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Brian. R. Morrison

Corresponding author:
brian-m@kanda.kuis.ac.jp

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TEXTUAL HEALING: A DOCUMENT ANALYSIS OF HOW FIRST DRAFTS IMPROVED

Brian R. Morrison

Kanda University of International Studies, Japan

ABSTRACT

Much has been written on the role of error feedback in written work (for example, Truscott, 1996; Ferris, 1999; Ellis, 2009). While validity in the arguments for and against specific types of feedback in error reduction continues to be investigated, the focus on error is unlikely to address perceptions of competency required for intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1996) and implies that an effective piece of written work needs to be error-free. This paper briefly outlines a short distance course that was designed to improve writing through a genre-based approach to second language writing before indicating how the feedback on each draft involved a different approach and went beyond the written corrective feedback and the typology Ellis (2009) proposed. Results of an analysis of the first drafts of the initial and final essays are then presented to identify how the written work became more effective as the course progressed. Specific improvements are observed in the four categories investigated: task achievement; cohesion and coherence; lexical resource; grammatical complexity.

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been different approaches to writing pedagogy based on an amalgamation of intuition, insight and methodology. It is likely that teachers who understand the approaches select from these to suit their teaching context and learners' needs.

White (2005) highlights four main developments in writing pedagogy evolving from shifts in how writing is viewed, the study of what effective writers do and pragmatic considerations of the purpose of a text. There is an underlying assumption in a substantial amount of literature on process and genre approaches that learners want to compose academic texts (Flowerdew, 1993). For the course being discussed in this research paper the students enrolled on an IELTS writing course with a view to postgraduate study in the UK and this influenced the choice of approach. The approaches are summarized below to provide rationale for the course.

Four approaches to writing

Product Focus: Controlled & Guided Writing

This approach is strongly influenced by behaviourist theories of language learning. These theorists believe that stimuli and motivation are external and that guided, controlled, text-production practice, where accuracy is paramount, will lead to automatic and habitually accurate writing (Holzman, 2005). These views are realised in the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM); a methodology that emphasises spoken over written language. Accuracy is at sentence level and writing is seen as a way of reinforcing good (accurate) behaviour, of consolidating form and of aiding language learning rather than an end in itself. With this approach, language is conceptualised as a grammar frame with slots for vocabulary (Hyland, 2003), exemplified by substitution drilling. Writing from a model text thereby becomes a display of manipulation, transformation and substitution judged on accuracy; communicative purpose and competence are not considered.

Language Functions: Parallel Writing

The functional approach has different views about the construct of language i.e. that function is not linked to form. However, writing is a similar enterprise of a framework with slots, the slots being larger and at function level rather than word level. A model text is still presented followed by controlled and guided writing. As White (2005) makes clear, the modelled product in these two approaches to writing can be restricted to imitation.

Process Approaches

Influenced by cognitive psychology rather than applied linguistics (Hyland, 2005), process approaches to writing hone in on the creativity of composition rather than the analysis and reproduction of a model text. The complex and recursive, non-linear nature of composition masked by the linearity of the written form is recognised. White & Arndt's (1991, p. 4) proposed model of writing processes (Fig. 1) aims to reflect this complexity and uses a non-linear sequence, although it should be noted that in this model White and Arndt have neglected to include publishing in their model (Caudery, 1997).

