

## **The Practice and Effect of a Workshop Approach to Teaching English Writing in ESL Composition Courses**

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### **Abstract**

*The qualitative case study was used as the basis of research method to examine the practice and effect of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in an ESL composition course. Eleven (n=11) college ESL students were involved in an eight-week ESL composition course of spring semester. Classroom observations, interviews and artifacts were collected and analyzed for this case study. Findings revealed that the majority of ESL students in this sample made progress in their English writing via the practice of writing workshops in the composition course. Findings also unfolded that writing instruction using a Workshop approach successfully enhanced students' writing competence to meet the requirement of the college for starting or continuing college courses.*

**Keywords:** English writing, ESL composition course, Workshop approach, ESL students

### **1. Introduction**

In accordance with the 2012 Open Doors Report, the number of international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities was at an all-time high of 764,495 in the 2011/12 academic year ("Open Doors," 2012). Of these students, large increases in undergraduate levels are mainly from China and Saudi Arabia ("Open Doors," 2012). Since their first language is not English, they encounter challenges while studying in the United States. A big challenge noteworthy is that inadequate English writing competence affects English as a second language (ESL) and international students' literacy competence (as cited in Giridharan, 2012).

Needless to say, it is indispensable for ESL students to develop satisfactory second language (L2) writing skills so as to reach academic or professional purposes (Horwitz, 2008). However, ESL students come from a diverse range of educational, literacy, social, cultural backgrounds, and all have their own history of educational continuity in relation to learning English; therefore, teachers have to reconcile these differences with their personal approaches to instruction (Ariza, 2006). Among many approaches and techniques of teaching English writing, Caplan and Pearson (2007) suggested that a writing workshop is able to successfully improve ESL students' writing skills through student-centered writing processes. Dorn and Soffos (2001) also confirmed that teaching writing with a Workshop approach scaffolds students' writing development, further helping them become independent writers.

Clearly, Workshop approach is a great teaching technique for teaching writing (Caplan & Pearson, 2007). Indeed, a successful writing workshop not only promotes students' skills in writing, but also cultivates teacher-student and student-student relationships in the environment of collaborative learning (Oszakiewski & Spelman, 2011). It is widely known that ESL students confront a problem of how to use the language to create meaning in written production (Chen, 1992). Working in a workshop would provide them a platform where writing is no longer a tough task but engages them in the world of being a real writer.

The aforementioned studies (e.g., Caplan & Pearson, 2007; Dorn & Soffos, 2001; Oszakiewski & Spelman, 2011) have specifically indicated the positive effects of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing for ESL students.

The practice of English writing instruction using a Workshop approach in the ESL composition course, however, needs to be explored. In particular, a case study would provide insight into how a Workshop approach works in enhancing ESL students' writing competence.

As expected, this study would benefit intended audiences: teachers of all grades and educators of ESL education, particularly teachers working with English language learners (ELLs). With an understanding of effects using Workshop approach in an ESL composition course, teachers are likely to move beyond basic teaching strategies and engage students in appropriate writing workshops that help students achieve academic success in U.S. schools. Specifically, this study would provide educators with a panorama of knowledge regarding student-centered writing workshops on the development of English writing competence. In addition, the findings of this research would serve as empirical data for further studies in exploring the applicability of Workshop approach used to motivate ESL students for learning writing through the collaboration among students and the teacher.

Applying Workshop approach as the theoretical framework, this study therefore attempted to contribute to the knowledge base by examining the practice and effect of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in an ESL composition course through the exploration of the following research questions:

- (1) How does the practice of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in an ESL composition course?
- (2) To what extent does English writing instruction using a Workshop approach enhance ESL students' writing competence?

## **2. A Brief Theoretical Overview**

A majority of literature and research (Connors & Glenn, 2003; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2008; Rothschild, 1991; Silva & Matsuda, 2001) in reference to instructional practices in ESL composition courses reveal that ESL teachers confront much more problems than other teachers in the classroom seeing that not every teaching strategy can be applied to every student with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is suggested that teachers should equip with specialized competence to prepare for teaching L2 writers, and have abilities to deal with "sociocultural, rhetorical, and linguistic differences" of ESL students (Silva & Matsuda, 2001). To be more specific, teachers have to spend more time to work with ESL students in classrooms, and pay much attention to strategies, rhetorical, and linguistic issues (Silva & Matsuda, 2001).

