How to Support ESL Learners' Writing by Using Mentor Texts

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Abstract

To write effectively is a crucial but challenging skill from which everyone could benefit (Kane, 2012). In this article, I report on action research where I utilized mentor texts and mini-lessons to teach writing to an English as a Second Language (ESL) learner who was experiencing writing anxiety because of his dislike of academic writing rules and the lack of the ability to write coherently. In order to minimize his writing anxiety and enhance his writing skills, I planned three phases for action and implemented the first two phase action plans. The findings suggest that through the use of mentor texts, ESL learners can better appreciate the beauty of coherence in mentor texts and are willing to write creatively but with strong coherence by imitating the structure, craft, and style in the mentor texts. Furthermore, mentor texts should be carefully chosen to meet ESL students' interests and needs. Last but not least, the writing intervention could start from the sentence level and then move to the paragraph level.

Keywords: Mentor Texts, ESL, Writing Skills, Writing Anxiety

Introduction

To write effectively is extremely important as a means of communication in the 21st century, but is also arguably the most demanding challenge for all school students (Kane, 2012). Language learners, especially English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, experience writing anxiety which might result from their low self-confidence in English writing and gender and grade level (Cheng, 2002) and their lack of writing skills (Daud, Daud, & Kassim, 2016). Such anxiety discourages them from writing. With no exception, Chinese ESL learners also experience writing anxiety, ranging from middle school students (Wern & Rahmat, 2021) to college English major students (Zhang, 2011). Consequently, it is important to research how to emotionally support Chinese ESL students while improving their writing skills.

Mentor texts are recorded to contribute to students' self-efficacy and success in writing. Escobar Almeciga and Evans (2014) defined mentor texts as "a piece of writing that is observed and analyzed so that students may attempt to imitate one or more linguistic functions" (p. 100). With the help of mentor texts, students can identify, analyze, and then imitate the authors' writing craft. With the use of mentor texts, students' confidence in writing can be gradually built upon (Adame, 2019) because these texts serve as writing models, allowing students to think and write as writers (MacKay, Ricks, & Young, 2017). Much research has been conducted documenting the benefits of mentor texts rather than specific ways in which mentor texts can be employed to emotionally and academically support ESL students' writing.

In this article, I report on action research where I utilized mentor texts and mini-lessons to teach writing to a Chinese ESL learner who was experiencing writing anxiety because of his dislike of academic writing rules and the lack of the ability to write coherently. To minimize his writing anxiety and enhance his writing skills, I planned three phases for action and implemented the first two phase of action plans. Recognizing the complexity of the writing process, I do not propose a solution to a long-standing challenge faced by ESL students, but I share my instruction plans and reflections in this article which are hoped to better support ESL students' writing and ESL teachers' writing instructions. The goal of this action research was to understand: 1) How mentor texts can be used to emotionally support ESL learners' writing; 2) How mentor texts can be used to improve students' writing coherence; 3) What aspects of mentor texts affect ESL students' writing.

Literature Review

Guiding Cognitive Theories

One guiding theory of this action research is Jean Piaget's cognitive constructivism. Piaget theorizes that "cognitive development is the result of the dynamic interactions between the child's thinking and reality which are promoted by the inner psychological tendencies to overcome the disequilibrium in his or her mind" (as cited in Inoue, 2012, pp78). When humans encounter new knowledge, the gap between what they can do and what they want to do motivate them to acquire the new knowledge by utilizing their prior knowledge and developing the new knowledge. Piaget's constructivism effectively serves as theoretical guidance in my mentoring for the writing of my ESL student named John (pseudo name). When dynamically interacting with published mentor texts that are well written by writers, John, who disliked the rigid rules of five-paragraph academic essay writing, can internally

interpret the sample creative literature texts and develop his writing with vivid descriptions and focused topics.

