

The Usefulness of Grammar for Writing

Abstract

The present study investigates the rates of correlation between grammar and writing as revealed by the students' grades, in the department of Foreign Languages at the University of Constantine. Our study is based on an analysis of students' marks of grammar and writing obtained over four semesters in 2005 and 2006, since the LMD system was implemented. The comparative analysis of the two subjects seeks to determine how far the teachings in grammar are reflected in those of writing, and whether a student skilled in grammar is inevitably good at writing. Measuring the degree of connection between the components of the same Teaching Unit is dictated by the supposedly natural coherence and articulation existing between them. Before classifying two or more subjects within the same Teaching Unit, one should confirm how deep they are connected. The remote objective of such a study would be the adaptation of the appropriate approach to the contents designed.

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ملخص

يبحث هذا المقال في معاملات الارتباط بين النحو والتعبير الكتابي كما تعكسها نقاط طلبة الإنجليزية بجامعة منتوري، قسنطينة. و يتمثل العمل التجريبي، الذي تم بعد فترة ملاحظة دامت سنتين، أي منذ بداية تطبيق نظام ل.م.د.، في سنة 2004، في جمع نقاط الطلبة في مادتي النحو والتعبير الكتابي المحصل عليها في أربعة سداسيات خلال سنتي 2005 و 2006 و تكميم مدى تأثير المادة الأولى في

Introduction

The present article is mainly concerned with writing as an important and unavoidable topic to be dealt with both in isolation and in relation with other subjects which form the Bachelor degree (Licence) in the English Language.

Over the years writing has been investigated from several angles. Scholars from all parts of the world have proposed some theories about it such as: writing as a product or as a process, some approaches, writing as a language skill related to other skills, numerous ways of evaluating a piece of writing ranging from the global marking scheme

المادة الثانية. يسلط هذا المقال الضوء على معاملات الارتباط بين النحو و التعبير الكتابي كما تعكسها نقاط طلبة الإنجليزية بجامعة منتوري بقسنطينة منذ تطبيق نظام ل.م.د. و بعد فترة الملاحظة التي دامت سنتين، بينت الدراسة أن الطلبة المتفوقين في النحو قد حصلوا على علامات متفوقة في الكتابة.

to self-evaluation ...etc. Some aspects have gained consensus, like the process approach; while others like some modes of evaluation, remain controversial.

The need to develop students' writing performance is a part of the objectives at all levels and in all subjects within Teaching Units; in the LMD system each Teaching Unit comprises one or more subjects.

Learning to write effectively means both developing writing skills and mastering rules of grammar. The latter are usually taught by another teacher. Both of these aspects are reflected in the students' writings during the writing session and during other sessions too. In other words, the teacher of writing gets provision from the colleague in charge of grammar and serves the one in charge of literature or civilisation... etc.

In the L.M.D system, the obligation to make all subjects belonging to the same Teaching Unit coherent and articulated with one another requires the teacher of writing to be alert to the progress of his teachings in parallel with those of other teachers. Why especially the teacher of writing? Simply because he is in a more problematic situation than his colleagues: his work overlaps greatly with grammar *a priori*, and with content courses *a posteriori*.

Statement of the Problem

Proficiency in writing depends highly on the mastery of grammatical rules; and good writing in literature, linguistics and civilisation depends on the mastery of the writing skills. Such a situation puts a lot of pressure on the teacher of writing. On the one hand, he has to check to what extent his students are using what they have been learning in grammar in their writings; on the other hand, he has to make sure that the techniques of writing he supplied his students with, are put into practice in content courses like literature, linguistics and civilisation. This article is concerned with the first part of the process, i.e. the correlation between grammar and writing.

It would be of great benefit to the teacher of writing to gauge his students' awareness of the syntactic rules during the process of writing, and for the teacher of grammar to know how they manage to transfer and use their syntactic knowledge in creative writing. The fundamental question, then, would be: do students reflect what they learn in grammar in their writings? To answer this question, we have decided to calculate the rate of correlation between the two subjects through the students' marks obtained in both modules. It seems clear that answering such a question would contribute to help both teachers of grammar and writing adapt their teachings to the learners' needs.

Another impact of determining the rate of correlation between the subjects of our concern is the one related to ensuring a better coordination between syllabi designers when elaborating “Training Offers” (*Offres de Formation*) in the context of the L.M.D system. The teachers of writing in the same semester, for example, should coordinate with one another to guarantee a parallel progress to all the students and should coordinate with the teachers of grammar and content courses as well to secure a similar approach to teaching. Depending on whether the latter is form-based or meaning-based, we obtain different results.

