

INTERVENTIONS FOR STUDENT AUTONOMY IN A VIRTUAL EFL WRITING CLASSROOM

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Abstract – *The study investigates whether the design of a combined intervention with self-analysis of re-contextualized sample texts and subsequent peer interactions might be promising in supporting writing skills development of Vietnamese EFL students in a virtual environment. A pretest-posttest control group design with switching replications was set up with one experimental condition of the combined intervention and one conventional condition with teacher-led analysis of textbook-based samples. Participants included 97 Vietnamese English-majored undergraduate students in the third year in a university in Mekong Delta, Vietnam: 46 students in the experimental condition and 51 students in the control condition. Univariate covariance analyses showed that experimental condition had a positive effect on quality of texts. For writing fluency, students of the experimental condition wrote longer texts in the second panel (posttest 2); the effect could not be seen immediately in the first panel (posttest 1). Implications for EFL writing pedagogy and research, including research planning to avoid the effect of topic on quality of writing, importance of writing topics relevant to L2 student writers, and organization of prewriting sessions are discussed in the last part of the paper.*

Keywords: *authentic sample text, autonomy, EFL argumentative writing, peer evaluation, prewriting intervention, virtual writing classroom.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Instruction units on argumentative writing of English writing textbooks have focused on the

problems of Vietnamese writers in terms of idea generation and patterns of writing. Taking the sample textbook students in the research context have been using as an example, to prepare for genre awareness, students are asked to analyze a model text to recognize the purpose, the main ideas and rhetorical devices the author of the text used. However, for second language learners, the explicit analysis of language and features of the model text might hinder students' creativity [1, p.108] since the specialization into one singular text could evoke students' perception of the argument structure and language usage of the model being the only superior one. Another disadvantage of using the model texts of the textbook was that topical themes of the texts have been more embedded in the Anglophone cultures. For example, in the textbook for advanced writing *Final Draft 3*, the chapter on opinion essay provided one single essay, as the model for the genre, on *Third Culture Kids* in the US [2]. While the function of a model text was to support students' genre-specific individualization, the sample text, set within an entirely new and foreign context, might influence the Vietnamese EFL students' ability to understand the text and the subject matter.

Introduction of an analysis for genre awareness in a textbook

In the scope of the study, the focus was primarily on opinion writing which was likely to be considered as the most challenging one for Vietnamese EFL writers [3]. In genre-process approach, each textbook unit focused on one target genre and usually consists of three sub-processes of prewriting, formulation, and revision (see specific examples in the textbook *Effective Academic Writing* [4] and *Final Draft 3* [2]). In the prewriting stage for genre awareness, students were required to read a model text arguing for or

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against an issue. Below were two extracts of the model texts used for opinion essay, to help L2 students be aware of how an author convinced the audience of her ideas: one with the topic of full integration into American culture of the immigrants and one with the topic of free cable in the US.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The necessity of learner-centered pedagogies of academic writing for Vietnamese EFL students in a virtual setting

On the one hand, foreign language learners, in lingua franca situations, should be able to navigate communicative conventions and pools of meaning of the target language; and on the other hand, to simultaneously maintain his own identities [5]. There might be more challenges for EFL teachers and students in realizing the expectation in a writing classroom, especially in a virtual setting. Research in the Vietnamese EFL context showed the increased requirements of interaction and hands-on activities for students who might face the problems of ‘losing focus, falling asleep, no self-study skills’ in online learning [6]. Writing has been a highly cognitively demanding task for EFL students since it was about self-generation of ideas, choice of expressions and text structure, and focused revision. Students’ autonomy in the involved sub-processes must be a key factor deciding the success of L2 composition.

Autonomy is the characteristic of 21st century education: learners’ autonomy in an EFL writing classroom

The concept of autonomy might vary according to the perspectives of constructivism, positivism, and criticism [7]. In a nutshell, student or learner autonomy was defined by Trebbi as ‘the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning’ [8, p.33]. Learner autonomy was commonly associated with ‘self-directive, decision making and choice’ [8, p.34]; ‘the learning context is autonomy supporting in that it facilitates self-determination on the part of the learner’ [9, p.166]. It was one among four key indicators deciding the progression in learning of the Bloom’s taxonomy [10, p.33]. According to van Lier from

