The Effect of Relentless Monitoring and Grading on Teaching Writing: An Example from Two South African Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the way in which two Grade 5 teachers employed at different primary schools in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa taught writing to their English first additional language (EFAL) learners. A qualitative interpretive approach was used to identify factors that shape the ways these teachers handle the teaching of writing. Data collection methods consisted of interviews, classroom observations and document analysis.

Analysis of the data reveals that both teachers focused primarily on ensuring that their learners completed their written work so that it could be marked and graded in response to demands from their superiors, rather than on engaging deeply with the processes of writing (brainstorming, drafting, revising etc). Not only does this run counter to the writing pedagogy recommended in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), but it also denies learners the scaffolding needed to help them develop the self-regulation skills needed to become independent writers. These findings demonstrate the need for assisting teachers to shift away from focusing only on learners' performance (testing and grading) towards a stronger emphasis on the process of writing. This would require that teachers develop a deeper understanding of the process/genre approaches to teaching writing advocated by CAPS.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is an extract from my Masters of Education (MEd) thesis submitted at Rhodes University, South Africa. The central goal of my MEd thesis was to investigate how two Grade 5 teachers from two different schools teach writing to their EFAL learners and to identify some of the factors that inform these teachers' pedagogies. My MEd case study addressed among others issues, the following two questions:

How do the selected teachers teach writing to their Grade 5 EFAL learners?

What type of feedback do they provide on their Grade 5 EFAL learners' written work?

It was found that both teachers focused primarily on ensuring that their learners completed their written work so that it could be marked and graded in response to demands from their superiors, rather than on engaging deeply with the *processes* of writing (brainstorming, drafting, revising etc). Not only does this run counter to the writing pedagogy recommended in the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS), but it also denies learners the scaffolding needed to help them develop the self-regulation skills needed to become independent writers. These findings are the focus of this paper.

The paper comprises of four sections. The first section discusses writing and the pedagogies of writing recommended in the CAPS to be used in South African schools. The second section presents the methodology of the research, outlining the research paradigm and the methods employed in the collection of data. In the third section I discuss the findings concerning some of the contextual factors that influence the two teachers teaching of writing to their Grade 5 EFAL learners. The final section presents the concluding remarks.

2. WRITING

Research has shown that one of the best predictors of whether a child will function well in school and go on to contribute actively in our increasingly literate society is the level of his/her reading and writing (National Association for Education of Young Children (NAYEC) (1998). The importance of writing cannot be over emphasized. Writing is a powerful way for learners to develop an understanding of themselves and their world. Learners must have adequate written language skills in order to pass a grade, complete school and ultimately obtain employment (Hampton and Resnick, 2008)

It is often argued that writing and reading are inextricably linked (Bower, 2011); what children write reflects the nature and quality of their reading (Barrs & Cork, 2001, as cited in Bower, 2011, p 4). Similarly, Krashen (1984) argues that extensive reading contributes to the development of writing ability and that it is more significant in improving writing than the frequency of writing. Martin (2003) maintains that children who have difficulties with writing are not experienced enough as readers to anticipate the needs of readers of their writing. However, unlike speaking, writing is not picked up incidentally; children need careful teaching if they are to learn to write effectively (Initial Teacher Education [ITE], 2013).

2.1 Different pedagogies of writing

Nordin and Mohammad (n.d., p.75) assert that "there have been numerous approaches to the teaching of writing in the history of language teaching and this has led to several paradigm shifts in the field." Researchers such as Cumming (1998) and Matsuda (1999;

2003) note that language practitioners are still in search of a coherent, comprehensive theory about teaching writing.

However, there is no one way to teaching writing. Answering the question of how to teach writing, Raimes (1983, p. 5) argues that "there are as many answers as there are teachers and teaching styles, or learners and learning styles". In recent years however there has been debate over the relative merits of three major approaches to teaching writing namely: the product-based approach, the process-based approach and the genre/text-based approach.

