noted that limited results had been achieved in the area of research into learning styles with first language reading and technology studies.

[ii] The study also uncovered the interesting fact that about one third of married AMES students had no children. After comparing this with data for the overall migrant population he noted that this was "far in excess of the proportion of childless marriages in the immigrant population generally; we must conclude that having children is a definite obstacle to coming to AMES classes." And he recommended that childcare facilities be provided at AMES. A worthy discovery even if unrelated to the aim of the survey.