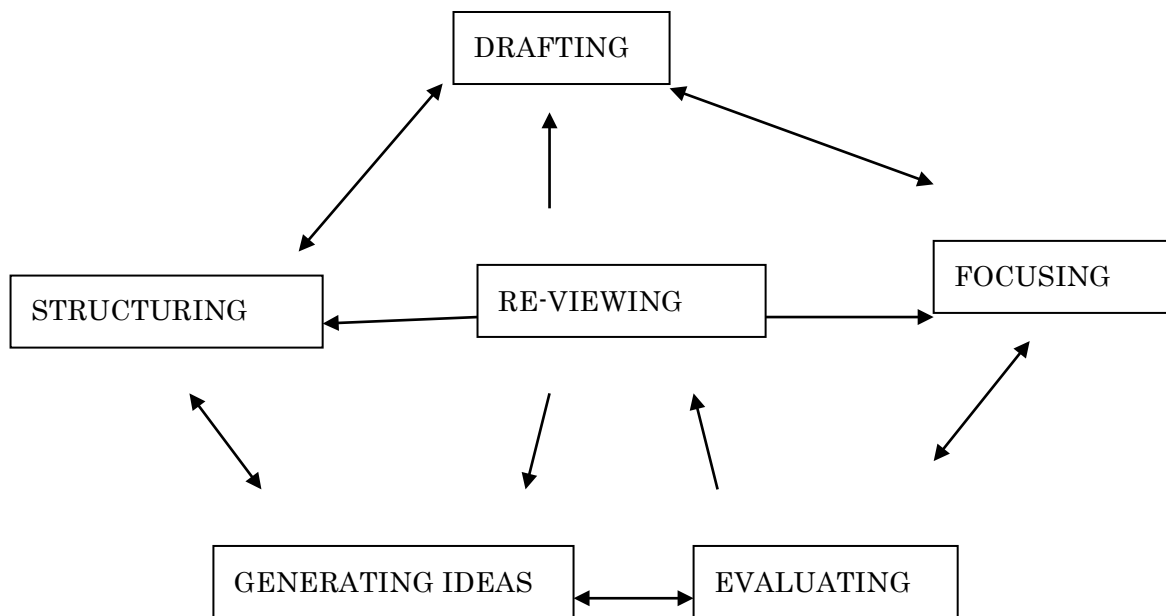


Figure 1. Model of writing processes (White & Arndt, 1991, p. 4)

The approach attempts to reflect the creative process by integrating the various aspects of the writing process within the pedagogic context. The teacher reacts to the text more globally, with attention to meaning taking precedence over accuracy of form. Feedback of the work in progress occurs during the writing rather than merely post-composing feedback of the end product. The reader is also considered in process writing (Tribble, 1996), although it is in genre approaches that the reader becomes the focus.

Genre Approaches

Genre approaches are the most recent addition to ELT writing pedagogy. These, like process approaches, evolved from mainstream education. However, in process approaches the focus on the writer may result in ineffective texts if they recognise the reader but do not consider his or her expectations (Tribble, 1996). Since texts are most often produced for another reader, proponents of genre approaches

believe the focus of a text should be on the reader's expectations and demands (Hyland, 2005) rather than on the text or writer. With a genre approach some authors have referred to a model text. This is an unfortunate term, as it seems to suggest a return to imitation. Authors such as Tribble (2005) favour 'exemplar texts', a term that more adequately describes texts used in genre approaches and the one used in this paper.

The courses

The courses were designed as distance-learning courses for university graduates in Japan aiming for postgraduate study in the UK who were unable due to time constraints or location to attend classroom-based lessons. The focus was specifically on academic IELTS and each course focused on one of the two IELTS writing tasks: task 1, a description of a diagram; task 2, a formal discursive essay. The discourse community was therefore the IELTS examiners, and published assessment criteria indicate the expectations of this community. It therefore followed that a genre-based approach to second language writing (Hyland, 2004) using non-native exemplars, as advocated by Tribble (2005) would provide appropriate exemplar texts. Morrison's (2010) research into the design of this course not only found that the texts were appropriate for learners from a Japanese context, as the content dealt with familiar narrative constructs, but just as importantly, they were achievable exemplars as they were at the level of the target score (IELTS 7.0) rather than an expert user's IELTS 9.0. Another key element of the course was the submission of multiple drafts via email and use of the Microsoft Word editing tools for technologically-enhanced instructor feedback. This allowed a dialogue to develop which in turn encouraged

participants to consider how to come closer to genre expectations of organization and structure as well as improving the complexity and sophistication of their texts. In addition, the feedback on multiple drafts provided further self-generated exemplar texts for subsequent writing while encouraging participants to consider how to come closer to genre expectations of organization and structure as well as improving the complexity and sophistication of their texts.

