Teaching Writing: From the Core to the Complexity

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Abstract

Although writing is a multifaceted task, teaching writing is a demanding task basically for two reasons: Grammar and Syntax. This article provides a method of teaching writing that was found to be effective in improving students' academic writing composition skill. The article explains the concepts of 'guided-discovery' and 'guided-construction' upon which a method of teaching writing is grounded and developed. Providing a brief commentary on what the core could mean primarily, the article presents an exposition of understanding and identifying the core and building upon the core that can demonstrate the way a teacher can make use of the concepts in teaching for improving the writing skills of their students. The method is an adaptation of grammar translation method that has been improvised to suit to a student-centered classroom environment. An intervention of teaching writing through this method was tried out with positive outcomes in formal classroom research setup, and in view of the content's quality that relates more to the classroom practices and also in consideration of its usefulness to the practicing teachers the process and the findings are presented in a narrative form along with the results in tabular form.

Keywords: Guided Discovery, Guided Construction, Core of a text, Theme of a Text.

1. Introduction

Writing is a multifaceted task that relates to the use and coordination of many cognitive processes. Owing to its complexities, many students find writing challenging and many teachers struggle to find methods to effectively teach the skill (Gillespie & Graham 2011). However, with regard to language use in writing the two basic factors that can affect the quality of one's writing are grammar and syntax. Unlike speaking that can be gained by constant exposure to a language, writing needs investments of special efforts for both learning and mastering, since it requires the basic knowledge of grammar and syntax of a language. The core of a text, which is something similar to the theme of a text, can be identified in a sentence, in a paragraph, in an essay or an article and also in a big text like a

novel or a content book. To be specific the theme of a text refers to be the essence of a larger text, and the core refers to the root of a sentence as well as the theme of a larger text. In a different way, one can understand that the theme is based on the core. Drawing upon the strategies of teaching writing mentioned in the works published by the National Writing Project and few other sources, and the results of an experiment carried out clinically with a group of 9 students preparing for IELTS academic module test and a group of 8 other students preparing for TOEFL iBT test, the article describes a writing instruction method that is built on the concepts of identifying the core and building upon the core. Identifying the core helps in improving grammar and building upon the core helps in improving a sentence, a paragraph, a story or any other bigger text. When the instructional model was tried out with adult English learners at a university the results were positive and when the same strategy was employed in training the students for TOEFL and IELTS tests the outcomes were a considerable improvement in their writing as well as reading scores, in comparison with their previous test scores. Grounded in the concepts of 'guided discovery' for identifying the core, and 'guided construction' for building upon the core, the article explains the pedagogy that an English language teacher can adopt for improving the writing quality of their students.

2. Backdrop

In the view of Killgallon & Don (2000), learning sentence composition can be eased through imitation. They advocate that teachers collect model sentences from classic texts and show their students the way they can compose similar sentences. They argue that the practice of imitation gradually leads to the acquisition of quality writing composition in the way that one can imitate and master the skills in the events like playing a sport, making a cake, and driving a car. Matulis (2007), mentions, "Sentence fluency is an essential writing skill, but it's very difficult to teach in a way that transfers into student writing." Matulis maintains that every two weeks they would focus on a particular sentence structure and in their analysis of a model sentence, taken from Killgallon's "Worktext" booklets, they would first find the base sentence and would proceed to tack the chunks in line with the model sentence.

Gillespie & Graham (2011) present a list of strategies for teaching writing that according to them are built on scientific studies and so are evidence-based practices for teaching writing. The list includes;Teaching strategies for planning, revising, and editing; Having students write summaries of texts; Permitting students to write collaboratively with peers; Setting goals for student writing; Allowing students to use a word processor; Teaching sentence combining skills; Using the process writing approach; Having students participate in inquiry activities for writing; Involving students in prewriting activities and Providing models of good writing. They suggest that since no single strategy has proven to be effective for all students, teachers should consider a combination of suitable strategies from the list and customize the combination of strategies to each student. In fact, they argue that these evidence-based strategies, either individually or in combination, can supplement the teachers' current practices and curricula and so are not a complete substitution.