The CAPS has adopted two main approaches to teaching writing in EFAL in the Intermediate Phase: the *text-based approach* also referred to as the genre approach (which involves listening to, reading, viewing and understanding different types of texts) and the *process approach* (in which teachers encourage their learners to brainstorm, plan, draft, revise and edit their work before they produce their final texts) (South Africa DBE, 2011, p.15). Some educators claim that a combination of these two approaches suits the teaching of writing to second language learners because together they provide a lot of modeling, support and scaffolding to learners thus leading them to becoming independent writers (Derewianka, 1990; Ho, 2006; Gibbons, 2002).

Macken-Horarik (2002) holds that the combination of process and genre approaches allows learners to (1) see how texts are written differently according to their purpose, audience and message, and after they are exposed to the organization, structure and language used in the text (2) go through a process of planning, drafting and finally publishing their final product. The teacher's role in using the combination of these pedagogies is usually to provide feedback. Feedback is important in developing learners' competence in writing. The process approach provides opportunities for learners to act on feedback (drafts) whereas the genre approach makes criteria for assessment explicit. The combination of the two approaches adopted by the CAPS can therefore be seen as complementing rather than competing with each other.

In all the three written pedagogies discussed above, feedback emerges as a key aspect of their instructional repertoires. Feedback helps learners to see where and how they may be making errors or failing to communicate in some way (The role of feedback and assessment in language learning, 2012). Feedback does not only help learners to set realistic goals but also allows them to see where and how they need to improve. There are several ways of providing feedback to learners' written work. After conducting an empirical study on written feedback, Ellis (2008) identified a 'typology of options for correcting linguistic errors'; he suggests that teachers can provide direct, indirect or metalinguistic corrective feedback to their learners' linguistic errors.

In terms of direct corrective feedback, the teacher provides learners with a correct form using techniques such as crossing out an unnecessary word, phrase, or morphemes, inserting a missing word or morpheme, and writing the correct form just above or nearby the error (Ellis, 2008). Indirect corrective feedback involves teachers indicating that learners have made errors without actually correcting them (Ellis, 2009). By using this

type of corrective feedback, the teacher draws learners' attention to such errors by using techniques such as underlining or circling the error and expects learners to do corrections by themselves

Metalinguistic corrective feedback entails teachers providing learners with some form of explicit written comments related to the nature of errors they have made (Ellis, 2008). This takes two forms: Teachers may decide to take note of the linguistic errors in the text and provide a brief grammatical description for each error at the end of the text or use error correction codes comprised of abbreviated labels or symbols which show the nature of the error and give a clue on the type of correction needed (Ellis, 2008).

Hyland and Hyland (2006) assert that the language that teachers use in their feedback plays a significant role in facilitating learners' writing development. They argue that negative feedback may have a detrimental effect on learners' confidence. Hyland and Hyland believe that although L2 learners value their teachers' written comments, some of them may ignore or misuse them when revising their written drafts or doing corrections. Hyland (1998 as cited in Hyland and Hyland, 2006, p. 81) claims that sometimes learners misunderstand, or they understand the errors pointed out by the teacher but are unable to come up with suitable revision or correct answer, which sometimes causes them to simply delete the offending text to avoid the issues raised.

In addition to comments, some teachers also give grades as part of feedback on their learners' written work. The negative effect of grades has been documented. Hattie and Timperley (2007), for example, argue that grades can be contentious and may negatively affect learner motivation and distract their attention from the more constructive corrective feedback provided by the teacher.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is situated in the interpretive paradigm. "The central endeavor in the context of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience" (Cohen et al, 2007, p. 21). I believe an interpretive paradigm is appropriate for this study because, as Haralambos, Holborn and Heald (2000) observe, "social action can only be understood by interpreting the meaning and motives on which it is based" (p. 971).

