The Value of Reflectıon in Wrıtıng Courses in ELT Preservıce Teacher Educatıon Programs

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Bio Data

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Abstract
Constructivist theory has brought significant momentum to all aspects of teacher education. Currently, personal growth of the individual in educational domains is so important that teacher candidates are asked to develop their reflective skills in many courses so that they grow by having internalized and problematized the issues under study by gauging them themselves. The aim of this paper is to report on an experimental syllabus design used in a Writing Skills course offered at a Turkish University's English Language Teaching department. In this syllabus, by using the insight derived from constructivist theory, topics related to English language teaching are merged with reflective writing and the knowledge derived from reading traditional academic writing through activities such as discussion, peer reviewing, and journal keeping. Along with the application of this syllabus, a rubric is designed and proposed by the researcher/ instructor to measure students' writing. The results of this curricular undertaking showed that when students were asked to write academically by using their developing professional and practical knowledge in a reflective manner, they were highly motivated by the writing task at hand.

Keywords: syllabus, reflection, reflective, teacher education, writing, writing skills course.

Introduction

Preservice ELT teachers need to develop their writing skills, but there is much still to be learned from this compelling process. The Writing Skills course content in our department (similar to many other departments throughout the world) is described as follows: "This course aims at introducing students to ELT basic concepts in writing and making them aware of composition types, outlining and expressing ideas through writing compositions." A brief analysis of this and the content of similar courses show that they prioritize the mechanics of writing rather than topics on which these students will write. This may sound fair partly because future teachers of English are supposed to learn how to teach writing after having learned how to write well in an academic way. However, considering the fact that writing skills are mostly framed within a mode that postulates the acquiring of mechanics of writing, this perspective seems to be short sighted because writing on the topics that are relevant to lives of the learners, or that are interesting for them, are equally important. Hence, preservice teachers of English in ELT departments need to be instructed through adequate writing courses in which carefully selected topics are assigned, so that they grow as future ELT teachers. Using ELT related topics that stimulate reflection in the preservice ELT teachers' written work can be considered as a more holistic approach towards the teaching of writing in such programs.

  The combination of developing writing skills together with seeking ways to develop students' knowledge in language teaching has its foundations in reflective teaching. Reflective teaching has stressed the need to educate teachers to learn from their experience and to experience as they learn. In their critical review of literature, Hatton and Smith (2006, p. 3) explain that "reflective thinking generally addresses practical problems, allowing for doubt and perplexity before possible solutions are reached." Thus, writing offers a chance to develop students' reflection on various issues related to their growing professional knowledge and experience. From a social constructivist perspective, it is possible to bridge the views of reflective practitioners with issues such as the relations between learning and physical development, and between thought and action in thinking and writing processes in which writing becomes a good support for

learning, especially when it is accompanied by social interaction with peers (Vanhulle, 2005).

The aim of this present paper is to report on a syllabus design implemented in a Turkish university's English Language Teaching department in the spring semester of the 2005-2006 school year. A total number of 38 first-year ELT preservice students were involved in the implementation of the syllabus in the course entitled Writing Skills II, taught to the first year preservice English language teachers. The syllabus was used in the course lasting 27 hours over nine consecutive weeks. Student attendance was high, with the highest number of the absentees being three which occured in only two class meetings. It was noted that students were highly motivated and eager to learn and write in this course from the outset. Instructional materials used included an overhead projector and transparencies on which classroom discussion notes were taken, newspaper and journal articles distributed as handouts, and colored pencils used by the students while commenting on each others' drafts. The writing activities with which the students were engaged included journal keeping, concept mapping, practical arguments, peer reviewing, and were supplemented by conversations on the development of their work. These activities are previously acknowledged in the literature as "instruments and techniques to access practical knowledge" (Vanhulle, 2005) of preservice teachers of English. Hence, it was believed that in this writing course students would be working in a mode to facilitate their understanding of English language teaching while developing their writing skills through reading and applying academic writing skills on issues related to their future ELT profession.

In this article, an initial review of literature related to writing and preservice ELT teacher education is followed by the methods in which the activities, the topics of the writing tasks, and the rubric designed for this syllabus are explained. Following the summary of findings, which includes the evaluation of the students' feedback forms and the results of the analysis of their essays, the overall research process is discussed and conclusions are drawn.

