

Literacy Teaching: How Much Grammar Is Required in Writing as an Expressive Skill?

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Abstract

This paper is a one hypothesis research that investigates the perception of teachers on the effect of grammar on the expressive or productive skill of writing to provide a good platform for literacy teaching. One hundred undergraduates and post-graduates participants—50 each—were given a fifteen-item questionnaire to show their opinion on the relevance of grammar to the teaching of continuous writing. The hypothesis tested at 0.05 level of significance was rejected. Obtaining a mean score of 2.93 above the undergraduate students' 1.92 in the t-test of the data collected, the findings show that the post-graduate students believe grammar is an essential part of good writing. The researcher consequently suggests ways of slicing up grammar teaching for better performance in writing.

Keywords

Perception, Grammar, Expressive, Writing, Academic

1. Introduction

Writing is a key skill in life-long learning as it has the potential to help students express their thoughts and assist school graduates in enhancing their careers. It ushers young adults into politics and socialization, especially in contemporary times. The emergence of computer assisted language instruction and social media, for instance, advance researchers by connecting them faster to the world through writing than it was in the last twenty years.

In a study conducted by Abu-Seileek (2004) on Computer Assisted Language Instruction and its impact on respondents' writing ability, it was found "*that there were statistically significant differences between the experimental group who studied via computer and the control group who studied in the traditional method*". The former performed better.

In another research conducted by Evangelin (2011) on effect of instructional media on the learning of English grammar among teacher trainees, the 40 students considered for learning grammar based on instructional media through a software programme were found to have a higher achievement compared to their colleagues (another 40 respondents) who constituted the conventional group.

However, whether in traditional setting or with electronic strategies or resources and whether with or

without phobia for grammar, “*Students struggling with the writing process develop a negative view of writing as well as a negative image of their own abilities to conduct written communication*” (Algozzine & Diliberto, 2004).

Writing, though a strong literacy skill, provides a cover up for people who are weak in speech communication and pronunciation, both of which are universal indicators of proficiency in any language as well as yardsticks to measure literacy. As a productive skill, therefore, writing should be approached with the sagacity of sharing authentic materials and resources that are comprehensible. To do otherwise is to promote bigotry and cripple learning and socialization.

As an expressive skill of language, writing showcases people’s culture and social milieu, promotes interaction, encourages adaptation and allows for feedback. This makes academic literacy to be broad and wide; while academic writing remains a genre within the larger field of academic literacy (Lee, 2012; Gijbels, Donche, Richardson, & Vermunt, 2013). Students come into the universities not just from varied backgrounds but with diverse experiences that would require processing in the face of multiculturalism and heterogeneity of humanity. Such processing is a test of effective academic writing involved in the daily university life.

2. Brief Literature Review

2.1 Writing as a Literacy or Productive Skill

In the university, students are expected to be involved in multiple tasks that require broad reasoning and critical analyses of issues, notions and ideas. The ability to do independent thinking, synthesize thoughts and extract decisions come under serious scrutiny in report writings of term papers, projects, dissertations and theses. Hence, academic literacy is all about being able to bring, from your “archive”, a scientific induced form of thinking which makes you *a jack of all trade* and *master of all*. Academic writing as a standard literacy measurement tests the scholastic part of a researcher. For example, the one in humanities, reasoning out trends in social and natural sciences to further his arguments. While most researchers tend to shy away from writing, no one doubts the fact that writing skills are required to get established as an authority (Cameron, Nairn, & Higgins, 2009). “*Academic writing skills are crucial when students, e.g., in teacher education programs, write their undergraduate theses*” (Aberg, Stahle, Engdahl, & Nyqvist, 2012).

Academic writing, unfortunately, is not a linear process. That is, we don’t count the teaching or acquisition as well as the knowledge of the skills like we count numbers. Many students might feel disappointed to learn this. Writing skills are acquired in a long time learning processes of building up from resources, materials and personnel on the road map of the learner. The researcher writes, presents drafts for criticism and writes again. Academic writing is writing to re-write. Experience has shown that precocious students would be on the lookout for a comprehensive syllabus on academic writing that would spell out the step-by-step approach to acquiring skills for academic writing. Braine (2002) believes that the direction to acquiring literacy for fantastic academic writing includes:

- A working knowledge of learner's specialism
- Research skills
- good reading habit and ability
- genuine interest in writing
- willingness to adapt to university social and academic cultures
- personalities of academic mentors
- demands of academic mentors
- demands and influence of student peers
- textbooks, manuals and handbooks.

And, we can add, to the list of Braine, social media.