Meta-cognition is defined as "a higher level of thinking that monitors a series of your thinking processes so that you can navigate complex factors and dynamics involved in the task in a systematic, integrated fashion" (Inoue, 2012, pp47). When reflecting upon the knowledge they are learning, students can identify what they are learning well and what they need to improve. In the long run, by knowing what they excel in and improving their weakness, their confidence as well as content knowledge can be strengthened while learning. During the research, I used the meta-cognition strategy to encourage my ESL student John to monitor and adjust his thinking and behaviors, which was hoped to build his confidence and stamina on creative writing he desired. In other words, by thinking about the thinking presented in his essay, John can adjust his writing to a better one or get emotional support from the writing section that is creative and well-developed.

This research is also grounded in Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Vygotsky emphasizes "the role of social interactions and situations as the key driving force for knowledge development" (as cited in Inoue, 2012, pp95). Social interactions contribute to effective learning because knowledge co-constructions within the zone of proximal development, a key step of a learning process, are more likely to happen when more capable peers serving as experts scaffold the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978). I took advantage of the one-on-one meeting with my ESL student John to exchange our perspectives on mentor texts and his writing as much as possible. On one level, such interactions might inspire my student John to deepen his understanding of the provided mentor texts and write his essays in a way that a mentor text is written. On another level, as a lifelong learner and teacher at the same time, I would like to co-construct knowledge with my student rather than just impart knowledge, which is also beneficial to build a harmonious relationship between John and me. Besides, the concept of scaffolding proposed by Vygotsky (1978) also guides me on how to facilitate my student's learning. When teaching creative writing at the initial stage, I need to assist my student heavily. After he reaches a certain level, there is a necessity to remove my assistance gradually until he can independently write a creative essay with a clear topic and coherent organization.

Mentor Texts

Escobar Almeciga and Evans (2014) defined mentor texts as "a piece of writing that is observed and analyzed so that students may attempt to imitate one or more linguistic functions" (p. 100), while mentor texts are also defined by Dorfman and Cappelli (as cited in Dollins, 2016,) as "pieces of literature that we can return to again and again as we help young writers learn how to do what they may not yet be able to do on their own" (p. 49). In either definition, mentor texts are mentioned as exemplars of good writing for writers to learn and imitate.

Much research has been conducted documenting the effect of mentor texts on classroom practices. English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' writing accuracy is greatly improved when the mentor text teaching model is used in a writing class (Ghorbanchian, Youhanaee & Amirian, 2019; Liaghat & Biria, 2018; Tabrizi, 2017). Premont, Young, Wilcox, Dean, and Morrison (2017) found that with the use of mentor texts, high school students not only enhance their writing abilities, namely word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions, but also improve self-efficacy in writing. Students' writing interests, motivation to write, and

self-efficacy in writing are reported to be increased when mentor texts are employed during writing instructions (Turner, 2015). Different from these studies, I conducted this action research to explore in what ways mentor texts emotionally and academically support Chinese ESL students' writing rather than to determine the effects of mentor texts.

Methodology

To better understand how mentor texts emotionally and academically support my ESL student's writing, I employed the research methodology of action research in this study. Action research is defined by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) as the following:

> Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own social or educational practices, as well as their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out. (p. 1)

In bridging the theoretical ideas presented in the literature review into my teaching practice, through this research, I aimed to understand: 1) How mentor texts can be used to emotionally support ESL learners' writing; 2) How mentor texts can be used to improve students' writing coherence; 3) What aspects of mentor texts affect ESL students' writing.

Participant

As mentioned earlier, John came from China and was in a Test Prep class I observed in the fall semester of 2014. He just graduated from a Chinese high school and was supposed to come to San Diego to study undergraduate at the University of San Diego. However, he ended up learning the English language at a local language school called English Language Institute (pseudo name, abbreviated as ELI) because he missed the application deadline. John decided to study the English language at the ELI and then apply for the engineering school of the University of San Diego for the 2015 spring semester. After taking the placement test at the ELI, he was placed in Level 6, the highest level at the ELI. One of the advanced classes he attended was Test Prep, which was to prepare students to take the TOEFL or IELTS.