social dimension of autonomy in language learning, autonomy meant the ability of students to benefit from the opportunities for meaningful action that the learning situation affords and could transfer the knowledge and experience gained in the learning process to new situation [11]. In second language writing, the singular concept of autonomy in writing has not been reached: Schmenk noted that ‘language educators must demonstrate awareness that autonomy is not a universal or neutral concepts, and consider its possible applications and limitations within given contexts’ [12, p.18]). In the distinction of the two levels between ‘proactive autonomy’ and ‘reactive autonomy,’ and in the scope of the research for novice EFL writer students, we were in the vein of the second level ‘[students] regulates the activity once the direction has been set’ [13, p.75]. In particular, the second level of autonomy ‘reactive autonomy’ is the focus of the study. At this level, students manage their learning and cognitive processes to achieve intended learning outcomes set in the curriculum [13]. To be compared with the first level of autonomy which emphasizes students’ ability to set their own learning goals and evaluate their own progress [7], the focus of autonomy in the scope and in the context of the study is on how well a student manages their learning and cognitive processes to master the tasks of online learning and achieve better results.

In foreign language learning in general and virtual learning in specific, practitioners in the field of second language writing might need to know precisely the strategies for ‘learners’ active contributions to the learning process’ in computer-assisted language learning [14, p.247]. Unfortunately, in EFL writing classroom in a virtual setting, ‘the classroom may easily go back to a lot of teacher talk and a lot of student listening; teachers’ contributions are privileged; students respond in predictable teacher pleasing ways’ [15]. In brief, although autonomy was reported as important for writing acquisition but there has been still less empirical evidence on the pedagogies involved, especially in the context of EFL writing in Vietnam.

Table 1: Extracts from the model texts in the textbooks

Preparation for genre awareness on page 170-172 of the textbook Final Draft 3 (2016)	
<i>Sample text starts with</i>	<i>Key questions for genre awareness</i>
<p>Assimilation Does Not Mean Losing Culture In her letter to the editor in the Brownsville Times, Dr. Carla Banks, a history professor at Two Peaks College, argues that immigrants should not have to assimilate and shed one’s culture to be successful in America. Although I agree with Dr. Banks that immigrants should not lose their cultures, I do not agree that assimilation to a new culture always has negative effects. Immigrants can enjoy the many advantages of living in two cultures.</p> <p>[...]</p>	<p>1. The student writer did not think that Banks should have focused on the negative effects of assimilation. What are his reasons? What do you think Banks would think of his reason? 2. Arrange the student writer’s ideas in an essay outline.</p>
Preparation for genre awareness on page 122-124 of the textbook Effective Academic Writing 3 (2019)	
<i>Sample text starts with</i>	<i>Key questions for genre awareness</i>
<p>Getting Free Cable Everyone likes to watch TV. In fact, just one cable company in India has more than 80 million subscribers. In the United States, nearly 90 percent of the population has cable TV. However, cable service is overpriced, which has become a burden on many people. There is a cheaper alternative called digital satellite TV. Unfortunately this type of service is not available everywhere. Because viewers have limited options and because cable companies overcharge for their services, I believe that viewers have a right to use free, unauthorized cable service.</p> <p>[...]</p>	<p>Examine the organization of the essay by responding to the questions and statements below. Then compare your answers with a partner.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Underline the thesis. What opinion does it give? 2. How does the background information help readers understand the writer’s opinion? 3. What fact does the writer use to support his argument? 4. Does the summary of Time Warner’s opinion support the essay’s position? Why or why not? 5. What prediction does the writer make in the conclusion?

How the intervention contributes to learner autonomy: Theoretical and empirical evidence reported in the EFL writing literature

The process-oriented writing pedagogy generally emphasized the importance of prewriting stage for students’ genre understanding, whether in subject-specific or general academic purposes [3, 16, 17], while not much has been known about what interventions might facilitate learner autonomy in the prewriting stage. The study was aimed to investigate if the two activities including using sample texts closely connected to the students’ context and interactive tasks with peers could facilitate their developing autonomy in the prewriting stage, and therefore better preparation for their own content generation and structure design in composition. See also a brief description of the intervention in Appendix B.

Sample texts closely connected to the students’ context

Research has found that sample analysis ac-

tivity was necessary for students’ awareness of text features and therefore conscious manipulation of textual regularities of a text genre. However, students preferred authentic student writing samples over textbook texts or textbook models and therefore ‘they [students] are more likely to develop transference [from the samples] to their own [writing] work’ [18, p.3]. The authenticity of student writing samples was assumed to lead to increased engagement of student writers in a writing classroom [19]. Recent research also revealed the power of using student writing samples for analysis activities in facilitating L2 students’ knowledge of features of academic writing such as objective writing style and structure [20]. In a more specific and rare report on learning to write personal opinion essays of Asian students at an EFL university level, learning generic knowledge from a model text in the textbooks would probably hinder creative thoughts, ideas, and linguistic expressions of L2 student writers since the

models would represent the product-oriented and procedural constraints, e.g. what the final product should be and how a student writer should do to produce the final text [21]. In brief, to develop L2 students' sensitivity to organizational patterns of an argumentative writing whilst maintaining their personal identities, second and foreign language writing instruction in the virtual setting should involve recontextualization and variation of sample texts as well as peer interactions for various pieces of writing.