Webster (2007) recommends that the teachers teach their students the way of reading a book that helps in enhancing their writing. She prefers the phrase 'teaching-writers' to 'teaching

writing'. The strategy highlighted by Webster adopts the technique of empowering the students to observe the techniques employed by authors of texts in order to ensure that their texts more interesting. For example, when students are empowered and guided to observe the techniques like alliteration, ellipses, pauses, word stretches and the choice of words their imagination gets sparkled toward the writing techniques. An initiation of a discussion on the techniques further flares the student's interest in writing techniques and they become encouraged to take up a writing task and the author's techniques that they recently observed.

Hillebrand (2007) talks about the practice of imitating periodic sentences that can improve students' knowledge of the structure of a sentence, can support the students' understanding of punctuation and can promote their style awareness like the word order, varied sentence lengths and parallel structure. In her words, "a periodic sentence is one in which the reader must wait for the other shoe to drop; the structure of the sentence creates a sense of suspense. The subject of the sentence may be introduced toward its beginning, but the rest of the core sentence—which completes its meaning—is held in abeyance until near the end." We can also note that in view of Chomsky (1972, P.88-89), since a language user is innately equipped with a framework for constructing grammars and he/she is genetically programmed to construct grammars of a particular kind, their creativity in producing an "indefinite number of expressions which are new to" his "experience" (Ibid, p. 100) reflects their ability in mastering the grammar and syntax of the language.

When the authors of this provided the question 'What are the elements required for good writing?' to teachers participated at some international conferences the participant teachers came up with a list of things that include knowledge of the language, grammar, vocabulary, ideas, information about the target readers, creativity and genre. That means a competent writing instruction should be able to address all these elements, which is really a complex and challenging task.

3. What is the core?

The core of a sentence is the base of a sentence upon which various chunks of phrases can be tacked. It's the root of a sentence that supports different modifiers of the sentence. It's the skeleton that can be fleshed up with any additional information adjuncts. The core is the simplest unit of a sentence that can be increased to any level of complexity of the sentence. Every sentence is built up on a core that signifies the tense of the sentence. Getting habituated to identify the core, while reading a text, is an essential strategy for improving one's reading fluency as well as writing fluency. Identifying the core helps in improving one's grammar knowledge and building upon the core helps in improving one's syntactical knowledge. For improving the academic writing skills of students, teachers can think about teaching the way to identify the core of a sentence. For instance, let's have a look at the following sentence.

"Though digital literacy can be broadly defined, in this contribution **we will focus** particularly on the skills and practices of reading and writing, and how those are transformed in the digital environment." (Warschauer, Zheng and Park 2013)

In the above sentence, the bold faced sentence "we will focus" is the core of the sentence. Teachers are required to bring the attention of their students to this phrase while reading it. When students understand that the entire sentence would be meaningless without this core, their reading strategy starts changing. Once they start looking at a sentence from its core their comprehension levels of a text could dramatically increase. The complexity of any difficult sentence can be easily worked out and their analysis of a sentence aims at understanding the sentence and comprehending the text completely.

4. Guided-Discovery: How to Employ It in Teaching Writing

According to the Teaching English of the British Council, BBC, "guided-discovery, also known as an inductive approach, is a technique where a teacher provides examples of a language item and helps the learners find the rules themselves." Teachers are required to guide their students towards identifying the core while analyzing a sentence. Teachers can start guiding them with the examples of the simplest sentences and carry them to analyze complex sentences. Let's look at the following sentence, which was provided in one of the GMAT exams in its verbal section.

"While larger banks can afford to maintain their own data-processing operations, many smaller regional and community banks are finding that the cost associated with upgrading data-processing equipment and with the development and maintenance of new products and technical staff is prohibitive."

Many students even at advanced level of English find it either difficult to find the core in complex sentences or they may need some time to identify it, unless he or she is trained to identify it. In spite of their speaking fluency, many students fail to analyze and identify the core of a complex sentence until their attention is brought to this aspect of sentence analysis. To start with, the teaching process of identifying the core, the teachers can consider the sentences as simple as the following.

<p align="center">The white cat killed the black rat.</p>

In the analysis of the above sentence, teachers bring the attention of their students to the boldfaced part of the sentence. And isolate that part of the sentence and write it separately on the board. Now the students can see only that part.