Review of the literature on writing

So far, a variety of approaches to the teaching of writing has flourished such as the controlled-to-free approach, the free writing approach, the paragraph pattern approach, the grammar syntax-organization approach, the communicative approach and the process approach, which emphasizes the process of writing rather than the end product (Raimes, 1983). According to such an approach, what students learn and how they manage their learning throughout their learning and writing processes should be the core of their strategies for learning to write. Raimes (1991), later outlines four approaches to second language writing instruction as focus on form, focus on the writer, focus on content, and focus on the reader. In both delineations, as can be seen clearly, contemporary applications started combining topical analysis and study with the learning of the sub-skills of writing, which aim to develop academic writing as a process in which the individual's awareness on the process of writing increases with the help of the topic that is interesting for and useful to the learner. In such a process writing approach, as Raimes (1983, p. 10) articulates, "the students do not write on a given topic in a restricted time and hand in the composition for the teacher to 'correct'" but "they explore a topic through writing, showing the teacher and each other their drafts, and using what they write to read over, think about, and move them on to new ideas" (p. 10). Hence, current approaches to the teaching of writing postulate that students should perceive writing as a tool for learning that can be useful to them throughout their professional and personal lives (Raimes, 1991, p. 415). The process genre approach allows students to study the relationship between purpose and form for a particular genre as they use the recursive processes of prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing, and using these steps develops students' awareness of different text types and of the composing process (Yan, 2005). Furthermore, a process genre approach is known to focus on teaching particular genres that students need to control in order to succeed in particular settings which might include a focus on language and discourse features of the texts, as well as the context in which the text is produced (Paltridge, 2004). In this course, it can be said that a genre approach is followed by the course instructor who:

- adopted the role of assistant and guided and worked closely with students to encourage them, offering helpful feedback and suggestions.
- directly trained students about writing strategies

- included the listening, speaking, and reading skills in the writing class (Yan, 2005).

Writing is not a skill that can be learned or developed in isolation (Rivers, 1981), but it should be taught and developed in cooperation with other skills and aspects of the language studied. Previous research in Turkey, for example, has shown that academic input received through reading information on how to develop writing skills causes improvement in students' essays (Tütüniş, 2000). Apart from the importance of making use of other skills in the teaching of writing, the nature of activities through which the learners develop their writing has changed significantly, among which cooperative learning and journal keeping are two of the newest applications. In a writing classroom, during a cooperative learning process, students review and comment on each other's writing as peers who collaborate in order to give insight and knowledge to each other. Peer reviews, thus, can be seen as powerful learning tools incorporating reading and writing practice and such a view encapsulates the contemporary social constructivist theory of learning (Gousseva, 1998). Peer reviewing can also be considered as cooperative writing in which, in Harmer's (2001) words "reviewing and evaluation are greatly enhanced by having more than one person working on it, and the generation of ideas frequently more lively with two or more people involved than it is when writers work on their own" (p. 260). Thus, especially when the profiles of the students are similar, learners can learn from each other during this writing process.

Methods

Activities in the Syllabus

The following are used as the main activities in the syllabus of this writing course:

- **Academic reading related to writing**: The coursebook by Smalley & Ruetten (1995) was used as a reference book. This was supplemented by some necessary articles or extracts given to students as handouts.to better examine the ways to improve our academic writing. Students were expected to continue writing on the topics by checking on the quality of their writing through revising their work in constant comparison with the academic information they got from this coursebook and the relevant handouts.

- **Peer reviewing**: Students were involved in reading each other's essay papers as they were being developed, and commented on them by using colored pencils for different purposes such as the red lines for problematic grammar-based and syntactical usage, the yellow ones for lexical problems, the blue ones for problems with the organization, and the green ones for the mechanics of writing such as spelling and punctuation. Within this peer reviewing process, a problem based inquiry, both by the students as well as by the instructor, led us to examine the problems we faced while developing our essays in a detailed manner. As Muncie (2000) articulates, "the subsequent lack of critical involvement with the feedback by the student means that there is less chance of it becoming internalized and having effect beyond the immediate piece of work. Instead, peer feedback is advocated on mid-drafts, and teacher feedback on final drafts" (p. 47). Hence, in this research application, peer reviewing within the process and teacher feedback on the final draft are employed. Students worked in their peer groups at every class meeting for at least 30 minutes to share their evolving work, exchange ideas, and develop each other's writing. During this process, along with the work mentioned above, the instructor monitored students' evolving work, made sure that peer reviews were handled smoothly, and tasks were carried out as they were recorded in the syllabus.