Self-analysis of student writing samples (Phase 1)

Analyzing other students' texts to identify their writing purposes, how the central arguments were developed in the texts, and impressions of strong and weak points might help students become better writers since better writers were from better readers with conscious judgment of the effectiveness of a text [17, 22]. Self-analysis in writing pedagogy was 'an excellent example of process learning through reflection-in-writing and reflection-on-writing...' [23, p.90]. When the analysis of writing samples was shifted from teacher-led manner to students generating their own internal feedback, students' roles as decision makers and knowledge producers were promoted. In brief, the emphasis on students' self-construction of the textual knowledge might be more relevant and critically engaging to the students in the L2 learning context.

Peer evaluation of student writing samples (Phase 2)

After phase 1 of self-analysis of a series of sample texts, increasing student-initiated interactions in a writing lesson 'will compel them to read to learn more' [24, p.185]; therefore, peer discussion of quality of sample texts could contribute to the students' more exploration and cumulation of the traits or features of opinion writing. Peer discussions would be more effective when coming after students' self-preparation of critical comments and judgments related to the sample texts and in a feedback protocol [25, p.356-358]. Furthermore, peer discussions of writing quality after self-analysis helped students be confident in their understanding of writing processes [26]. In brief, the collaborative phase in which students working with other students to

negotiate for the final judgment of the sample texts might be in line with the principles of online learning including social interaction, self- and collective efficacy, and verbal immediacy [27, 28]. In particular, the process of interacting with peers would, first, require students to use important skills such as proposing ideas, listening, and negotiation to reach a common understanding. Second, students might feel positive and confident when their text analyses are presented in a peer-to-peer session, as a task of shared responsibility before their presentation of the analyses to the whole class. Third, research has found that in a virtual setting, students' collaboration on what needed to be assessed would help them understand a written text better and see the direction for improving it [29].

Purpose of the study

To enhance student motivation and engagement in the virtual writing classroom, student talk, student involvement in short-term activities, and real-life writing topics were three supposedly major practices. Although there has not been existing a strong empirical literature on effective interventions in writing skills in a virtual setting, we expected that the design of a combined intervention with analysis of re-contextualized sample text and subsequent peer interaction might be promising in supporting writing skills development.

Research question

What are the effects of a combined intervention with analysis of re-contextualized sample text and subsequent peer interaction in the prewriting stage on Vietnamese EFL students' quality of writing and fluency of writing?

III. RESEARCH METHODS

Participants and research design

Participants included 97 Vietnamese English-major undergraduate students in the third year in a university in Mekong Delta, Vietnam: 46 students in the experimental group and 51 in the control group. As set out in the curriculum for the English majors, improving academic writing skills, such as writing essays, would contribute to students' academic success and professional development; the students were, in general, aware

of the importance of learning to develop their expertise in writing.

Course platform

MS Teams application was used in the intervention course since it was being generally used in the educational setting: practitioners agreed on its practical functions as a platform for teamwork in a synchronous mode [30-32]. In general, the platform was used for multiple synchronous and asynchronous tools such as live lectures, video/audio conferencing, text chats, file posting and assignment submission.

Data collection procedures

All the experimental activities were carried out in a virtual setting, using MS Teams. Each group met with the instructor once per week of four teaching periods (from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.). To avoid the effect of topic on quality of writing, as in the case of students who might prefer one topic to another between measurement moments, seven different topics would be randomly assigned to the students per one measurement moment. In general, for each student, he would work on three different topics among the seven ones, for three times of measurement. Because we expected the topics could be more relevant to the students, and therefore of interest to them, the topics were extracted from the op-ed articles in the national newspaper; another reason for the choice of topic was that sample texts related to the writing topics were not relevant and therefore that might help avoid plagiarism in the virtual setting. Students could submit their written assignment using email or the MS Teams platform in three or four days. We did not observe the case that students report problems associated with personal experience or background knowledge about the topics. See also writing pretest and posttest instructions in Appendix C.

