

**EFFECT OF TRAINED PEER FEEDBACK ON TEXT ORGANIZATION IN EFL WRITING**

REVISIÓN ENTRE PARES Y USO DE ORGANIZACIÓN TEXTUAL EN INGLÉS COMO LENGUA EXTRANJERA

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the effect of training EFL learners to participate in peer feedback activities on their awareness of text organization. The intervention was carried out in an intact class in a state-university in Chile. Two instruments of data collection were used as Pre and Post measures: an awareness test and a writing task. Results highlighted the need for further research on this topic.

KEY WORDS

Writing – Feedback – Organization – Training

RESUMEN

Este estudio indagó el efecto de entrenar a aprendices de inglés como lengua extranjera para el uso de revisión entre pares, con el fin de fomentar su toma de conciencia de la estructura textual en esta lengua. La intervención se realizó en una clase intacta. Se recolectó los datos con una prueba de discernimiento y una tarea de escritura. Los resultados sugieren nuevas perspectivas de investigación.

PALABRAS CLAVES

Escritura – Retroalimentación – Organización – Entrenamiento

1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) have long identified learner attention to form as a facilitator of acquisition. The concept of attention has also been related to awareness and noticing of the target language form in order for learners to achieve high levels of competence in the L2. In this paper, I report on a study that sought to find out the effect that training second language writers to give each other feedback on text organization may have on their awareness of that structure in English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

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2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The role of attention in L2 learning has been subject of serious debate in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) for sometime now. Based on the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985 as cited in Doughty, 2007), some scholars have advocated the view that language learning is incidental and unconscious, requiring only access to comprehensible input in order to construct a grammar of the language being learned¹. The development of competence in an L2 is a subconscious process similar to L1 acquisition by children. In this view, conscious knowledge of the L2 can never become acquired knowledge, and so instruction on form is rendered useless since learners access two separate systems for the processing of conscious and unconscious (or subconscious) learning, which in turn become, explicit knowledge of the L2 on the one hand, and implicit (automated) acquisition of the L2 on the other².

Opposite to this view of language acquisition and learning, there have been scholars who pointed out limitations in Krashen's theory, for being vague and unrealistic for application in the classroom. Offering an opposite view, Schmidt (1995) claims that language learning requires *noticing*, at the level of awareness *at the time of learning*. In his view, language learning is not always subconscious and incidental, and his theory emphasizes the role of conscious awareness of the form of the input on the learners' part in order to achieve a higher level of competence.

This theory of language learning seems to advocate for instructional approaches which may foster and enhance learner attention to form in the input during the language learning experience. Ellis³ answers the fundamental question in second language pedagogy whether instruction makes a difference or not. He proposed that effective pedagogical techniques must "(...) cater to all aspects of language learning. Explicit skills are necessary for deep elaborative processing of semantic and conceptual representations, but naturalistic settings provide maximum opportunities for exposure and motivation"⁴. A study by Robinson (1995) concluded that: "While awareness at the level of noticing did not lead to successful learning (...), awareness at the level of looking for rules and ability to verbalize rules predicted superior learning"⁵. This finding lends support to the benefit of exposing learners to pedagogical activities which engage them in meaningful interaction in the L2, and support acquisition by providing "scaffolding", i.e. assistance in organizing input processing, through the provision of enhanced input or feedback.

The intervention implemented for this study was based on *process writing*, a pedagogical technique which has transformed the way writing is both understood and taught. In traditional writing classes, students were expected to write only one version of any given assignment, and their learning was then evaluated on the basis of the final product. In the 60's, this approach started to change into a deeper understanding of the complex processes involved in successful L2 writing, and so L2 writing pedagogy sought to construct cognitive models of what writers do when they write, emphasising the complexity of planning, and the impact of guiding learners to greater competence by awareness of expert strategies⁶. In the traditional approach to teaching writing, the organization of the text was usually tackled on to the end of the process as "editing", rather than constituting a central resource for constructing meanings. Without proper guidance, before starting the process of writing, students

were offered no way of seeing how different texts are codified in distinct and recognizable ways in terms of their rhetorical organization⁷.