When embarking on this study I did not have a preconceived list of hypotheses to test or any list of outcomes that I expected to find. Instead I have tried to find the answers to my research questions as these have emerged from the data. This, as Losifides (2011) suggests, is achievable through the use of rigorous qualitative research methods. I chose to use a case study method for my investigation of the two Grade 5 teachers' teaching of writing, for as Ragin (2000) explains, case studies allow for an in-depth exploration, investigation and understanding of complex phenomena. Notwithstanding the size of this study, as Hoadley (2010) posits, "there are a number of aspects to the classroom environment that can emerge from smaller scale studies [such as this one] which would

merit further investigation at a larger scale and using alternative methodologies" (p. 12). Case studies are very good methods for classroom based research as they fill in the gaps left by powerful generalized studies and illuminate by example (Shulman, 1986).

The study took place in two Grade 5 classrooms at different schools, School A (Grade 5 B) and school B (Grade 5A), both situated in the heart of a township which is part of Grahamstown and commonly referred to as Rini or Grahamstown East. These two schools are adjacent to each other. There are 35 learners in Grade 5B at School A and 30 learners in Grade 5A at school B. The ethnic make-up of the learner and teacher population at these schools is entirely Xhosa, with the exception of just one isiZulu speaking learner at School B. Both teachers participating in the study were females and had extensive teaching experience. Both had been teaching for more than 15 years.

I chose to focus on Grade 5 EFAL teachers because Grade 5 is the grade that I teach in Namibia. Whereas Grade 5 marks the first year of Namibia's Upper Primary phase (Grades 5-7), in South Africa it is the middle year of the Intermediate Phase. I was interested in understanding more about the teaching of writing to learners who had recently changed over from using their home language as the LoLT to using a second language (English in this instance). By Grade 5, learners are expected to do more independent writing as compared to Foundation Phase (South Africa. DBE, 2011). Doing research on the grade I teach would help me grow professionally and inform the way I supported my own ESL learners' independent writing.

In this case study, both purposive and convenience sampling were used. The participating schools were selected for the following reasons: firstly, both catered for Grade 5 learners; secondly, both schools use English as the LoLT in the Intermediate Phase; thirdly, one of my supervisors advised me that these two schools have a good working relationship with staff and students from Rhodes University; fourthly, both schools are reasonably close to the university which reduced travel and other costs throughout the research project; and finally, although this is not a comparative study, I thought that observing similarities and differences between the two teachers might add to the richness of the data.

The three main data collection methods used in this study were interviews, classroom observation and document analysis. Before I began my observation of the two teachers teaching writing to their Grade 5 EFAL learners, I decided to have preliminary interviews with each of the teachers so that I could gain insight into some of their beliefs regarding writing and writing pedagogy, their beliefs about different approaches to teaching writing including feedback, their beliefs about their learners when it comes to writing, plus any other factors that they thought might enable or constrain them to teach writing effectively.

I chose to use non-participatory observation, as it is a "relatively unobtrusive qualitative research strategy for gathering primary data about some aspect of the social world without interacting directly with its participants" (Ostrower, 1998, p. 57), which allows a researcher to concentrate on collecting data without getting pre-occupied by anything

else, and to thereby get deep rich information (Wragg, 1999). I am not claiming that my presence had no impact on classroom events, but I did my best to minimize this.

According to Dias de Figueiredo, the term 'document' is "understood very broadly, including not just texts, but also sounds, photos, video and any materials that carry relevant messages" (2010, p. 29). After each observed EFAL writing lesson, I asked the teachers to choose for me 9 samples of learners' scripts comprised of 3 good pieces of writing, 3 average ones and 3 poorly written ones.

The teachers' responses to both the semi-structured interviews, stimulus recall and informal conversational interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed. Video and audio records of the observed lessons were also transcribed verbatim and analysed. A colleague who speaks and writes isiXhosa fluently helped with the translation of teacher-learner interactions that were in isiXhosa. The translated version of isiXhosa to English was checked by another colleague who teaches English and isiXhosa in the Senior Phase (at another school not part of the study) to help ensure that there were no distortions in the data after translation. I read these transcripts to fully familiarise myself with the data.

The samples of learners' scripts were first used to analyse how the two teachers responded to their writing in attempt to find answers to one of the research questions. The scripts were also used to determine if the EFAL written activities given by the teachers were congruent with the Grade 5 EFAL writing activities recommended in the teaching plans by the CAPS documents for that period of time. In addition learners' scripts provided insights about how competent they were in EFAL writing in relation to the CAPS assumptions.