Feedback

In spite of the continuing debate surrounding the effectiveness of error corrective feedback since Truscott (1996) first questioned the validity of much of the research, Hyland & Hyland (2006, p. 86) cite several studies which show that:

Feedback is not simply disembodied reference to student texts but an interactive part of the whole context of learning, helping to create a productive interpersonal relationship between the teacher and the individual students.

On this course, initial feedback on the first draft used the editing tools in Microsoft Word to add comment boxes to give specific guidance on what was done well, where there were errors and how certain areas could be improved even when error free. This extends written feedback beyond Ellis' (2009) typology. Although Ellis acknowledges that his typology is limited to the correction of linguistic errors, this error focus in the research he cites appears to take a rather myopic view of writing, a view which values accuracy over other indicators of good writing such as purposeful communication and meeting the needs of the reader. As Bunton (2005) makes clear, a

text will not necessarily be accepted or rejected on accuracy of language, but on its acceptability to the discourse community of genre. Research on the effect of feedback that is limited to errors might be valid research but should not be confused with research into the effect of feedback on writing development. Research in this area needs to investigate progress beyond the narrow confines of accuracy.

The aspects of IELTS writing valued by the discourse community of examiners can be understood from the assessment criteria available online (ielts.org). The IELTS categories grade four specific areas. Accuracy in grammar and vocabulary choice influences the grade in each of these eponymous categories but not at the expense of complexity and sophistication. Indeed, grammatical complexity containing errors is viewed more favourably than accuracy that relies on simple structures. Likewise, less common lexis is preferable to a restricted range of simple vocabulary, even when the former is used with less accuracy as long as the meaning is clear. The other two grading criteria, task achievement and coherence and cohesion, are equally important. Therefore a candidate aiming for IELTS 7.0 is not expected to write two error-free essays however they can only achieve their target if they have answered the questions, supported their answers, structured their writing appropriately and shown a range of grammatical structures and incorporated some sophisticated language. These points should therefore inform the range of feedback that could be given to the learner.

A document analysis of the feedback using Ellis' (2009) classifications as a framework for categorization showed that in the initial feedback on the first draft included Ellis' (2009) type 3 *Metalinguistic Corrective Feedback* and type 4 *The focus of the feedback* both as in-text comments and as part of a summary of the feedback written in as a letter at the end of the text. However, in addition there were

comments and end-of-text feedback that went beyond corrective feedback to include:

- Commenting on what is good about the essay and its constituent parts e.g. *Your idea is clear and well supported in this paragraph – good work.*
- Encouraging learners to push their abilities e.g. *Normally this is fine, but judging by your work, I'm sure your vocabulary is good enough to substitute a more sophisticated verb.*
- Giving direction on content e.g. *In paragraphs 2 and 3 you identify two negative aspects to living in a city but you never say why they are negative. If you can do that and make a few adjustments to phrases, this will be much better.*

At the end of the essay a summary in the form of a letter conforming what was good about the text and areas to concentrate on for the second draft.

The second draft received a different approach for feedback. With this version, the in-text feedback was limited to proofreading categorized by Ellis' as type 1, direct corrective feedback and type 6, reformulation. In other words, anything that the writer was guided to but unable to rectify in the first draft feedback was corrected or reworded. This then provided a further model but one that is borne out of collaboration between the learner and the tutor leading to user-generated exemplar texts. Although the learners were not required to redraft further, a task of taking notes on structure and language that could be reused in subsequent essays was set. This required the learner to re-read, value and analyse their own work with a view to improving subsequent writing. Questionnaires given after the course ended showed that respondents unanimously felt that the feedback made them more competent

writers (Morrison, 2010). When asked about the two different feedback styles, these were valued by all. The vast majority specifically commented on how beneficial they felt their own rewriting was to their development as writers. They also noted that the feedback had helped them identify what they were doing well as well as what they had to improve upon, with a specific comment referring to the development of a greater awareness of the comparative rhetoric of English and Japanese.

In order to investigate how the students' writing had changed, research was conducted into the texts they had produced during the course.