Probing into the effects of a workshop approach on ESL learners' writing performance, Rothschild (1991) conducted a controlled experiment and found that writing instruction using a workshop approach benefited ESL students' writing improvement, especially in the aspects of content and organization. Findings derived from a survey of ESL students' attitudes towards the writing workshop confirmed the effectiveness of a workshop approach. Findings also pointed out that teaching writing with workshop approach brought great benefits to ESL students who spent less than two years in target language setting. Specifically, the workshop students were well aware of processes of writing an English essay and article.

The main purpose of a workshop approach to teaching is to allow students "to see their work through the eyes of their peers and help them gain distance so they can evaluate the work for themselves" (Connors & Glenn, 2003; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2008). Therefore, in the writing workshop, the teacher can ask students to accomplish specific tasks like a brainstorming discussion of an essay topic, the analysis of errors on essays, and making comments on one another's draft (Connors & Glenn, 2003; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2008). More precisely, a workshop approach to the teaching of writing is designed to get students involved in the group work, as during in-class writing activities, evaluating peers' papers and providing peers with comments (Connors & Glenn, 2003; Fiderer, 1995; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2008). Definitely, writing workshops enable students to reach a goal of collaborative learning in "peer-response" groups where the group members offer oral and written responses to peers' papers (Connors & Glenn, 2003; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2008).

Apparently, students are capable of improving their written work by peers' assessment while collaboratively learning in a writing workshop. Peer assessment is used to evaluate each other's written product through group discussions or writing conferences (O'malley & Pierce, 1996). It not only enables teachers to understand students' progress, but also provides students with some benefits, such as cultivating their autonomy, helping them to see their works through peers' eyes, and increasing their motivation to self-involvement (Connors & Glenn, 2003; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2008; O'malley & Pierce, 1996). It is believed that "feedback to the writer provides a means of focusing attention on the language used in writing and on the writing skill" (Nation, 2009). Therefore, peer assessment will greatly promote students' writing performance by means of peers' review and feedback (Jenks, 2011).

In addition, evaluating peers' papers with scoring rubric forms helps students make progress in writing (O'malley & Pierce, 1996). Scoring rubric forms can be designed with a combination of trait scoring and analytic scoring types; namely, teachers can show given traits that students are requested to have on their essays, along with separating features of the essay into components that are each graded separately (Alderson & Bachman, 2002). Hillocks (1984) stressed that such method is beneficial for improving writing skills (as cited in Nation, 2009). Also, making marginal comments on students' papers or scoring rubric forms helps teachers "call attention to strengths and weaknesses" of students' essays, further correcting their errors (Connors & Glenn, 2003; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2008). Generally, the scoring rubric and marginal comment are convenient ways for teachers to provide students with feedback and for students to obtain feedback from teachers.

In a word, the discussions above present the tenets of Workshop approach and the justification of its applicability in the pedagogy with a basis that teaching writing with Workshop approach enhances students' writing competence. Rather, the above brief theoretical overview is imperative in order for readers to understand the answers of research questions. The next sections would discuss the methodology, findings and discussions, followed by conclusions and recommendations.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Participants

The target ESL composition course included eleven (n=11) college ESL students and a professor at Arkansas Tech University (ATU), Russellville, Arkansas. All participants were involved in an eight-week ESL Composition course taught twice per week. The class period was 80 minutes without break time. The students' backgrounds are shown in the following table.

**Table 1: Background Statement of ESL Students (n=11)**

Participants	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Nationality	Z	J	J	J	C	C	S	S	S	S	S
Status (study)	B	L	L	L	L	B	B	B	B	B	B

Key: (1) **Nationality**: Z=Zambia, J=Japan, C=China, S=Saudi Arabia.

(2) **Status (study)**: BA: Bachelor's student; LI: English Language Institute's student

#### 3.2 Instruments

Classroom observations were adopted as research tools to detect the writing instruction using a Workshop approach. Also, artifacts exploited by the professor of the target course were collected and analyzed to examine students' writing progress and the effect of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in the Composition course. Still, the interviews were conducted after the completion of the target course to further look into students' reactions of learning writing through writing workshops.

