THE IMPACT OF DETECTING TEXTUAL DISTINCTIVE LINGUISTIC FEATURES TO TEACH LETTER WRITING TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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This study investigates how the linguistic analysis of discourse contributes to ameliorating the teaching of letter writing to high school students. To delve more into the topic, a study was conducted during the academic year 2021/2022 in which ten high school teachers of English from three different institutions in the city of El-Oued in Algeria were interviewed face-to-face about the impact of conducting linguistic analysis of model texts on the teaching of letter writing. Results reveal that all participants opt for the explicit teaching of the writing skill. According to them, heterogeneous classes in the Algerian context hamper the implementation of the implicit teaching of writing. They stated that presenting textual features of all types will make text production easier. They clarified that letter writing lessons are better understood when mainly the distinctive linguistic features of model texts are initially detected in a collaborative way with students. They added that the Teaching Learning Cycle (TLC) is an efficient approach to explicitly teach letter writing.

Keywords: distinctive features, letter writing, textual features, Teaching Learning Cycle.

Introduction

Teaching writing to young foreign language learners is challenging because it is a skill that requires different strategies and competencies to be merged together to produce the target text. Algerian English language curricula focus on introducing the written expression tasks in the textbooks. Writing letters is one type of written expression exercises assigned in the Algerian educational programs to high school students. Different teaching writing approaches have been adopted by teachers to instruct some written genres. However, the students still face impediments to conduct the written expression tasks adequately. The motive that led to conduct this study was to investigate the best way adopted by teachers to ameliorate the teaching of letter writing to high school students. Hence, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Is the explicit teaching of writing adequate for young foreign language learners?
- To what extent does the detection of textual and linguistic features contribute to gaining competence in writing letters?

1. Literature Review
1.1. Letter Writing

One of the most important written genre assignments assigned to high school students is the writing of letter of all types: letters of application, letters of complaints, letters of motivation, letters of inquiry, etc. This stems from the conviction that the students should control the writing of letters due to their importance for formal, informal, academic and social communication among people and organizations.

Letters constitute a conventional written genre and a genre can be defined as "A class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (Swales, 1990, p. 58). Hence, the letter is not a mere neutral written text to be produced for readers, it is rather

a text type that is composed to fulfill a task or to convey important information that generally requires decision taking. Letters ensure different communicative purposes that are recognized and expected by both correspondents.

1.2. Distinctive Features

Letters have numerous distinctive features that make them a unique genre. This uniqueness existing in the 'letter discourse' can be easily detected via language forms. The distinctive features are shown on the different linguistic levels such as the lexical level, the syntactic level and the discourse level. The features are resulted from the statistical operations realized on the different letters. Features are taught to learners and to the community of practice so as to use them while producing their own texts (letters). Those distinctive features developed to have the status of conventions among the members of the community of practice that will be constituted by both senders and receivers.

1.3. Textual Features

According to Swales (1990), discourse communities are socio-rhetorical networks that work towards sets of common goals. Thus, the different communicative purposes place constraints on the formal features of the text, the discourse communities' language structures, and the lexical and grammatical choices. Accordingly, the textual features of letters comprising the linguistic features, the genre features and the style features are designed, restricted and codified by the standards and rules set by the members of the discourse community. The letter genre was able to develop templates due to the abundance of accurate identification of the distinctive features.

The fixed format, the dominance of formulaic expressions (such as the salutations and closings), the limited amount of vocabulary for the sake of conciseness, and the limited use of conjunctions are the basic characteristics of the formal letters. These common features are easily identified and recognized by the students which will help teachers to engage in a process of collaborative discussion about the typical features of the text type- the letter- with the students.

Almost all types of letters assigned in the Algerian high school textbooks belong to the academic or the professional settings such as the motivation letters and the application letters. Hence, they are highly structured and conventionalized. Accordingly, contributions to any sort of a change in the form or structure are very limited. Bhatia considers the professional and the academic genres as being "…highly structured and conventionalized with constraints on allowable contributions in terms of their intent, positioning, form and functional value." (Bhatia,1993, p. 13). Consequently, students find the writing of letters much easier than writing other written genres.

1.4. The Genre-Based Approach to Teach writing

The Genre Approach is based on the Systemic Functional Linguistics developed by Haliday. ''The writer is seen as having certain goals, and intentions, certain relationships to his/her readers, and certain information to convey, and the forms of a text resources used to accomplish these.''(Hyland, 2003, p. 18). The Genre-based writing pedagogy takes into account the linguistic resources, the purpose and audience. This reinforces the idea of the necessity to adhere to the discourse community rules and standards so as to produce a successful text with a high rate of acceptance among both writers and readers.

The genre approach advocates the explicit teaching of the different linguistic and textual features by initially analyzing model texts to be used as a reference when composing new texts. ''teachers provide students with opportunities to develop their writing through analyzing 'expert' texts'' (Hyland, 2003, p. 22). The genre approach to teach writing is of significant help for the inexperienced novice writers since it establishes a strong link between the communicative purpose and the features of text at different discourse levels (Johns, 1997) by presenting an explicit method of teaching. Hyland describes the genre-based pedagogy as ''explicit, systematic, needs-based, supportive, empowering, critical, and consciousness-raising'' (Hyland, 2004, pp. 10-11). Accordingly, it is widely advised to adopt this pedagogy in foreign language classes.

1.5. The Teaching Learning Cycle (TLC)

The Teaching Learning Cycle (TLC) is one of the widely used approaches to teach the written genres. The cycle is a form of macro scaffolding (Hammond, 2001). Through the interaction and assistance from experienced others (teachers and peers), learners can finally achieve their potential by completing the task alone (Vygotsky 1978). Therefore, the dependency of the students on the teachers will gradually decrease in a smooth way to finally enable the students to produce their own texts independently.