Through my observations in that class and interactions with John, I found that John was anxious about his English writing because of his dislike toward the standard five-paragraph essay writing. He liked to write creatively by creating pictures before readers. However, he was discouraged to write because his Test Prep teacher told him that his writing was difficult to understand owing to the lack of the standard academic writing format and the awkward use of vocabulary. Particularly, John was so frustrated about the ignorance of his creative writing in his essay "Spring Break" (see Appendix A) that he presented that essay during our interaction. After carefully reading and analyzing his essay "Spring Break" and other several essays I asked from him, I found that John was indeed trying hard to write creative essays, but he sometimes failed to include a clear and well-developed topic when trying to write something creative. Thus, I wanted to work on his writing needs by emotionally supporting his creative writing and improving his writing skills in topic development and coherence.

1st Phase Action and Assessment Plan

After reading John's essay "Spring Break" (see Appendix A), I found that there are dazzling descriptions of details as well as obscure points when he tried to write in an unusual way.

Unlike the third and fourth paragraphs, the second paragraph of his "Spring Break" has no clear topic, but is more like a list of experiences he had in San Francisco.

Intending to emotionally support his creative writing and improve his creative writing skills in topic development, I asked John to not only think about what he thought when he wrote this essay, but also check which part of this essay matched what he was trying to write and which part did not. After this metacognitive analysis of his essay, he was aware of what he could do and what he needed to improve when trying to write good creative writing. John was also asked to rewrite the second paragraph of his essay "Spring Break" and we both evaluated his revised paragraph two, which focused on the economic property of San Francisco.

Next, I introduced mentor texts to John and scaffolded him to use mentor texts to learn how English writers creatively describe details and develop a topic. I used the PowerPoint I created to explain how to use mentor texts to improve his writing: he needed to first comprehend the meaning of the mentor text from the lens of reading like a reader, and then notice how the mentor text author writes and meta-cognitively think why the mentor text author writes in that way from the lens of reading like a writer. After the introduction of mentor texts, in order to enrich the joy and meaningfulness of learning, I shared several pictures of San Diego (the city we lived in) and wrote about it in a similar way that Abha Dawesar writes Delhi in her book *Babyji* (see Appendix B). John was excited about such power of mentor texts, commenting "I LOVE it!" Then I also asked him to write San Francisco which he just rewrote in the revised paragraph two as Dawesar's writing about Delhi. He was satisfied with the mentor text I provided and his rewriting of San Francisco (See Appendix C).

My goal was not only to make him feel comfortable about his own creative writing, but also to improve his creative writing which should have a focused topic and coherent details. Thus, both as a learning process and as an assessment, I provided another mentor text from Henry Beston's *The Outermost House* (see Appendix D) to further support his creative writing. However, John told me that this mentor text is too difficult for him to imitate and learn. Then he chose to rewrite his fourth paragraph of "Spring Break" and his rewriting is included in Appendix D.

2nd Phase Action and Assessment Plan

Reflecting on the first phase, I continued the use of mentor texts to give John more emotional support in English writing and improve his creative writing skills. The first part of the second phase is to take him to go around his dream undergraduate school, the engineering school of the University of San Diego. I believed that this visit could not only generate qualia of the engineering school that helps his creative writing, but also enrich the happiness of this creative writing learning. When we stepped into the lobby hall, John was attracted by the droplight that John thought is made of diodes. He was so interested in the droplight that he stood there observing it and took several photos. After observing the droplight for about twenty minutes, we continued our tour of the engineering building while chatting.