- **Whole class and pair work discussion**: All issues stemming from our academic reading and its application to our writing were discussed as whole class or in pairs. Furthermore, many of our brainstorming activities were completed collaboratively as whole class activities. Throughout the process, the input received from these discussions were noted on OHTs so that they were shared in a more meaningful way.

- **Writing journals**: Students were asked to develop their writing by taking down their notes, jotting down their questions, commenting on the issues covered in class meetings, brainstorming, recording the information they collected into their journals so as to extend and merge their academic readings with their own reflective and research based ideas on education and ELT.

Writing Topics

Each week, the students were asked to focus on one of the following topics to develop their writing by making use of their evolving knowledge of developing writing skills. Table 2 shows the classroom activities that were planned, processed, and completed with the topics of sample academic readings from the coursebook by Smalley & Ruetten (1995) given in the right column.

Table 2. Writing topics and the academic writing skills aimed to be developed in this course

Writing Topics	Academic Writing Skills
What should I do to become a successful ELT teacher?	Generating ideas, brainstorming and mind mapping for ideas
What did I do for my future teaching career today?	Revising and editing your evolving paper
A newspaper report that I liked as a future teacher	The topic sentence and thesis statement
Description of the classroom as a language classroom	Unity and coherence
What it means to be a preserviceELT teacher	Making generalizations and organizing your supports
A newspaper report that made me feel uneasy about the future of education	Argumentative essay
The portrait of a good ELT teacher	Cause and effect essay
Comparing a good ELT teacher I had with a bad one	Comparison and contrast essay
How does one learn to be an ELT teacher: A close look at our curriculum at the ELT division	A Process analysis essay

As can be seen in the list of writing topics, these topics are thought to encourage student reflection on their developing knowledge and insights about the professional and pedagogical issues related to their teacher education. Hence, the students combined their

growing knowledge of writing skills and the knowledge of the topics which required a reflective study. During this process of thinking, reflecting, and writing, a rubric is used to control and evaluate the quality of their written work.

The rubric

Current tasks used in the teaching of writing include keeping a journal which enables students to record their observations and to reflect on them by responding to a reading passage or their peer's writing process (Smalley & Ruetten, 1995). In the evaluation of such writing, as in many other forms of writing, rubrics are used for attaining a standardized, accurate, and applicable evaluative feedback to the learners. As studies have shown, rubrics are not innocent tools used to improve the quality of writing, on the ground that too much attention to the quality of one's own performance in writing is associated with more superficial thinking, less interest in whatever one is doing, less perseverance in the face of failure (Kohn, 2006, p. 14). However, rubrics are practical and widely used evaluative structures used throughout the writing process. In short, a rubric is often necessary when one wants to measure a performance in a more objective and meaningful way (Bargainnier, 2003). In this research, a rubric was adapted by studying the extensive collection offered by Crawford (2001) while considering the givens of the context. Because the students would be using this rubric, one was created that would be intelligible and applicable to them. In the rubric I adapted, I tried to measure the extent to which preservice English language teachers incorporated their reflective inquiries into their writing of essays. In this course syllabus, the students and the instructor used the following rubric (see Table 1) which is designed for this specific course as a simple yet effective tool fit for the specific purposes of this syllabus:

Table 1. Task-specific rubric for Writing Skills course

Point level	Description of the performance
0	The writer has not handed in the written task or it is of very poor quality
1	There is not clear evidence that the writer controlled and re-wrote the essay by reviewing the fundamental points as suggested in the coursebook and personal-reflective inquiry is not detectable
2	There are only one or two instances on which the writer controlled and

	re-wrote the essay by reviewing the fundamental points advised in the coursebook although there is some evidence that his or her reflective inquiry is incorporated.
3	There is some evidence that the writer controlled and re-wrote the essay by reviewing the fundamental points advised in the coursebook, but some points are missing although reflective inquiry is visible.
4	There is strong evidence that the writer controlled and re-wrote the essay by reviewing the fundamental points advised in the coursebook and the writer incorporated a thorough reflective inquiry.