In response to these limitations, cognitive models of writing emerged in the 80's, which proposed a model of recursive writing, consisting of three main elements: "1) the planning stage, subdivided into smaller processes such as generating ideas, organizing these ideas and setting the goals for writing; 2) the translating stage, in which writers articulate and write down their thoughts generated in the first stage; and 3) the reviewing stage, in which writers evaluate and revise the text."⁸ This approach represented the first step towards a focus on the writing process, and in the following years, research in this area concentrated on looking at writing from an interactionist view to language learning, under the influence of Vygotsky's theory, and through the emergence of *discourse analysis*, as a means of providing theoretical foundations for understanding the act of writing⁹. In linguistics, *discourse analysis* is associated with *systemic linguistics* or *genre analysis*, which extended the analysis of the written text by including its functional objectives.

The field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has long embraced the principles underlying the learning theory first proposed by L.S. Vygotsky. His theory gave rise to the collaborative learning theory, which claims that learning is a socially constructed activity that takes place through interaction. This idea has influenced the teaching of foreign languages, and it has sparked the development of language learning methodologies that involve a great deal of interaction among learners. It is within this approach that the strategy of peer response has been proposed, as a way to provide student writers with the necessary feedback they need to make their written message effective. Peer response activities in the Second/Foreign Language (L2) classroom is also supported by interactionist theories of SLA, which state that "learners need to be pushed to negotiate meaning to facilitate SLA"¹⁰.

A growing body of research has investigated the effects of using various peer response options in L2 writing¹¹. Most studies have dealt with the effects of peer response in grammar accuracy, the use of vocabulary or a variety of aspects that do not involve the organization of texts in a particular genre¹².

Scholars agree that in order for peer response to effectively help students improve their writing, the teacher needs to conduct careful planning and train students to give effective feedback to their peers, before the activity is implemented¹³, and the feedback given should ideally have only one form as the focus of the activity, thus fostering the *noticing and awareness* of this form, which it is said to be an important condition for achieving a higher level of L2 language development¹⁴.

3. THE STUDY

It has come to the attention of the researcher that students who have been enrolled in writing classes in the English Language Teaching (ELT) program at Playa Ancha University (UPLA), tend to focus mainly on the grammatical aspects of their writing, such as verb tense, sentence construction, vocabulary, and spelling, but they do not seem to pay attention to or be aware of the organization of the texts they produce. Since text organization is an important aspect in the development of

discourse competence in academic writing, this has been the focus of the pedagogical intervention carried out for this study. The main goal of this intervention has been to foster students' awareness and comprehension of the target language discourse form. The general objective of this study has been to evaluate learners' awareness and use of the structure of the paragraph, before and after the intervention.

As part of the implementation of the process writing approach, this pedagogical intervention included a central component of peer feedback on text organization as a means for supporting the "reviewing stage" in the process. To this end, students received training on the structure of the paragraph, on effective writing strategies to improve their own personal processes, and were instructed on ways to provide each other feedback in a supportive way throughout the writing process. The training for and practicing of peer revision was carried out during the second semester in 2010.

The subjects of this study were 13 students enrolled in the Writing Workshop in the ELT program. The participants belonged to three different sections of the class, which is offered in four sections, in the Valparaiso and the San Felipe Campuses. Although this class was mandatory for all students, and all of them were asked to volunteer to be subjects for this study, only a few completed all requirements to be included in the analysis. These students were also enrolled in the English language course track of the program at the intermediate level. Participants were asked to answer a background questionnaire in order to collect relevant information regarding their age, experience in the program, autonomous work, and previous knowledge about the form which was the focus of this study. Their average age is 20 years old, and they reportedly spend an average of 4.5 hours a week doing autonomous language learning activities. They had been enrolled in the ELT program at UPLA for an average of 2.5 years.