<p align="center">Cat killed. (It's a complete sentence.)</p>

<p align="center">Killed. (Can also be a complete sentence in a context.)</p>

Then guide students to elicit the other parts of the sentence with the following questions.

What did the cat kill? Cat killed *rat*.

What kind of cat is it? White cat. *White* cat killed rat.

Which white cat is it? The white cat (that we saw yesterday.) *The* white cat killed rat.

No. We don't know anything about the cat.   *A* white cat killed rat.

What kind of rat is it?   Black rat.   The white cat killed *black* rat.

(Or) A white cat killed *black* rat.

Which black rat is it?

The black rat (that we saw before.)   The white cat killed *the* black rat.

(Or) A white cat killed *the* black rat.

No. We don't know anything about the rat. The white cat killed *a* black rat

(Or) A white cat killed *a* black rat.

After working with some simple sentences, teachers can switch over to working with a little complex sentence. And once students understand the concept, teachers can get their students exercise with the sentences as complex as the following one.

"From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon **they sat** in what Miss Coldfield still called the office because her father had called it that--a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl someone had believed that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and which (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) became latticed with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Qunetin thought of as being flecks of the dead old dried paint itself blown inward from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them." (Faulkner 1990, p.1)

In the analysis of the above sentence a teacher can point to the bold faced and underlined part of the sentence "they sat" as the primary core of the whole sentence and for easier comprehension of the entire sentence teachers can point to the core parts in the other subordinate or adjunct clauses that are connected by the conjunctions like that, which, because, and, etc., as they are boldfaced, underlined and presented below.

"From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown of the long still hot weary dead September afternoon **they sat** in what **Miss Coldfield** still **called** the office because **her father had called** it that--a dim hot airless room with the blinds all closed and fastened for forty-three summers because when she was a girl **someone had believed** that light and moving air carried heat and that dark was always cooler, and **which** (as the sun shone fuller and fuller on that side of the house) **became latticed** with yellow slashes full of dust motes which Qunetin thought of as being **flecks** of the dead old dried paint itself **blown** inward

from the scaling blinds as wind might have blown them." (Faulkner 1990, p.1)

When teachers can organize a discussion on all the underlined parts, the discussion can lead to brainstorming and elicitation of grammar in the sentence. Teachers can play their role as facilitators of the discussion and take the opportunity to explain the role of conjunctions and adjuncts without using grammatical terminology. For example, in leading a discussion on the sentence given above, to begin with, teachers can focus on the primary core part 'they sat' and start a discussion with the following questions and the strategy for eliciting grammar.

Who sat?   *They* sat.

Where did they sit? They sat *in the office*.

What time was it?   *After two O'clock in the afternoon* they sat in the office.

How long did they sit?

From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown they sat in the office.

What kind of afternoon was it?

From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown *of the long still hot weary hot*

dead September afternoon they sat in the office.

How do they know that it's an office?

From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown they sat *in what Miss*

Coldfield still called the office.

Why did Miss Coldfield still called it an office?

From a little after two o'clock until almost sundown they sat in what Miss

Coldfield still called the office *because her father had called it that –*

5. Guided-Discovery: In Parsing the Garden Path Sentences

Although teachers and students can work with regular sentences for parsing, it's the block style appearance and the rhythm that creates special interest in working with garden path sentences. Moreover, the omission of functional words also creates some curiosity in learners to understand in what way they are grammatically correct sentences. That's why after working with common sentences we recommend the teachers to work with garden path sentences in guiding the students towards identifying the core. Working with puzzling sentences that look awkward but grammatically perfect can be a way to strengthen the knowledge of sentence structures and to enhance learners' ability in identifying the core. For example, a teacher can provide the sentences similar to the following ones for analysis.