Analysis

To observe the effect of the two experimental conditions in panel 1 and 2 separately, we applied univariate covariance analysis with condition as independent factor, the pretest score as a covariate, and the two dependent variables of global quality and text length as dependent variables in measurement occasion 2 and measurement occasion 3, respectively. See Appendix A.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

Global quality

We found an effect of condition in Figure 1. Students in experimental condition (self-analysis of re-contextualized sample texts and subsequent peer interactions) generally showed higher scores than students in the control condition (teacher-led analysis of textbook-based samples), controlled for the pretest scores ($F(1, 87) = 4.65, p = .034, MS = 22.42$). In Figure 2, when two groups swapped roles, no significant effect of condition was found in Figure 2 ($F(1, 85) = 2.76, p = .1$). See also Mean (Standard Deviation) of the variable in Appendix A.

Text length

We found an effect of condition in Figure 2 with students in peer-interaction condition produced longer texts than students in the control condition, controlled for the pretest scores on length ($F(1, 65) = 6.97, p = .010, MS = 174587.58$). No significant effect of condition was found in panel 1 ($F(1, 67) = 1.25, p = .268, MS = 18190.39$). See also Mean (Standard Deviation) of the variable in Appendix A.

B. Discussion

The finding related to the effects of experimental condition, with self-analysis of re-contextualized sample texts and subsequent peer interactions, is in line with previous studies on the positive influence of context-based teaching materials. This empirical finding supports the assumption that analysis of authentic samples of student writing can facilitate the development of genre knowledge for writers such as objective writing style and structure and therefore their better writing quality [18, 20]. Similarly, it goes along with the expectation that peer discussions on quality of the sampled texts help students have an increased confidence in their understanding of the writing process and see the direction for improving their writing [26, 29]. The finding provides significant empirical information about the active and interactive learning activities in a writing classroom that was still largely based on the strong guidance by the teacher and the textbook used [33-35]. In brief, the study indicated

Table 2: Research design and topics for test

	Group/condition	MO ₁	Panel 1	MO ₂	Panel 2	MO ₃
Random on group level	1 (n= 46)	T1-7	Self-analysis of re-contextualized sample texts and subsequent peer interactions	T1-7	Teacher-led analysis of textbook-based samples	T1-7
	2 (n= 51)		Teacher-led analysis of textbook-based samples		Self-analysis of re-contextualized sample texts and subsequent peer interactions	

Notes:

MO₁₋₂₋₃ = measurement occasion 1,2,3

T1=Topic 1 = Higher college fees may lead to better employees

T2=Topic 2 = Crackdown on extra classes

T3=Topic 3 = No need for new museum

T4=Topic 4 = Overprotection or privacy violation

T5=Topic 5 = Time for clampdown on rampant cheating

T6=Topic 6 = What are the chances probability is too hard for kids

T7=Topic 7 = Work hours for students should be managed

It is noted that the seven topics were extracted from the op-ed articles in the national newspaper

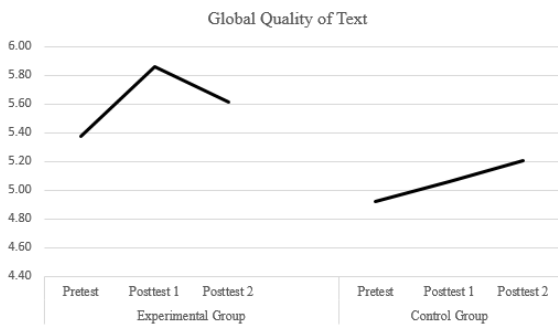


Fig. 1: Global quality

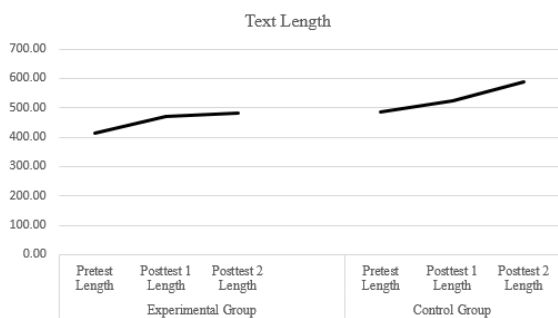


Fig. 2: Text length

that, in virtual writing classroom, peer evaluation of student writings on the topics related to their own experiences, contexts, and everyday lives has proven helpful in supporting students in writing a new genre.

