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RESEARCH ARTICLE

TEACHING ECUADORIAN EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ACADEMIC WRITING UTILIZING SENTENCE STRUCTURE FORMULAS

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory sequential mixed methods study investigated the effects of using sentence structure formulas to teach EFL university students basic academic writing skills. Thirty level B2 EFL students from an Ecuadorian university participated in this research. Two types of data were collected and analyzed, namely, qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were collected through opinion academic essays administered both at the beginning and at the end of a pedagogical intervention using sentence structure formulas. Findings revealed that assisting academic writing with sentence structure formulas helps EFL students write more well-structured academic essays. Three major positive effects were found: 1) use of more varied sentence types and sentence patterns in academic essays, 2) less errors with complements of main verbs, and 3) less punctuation errors. The results showed that pedagogical interventions focused on sentence structure can be applied as a first stage in the process of teaching academic writing. Participants said that they felt more confident to write academic essays after they were taught the different sentence structure formulas, both based on punctuation and on the six types of verbs that constitute the essence of sentences in English. This study suggests that EFL learners may benefit from focusing on sentence structure formulas when they are at the onset of their academic writing learning process.

INTRODUCTION

This research falls into the field of teaching and learning academic writing skills in the EFL classroom. The process of academic writing acquisition in EFL contexts has been investigated for a long time (Bacha, 2002; Belcher and Braine, 1995; Cai, 2017; Hyland, 2015; Jordan, 1997; McKinley, 2015; Mukminin, Ali, and Ashari, 2015; Piniel and Csizér, 2015; Rakedzon and Baram-Tsabari, 2017); according to Bacha (2002), one of the EFL settings in which academic writing has been researched is in universities wherein English is used as a medium of instruction. However, it is implied that more research is needed at this level of education to investigate different strategies that can help EFL learners master academic writing skills (Cai, 2017; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2015; Mukminin, Ali, and Ashari, 2015). Existing studies stated that with direct and appropriate instruction EFL acquirers could improve their writing skills (Connor, 1996; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2015). Research findings suggested that the most common writing problems faced by EFL university students were, for instance, grammar structures

transferred from the L1, cohesiveness and coherence, redundancy, communicative discourse, punctuation, sentence structure (Kaplan, 1966; Sa'Addedin and Akram, 1991), and critical thinking (McKinley, 2015). Pursuing this further, sometimes EFL students experience difficulties in academic writing because they do not receive enough and appropriate training (Cai, 2017). This means that English instructors need to provide sufficient opportunities to learn and practice academic writing in the EFL classroom. We learned from existing research that academic writing skills are highly important for university students (Cai, 2017; Mukminin, Ali, and Ashari, 2015). That happened to be the case of some universities in Ecuador where this study took place. That is some Ecuadorian universities use English as a medium of instruction; therefore, they require their students to be proficient English users. This includes possessing a proficient command of academic writing skills. However, data collected through diagnostic and placement tests in some of these universities have suggested that developing academic writing skills is not that easy for EFL students. For instance, even though the English Department in the chosen university

included academic writing as part of its English program starting in level B1.2, level B2 students still had to cope with basic writing problems such as sentence structure, punctuation, and correct complements that follow main verbs in English sentences. Consequently, with the premise that more research was still needed to understand how EFL university students overcome academic writing issues (Cai, 2017; Mukminin, Ali, and Ashari, 2015), this study sought to examine whether or not using sentence structure formulas helped EFL university students improve their basic academic writing competences, mainly those related to sentence structure. Two research questions guided this inquiry: 1) What do EFL university students think about using sentence structure formulas to acquire academic writing skills? and 2) Are there any positive effects of using sentence structure formulas to assist EFL students in their academic writing acquisition process? The next section explains the research methodology utilized in this research.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Context: This inquiry took place in the English Department at a public university in Ecuador in which English was used as a medium of instruction. The researchers chose this research site purposefully because, according to Creswell (2013, 2014) and Gliner, Morgan, and Leech (2017), purposeful research sites provide meaningful data to inform the research problem as well as the research questions under investigation. This research site met the criteria for data collection because the research problem was closely related to the process of academic writing acquisition, and it happened that academic writing was part of the English competences that the participants had to develop prior to taking any coursework in their undergraduate majors.

