Can writing for publication improve student-teachers' English (L2) language proficiency?

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Abstract

This report is part of a larger collaborative action research-based study examining the relationship between writing for publication, English language proficiency, and motivation in pre-service English language teacher education. Data come 171 book review drafts completed by 57 student-teachers as part of their coursework in Argentinian teacher education institutions. Quantitative analysis shows that student-teachers' English language proficiency improved in terms of textual organisation, academic vocabulary use, and grammar. The findings should encourage teacher educators to engage pre-service student-teachers in writing for publication initiatives in order to promote authentic and meaningful writing experiences.

Introduction

Current research on L2 teacher education shows that L2 proficiency in academic writing is perceived as a strong feature of L2 teachers' professional identity (Seloni and Henderson Lee 2020). However, in contexts where the L2 is not part of student-teachers' lives, demotivation to succeed in writing tasks may be problematic.

The purpose of this study is to analyse whether engaging three groups of student-teachers from different Argentinian higher education institutions in writing book reviews helped them improve their English language proficiency (ELP). Writing book reviews for publication was selected as a motivating writing activity since it involves authenticity of purpose and audience (Pinner 2019). The significance of this study lies in the fact that the intervention was carried out with future teachers, who, in their future practices may engage learners in similar authentic writing activities.

The study

This article reports on some preliminary findings of a larger collaborative action research (CAR) project on the impact of writing book reviews for publication on student-teachers' motivation and ELP. The project was divided in two cycles. In both cycles, we, a group of four teacher educators from different institutions and our student-teachers (N=57) worked on academic writing with a focus on writing book reviews for publication.

We examined 171 book review drafts (two drafts from Cycle 1 and one draft from Cycle 2 per student-teacher). ELP was measured through two metrics per sentence

as a T-unit: (1) syntactic complexity (mean length of production, amount of coordination (independent clauses) and subordination (dependent clauses), and (2) accuracy (mean number of syntactic, morphological, and lexical errors per clause). For these metrics we followed the procedures detailed in Ruiz-Funes (2015). ELP was also scrutinised through academic vocabulary growth by comparing each draft against a combination of the Academic Word List (AWL) (Coxhead 2000) and Academic Vocabulary List (AVL) (Gardner and Davies 2014). We calculated the mean number of types (number of words from AWL-AVL) and tokens (number of times an AWL-AVL type is used) in each draft.

All the student-teachers accepted to participate. For ethical purposes, they signed a written consent form allowing us to use their drafts provided they were treated with confidentiality and their names replaced by pseudonyms.

Findings and implications

Table 1 compares the overall results obtained in Cycles 1 and 2. For statistical significance, an alpha value of .05 was used; hence, the results were significant if the p-value was below .05. With the exception of morphological and lexical accuracy, ELP improvement between the cycles proved statistically significant.

[Table 1 near here]

A reduction in review, number of sentences, and sentence length was found positive as it reflects that the student-teachers developed mechanisms for conciseness and clarity. Such a reduction also shows that they learnt to build less wordy and

convoluted sentences. This shift is also supported by the reduction of subordination clauses per sentence:

> Kramsch not only expresses her thoughts about a particular language but also she refers to several languages and how the speakers of those languages react in similar situations and from her analysis we may infer that such speakers not only have different reactions due to the influence of a language but also due to their cultural background. (Mariana, Cycle 1, Extract 1)

> Kramsch shares her insights on a particular language, English, as well as others, and analyses speakers' different reactions to similar situations due their unique language and cultural background. (Mariana, Cycle 2, Extract 2)

Syntactic accuracy also displayed improvement. Reduction in the number of syntactical errors may be associated to reduction in sentence length. As student-teachers produced shorter sentences, they were in control of syntactic elements (e.g. phrases) per clause.

Last, academic vocabulary improvement was shown through a reduction in types and tokens. This may have been due to: (1) less contrived use of AWL-AVL items, and (2) lexical cohesion achieved through ellipsis, superordinates, formulaic sequences, and anaphoric nouns instead of item reiteration. For example, note the changes in reference to 'language' in Extracts 1 and 2 above.

The quantitative analysis supports that engaging student-teachers' in writing book reviews for publication contributes to ELP improvement in text organisation (e.g.

sentence reduction and cohesion), academic vocabulary (judicious use and lexical cohesion devices), and grammar (reduction in syntactical errors).

This study is significant in the L2 teacher education field as it contributed to student-teachers' improvement of subject-matter knowledge, i.e. knowledge about English. Also, it provided them with a meaningful pedagogical experience that showed them the linguistic benefits of embedding authentic writing activities in L2 education. Therefore, teacher educators should enable their student-teachers to engage in and reflect on academic writing activities which are authentic and relevant. It should be added that some of the student-teachers from this study have had their book reviews published in an Argentinian journal of applied linguistics.

References

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Table 1. ELP development.

ELP measures	Book reviews	Book reviews	*p*-value

		Cycle 1		Cycle 2		
		M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	
Book review length	Words	1,281	354.66	1,095	124.42	.043
	Sentences	46.51	12.87	34.28	4.05	.032
Syntactic complexity	Length of production (number of words)	37.33	7.56	30.28	6.44	.041
(per sentence)	Coordination clauses	.82	.23	.91	.38	.028
	Subordination clauses	1.47	.59	1.09	.41	.048
Accuracy	Syntactical	.97	.71	.22	.06	.012
(errors per sentence)	Morphological	.05	.02	.04	.03	.056
	Lexical	.09	.08	.06	.08	.061
AWL-AVL	Types per review	32.52	10.44	30.71	6.03	.025
	Tokens per review	256.05	178.33	166.92	23.81	.018