#### 3.3 Research Design

The qualitative case study was used as the basis of research method to examine the practice and effect of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in an ESL composition course. Qualitative research method is used to explore, understand, and explain the "behavior and attitudes" of the meaning individuals or groups (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, it is an appropriate research design for this study that tried to explore how a Workshop approach works in teaching English writing, understand students' perspectives about how writing workshops affect their writing improvement, and explain students' progress in English writing with the aid of artifacts designed to assess students' written works.

Additionally, the case study design involves "the study of an issue explored through the case within a bounded system" (Creswell, 2007). This study focused on the issue related to the application of Workshop approach in teaching writing, and then selected the ESL composition course to illustrate this issue (Creswell, 2007). As a result, the case study design was a better method for conducting this study.

### 4. Findings and Discussions

As stated in the introduction section, the research questions guiding this study were: (1) how does the practice of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in an ESL composition course?; (2) to what extent does English writing instruction using a Workshop approach enhance ESL students' writing competence? The following section would present the findings and discussions pertaining to the research questions.

#### 4.1 Answering the first research question: How does the practice of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in an ESL composition course?

Overall findings and discussions on classroom observations answered the first research question. In the first class of every week, the professor integrated the Internet-based instruction into the writing workshop for arousing students' interest in English writing. The goal of the pre-writing phase was to motivate students to write more. At first, the professor divided all students into three small groups, and assigned a topic for their group discussions. She provided some questions related to the topic for each group to discuss, and asked them to search online information regarding those questions. Later, she asked each group to begin with sentence level exercises while answering those questions, such as expanding words and phrases into sentences.

Next, at drafting stage, she gave each group clear instructions and ample time to get their ideas from online information and group discussions on their papers. Meanwhile, she taught them about how to write an essay, and explained to them about the elements of an essay, such as the topic sentence, organized details, transitional words, and a concluding sentence. At revising stage, each group turned in their drafts for written comment from the professor, and revised drafts again. After that, the professor gave each group the Peer Feedback Form (see Table 2) and asked them to assess other groups' essays by this form. At editing stage, each group used the feedback they received from both peers and the professor to edit and rewrite their essays. Later, the professor evaluated students' essays with the Grading Rubric Form after they resubmitted revised ones. Finally, the professor published their essays into a class booklet.

**Table 2: Peer Feedback Form**

PEER FEEDBACK FORM

Writer's name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Reviewer's name: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1 What is the problem that is discussed in the essay?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 2 On your partner's paper, underline the thesis statement twice.
- 3 Answer these questions about the introduction. Mark each box  or .
  - Is there an interesting hook?
  - Is there a description of the problem?
  - Does the thesis statement mention the solution(s)?
- 4 Underline the topic sentence of each body paragraph.
- 5 Is this a Type 1 (several solutions) or a Type 2 (one solution) problem-solution essay? \_\_\_\_\_
- 6 Look at the writer's original outline for this essay. Compare the outline to the essay. Do you see any differences between the two? Can you see any areas where the writer's ideas may have changed during writing?  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 7 Answer these questions about the conclusion. Mark each box  or .
  - Does the conclusion summarize the main points of the essay?
  - Are any new points added?
  - Does the conclusion contain a recommendation, a prediction, or a closing thought?
  - Does the conclusion tie back to the introduction?
- 8 Draw a star (★) in the margin next to your favorite sentences. Choose two or three.
- 9 Any other comments: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

*Note.* Zemach, D. E., & Stafford-Yilmaz, L. (2008).

In the second class of every week, the professor conducted the writing workshop using the same procedures, but asked all students to have individual written work and share with their group members. Therefore, at revising stage, each group's members needed to assess other members' essays by the Peer Feedback forms (see Table 2). Besides that, each student also had to share individual work with one member in other two groups.

## 4.2 Answering the second research question: To what extent does English writing instruction using a Workshop approach enhance ESL students' writing competence?