The main reason for developing and using a rubric for the purposes of this course was that the students were collaborating in their peer groups for the first time in their educational lives, and thus needed a more standardized form of evaluation of their essays. This evaluation form helped to reduce the problems that we might have faced in the peer reviewing process. By going through a variety of rubrics and studying them, this final version is developed as a concise, applicable, and effective tool that can easily be used by the students. With the help of this rubric, the instructor could have a more accurate view of how the students writing developed.

Feedback forms

Students were given an empty course feedback form and were asked to write their opinions on the course in relation to the tasks and the overall implementation of the course. Students were also told to comment on their learning processes in relation to how the syllabus worked for them both in and out of the classroom through these anonymous feedback forms.

Summary of Findings

Students' feedback forms

My observations throughout the semester and my students' feedback forms have shown that there seemed to be a high level of satisfaction on the part of these preservice ELT teachers in this writing course. The following were the themes and concerns that appeared in students' feedback forms:

- All of the students found writing on ELT topics very interesting and informative. It was claimed that such topics were more serious and engaging. One student claimed that s/he was 'tired of writing about what we did in the summer break.'

Another student claimed that they 'felt more responsible while working with such 'real' topics'. In short, the students were content with working with ELT topics.

- The most challenging part for the students was applying academic writing skills to their own writing because they had to complete two tasks (generating ideas or researching and developing academic reading skills) all at once. However, this point has always been made in research and general writing courses, so there is no significance of this point apart from the fact that future syllabi should pay closer attention to the relationship between the tasks and writing processes in a more formal way.

- Peer reviewing was welcomed by the students, with only one negative case against and 37 cases of positive feedback, although it is the most problematic area about which they complained in our face to face conversations and during my observations of the students at work. The positive points that the students found in peer reviewing were that it made them get the opinion of many different individuals and this helped them improve their work, and that it helped them to act like a teacher which even made them make use of other resources to provide feedback to their peers. The majority of negative feelings towards peer reviewing were voiced on the grounds that feedback received from their peers was not always intelligible to them, a feeling that is common in many applications of peer reviewing and other collaborative work. This feeling partly stemmed from the activity being new to them and partly because the students expected to have a direct feedback from the instructor as they were used to the instructor giving feedback to them as a follow up of their writing. As one student writes in his or her feedback form, many students 'first thought you couldn't get much help from your friends, but my friends have really pointed at important mistakes I made.'

- The most significant negative feedback received from the students was the work load; that is, having to write nine essays within nine instructional weeks. It was an acceptable criticism on the part of the instructor since this work load could have been reduced to a more acceptable level such as four or five essays maximum for the quality of the course work.

- The rubric was welcomed by these students with feedback showing only two negative as oppsed to 36 positive comments. However, as is stated above, there has always been an argument against the rubrics on the grounds that they are open ended and thus subjective evaluation sheets which are difficult to standardize. In our experience, rubrics worked well in the classroom as the students' feedback forms suggest. The rubrics, as the students stated, helped improve their writing simply because week by week their peers' evaluative scoring led to improved writing by these students.

- In the final analysis, which was provided by the instructor, all rubrics and the essays were collected and re-evaluated to see if and how individual students scored throughout the semester in relation to the quality of their writing. What follows are the results of this final analysis by the instructor.

A Review of Students' Essays

- The quality of the students' essays was high in terms of the content as they wrote through contextually important examples and presented their ideas well while writing. Both in the evaluation of the peers and of the instructors, there was an increase in the arithmetic average of the first and the second drafts as shown below:

1st drafts

  - Peer review: 1.72 / 4
  - Instructor's: 1.82 / 4

2nd drafts

  - Peer review: 3.37 / 4
  - Instructor's: 3.10 / 4

- The instructor's review of students' essays has shown that the quality of students' papers increased gradually, by asking students to apply and reapply their academic reading skills to their evolving essays and by checking on them through the analytical rubric forced them to write in a more accurate and academic way.