To sum up, the study might shed some light on the topic of learner autonomy and virtual writing classroom. First, it provides a detailed description of the series of three steps in the prewriting stage including (i) a shift from sample essays from foreign cultures to the sampled texts relevant to Vietnamese EFL students (ii) students’ own analysis of the texts as an activity which prompts individual responsibility or autonomy and (iii) peer evaluation of the quality of the texts in the EFL writing classroom for Vietnamese students. Second, the design of the research helps eliminate the effect of topics on condition, when one topic could be more favorable to one condition. Finally, the positive impact of inductive teaching on quality of writing in a virtual environment probably provides more insight into the prewriting process, towards ‘systematic EFL writing instructions in schools’ [36].

However, there are still some remaining questions that may need further attention. First, the study has not addressed the question of how differently groups of students, weak and strong students, may be influenced by the prewriting conditions. Second, the effect of student-led approach on writing fluency observed in Figure 2 (posttest 2) suggests a need for further study of the sequence order of the prewriting tasks: whether teacher-led lessons should come before student-led ones in the process genre-based pedagogy. Recent studies in inductive and deductive teaching mostly focus on the differences of student-led and teacher-led approaches, rather than the empirical sequence of the two approaches integrated in a writing course (see further discussions of the need to investigate the sequence effects of prewriting instructions of different natures on quality of writing [37]). The question of an appropriate sequence of student-based and teacher-based tasks in preparing students to write still has not been addressed in the scope of the study.

V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We reach two conclusions concerning the effect of a combined intervention with self-analysis of re-contextualized sample texts and subsequent peer interactions on writing skills development of Vietnamese EFL students in a virtual environment. First, the condition supports students in their argumentative writing; they produce better-quality texts. The effect is observed in the first pure panel; and then in the second panel when both the groups have experienced the peer evaluation of quality and features of the sampled texts, the difference has not been observed. Second, the condition supports students to write longer texts in panel 2 (writing time 3); the effect could not be seen immediately in the first panel.

The results of the study, first, indicate the necessity of writing topics that are close to the students' lives in an EFL college composition classroom. Second, teachers may consider to organize the prewriting session in which written texts produced by Vietnamese EFL students might be used as the writing samples of varying quality for self-and-peer analysis in the prewriting stage. Third,

the inclusion of different writing topics in each measurement occasion and the same number of writing topics through all measurement moments, although there must be three different topics per subject through the three moments, might help to prevent topic effects (Table 2).

While this research did not address the issue of quality of discussions of the sampled texts in the prewriting process, mainly for methodological reasons, the analysis of final texts suggests that encouraging students' self-and-peer exploration of the authentic sample texts may result in better compositions of the Vietnamese EFL students.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Table 3: Mean (Standard Deviation) of the three variables

Variable	Group	Pretest	Posttest 1	Posttest 2
Global Quality	Experimental group	5.37 (2.31)	5.86 (2.16)	5.61 (2.45)
	Control group	4.92 (2.54)	5.06 (2.50)	5.21 (2.60)
Text Length	Experimental group	412.19 (110.37)	468.68 (167.44)	482.18 (244.62)
	Control group	484.55 (161.03)	523.02 (185.08)	588.02 (201.78)

Appendix B

Summary of Intervention (experimental manipulation): Self-analysis of re-contextualized sample texts and subsequent peer interactions. Each student reads a set of three student sample texts and reflects their impressions by giving a holistic score to each text; they are also asked to take note, as they read, of the reasons why they make the scoring decisions (for example, the macro structure, the friendliness of language, the quality of ideas, the clarification of stance, the overall impression of the persuasiveness of the texts). They then work in pairs, assigned by the teacher, to discuss virtually, via MS Teams platform, their scoring decisions and the reasons. Finally, the pairs present their final scores for the texts and their feedback about the strong and weak points of the student sample texts, also via the MS Teams.

Summary of control condition: Teacher-led analysis of textbook-based samples

Students follow along with the series of steps for close analysis of the sample texts in the textbook, led by the teacher, for their awareness of text attributes including quality of the hook, thesis statement, statements of reasons, supporting information, counterargument and refutation. Students then practice to brainstorm the ideas necessary for the outline sketch of an essay towards a controversial issue; the sketch with missing information contained in the textbook will be completed by the students, with the teacher’s guidance.

Appendix C

Writing pretest and posttest instructions:

students read one article of a controversial issue on the national press such as Higher college fee may lead to better employees from Vietnam News as a prompt to the issue and then write an argumentative text on the issue. It is noted that students are not getting used to the genre so the writing prompt is accompanied with the leading questions such as

What stance you take for the controversial issue?

What reasons you think about to support your stance?

What evidence you may use to clarify your reasons?

What reasons people who have a different stance from you may propose?

How you will refute the reasons (refuting the opposing viewpoints)?