### 4.2.1 Classroom Observations

Findings from classroom observations revealed that ESL students' confidence toward writing English essays was increased and their writing performance made great progress through writing workshops. First, with the collaborative learning within writing workshops, students who were reluctant and fearful to perform were drawn to be willing to share their ideas (Kong, 2009). Second, group discussions decreased ESL students' sense of fear toward individual works; namely, their sense of achievement for learning writing was promoted in group works. In particular, Japanese students who were shy of asking questions in class learned how to deal with their writing problems through group discussions. Third, peer assessments provided ESL students with substantial and constructive feedback from others, further enhancing their writing skills.

The above findings unfolded a successful instructional practice that created a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom to motivate students for writing and reduce students' fear toward writing. Applying a Workshop approach to writing instruction, the professor helped students eliminate the feeling that they could not be successful and helped them overcome the barriers of learning English writing. With the aid of the Peer Feedback Form, the professor pointed out students' problems in English writing, which rendered students to focus on their learning processes and allowed them to see their progress. As a whole, obviously students' word craft was improved by the instructional design adopting a Workshop approach that offered a supportive environment so that students were likely to expand their voices for written production and take risks in learning writing.

### 4.2.2 Collection of Artifacts

Findings from the collection of artifacts uncovered that the majority of ESL students in this study had great progress in English writing, thus being able to start or continue college courses according to the requirement of the university. The first-type artifact was the professor's Peer Feedback Form used to assess peers' essays and provide comments and feedback for writing enhancement. The comments excerpted from several students' forms are shown as follows:

*"You should review your grammar. Good ideas. Good luck."*

*(Comments of Student S-1 on the essay of Student J-2)*

*"Your writing is so good, but you should work hard in the TRANSITIONS."*

*(Comments of Student S-4 on the essay of Student J-1)*

*"You don't have title. You don't have these statements in conclusion."*

*(Comments of Student J-3 on the essay of Student S-1)*

*"I like your essay!! Keep going."*

*(Comments of Student S-4 on the essay of Student C-1)*

While evaluating peers' essays, all students interacted with each other and discussed the problems with peers. In writing workshops, they not only could learn peers' advantages concerning writing English articles, but also avoided making the same mistakes as found in peers' essays. Apparently, ESL students' comments and feedback proved that peer assessments were beneficial to keep moving forward in English writing.

The second-type artifact was the Grading Rubric Form designed by the professor utilized to assess students' essays. The criteria of Grading Rubric Form consisted of four items: thesis/focus/main idea (30% of the grade), organization (30% of the grade), development (30% of the grade), and syntax/diction/mechanics/MLA style (10% of the grade). Based on her writing assessment criteria, levels and grades of essays of ESL students would be evaluated with an overall consideration of writing skills encompassing content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. Also, she made some constructive comments in the margins of the Grading Rubric sheets and essay sheets to point out the errors of students' essays. Some comments written in the margins of the Grading Rubric Forms are as the following excerpts.

*"Main idea/thesis is general, but it is proven well in body of this paper."*

*(Comments on Student Z)*

*"You need to give examples and details to support each of your main reasons/points."*

*(Comments on Student J-2)*

*“Need to work on your sentence structure, specifically your phrase constructions. They are difficult to understand. A lot of the time.”*

*(Comments on Student C-2)*

*“Gave you this score (60%) because of MLA. It is related to the source material, and not providing the separate page at the end with information on it about your Internet sites.” (Comments on Student S-3)*

As shown above, the professor’s comments were helpful to the development of writing skills. In addition, examining students’ progress of writing abilities, the researcher compared two-essay grades recorded on Grading Rubric Forms. One was the first-week explanatory essay titled “Why I Chose to the United States to Study;” the other was the final-week problem-solution essay that each student chose a topic from the textbook. The results on the comparison of two essays are illustrated in the following table.