1. *The Horse Raced Past The Barn **Fell*** – Beaver 1970

2. ***The complex houses** married and single **soldiers** and their families (Wikipedia, n.d).*

3. ***The rat** the cat the dog chased killed **ate the malt** --* Chomsky & Miller 1963

4. ***Anyone** who feels that if so-many more students whom we haven't actually admitted are sitting in on the course than ones we have that the room had to be changed, then probably auditors will have to be excluded, **is likely to agree** that the curriculum needs revision* – Chomsky & Miller 1963

5. *Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo* – Rappaport 2006

   A buffalo that can buffalo a Buffalo buffalo **can** aslo buffalo other Buffalo **buffalo.**

6. ***This** exceeding trifling **witling,** considering ranting criticizing concerning adopting fitting wording being exhibiting transcending learning, **was displaying,** notwithstanding ridiculing, surpassing boasting swelling reasoning, respecting correcting erring writing, and touching detecting deceiving **arguing** during debating.* – Brown (1851)

Once the students brainstorm and analyze these garden path sentences, teachers can present the same sentences that are modified by removing the ambiguity so that they look like normal unambiguous sentences and lead a discussion for clarification.

6. Guided-Construction: Building upon a Story

The concept of guided construction can be employed in teaching writing to advanced student in constructing sentences in a story based on the core parts of the story. The process of teaching can follow the steps given below that are shown using a story as an example. First, a teacher can show a simpler version of a story as small as the following one. Allow students to have enough time for reading.

There was a blind girl. She had a boyfriend. She used to say that she'd marry him if she could see him. One day someone donated her a pair of eyes.

She finally saw her boyfriend.

He told her, "You can see me now, can we get married?"

She replied. I have my eyesight now, but you're still blind. I'm sorry."

He said, "Take care of yourself, and my eyes."

When teachers are sure that they have given their students enough time for reading they can hide the story and show the students the same story with only the core parts and questions related to the deleted adjuncts of the story. The text then does look like the one given below.

There was a girl (**What kind of girl was she?**). She had a friend (**What kind of friend was he?**). She used to say that (**What is *that*?**). One day someone donated her (**what did someone donate?**)

She finally saw (**What did she see?**). He told her (**What did he tell?**) She replied (**What did she reply?**)

He said (**what did he say?**).

Now teachers can ask the students to construct the story again. The students will be able to discuss and reconstruct the story and will be able to understand the way they are connecting sentences. Then teachers can show the bigger version of the story that may look as the following one.

There was a blind girl who was filled with animosity and despised the world. She didn't have many friends, just a boyfriend who loved her deeply, like no one else. She always used to say that she'd marry him if she could see him. Suddenly, one day someone donated her a pair of eyes.

And that's when she finally saw her boyfriend. She was astonished to see that her boyfriend was blind. He told her that she could she see him and asked if she could marry him? She replied that if we would marry him, she couldn't do anything and they would never be happy because she could see now and he was still blind. And she said that it wouldn't work out and she was sorry to say that.

With a tear in his eye and a smile on his face, he meekly said that he just wanted her to always be happy, and told her to take care of herself, and his eyes.

(Source of the story:

Romantic Love Messages http://www.romanticlovemessages.com/cat/stories1.htm)

Again allow students enough time to read the story and when the teachers are sure that their students have had enough time to read, hide the story text and present them the text with the core parts along with the questions embedded in the text that can prompt the missing parts and can ask them to reconstruct the story. This part of the text for the story given above can look like the one given below.

There was a blind girl (**Who is this blind girl? How do you describe her?**). (**How many friends did she have?**), just a boyfriend (**who is this boy? How do you describe him?**). She always used to say that she'd marry him if she could see him. Suddenly, one day someone donated her a pair of eyes. And that's when she finally saw her boyfriend. (**What was her reaction?**). He told her that she could she see him and asked (**What did the boy ask?**) She replied that (**What did she say?**). And she said that it wouldn't work out and she was sorry to say that.

With a tear in his eye and a smile on his face, he meekly said that he just

wanted her to always be happy, and told her (**What did the boy tell**

her?)

When the students finish the task teachers can lead a discussion on the questions and they can provide the students with the feedback on their use of the conjunctions and other adjuncts of information.