Research Participants: A total of thirty level B2 EFL university students participated in this study. Since our purpose was to gather meaningful data to inform the research problem, we decided to choose this sample using a purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2014; Gliner, Morgan, and Leech, 2017). The research participants were taking a B2 level English course, which purpose was to teach them how to write academic essays and papers. Informed on data from previous academic writing courses in the English Department at the chosen university, a pedagogical intervention was developed by the researchers and the instructor of the respective B2 level course. This pedagogical intervention focused on using sentence structure formulas to help the participants improve their academic writing skills.

Research Design: To carry out this research, an exploratory sequential mixed methods research design (Creswell, 2014) was applied. This study had to do with implementing a pedagogical intervention to investigate whether or not using sentence structure formulas helped EFL university students improve their academic writing competences. Two research questions guided this inquiry: 1) What do EFL university students think about using sentence structure formulas to acquire academic writing skills? and 2) Are there any positive effects of using sentence structure formulas to assist EFL university students in their academic writing acquisition process? To answer these research questions, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered and analyzed. Qualitative data were collected using semi-structured interviews, and quantitative data were collected from opinion academic essays

that participants wrote prior to the pedagogical intervention and after it.

Semi-structured Interviews: The semi-structured interviews were meant to answer research question one, namely, what do EFL university students think about using sentence structure formulas to acquire academic writing skills? These interviews were administered after the pedagogical intervention. That is at the end of the 2018 spring semester. According to Lichtman (2013), semi-structure interviews meet two purposes: 1) they allow the researchers not to improvise during the interviews and 2) they are probing friendly.

Essay analysis: Quantitative essay analysis was used to answer the second research question of this study, namely, are there any positive effects of using sentence structure formulas to assist EFL university students in their academic writing acquisition process? The participants were asked to write two academic essays to inform this investigation: one prior to the pedagogical intervention, at the beginning of the 2018 spring semester, and the other after the pedagogical intervention at the end of the spring semester of 2018. Both data were analyzed two compare whether or not utilizing sentence structure formulas had any positive effects on developing EFL students' academic writing skills.

Pedagogical Intervention: It consisted of two types of sentence structure formulas. The first one was centered on formulas to learn the kinds of complements that follow the six verb types that constitute the essence of English sentences, to be precise, intransitive, transitive, two-place transitive (Vc and Vg verbs), the verb BE, and linking verbs (Morenberg, 2010).

The Six Verb Type Formulas

Intransitive verbs

- NP + VI + (Adverb)

Linking verbs

- NP + VL + {NP: PredN}
- NP + VL + {Adj: PredAdj}

Transitive verbs

- NP + VT + NP: DObj (Adverb)

Two-place transitive (here called Vg verbs)

- NP + Vg + {NP: IObj + NP: DObj}
- NP + Vg + {NP: DObj + To/For + NP: IObj}

Two-place transitive (here called Vc verbs)

- NP + Vc + NP: DObj + {NP: ObjComp}
- NP + Vc + NP: DObj + {AdjPh: ObjComp}
- NP + Vc + NP: DObj + {InfPh: ObjComp}

Verb BE

- NP + BE + {NP: PredN}
- NP + BE + {Adj: PredAdj}
- NP + BE + {Adv-pl: PredAdv}

The second type of formulas had to do with sentence structure based on punctuation and linking words, for example, simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences (Longknife and Sullivan, 2002). See the formulas below.