The TLC comprises a series of sequential steps which are systematized in five stages (Feez & Joyce 1998; Hyland 2004):

(a) The Context building: experiencing and exploring the purpose, context and audience of the genre.
(b) The Modelling: analyzing the genre to reveal structural patterns and linguistic features.
(c) The Joint construction: It is a guided, teacher-supported practice of genre
(d) The Independent writing: It is an independent writing monitored by the teacher;
(e) Comparing: linking what is learned to other genres and contexts.

The TLC develops a collaborative activity involving both teachers and learners to finally produce a successful genre. "The teacher and the student develop text together and share the responsibility for performance until the student has the knowledge and skills to perform independently and with sole responsibility" (Feez & Joice, 1998, p. 27). The guided support of the teacher is indispensable and leads to a focused task completion.

2. Methodology

A study was conducted during the academic year 2021/2022 in which ten high school teachers of English from three different institutions in the city of El-Oued in Algeria were interviewed face - to- face about the impact of conducting linguistic analysis of model texts on the teaching of letter writing.

2.1. Participants and Sampling

The participants of this study are ten English language teachers. Seven female teachers and three male teachers. All of them are holding the position of full time teachers of English in three different high schools. They have a teaching experience that exceeds ten years. A purposive sampling was adopted since the present researcher has a prior knowledge with the participants. This purposive sampling enables us to obtain quick, focused and reliable responses and will not be considered as a sign of subjectivity.

2.2. Data Gathering Procedures

The data gathering tool utilized in this study was a face- to face structured interview that comprises ten questions that focus on these three axes:
- The explicit teaching of the letter genre
- The importance of detecting and presenting the textual distinctive linguistic features to teach letter writing.
- The efficiency of utilizing the Teaching learning Cycle (TLC) in ensuring the scaffolding.

The data obtained from interviewing the participants were recorded then analyzed qualitatively to answer the study's research questions.

3. Results and Discussion

Results reveal that the participants consider the letter writing task as a motivating task for the students comparing it to other written genres' tasks assigned in the Algerian English language high school textbooks. This is derived from the fact that even the students with modest language resources can compose successful letters because of the restricted forms of the language found in letters.
Results also show that all the participants opt for the explicit teaching of the writing skill in general and mainly for writing the letters because letters are much more structured than the other written

genres. Hence, the Teaching Learning Cycle was considered as be the best option to explicitly present the subsequent steps of the letter writing to the students.

According to the participants, heterogeneous classes in the Algerian context hamper the implementation of the implicit teaching of writing because of the students' mixed abilities and their diverse learning strategies.

The students can detect the distinctive linguistic features of model texts by the guidance and the support of their teachers. Teachers draw the students' attention to the reoccurrence of certain language features. Statistical operations can be made to agree on the permanent features of the letters. The participants stated that presenting textual features of all types such as the linguistic features, genre features and style features will make text production easier. They clarified that letter writing lessons are better understood when mainly the distinctive linguistic features of model texts are initially detected in a collaborative way with students.

They added that knowledge about formulaic expressions, choice of appropriate vocabulary, use of polite forms, different uses of modal auxiliaries and the different registers are prerequisites for better letter writing. Most participants are in favor of implementing the Feez Teaching Learning Cycle (TLC) while teaching letter writing. It comprises five stages: building the context, modeling and deconstructing the text, joint construction of the text, independent construction of the text and linking related texts. They said that presenting the linguistic features will be extensively made at the second stage which is the "Modeling and Deconstruction" phase. This phase will also enable learners to develop their lexico-grammatical choices adequately.

The participants argued that the TLC establishes a shared responsibility between teachers and learners when composing written genres. There exists a sort of a teacher-student collaboration that aims at reassuring the concerns and the fears of the students when engaging in the writing skill.

The participants see that teachers should maintain a balance between a complete guidance and students' independency when planning, designing and sequencing the letter writing steps. The balance is maintained through a smooth shift and gradation of the teacher's control.

4. Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations
The study ends up with recommendations to teachers to focus on giving priority to highlighting the linguistic qualities of model texts as a prior step to the different writing tasks. Teachers should reinforce the collaborative conducting of texts' linguistic analysis so as to facilitate the process of writing letters and other written genres.

Conclusion
The results obtained enabled us to answer the present research questions. The explicit teaching of writing including writing letters is adequate for young learners; especially the foreign language learners because it is a guided strategy that aims at developing the students' control of the target written genre. Additionally, it was clearly identified that the detection of the textual and the linguistic features of a model text contributes enormously in gaining competence in writing letters. These linguistic and textual features have a conventional status and they are shared among the members of the same discourse community. Hence, the students have to strictly incorporate those distinctive linguistic and textual features in their letter writing assignments.

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Appendix: The Teachers' Interview

1. How can you evaluate the letter writing task comparing it to other written genres' tasks assigned in the Algerian English language high school textbooks?
2. Which approaches do you adopt to teach writing in general and to teach letter writing specifically?
3. How can your students detect the distinctive linguistic features of model texts?
4. Do you think that presenting textual features of all types such as the linguistic features, genre features and style features will make the text production easier? Why?
5. Do your students need some prerequisites for better letter writing? If yes, what are they?
6. What is the best approach to explicitly teach the letter genre?
7. Do you consider the letter writing as the students' sole responsibility?
8. How can the teacher-student collaboration produce a successful letter?
9. How can the procedure of detecting the textual distinctive linguistic features assist in teaching the writing of letters?
10. How can teachers maintain balance between the complete guidance and the students' independency when planning, designing and sequencing the letter writing steps?