- It was noted that when students wrote about their own experience based ideas, the rubric based assessment scored much higher than when they wrote about the

topic "A newspaper report that made me feel uneasy about the future of education." This might be caused by the fact that this task is more abstract than the others since students had also complained about not finding an article for this purpose, the time set was not enough for them to find one, etc.

- The most important problem the students' essays contained was on lexis both meaning based as well as spellingwise. In the future, this syllabus should put more emphasis on vocabulary and spelling as they pertain into the development of writing skills.

Discussion

Given the fact that in the contemporary paradigm of education the development of writing has been considered along with the development of the individual as a professional member of his or her educational realm, planning and implementing adequate syllabi is not only a need but also a task that curriculum planners must perform. Considering this, the syllabi prepared and implemented for the Writing Skills course in our educational setting showed that it can be used as a valid and working syllabus apart from its pedagogical value. It is also natural that the contents, activities, and materials used in this syllabus should be changed and evolved in the future. However, it is certain that as long as current paradigms such as the constructivist theory gain places in our curricular studies and work, it should be expected that the future implementation of this syllabus should be more engaging for the learners. In such an engagement, the knowledge of the context and the needs of the students as future ELT teachers must be calculated and met. Hence, assigning students with the writing tasks that problematize their professional development is an important step for the development of these students who are to be more and more familiarized with various issues related to teaching and education.

Our experience with this syllabus has shown us that because our students are studying to be English language teachers, their writing courses should make use of their growing knowledge and experience of their pedagogical and educational assets. This course, as the results suggested, has achieved this aim and similar syllabi can be used all around the world including but not limited to those in Asia, where students are still considered

to be reserved and where silences and possible discontent among students can easily be observed (Adamson, 2005). Such syllabi, hence, will help those students to bring their growing knowledge and experience into their writing classrooms in an efficient way.

Conclusions

This paper has reported the implementation and evaluation of a syllabus designed and implemented in an ELT department. As mentioned before, the students complained on the grounds that feedback received from their peers was not always intelligible to them. Hence, future applications should include formatted or structured forms for these students to improve each other's writing along with the rubrics which they have used. Reflective feedback provided by the students helped them to assign the role of the teacher who provides feedback to his or her students. Ths is an interesting and unexpected result of this research which highlighted the feeling that these students adopted the role of a teacher while evaluating papers. Hence, this unexpected result has also added to the value of the assumption that reflective writing with peer reviewing had a positive effect on the students' knowledge of ELT from a practical point of view.

In this syllabus, peer reviewing was carried out as collaborative tasks through which pairs of students helped each other to improve their writing of essays. The following are some of the benefits of collaborative dialogues as proposed by Swain (2001) which were certainly visible in our course procedures:

- Students notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge.
- Students externalize their knowledge allowing them to reflect on it, revise it, and apply it.
- All students participate actively and the resulting output allows them to increase their use and knowledge of the target language.
- Collaborative tasks generate unintended consequences. Students carry out tasks according to their own needs and goals. They may not learn what the teacher intended them to learn, but nevertheless they learn what, given their state of content and language knowledge, they are able to learn. Often together, students accomplish what they could not have accomplished alone.

- Teachers, researchers, testers and the students, themselves, have much to learn by studying the substance of collaborative talk.

On a pedagogical level, the results of this paper support the main arguments raised in the literature review that encouraging preservice ELT teachers to write in a reflective mode would enhance the development of the students' writing in a contextually meaningful way. The results of this study also support similar research, such as that of Allen's (2000), in which students were asked to write personal essays that make meaning to them while using peer reviewing as a strategy at the end of which he observed increased confidence, a growth in the knowledge of editing principles, and a more successful application of writing. Similarly, the findings also support Adamson (2006) who found that collaborative dialogue helped sustain high levels of comprehension among most students for the duration of a content-based course other than writing. As this research study shows, when students were asked to write academically by using their developing professional and practical knowledge in a reflective manner, they were highly motivated by the writing task at hand. However, future research should also study the extent to which reflecting and writing on ELT has developed these students' knowledge of their future profession.

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