I assured confidentiality to the schools, principals, the EFAL teachers and learners. No real names have been mentioned in this study. I have referred to the schools as either school A or B, teachers as either T1 or T2 and simply said a learner(s) without mentioning names.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In both T1's and T2's observed EFAL lessons, learners were instructed to write fast, finish writing their activities and hand in their work at the end of each lesson for the teachers to mark those activities. Both teachers normally began marking their learners' exercises books during the EFAL lessons, starting with early finishers or immediately after the lessons when learners handed in their books. The EFAL Subject Advisors' visits appeared have shaped these teachers' practices of giving immediate feedback and making sure learners' books are marked. Both teachers explained that apart from helping them with teaching of EFAL subject, the Subject Advisors also look at learners' books:

Yes they do come and look at the learners' books to see if you are doing the work. If they see something wrong, they will tell you. For instance in my case, because I am teaching so many classes, I sometimes don't mark some of the learners' work. I would just put a signature that I have seen their work. So when the subject advisor came here she told me,

you better mark the learners' work, don't just put a signature. Mark the work, and do corrections. So now most of the time I mark during the lesson, if learners did not finish, I mark during the afternoon when learners are gone home. (T1, interview)

They also look at the volume of work that you have given to the learners. That is why you see me always giving a task, mark it and do corrections because you need to have those in the learners' books. They must see that you are working and not only come to school to hang the jacket on the chair and chat with the colleagues while learners are doing nothing [laughs]. (T2, interview)

These extracts give a picture that teachers rush learners to finish writing so that they can mark their books to appease their subject advisors when they come and look in the learners' books. It was evident from the samples of learners' written activities that I collected from each teacher's EFAL lessons, that both teachers gave corrected feedback to their learners. They used a red pen to mark learners' written activities as either correct (with a tick) or wrong (with a cross). In some instances, T1 only underlined or circled word(s) or sentences that she seemed not to comprehend, told learners to rewrite or provide the correct spelling of words. Sometimes she would discuss the correct answers (provided there was time left in the lesson after she had marked learners' books) with learners by asking probing questions and giving cues and then telling them to write corrections in their grammar books. She hardly ever wrote positive comments in the learners' books.

Both teachers indicated that they felt pressured by their visiting subject advisor(s), who demanded that written activities in the learners' exercises books should be marked. This in turn, seemed to have influenced the teachers to push their learners' pace when they give them writing activities so that their exercise books could be marked instantly. In most of the observed lessons I noted that both teachers would instruct their learners to 'write up quickly', and would then mark their books during their EFAL lessons, starting with early finishers. Those who were still writing when the lesson ended were instructed to hand in their books anyway for marking. It is safe to conclude here that teachers' focus was not primarily on the *process* of developing learners as writers but on the hurriedly completed *product* which they could then mark to prove to their superiors that they were indeed doing their job. This relates to performativity – a system where there is too much emphasis on accountability and demands for production in order to fulfill requirements rather than allowing for deep engagement with learning activities (Griffiths, 2011). It seems to me that the performativity demanded by the subject advisors, works against the implementation of the approaches recommended in the curriculum.

Teachers seemed to emphasise performance (assessing, correcting and giving marks) over learning (Griffiths, 2011; Watkins, 2003). According to Watkins (2003 p. 8,) "performance is not learning, although it may develop from learning" and a focus on performance can demoralize learning. Learners who are taught with the focus on performance display negative effects *inter alia*: 'negative ideas about their competence', 'greater helplessness (i.e. I am not good at EFAL writing)', 'they seek help less (from peers and teachers)', 'they continue to use strategies which are less effective' and 'their greater focus is on grades

not on the process of learning' (Watkins, 2003, p). All these may result in learners' poor performance.