7. Classroom Research

The authors' scholarship of teaching prompted to experiment with the strategy to improve their students' writing scores in IELTS and TOEFL. When the students who scored well in their speaking, listening and reading found it disappointing when it comes to their writing scores, the authors took up the task of teaching writing to the students who scored low in writing. The students who scored low in writing section of the tests and wanted to improve their writing scores were selected for the proposed course. We understood that in spite of their fluency in speaking, listening and reading they find it difficult to produce sentences grammatically accurate. And because of the grammatical inaccuracies they are scoring low. We planned to train them for 3 months on sentence analysis and sentence composition. We planned to make the classes more interactive, collaborative and teacher directive. The method on its face looks like a traditional grammar translation method, but we adapted the method and made it completely student centered by introducing pair works, group works and collaborative completion of the tasks that are followed by teachers' individual and whole class feedbacks. After the training with the method that we described above the results were promising and the students feed back was clearly positive. The students who scored between 4.5 and 5.5 in IELTS writing section could improve their scores from 6.5 to 7.5. Moreover, the reading scores of 4 students improved from 7.5 to 8 and the reading scores of 3 other students improved from 7 to 8. And the students who took TOEFL iBT test and scored between 12- 15 in writing before the training could improve their writing scores from 16-24. The reading scores of these students also improved from the range of 21-25 to the range of 24-28.

Table: 1

	IELTS Band in Writing Section Before Training	IELTS Band in Writing Section After Training	Percentage of Improvement	Standard Deviation
Student 1	5.5 (61.1%)	7 (77.7%)	16.6%	27.8
Student 2	4.5 (50%)	7 (77.7%)	27.7%	27.7
Student 3	5 (55.5%)	7.5 (83.3%)	27.8%	22.2
Student 4	5 (55.5%)	6.5 (72.2%)	16.7%	22.2
Student 5	6 (66.6%)	7.5 (83.3%)	16.7%	22.2
Student 6	6.5 (72.2%)	8 (88.8%)	16.6%	16.7
Student 7	4.5 (50%)	6.5 (72.2%)	22.2%	16.7
Student 8	5.5 (61.1)	7.5 (83.3%)	22.2%	16.606
Student 9	5 (55.5%)	7 (77.7%)	22.2%	16.6

Mean: 20.96667   Standard Deviation (SD): 4.36068 Variance (SD): 19.01556

Maximum Standard Deviation: 25.327   Minimum Standard Deviation: 16.6

Table: 2

	TOEFL iBT score in Writing section before training	TOEFL iBT score in Writing section after training	Percentage of Improvement	Standard Deviation
Student 1	14 (46.6%)	23 (76.6%)	30%	30
Student 2	13 (43.3%)	21 (70%)	26.7%	30
Student 3	18 (60%)	25 (83.3%)	23.3%	30
Student 4	18 (60%)	27 (90%)	30%	26.7
Student 5	17 (56.6%)	25 (83.3%)	26.7%	26.7
Student 6	12 (40%)	16 (53.3%)	13.3%	23.3
Student 7	19 (63.3%)	26 (86.6%)	23.3%	23.3
Student 8	15 (50%)	24 (80%)	30%	13.3

Mean: 25.4125   Standard Deviation: 5.26888   Variance: 27.76109

Maximum Standard Deviation: 30.681   Minimum Standard Deviation: 20.144

8. Closing Statement

On its face, the writing instruction method looks like traditional grammar translation method. But the improvised way of dealing with the traditional method makes it completely student centered and more interactive and can lead to active learning that can improve students' creativity and their ability to think critically. The teaching of writing can be simplified by getting the students analyze sentences from their core. When students are habituated to identify the core in sentences, comprehension of complex texts could be easier. The basic essentials of writing, grammar and syntax can be taught well by adopting the guided discovery and guided construction methods. Once teaching writing through this method is started, teachers can find that they are addressing many other elements of writing that are desirable in a good writer as well. For example, through collaborative approaches teachers can improve their students' critical and analytical skills, creativity, vocabulary and ability to select proper genre. Apart from developing writing skills, students can improve their reading skills as well through the proposed writing intervention. However, in view of varying learning styles of learners it's difficult to recommend any specific method as the best one

universally, because no single method could be the most ideal method for all learners. There is always a scope for a better method and the teachers should keep trying something that suits better to their students and one can consider this method as one of the best methods that can bring about a great improvement in their students' writing skills.

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