2. METHODOLOGY

Permission was granted from the first students who took this course to analyze their written work. The research had not been planned prior to these students completing their courses and therefore neither the students nor the teacher were aware that any research would be conducted. A document analysis of first drafts of the first and fifth essays was undertaken to consider how these drafts differed in the four categories valued by IELTS, namely coherence and cohesion, lexis, grammar, and task achievement. Seven task 2 essay pairs were examined. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data was collected using the four IELTS marking categories as a framework for analysis.

3. RESULTS

Task Achievement

Of the seven Task 2 essays, the majority of them required more development of the ideas proposed and greater perspicacity in the conclusion. However, in the later submissions ideas were supported more adequately and the conclusions were clearer.

Table 1.

Task Achievement

Task	Essay 1 Common Problems	Essay 5 Improvements
2	Insufficient development	More support for ideas
	Vague / unsupported conclusions	Logical conclusions
	Overgeneralisation	Greater use of tentative language

Cohesion and Coherence

In order to analyse this area, the essays were examined in two main ways, namely organization and language. The first, organization, looked at whether paragraphing was used appropriately i.e. unity, logical progression, and the existence of introductory and summarizing or concluding paragraphs. The second, language, investigated the existence and appropriate use of cohesive devices such as signaling devices, substitution and referencing, in other words, linguistic mechanisms which indicate the relationships of concepts within and between sentences and paragraphs.

Table 2.

Coherence and Cohesion

Task	Essay 1 Common Difficulties	Essay 5 Improvements
2	Over extending ideas leading to unity problems	No unity problems
	No paragraphing	Improved paragraphing
	General conclusions	Clearer, more precise conclusions
	Cohesive devices underused typically limited to coordinating conjunctions and personal pronouns	All integrate a greater range of academic cohesive devices more appropriately

In this task there was development in cohesion and coherence. Of the seven essays considered, only three submissions had noticeable paragraphing issues. Two of these appeared to be through an over-extension of ideas, while the third was written as one continuous paragraph. By the fifth essay, these issues had been resolved.

With regards to the actual paragraphs and the functions they fulfilled, the introductory paragraphs and main paragraphs had come closer to genre expectations by the fifth essay in all cases. All writers included concluding paragraphs from the beginning, and of the two submissions that had used rather general conclusions, by the fifth essay the conclusions had become clearer and more precise.

Regarding the language of coherence and cohesion, as with unity, development was evident regardless of the writers' relative ability from the initial

draft. In six of the seven first Task 2 essays, cohesive devices were underused and typically limited to coordinating conjunctions and personal pronouns. In spite of this, by the fifth essay all of these writers were using a greater range of academic cohesive devices more appropriately and to good effect, with the most successful of these seeming to have utilized extended formulaic sequences to show clear paragraph transitions. There was still room for further application of signaling devices in around half of the essays, nevertheless this should not detract from the progress made.

Vocabulary

A vocabulary analysis was carried out to examine what was used and whether there was any increase in sophistication. A calculation was done by attributing vocabulary to one of two groups: general or sophisticated. The general group included the first 2000 words on the Compleat Lexical Tutor while the sophisticated group received words from Coxhead's (2000) academic word list. The remaining words were designated to either group on a word-by-word basis e.g. television was general, vital was sophisticated. One further stage involved moving words from the sophisticated to the general group if they appeared in the essay question or as part of the diagram. There are limitations to this analysis in that it ignores accuracy of lexical use and sophisticated compounds such as human rights are allocated individually to the general word group. Nevertheless, a general overview of what is being used could be a starting point for further research.