Simple sentences

- Noun Phrase + Verb + Complement

Compound sentences

- NP + VP + Comp +, + coord. Conj. + NP + VP + Comp+ .
- NP + VP + Comp +; + NP + VP + Comp +.
- NP + VP + Comp + ; + NP + VP + Comp + , + coord. Conj. + NP + VP + Comp + .
- NP + VP + Comp + , + coord. Conj. + NP + VP + Comp + ; + NP + VP + Comp + .
- NP + VP + Comp + ; + NP + VP + Comp + ; + NP + VP + Comp + .
- NP + VP + Comp {DObj or NP: Comp} + ; + NP + , + Comp {DObj or NP: Comp} + .
- NP + VP + Comp (general idea) + : + NP + VP + Comp + . (example)
- NP + VP + Comp + ; Conjunctive Adverb + , + NP + VP + Comp + .
- NP + VP + Comp + . Conjunctive Adverb + , + NP + VP + Comp + .

Complex sentences

- NP + VP + Comp (Independent clause) + Subord. Conj. + NP + VP + Comp + . (Dep. Clau.)]
- Subord. Conj. + NP + VP + Comp (Dep. Clau.)+ , NP + VP + Comp + .(Ind. Clau.)

Compound-complex sentences

- Subord. Conj. + NP + VP + Comp (Dep. Clau.) + , + NP + VP + Comp (Ind. Clau.) + , + Coord. Conj. + NP + VP + Comp + . (Ind. Clau.)
- NP + VP + Comp (Ind. Clau.) + , Coord. Conj. + NP + VP + Comp (Ind. Clau.) + Subord. Conj. + NP + VP + Comp + . (Dep. Clau.)
- NP + , + Relat. pron/adv + VP + Comp (Dep. Clau.) + , VP + Comp (Ind. Clau.) + ; Conj. Adv. + , NP + VP + Comp + . (Ind. Clau.)]
- NP + Relat. pron/adv. + VP + Comp (Dep. Clau.) + VP + Comp (Ind. Clau.) + ; NP + VP + Comp + . (Ind. Clau.)

Participle phrases as adjectives

- Participle phrase. (verb + -ing/-ed) + , + main clause + . (Part. Ph. introduces the main clause)
- Main clause + Participle phrase + . (Part. Ph. describes the word right in front of it)
- Main clause + , + Participle phrase + . (Part. Ph. modifies a word farther up in the sentence)

Prepositional phrases

- Prepositional phrase + , + main clause + . (with long prep. ph.)
- Prepositional phrase + main clause + .(with short prep. ph.)

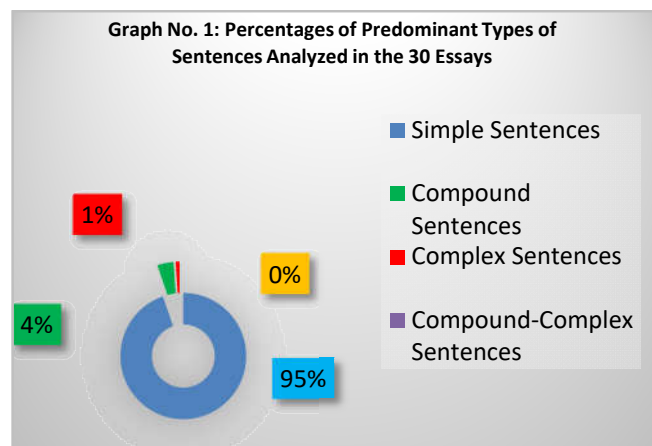
The main findings are presented and discussed below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, a discussion of the major findings that informed the two proposed research questions is presented. These findings were the result of a pedagogical intervention carried out with thirty level B2 EFL university students in an Ecuadorian university to inquire if utilizing sentence structure formulas facilitated the learning process of basic academic writing skills.