Some Requirements of the LMD System

The LMD system which is being implemented in Algeria is organised in 13 great training fields, each of which comprises several disciplines according to their affinity to each other; which themselves include different options. As an instance, the domain of Letters and Foreign Languages comprises all disciplines of Letters and Languages, such as Arabic, French, English and Translation. Each discipline splits into three or four options which the students choose in the fifth semester.

One of the principal characteristics of the LMD is the organisation of the courses into coherently articulated Teaching Units. These are the Fundamental, the Discovery and the Transversal Teaching Units. The Fundamental Unit, as the name indicates, is the most important one as it embodies such important subjects like Grammar, Writing, Literature, General Culture, Linguistics, Phonetics and Oral Expression.

The object of our concern, writing, is one of the seven elements which make up the Fundamental Teaching Unit. It is taught during the six semesters at the ‘Bachelor’ level, and it remains, with the Oral Expression, the most important subject all along the three years, as is reflected in its teaching which requires four hours and a half per week and is given the highest credit value and the highest coefficient (03).

A typical quality of the LMD system is the coherent combination of the subjects in a logical grouping according to a pre-defined objective for all. Writing coexists with Grammar, Oral Expression, Literature, Linguistics, Civilisation, Phonetics and General Culture. No need to specify that the main objective of this Teaching Unit is the mastery of the English language as an instrument of communication in its cultural context. However, such an objective cannot be reached unless we implement the necessary correlation between the subjects.

In order to preserve a homogeneous progress to all the students of the same year, the Department of Foreign Languages has set a policy since 2004, which consists in grouping all teachers of a single subject around a qualified

and experienced teacher. The latter is assigned the task of checking whether his colleagues deliver similar lectures. He invites them to regular meetings, and provides them with appropriate instructions to guarantee uniformity of teaching to all the students of different groups and sections.

The teachers of writing at the three different levels (first, second and third year) assert during regular meetings that they are obtaining encouraging results since the implementation of LMD. They work in teams and are given opportunity to debate any new decision. The lectures are well prepared under the supervision of the lecturer in charge of the subject and are delivered according to a maximum of uniformity. Regular sessions of evaluation are organised and recorded on reports which are sent to the head of the department. Even the mode of evaluation is the same for all the students in the same year.

Writing and Grammar

Perhaps one of the most controversial terms in linguistics is 'Grammar'. It is supposed to specify the rules of the standard variety of language, but it has shown some inadequacies in describing the language variation and the process of grammatical change through time. Many questions related to the grammaticality of the written language, rather than the spoken one, arise here and there. Indeed, writing is said to be less tolerant than speaking; hence, more conventional. Besides, the last five decades have seen the focus shift from form to meaning, from written product to written process and from directed teaching to centre learning. In other words, traditional grammar has lost ground to communicative grammar.

In fact, the 'love story' between writing and grammar began long ago. In the 1960s, the question that prevailed in the debate about the utility of grammar in the improvement of the writing skill was "Does training in 'formal grammar' improve a learner's ability to write?" During this period, it was believed that the answer was 'yes'; so grammar was taught with the purpose of improving the learners' writing. However, when educational researchers investigated deeply, they came to the conclusion that the results obtained were not those expected. As an instance, one team of American experts published a report in 1962 which concluded: "It seems safe to infer that the study of English grammar had a negligible or even harmful effect upon the correctness of children's writing in the early part of the five secondary schools." (Harris, 1962:156). One may think of conducting a similar investigation to check to what extent Harris' conclusion, applicable to children learning English as a mother tongue, can apply to Algerian students learning English as a Foreign Language. Many other experiments conducted in the sixties and seventies confirmed the view that grammar teaching does nothing for children's writing. In the seventies the doubt about the usefulness of grammar was dominant in both the UK and the USA, and possibly throughout the English-speaking world, was that "most

children cannot learn grammar and ... even to those who can it is of little value." (Thompson, 1969:67).

Since then, the view toward grammar has changed in both the UK and the USA. In spite of the very few research experiments driven in this field, grammar was unanimously cursed; some academic researchers started revising their views in favour of the benefit of teaching grammar. Progressively, the general attitude changed in education and more generally throughout society. Today many educational circles advocate the idea that conscious grammar (resulting from formal teaching) could have the useful benefit of improving writing. In the USA, many circles (Mc Cleary, 1995), and almost the whole English teaching schools (Weaver, 1996) advocate the necessity of integrating the syntactic structures in the teaching of writing. In the United Kingdom, the government directives apply to all public schools, primary and secondary, and prescribe the teaching of both content and form. The teaching of communicative grammar is then reintroduced with great enthusiasm.