The awareness of the structure of the paragraph was evaluated at the onset of the study, and after the intervention was completed. Two instruments were used to this end: an Awareness Questionnaire, in which students were asked to assess the text organization of six paragraphs (SEE APPENDIX A), and a Writing Task (SEE APPENDIX B). Both instruments were administered as pre and post measures. The Awareness Questionnaire was first responded by four teachers: the researcher, the research assistant and two other experienced language teachers, who held a discussion session to solve discrepancies. The students' responses were compared to the experienced teachers' assessment. For each of the statements in the rubric, students were given one point if their judgment concurred with the experts. The highest possible score on the Awareness Questionnaire was 36 points.

The Writing Task was evaluated using a rubric specially created with this purpose. It considered content, style and text organization as the evaluation criteria. All paragraphs were evaluated by the researcher and research assistant, and any discrepancies in judgment were solved by consensus. The highest possible score on this measure was 21 points.

The data obtained with the background questionnaire included students' average grades in the last two English courses they had taken at UPLA. Using this information, participants' results in both

awareness measures were compared dividing subjects into two groups: lower proficiency learners and higher proficiency learners.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The students' awareness of text organization as measured by the Awareness Questionnaire did not considerably change after the intervention. Out of 7 students in the Lower Proficiency group, 4 slightly improved their score in the Post Test, but 3 of them (nearly half) obtained a lower score in the Post Test measure. Similar results were obtained in the Higher Proficiency group. Half of the students (3) improved their score after the intervention, and the other half got a lower score in the second administration. The results for both groups are presented in Table 1.

**TABLE 1
AWARENESS QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS**

	LOWER PROFICIENCY							HIGHER PROFICIENCY					
STUDENT	a	B	c	D	e	F	g	h	i	j	k	l	m
PRETEST	30	28	30	26	31	19	26	27	30	33	26	18	28
POSTTEST	26	32	25	32	33	15	30	25	26	23	27	27	29

Similarly, the results on the Pre and Post intervention writing task did not indicate significant improvement of students' use of text organization in the paragraph. Among the lower proficiency learners, only 3 out of 7 obtained a higher score in the Post Test Writing Task. 3 of the learners in this group obtained roughly the same score in the second administration, and one learner got a significantly lower score in the Post measure. In the higher proficiency group, half of the participants obtained a higher score in the Post Test, and half got a lower score. The results are presented in Table 2.

**TABLE 2
WRITING TASK RESULTS**

	LOWER PROFICIENCY							HIGHER PROFICIENCY					
STUDENT	a	B	c	d	e	F	g	h	i	j	k	l	m
PRETEST	19	17	16	20	15	11	12	15	12	17	19	12	12
POSTTEST	18	17	10	19	20	20	16	17	20	12	16	14	19

The results indicate no progress on the participants' awareness of the text organization of the paragraph after the intervention. It can be argued that nearly half of the students, from both groups, did become more aware of text organization, but the results are not conclusive for a number of reasons. First, the small sample does not allow making any generalizations or statistical analysis. Second, the changes in the scores obtained were generally not significant. The instruments used to measure awareness proved insufficient, since they determined participants' awareness of the paragraph's organization only indirectly. Researchers in the area have recently turned to interviews and think-aloud protocols as more suitable measures to explore learners' cognitive processes during second language development.

Finally, a very important limitation was the administration of both primary instruments during class time. At the onset of the study, the Pre Tests were administered as diagnostic tests for the writing class, so students may have wanted to display their competence, and tried harder the first time. By the time the intervention was finished, and the Post Tests administered, students may have been more relaxed about their scores, because they knew it would have no consequences on their grades or the teachers' opinion of them.