Results prior to the Pedagogical Intervention: As can be appreciated in Graph No. 1. below, a quantitative essay analysis conducted prior to administering the pedagogical intervention revealed that 95% of sentences used by participants in their essays were simple sentences. Only a small percentage of other more complex structures was used. Additionally, findings showed that not all sentences in the essays were grammatically correct. That is there were some errors in terms of sentence structure, for instance, incorrect use of constituents after main verbs, incorrect punctuation in compound and complex sentences, incorrect linking words in compound and complex sentences, and sentence fragments.

According to the participants, these types of grammar errors were made because of the lack of guided opportunities to practice writing sentences in English. They added that most of the time English instructors asked them to write paragraphs or essays; however, they do not receive clear feedback or scaffolding to improve. To Nation and Newton (2009) and Loewen (2018), meaningful feedback and scaffolding is paramount to facilitate second language learning.

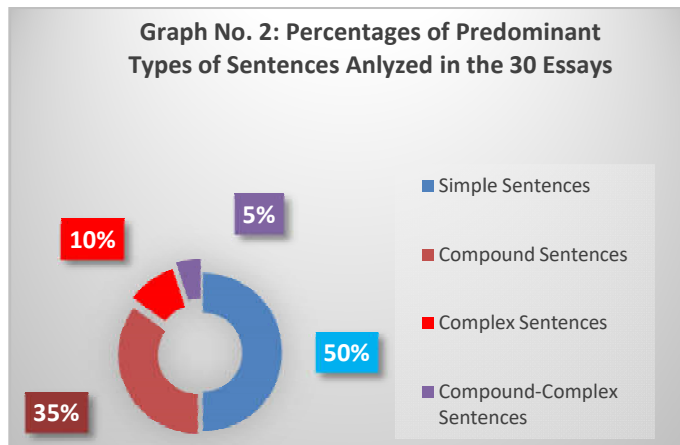


Results after the Pedagogical Intervention

Graph No. 2 indicates that there was some improvement in participants' academic writing skills after the pedagogical intervention as it was found that they used more varied types of sentences in their essays. In addition, the results demonstrated that after the pedagogical intervention the target EFL students not only augmented the use of sentence types but also increased the use of different patterns of each sentence types. Lastly, the number of errors regarding sentence structure and the use of correct complements of main verbs in sentences decreased.

In other words, participants showed improvement in using correct punctuation, linking words, and constituents that

accompany verbs such as intransitive, linking, BE, transitive, and two-place transitive verbs. Participants said that they liked being taught the target sentence structure formulas because it helped them remember and think about where each part of a sentence belonged. They mentioned that at the beginning they needed to have the formulas in front of them, but those formulas became more automatic in their brains as they continued to practice more and more. Existing research concurred with these findings as it has been found that providing overt instruction of language elements such as grammar structures and helping learners notice their errors facilitates the L2 learning process (Nation and Newton, 2009; Loewen, 2018).



Conclusion

This exploratory sequential mixed methods study concluded that EFL learners can benefit from using sentence structure formulas when learning how to write academic essays. Findings indicated three main benefits of using sentence structure formulas to teach academic writing in the EFL classroom. First, it was found that the target EFL students used more varied sentence types in their academic essays as a result of using the target sentence structure formulas. Second, they made less errors in the types of complements used with verbs such as intransitive, transitive, two-place transitive, the verb BE, and linking verbs.

Third, the instances of punctuation errors in the academic essays they wrote at the end of the pedagogical intervention decreased compared to the ones made prior to learning those sentence formulas. Another major finding was that the target EFL learners recognized that they felt more comfortable and confident to write academic essays after they were taught the sentence structure formulas. As can be seen, this research suggests that incorporating sentence structure formulas when teaching academic writing could benefit EFL university students to write better essays. However, since this study centered on sentence structure only, it is recommended to use this type of intervention as a complement stage or strategy to teach basic academic writing skills. Lastly, future research could continue to further investigate this topic applying different research approaches to better understand the impact that these kinds of pedagogical interventions have in the academic writing learning process of EFL university students.

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