**Table 3: Comparison of Grades of Two Essays (n=11)**

Subject	Code	Essay 1	Essay 2	Progress (%)
1	Z	83	94	11%
2	J-1	71	89	18%
3	J-2	74	84	10%
4	J-3	74	93	19%
5	C-1	84	95	11%
6	C-2	82	78	*-4%
7	Z-1	74	92	18%
8	Z-2	80	93	13%
9	Z-3	87	94	7%
10	Z-4	79	88	9%
11	Z-5	78	95	17%
<b>Average</b>		78.7	90.4	12.9%

As illustrated above, a majority of students made great progress in writing, and only a student did less well than before. The average grades on the first and second essays were 78.7 and 90.4 respectively. The amount of progress reached at 12.9% in six weeks. This result obviously confirmed that the writing instruction using a Workshop approach positively affected the learning outcomes by promoting students’ competence to write English essays. Above all, the professor successfully brought students’ writing skills into full play as well as increased their abilities for an advanced level of English writing in the ESL Composition course of the next stage where would meet the requirement of the target university for starting or continuing college courses.

#### 4.2.3 Interviews

In addition to classroom observations and collection of artifacts, students’ positive responses in interviews conducted after the completion of the target course verified the effectiveness that a Workshop approach brought to writing instruction in the English Composition course. Excerpts from the responses of ESL students are displayed in the following.

The interview question was “How do you feel about your English writing after completing this ESL Composition course?”

*“I have made progress in the format of writing essays and the use of better interconnecting words.” (Student Z)*

*“I know how to write an essay a little.” (Student J-1)*

*“I learned the hook, topic, introduction, paragraph, thesis statement...” (Student J-3)*

*“I can use more difficult words. It (refers to this course) tells me the form of an essay.” (Student C-1)*

*“I know how to select a topic, and write an outline for an essay. It helps me a lot in writing.” (Student C-2)*

*“Now, I am able to write any kind of essays.” (Student S-3)*

*“Now I am good at making the main ideas.” (Student S-5)*

As stated above, findings again proved that ESL students had greatly advanced in English writing. Teaching with a Workshop approach, indeed, the professor succeeded in improving students’ writing skills and elevating their self-confidence towards writing essays.

Most important of all, writing workshops built up the bridge between the knowledge and practices in English writing for ESL students and solved their problems in learning writing. Undoubtedly, a Workshop approach successfully functioned as an indispensable helper that enriched ESL students' skills as writers.

### **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

This study was intended to examine the practice and effect of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in an ESL composition course. To achieve the above scholastic objective, this study presented a brief theoretical overview for answering the research questions: (1) How does the practice of a Workshop approach to teaching English writing in an ESL composition course?; (2) To what extent does English writing instruction using a Workshop approach enhance ESL students' writing competence? An overall review of writing instruction in the target ESL Composition course assured the effectiveness of a Workshop approach on enhancing ESL students' writing competence.

This study was conducted with the basis of qualitative research method via a case study. Participants consisted of eleven (n=11) college ESL students and a professor at Arkansas Tech University (ATU), Russellville, Arkansas. All participants were involved in an eight-week ESL Composition course taught twice per week. Data were collected via classroom observations, interviews and artifacts. Findings revealed that the majority of ESL students made progress in their English writing via the practice of writing workshops in the composition course. Findings also indicated that writing instruction using a Workshop approach successfully enhanced students' writing competence to meet the requirement of the college for starting or continuing college courses.

This study mirrored the significance that teaching writing with a Workshop approach would help teachers move beyond basic teaching strategies and engage students in appropriate writing workshops that help students' writing improvement while studying in the U.S. As expected, this study would provide educators with a panorama of knowledge regarding student-centered writing workshops on the development of English writing competence. In particular, this study would benefit intended audiences: teachers working with ELLs of all grades and educators of ESL education.

Considering the significance and positive effects this study brings to language education, the author provides teachers and English language centers or institutions with some recommendations. First of all, teachers are encouraged to apply a Workshop approach into writing instruction seeing that it is extremely beneficial in motivating students' learning interests, reducing their sense of fear toward writing, cultivating their critical thinking via collaborative learning in groups, and engaging them in creative processes. Also, in order to help ESL students achieve academic success while studying in the U.S., English language centers or institutions should encourage them to take English composition course for at least one semester even though they have passed any English language proficiency exam in their home countries before attending U.S. universities or colleges. As a whole, teaching English writing with a Workshop approach will take English writing instruction to a new stage that benefits both students, teachers, and schools.



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