5. CONCLUSION

Although the results obtained on this study did not show significant change in participants' awareness and use of text organization after participating in the intervention, there is now a considerably body of evidence supporting peer feedback activities in L2 writing classes. Research in the field of Second Language Learning has supported the view that students benefit from developing their writing skills in a collaborative environment. This methodology allows them to become more aware of issues such as text organization, stylistic choices, coherence and audience. The results obtained with this study do not evidence the complexity of the interactions that take place between writers and peers who provide feedback. The pedagogical intervention consisted of training and practice. The results obtained with the instruments used to collect data for this study do not provide a complete picture of all the different variables that may impact learners' awareness and use of the text organization of the paragraph.

More research is needed on the benefits provided by peer feedback activities, especially with regards to specific textual aspects that have not been related to it (such as style and audience awareness). It is also necessary to explore learners' cognitive processes while developing their writing assignments and participating in peer revision sessions, in order to obtain a clearer understanding of the impact that engaging learners in this type of activities may have on their second language development.

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APPENDIX A

DISCERNIMIENTO Y COMPRENSIÓN DE LA ORGANIZACIÓN TEXTUAL EN INGLÉS

Los siguientes párrafos son una muestra de variados niveles de habilidad para redactar en inglés. En este Test, se espera que los evalúes, contestando las preguntas en relación a la organización general y coherencia de las ideas presentadas en estos. No tienen errores de gramática, ortografía, o puntuación. Si tienes dudas respecto del significado de alguna palabra u oración, puedes preguntar a la profesora. Léelos detenidamente y cuantas veces sea necesario.

PÁRRAFO A

My Mom, the Best

The most exceptional person in my life shows love before anything, in everything that she does. That is what my mother is like. Whatever she says and however she says it, it shows a love that is incomparable. She is the mixture between the perfect woman, wife, mother and grandmother. She is someone who all of us would want to have in our families. All my life, I have felt unconditional support from her part, even when she has to educate or correct me. I have always felt love in her heart, even when she has been disappointed in me. Her love is truly unrestricted. I hope to have my mother always by my side. When people say "A mother's love is unique", I can say I have that.

I. Marca con una X en la siguiente tabla, según corresponda:

	SI	NO
1. El párrafo tiene un título relacionado con la idea principal		
2. El párrafo tiene sólo una idea principal (<u>topic sentence</u>)		
3. Todas las oraciones se refieren a la idea principal del párrafo (<u>supporting sentences</u>)		
4. El párrafo tiene suficientes ejemplos como para entender la idea principal		
5. El párrafo concluye con una oración relacionada con la idea principal. (<u>concluding sentence</u>)		

II. Basándote en tu respuesta en el ítem anterior, ¿Cómo evaluarías la organización de este párrafo? Marca la alternativa que corresponda:

Muy Bueno

Bueno

Regular

Deficiente

APPENDIX B

Pre Test Writing Task

Escribe un párrafo acerca del lugar que tú consideras tu hogar. Este puede ser tu habitación, tu casa familiar, tu barrio, o tu ciudad. Habla de las razones por las que ese lugar es tan especial para ti. Incluye ejemplos para ilustrar tus opiniones. Tu párrafo deberá cumplir con los siguientes requisitos:

- TIMES NEW ROMAN, 12.
- Doble espacio.
- 250 palabras.

Tendrás 45 minutos para terminar esta tarea. Durante el proceso de escritura, podrás utilizar un diccionario (www.wordreference.com) y hacer preguntas a la profesora.

Post Test Writing Task

Escribe un párrafo acerca del trabajo ideal que te gustaría conseguir. Este puede ser cualquier trabajo, no necesariamente relacionado con educación. Habla de qué te gustaría hacer, con quién, para qué, y de las razones por las que consideras ese el trabajo ideal para ti. Incluye ejemplos para ilustrar tus opiniones. Tu párrafo deberá cumplir con los siguientes requisitos:

- TIMES NEW ROMAN, 12.
- Doble espacio.
- 250 palabras.

Tendrás 45 minutos para terminar esta tarea. Durante el proceso de escritura, podrás utilizar un diccionario (www.wordreference.com) y hacer preguntas a la profesora.

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- ¹³ Hansen & Liu (2005).
- ¹⁴ Schmidt (1995).

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