In teaching writing, learners of any language or age group need two crucial forms of support from their teachers: time to try out ideas and feedback on the content of what they have written in their drafts (Raimes, 1983). For longer pieces of writing (such as compositions, recounts and letters), learners need time to talk about their audience, clarify and check their spellings which often lead to revising and rewriting (Raimes, 1983). This is in line with the *process/genre-based* approaches to teaching writing endorsed by the CAPS documents. In the *process approach* for example, teachers are supposed to encourage their learners to brainstorm, plan, draft, revise and edit their work (Raimes, 1983; Tribble, 1996; Nordin & Mohammad, n.d). This is seen not as series of steps, but rather as a recurring cycle of activities whereby at each point learners are encouraged to share ideas and drafts and get feedback either from the teacher or peers.

In providing feedback for longer pieces of writing the two teachers made use of both direct CF (by providing learners with correct forms and spellings) and indirect CF (whereby they only underlined errors, or used arrows to point out mistake/errors and expected learners to perhaps do corrections themselves) as well as grade/marks (Ellis, 2009). For grammar and vocabulary development tasks both teachers simply provided feedback by giving a tick or a cross to indicate whether learners' answers were correct or wrong and providing grades. They then wrote correct answers on the chalkboard and instructed learners to copy them down into their exercise books as corrections. These practices suggest that teachers believed that students would learn and subsequently improve their writing competence in the process of copying and rewriting the corrections. Neither encouraged multiple drafts by their learners. Despite the fast pacing I discussed earlier in this account, learners' first drafts to the teachers were the final, which teachers then marked and awarded final grades.

Learners were not given opportunities to look at examples of the text type in order to unpack the main features of the text type they were being required to write. Furthermore, both teachers skipped the joint construction phase where they supposed to - together with their learners - discuss and draft examples of the text type, suggest more appropriate vocabulary, and consider alternative ways of wording an idea and work on correcting grammar mistakes, spelling and punctuation errors and so on (Derewianka, 1990; Gibbons 2002). As a result, some learners were not, for example, able to correctly position the address for a friendly letter, write their salutations correctly, or end their letters correctly

Data reveal that teachers in this study often acted as the sole source of feedback in their classrooms. This was evident during the observations when it appeared to be a norm for learners to always hand in their books so that teachers could mark them instantly. Again this speaks to performance and accountability demands made by the subject advisor.

While acknowledging that teachers' feedback is expected and valued in teaching writing, many researchers have found that learners' collaboration in written activities and peer

review are also useful in improving their writing (Raimes, 1983; Tribble, 1996; Murdoch, 1998; Harwane, 2000). These researchers claim that peer review provides learners with authentic audiences, discussions that lead to discovery and necessary peer feedback that may help them to improve their writing. It is therefore teachers' responsibility to provide the opportunity for learners to reflect on their own writing and share their attempts with each other. Of course, the reason for learners sharing their writing is not merely for them to transcribe what others have said but to make them feel comfortable to experiment in their writing, try out new ideas and new genres as well as share personal information and insights (Trible, 1996; Myles, 2002).

5. CONCLUSION

The findings reveal that in teaching writing, for example, both teachers' focus was not primarily on the process (e.g. brainstorming, drafting, revising etc) of developing learners as writers but rather on their learners' hurriedly completed written work which they would then mark and grade in response to their subject advisor(s)' demands. In other words, summative assessment took precedence over formative assessment. This goes against the tenets of the *process/genre approach* to teaching writing advocated in the CAPS documents. Since both teachers appeared to have the perception that all their subject advisors wanted was to see learners being given work and this work marked; they did not seem to have taken on board the curriculum recommendations on writing and thus did not familiarize themselves with what the *process/genre approaches* might be about. There was little evidence that these teachers were even aware of these approaches.

These findings interactively illuminate how the two teachers in this study taught writing to their Grade 5 EFAL learners and some of the factors that influenced their practices. Although these finding cannot be generalized due to the size and nature of the study, they may offer insights for EFAL teachers[1], as well as subject advisors, teacher educators, curriculum developers and other education stakeholders to possible ways forward in incorporating best practices and improving pedagogical practices of teaching English second language literacy, particularly writing.

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[1] In Namibia they are referred to as English Second Language teachers

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