2.2 Grammar in Effective Writing

In countries where English is studied as a second language and is utilised for multiple socio-political purposes we are confronted with the question: how much grammar is required for effective writing in all genres? This question arises for the following reasons:

- (a) Bad grammar distorts information and makes nonsense of good thoughts and fluid logic. According to Azar (2007), grammar sets the pace for structures because it consists of predictable patterns that allow what we say, hear or write to be intelligible.
- (b) Every language is cultural. We dream in our culture, we write in English. Some aspects of the cultures of people learning English as a second language cannot be expressed in the English Language.
- (c) In an attempt to "force" local thoughts into foreign language, writers sometimes "localize" English dictions or water down the effect the native thoughts should have on the reader. The consequence of this may rub on arriving at effective semantics, syntax or morphology of the report.

2.3 Rationale for This Paper

This paper is focused on:

- (a) Presenting a report of teachers' perception of the role of grammar on academic writing
- (b) Discussing the relationship between grammar and effective writing skills

2.4 Hypothesis

There is no significant difference in the perception of undergraduate and post graduate students on the relevance of grammar to academic writing.

3. Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey design tested on a hundred participants—50 undergraduate students and 50 post graduate students each of whom was given a well structured fifteen-item questionnaire (Relevance of Grammar to Academic Writing Questionnaire (RGAWQ)) aimed at eliciting their responses on how they perceived the relevance of grammar to academic writing. Section "A" of the inventory contains items requesting participants' bio-data which was actually not used for this research due to limited time and space. With reference to section B, participants were to tick (✓) the

correct item on a modified Likert structure ranging from 1 (Not all the time) to 4 (Exactly true). The total score obtainable was $4 \times 16 = 64$ and the lowest $1 \times 16 = 16$. High scores were associated with positive view of grammar in academic writing. Touching on the validity of RGAWQ, the instrument has undergone face and content validity through trial-tests in various populations including in-service teachers, online audience and young adults in foundation classes across cultures and nations. The reliability co-efficient was found to be 0.72. The test was administered the same day to all participants.

4. Findings

Table 1 shows the t-test analysis of difference in the perceptions of undergraduate and post-graduate students on the relevance of grammar to academic writing.

Table 1. Perceptions of Participants on the Relevance of Grammar to Academic Writing

| t-value | N | X | SD | t-cal | t-crit | Df |
|--|----|------|------|-------|--------|-----|
| Undergraduate Students' perception of the relevance of grammar to academic writing | 50 | 1.92 | 1.24 | | | |
| Post-graduate Students' perception of the relevance of grammar to academic writing | 50 | 2.93 | 1.26 | 5.71 | 1.92 | 198 |

* Level of significance = 0.05

* H_0 rejected

5. Discussion and Recommendation

The t-value (5.71) from the table is significant at 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). It follows therefore that there is significant difference in the perception of undergraduate and post-graduate students on the relevance of grammar to academic writing. It is not surprising that though both groups believe grammar is relevant to academic writing, the post-graduate students with (2.93) mean score have a higher perception. This is probably because they need to do more of writing in their study.

Writing, at this level, can be enhanced through introduction to specific skills in planning, drafting and revising. The road to demystifying conventions and providing explicit feedback to given tasks is:

- (a) More available today through growing technological opportunities like online avenues. Now, in the comfort of their homes, students intending to improve on their study could tap on online resources for innovative paths to pursuing their writing courses. A lot of worksheets and dummies are available for free
- (b) A good starting point in writing process is the selection of a topic. It is doubtful if a writer will choose a topic he would hardly be able to write about. Writing practice would normally include as well,

training in maintaining and applying a logical coherence, vocabulary development, style, good grammar and avoidance of plagiarism.

(c) These thoughts of Hacker (2002) on proofreading could assist us further:

“Although proofreading may be dull, it is crucial. Errors strewn throughout an essay are distracting and annoying. If the writer doesn't care about this piece of writing, thinks the reader, why should I? A carefully proofread essay, however, sends a positive message: it shows that you value your writing and respect your readers” (p. 45).

(d) With reference to teaching grammar for better writing performance. The first thing we should confirm is with “what method are we teaching grammar?” This is because methodology itself has a way of maligning our intention and destroying our purpose. A lot of students hate grammar because they view it as a compendium of rules and standards that cannot be met easily by second language learners of English. Gina Jaegar (2011) posits that notwithstanding the submission of earlier studies on the fact that traditional grammar instruction has no effect on composition, English teachers and policy makers need to re-evaluate the pedagogical approach to grammar instruction.

(e) Finally, this study also intends to uphold the earlier findings of linguists that it is more effective to teach punctuation, sentence variety and sentence patterns in the context of writing than to access the topic by teaching unorganized skills.

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