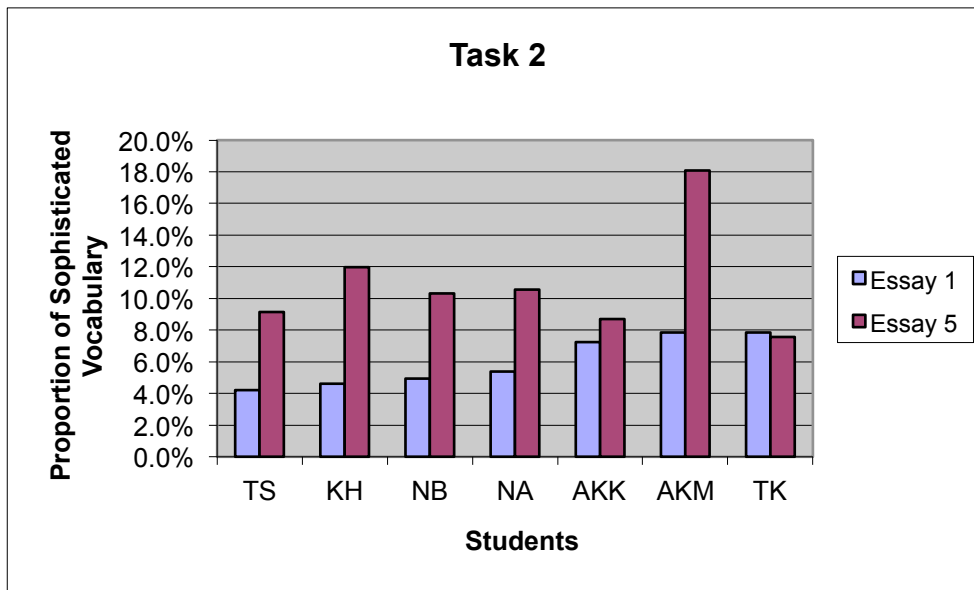


Figure 2. Task 2 vocabulary analysis

As can be seen, there is an almost unanimous increase in the proportions of sophisticated vocabulary. The proportions in Fig. 2 clearly show a general increase in representation of sophisticated vocabulary. Five of the learners have managed to double the ratio and six of these first draft, final submissions in the 10% range or higher. This translates into an average of one sophisticated word per line of the essay. This number may be even higher due to the calculation issues regarding sophisticated compounds mentioned previously. One student's proportion drops slightly and it is difficult to attribute this to any particular factor.

Grammar

An analysis of the proportion of complex sentences, i.e. sentences containing subordinate clauses, was done by counting the total number of sentences and identifying the number of those that were complex. For Task 2, all seven learners

increased the proportion of complexity.

Table 3.

Task 2 Proportion of Sentences Containing Complexity

Sts	Essay 1		Essay 5	
TS	5/22	23%	8/16	50%
NB	4/19	21%	10/17	59%
NA	11/20	55%	11/15	73%
KH	5/15	33%	8/13	62%
AKK	11/21	52%	12/18	66%
AKM	8/19	42%	11/17	65%
TK	11/18	61%	9/14	64%

A closer look at how the complexity appeared to have been achieved showed that one strategy had been to integrate formulaic sequences into common genre-specific functions such as thesis statements and paragraph transitions. Another approach was to use if- or when-clauses to support ideas. It is difficult to attribute this specifically to the exemplar texts, the instructional material built around the exemplars, or the feedback.

4. SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although there were variations in the relative improvements in each of these areas, overall every later essay was in some way better than the corresponding first essay. Some showed a considerable improvement in a relatively short time frame. It is

likely that the students who made the most progress did so through a deeper understanding of the genre expectations, including the inclusion of formulaic sequences and text organization rather than necessarily developing a deeper understanding of grammar. It therefore follows that feedback must go beyond a focus on form to consider how to bring writing closer to the expectations of the discourse community.

5. LIMITATIONS

Many of the limitations of this study have already been mentioned such as a lack of investigation into the accuracy of the greater range of vocabulary and difficulty attributing causes to some of the results that show deterioration. In a similar way, it is difficult to attribute improvements to any particular aspect of the course. In addition, the small sample size currently prevents the results from being generalized to the wider student community. Nevertheless, the majority of results seem to support the course's effectiveness.

In terms of the limitation of the course, given the nature of IELTS exams, some form of timed practice with a pencil and paper would have added value to this course. This is a limitation with this distance learning course where there is a real need to incorporate an element of exam conditions into writing practice, even if the handwritten essays are not evaluated by the teacher.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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