In the course of these changes, writing was not at rest. The meaning-centred approach advocated by the new trend of teaching writing emphasises fluency rather than form-based elements like grammar, spelling and punctuation. It is assumed that learners will automatically feel at ease with these elements once they have achieved control of the writing process. We shall not dwell in this article on the classical argument which claims that children acquire their native language by assimilating the rules they are exposed to, simply because they are highly motivated to communicate with others.

In the United States, the programme of English Language Development organises the Writing Standards into two sections (Schleppegrell, 2003:3): *The Strategies and Applications* section identifies the types of texts (in their rhetorical aspect), and the *Conventions* section identifies the grammar and sentence structure that students should be learning at each grade and proficiency level. This junction between writing and grammar suggests that the interconnection between them is fruitful.

Each writing genre (narrative, expository ...etc) requires the mastery of some specific grammatical structures; hence, one needs to identify these structures and to teach them not as a set of rules but as a set of resources making meaning (Halliday, 1994). The choices of the grammar points to deal with have to do with appropriateness to the context and are related to the genres students are asked to write. "Different grammatical options are functional for doing different things with language" (Schleppegrell 2003:15).

Since the mid 1980s, we notice that there have been studies which showed no benefit from teaching grammatical analysis (Hillocks 1986; Elley 1994), contrasting with other studies which did show a benefit. The references

which showed benefits in these ways are: Heap 1991; McCleary 1995; Klotz 1996; Bryant *et al* 1997; Mason and Mason 1997. The least we can say is that, contrary to popular wisdom, the question is still open.

However, the last two decades have seen a steady growth in research on academic writing. One of the most significant findings is that “students entering academic disciplines need a specialized literacy that consists of the ability to use discipline-specific rhetorical and linguistic conventions to their purposes as writers.” (Schleppegrell, 2003:55).

Conclusively, one might say that the proponents of the idea that grammar teaching improves the learners’ writing skills are dominating the debate. However, there is no doubt that further research is needed to determine the role of each subject (grammar and writing) in the process of teaching/learning writing. We finish with a quotation taken from Walmsley’s article (1984:211) :“If a small part of the research effort that has been put into demonstrating the uselessness of grammar ... had been distributed over a wider field, more might be known about how skill in the use of English can best be developed.”

Data collection

The data collection was done place in the Department of Foreign Languages and concerned all first and second year students. The number of students was as follows:

- 2004-2005: - Semester one: 249 students
- Semester two: 232 students
- 2005-2006: - Semester one: 285 students
- Semester two: 255 students
- Semester three: 208 students
- Semester four: 155 students

The work consisted in gathering the students’ marks of grammar and writing obtained during four semesters in 2005 and 2006. For the second year students, we collected all marks of grammar and writing of the four semesters; while concerning the first year students, we took the marks of the first and second semesters. The total number of marks analysed is 1957 for each subject (module). The marks were grouped in the following way: from 00 to 05, from 05 to 10, from 10 to 15 and from 15 to 20. Then the comparison between the ranges has been achieved moving from grammar to writing; i.e. we tried to determine and justify the proportion of students who ranked in a given group of writing among those who ranked in a similar or different group of grammar. The choice of this type of analysis was, in fact, to check whether those who got a given mark in grammar obtained a similar one in writing.

One of the most apparent limitations of the study resides in the fact we did not investigate the types of tests administered to the students. We all know that different methods of evaluation may lead to different results.

Table 1 : Corresponding Range Marks between Writing and Grammar

Grammar Mark Range	Percentage of Students in Writing Mark Range				
	0-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	Total
0-5	60,00%	14,29%	22,86%	2,86%	100,00%
5-10	1,46%	37,38%	58,74%	2,43%	100,00%
10-15	0,64%	25,67%	68,66%	5,03%	100,00%
15-20	0,00%	7,27%	75,15%	17,58%	100,00%

Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the students' results has been done as displayed on table 01, i.e., from the weakest to the highest mark ranges.

- We notice a logical correspondence between the percentages of the students who ranked in the 00-05 range both in grammar and writing: 60% of those who have got 00-05 in grammar have obtained similar marks in writing (table 2). However, we find it striking that more than 22% in this range could classify in the 10-15 category of writing. This is relatively significant for good writing cannot be dissociated from good use of grammatical structures. Only 14% could rank in the intermediate row of writing (05-10). On the same table, we notice that 02,86% among the weakest students in grammar (00-05) have ranked in the 15-20 category of writing. Here, it would be worth mentioning that evaluation is not an exact science which would never depart from being partly subjective.

- When we observe the rank of students belonging to the 05-10 category in grammar, we notice that they have obtained nearly the same marks in writing. Indeed, more than 95% classified in the large scale of writing comprised between 05 and 15. A deeper observation has revealed that the 10-15 marks obtained in writing are closer to 10 than to 15. The 'accidental' 02,25% emerges again on both extremes of the same line of the table (00-05 and 15-20)

- The scores of the 10-15 category of grammar are not surprising because almost 70% of the students of this category have obtained similar marks in writing, and more than 25% are slightly below in the chart (05-10).

The latter result is not surprising when we remember that writing requires from the students to be more creative than grammar. The same line shows that nearly 05% of the students having 10-15 in grammar have got a bit more than 15 in writing. Again, those are closer to 15 than to 20 in writing.

- The logical correspondence observed till now remains intact in the 15-20 category of grammar. Marks in grammar are a bit higher than those in writing. More than 70% of the students who got 15-20 in grammar fall in 10-15 category in writing. Though more than 16% are in the same row of writing (15-20). Knowing that the learners are all exposed to the content and evaluated in the same way, one can deduce that they feel much at ease in using what they have learned during the grammar lessons than in transposing it to the writing session. This is not to say that the potential failure in writing is due only to the misuse of grammar. It may be related essentially to the misuse of the writing skills.

The results may be surprising, at first glance, because the gap between the students' marks in grammar and writing was expected to be wider, in the sense that results in grammar would be much higher than those in writing. We should specify, here, that the students' general average in grammar during 2005 and 2006 equals 11,94, while in writing it is about 10,94.

The difference between the results in grammar and writing can be explained in the following way:

- The complexity of writing by comparison to grammar may be due to the creative aspect of the former which cannot be evaluated as objectively as a structural subject.

- Another plausible interpretation of the observations made above is that teachers of writing set a top-grade level when evaluating their students' papers and rarely go beyond it. We counted only one mark 17,50 exceeding in writing during the four semesters while we had thirty-one in grammar.

- Teachers of grammar and writing work on two different levels. While the former evolve at the sentence level, the latter concentrate on the paragraph level.

Conclusion

The results of the present study point to one clear conclusion: there is a logical correspondence between students' performance in grammar and in writing. Of course, there are exceptions as in any research of this type, but one may assert that the knowledge of grammatical structures is reflected in writing. The correspondence cannot be thoroughly true simply because writing is not an exclusive field of application for grammar; it combines the latter with some of its specific characteristics such as writing skills and creativity.

The influence of grammar on writing is then obvious and students need to be aware of it. They should be told repeatedly that as they learn writing by writing, they learn grammar by writing, too.

Another part of teachers' responsibility is in integrating all grammatical exercises in the teaching of writing. In other words, teachers of grammar and writing cannot work in isolation. The evident complementarity between both subjects works better in one direction than in the other; i.e., good writing relies on good grammar, not the reverse.

To secure the logical interconnection revealed between writing and grammar, and to reinforce the positive results obtained up till now, one may recommend the following:

- Teachers should consider the role of grammar in writing. They have to remind

- their students that this role changes according to the genre of writing they deal

- with. In fact, this is partly the reason why communicative grammar exists.

- Teachers should complete the multitude of tasks they have with the one which consists in insisting with their students on the use of the rules they learn outside the grammar session. The use of grammar rules does not end with the grammar session.

- Grammar should be taught with a minimal use of grammatical terminology, but rather with clear instructions on the use of what many American researchers in education call 'sentence combining'. There is some evidence, apparently good, that this kind of activity benefits learners' writing (Barton, 1997:65); and in some studies it turned out that this kind of grammar teaching produced better results than more traditional teaching of grammatical analysis. (Hillocks, 1986: 56).

- Knowing that grammar serves writing, not the reverse, it would be reasonable to assume that the teaching of the former should be adapted to the teaching of the latter. In other words, both teachers and students should remain constantly aware of the final destination of knowing grammar.

- The duality of grammar expressed in form vs. meaning is similar to the one of writing expressed in product vs. process. It is to be known that form goes with product and meaning with process. Hence, a form-based approach to teaching grammar should be completed by a product-based one in writing; and a meaning-oriented approach should be followed by a process teaching. This is so because to a single objective, one should assign a single approach.

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