The second part of my second phase is to ask John to write the most impressive place or room of the engineering building by taking away creative writing strategies from the mentor text from Henry Beston's *The Outermost House* (see Appendix E). This mentor text I provided is a paragraph that creatively describes a room with a kitchen. We started by reading this

mentor text to comprehend the meaning of the mentor text. After that, I asked him to think aloud, that is, to speak out his thoughts when reading the mentor text. Specific questions for John to think about are: 1) How does Henry Beston describe his room; 2) Why does he write in that way; 3) How would you take away aspects that you think are good from this mentor text? After we discussed these questions, I asked him to adapt the creative writing style of the mentor text into his writing. However, he was so attracted by the droplight that he chose to write about it rather than a place (see Appendix E).

3rd Phase Action Plan

In this phase, I changed my goal to improve John's creative writing at the sentence level by using the mentor text sentence. For example, the mentor text sentence could be "the birds plummet from the branches, looping and diving like combat aircraft", which is from Brian Heinz's *Butternut Hollow Pond*. I need to explain or ask him to look up these words in the dictionary, including "looping", "plummeted", "combat" and "aircraft" to make him comprehend the mentor text sentence. After that, I need to ask John to analyze the mentor text sentence as if he is the author of the mentor text sentence. He needs to know the purpose of why the author use comma (how birds plummeted) and what kind of craft element the author use (e.g. simile- looping and diving like combat aircraft, descriptive language- plummets from the branches). After such a comprehensive analysis of the mentor text sentence, John is expected to write a similar sentence. Here is just an example of how John could work on his creative writing from the sentence level. In this phase, I also hope that John could choose what topics he wants to write and what creative mentor text sentence he could find to utilize and learn. Every time he finds a creative mentor text sentence, John could record his creative writing learning process on a sheet of paper as in appendix F, which benefits both him and me to see his improvement in creative writing.

Findings

The findings of this research can be divided into three sections: meta-cognitive reflection, the effectiveness of mentor texts, and from the sentence level to the paragraph level.

Meta-cognitive Reflection. Metacognitive reflection plays a vital role in motivating ESL learners to write as well as improving their writing because meta-cognitive reflection sparks ESL learners' desire to write creatively as published writers and pass on the beauty of a mentor text to their own writing. John learned and applied good writing strategies from a mentor text to his writing by meta-cognitively analyzing his original writing and the provided mentor texts.

The Effectiveness of Mentor Texts. The effectiveness of the use of mentor texts in a writing class is affected by ESL learners' writing interests or the difficulty level of a mentor text. As mentioned earlier, John could not apply writing crafts from the second mentor text in the first phase because the mentor text was too difficult to understand. His attention was distracted by the challenging words, so he could not fully appreciate the beauty of the mentor text. Students' writing interests may affect if the use of mentor text is effective or not. In the second phase, John was so interested in the droplight in his dream school and failed to imitate the provided mentor text. Instead, he wrote about the drop-light that he thought was made out of diodes.

From the Sentence Level to the Paragraph Level. As writing is a long-term process, the use of mentor text in an ESL writing class should start from the sentence level to the paragraph level. After building students' writing confidence or willingness by using mentor texts, ESL writing teachers might start from the sentence level, such as word choice and figurative language, to the paragraph level, such as coherence or topic development. John hesitated about what words to use when he wrote and sometimes used words inappropriately in his writing during both phases. Although he realized that he needed to develop the main idea with supporting details and progress from one idea to another, his word choice made his ideas obscure. Considering writing is a long-term process, I should have slowed down the teaching pace when using mentor text in the class. After ESL learners establish their writing willingness, ESL teachers could use mentor texts at the sentence level to improve ESL learners' word choice, sentence fluency, or figurative language first and then gradually move to the paragraph level to help ESL learners' coherence or topic development.

Conclusion

Because writing is an important but challenging skill, there is a need to understand how to appropriately use mentor texts to emotionally support ESL learners' writing and improve their writing skills. Before employing mentor texts in teaching, ESL teachers should get to know students' learning needs and interests. After knowing ESL learners' needs and interests, ESL teachers should choose mentor texts that match their students' English proficiency level and interests. If possible, ESL teachers should also provide their students with a chance to choose what mentor texts they like to use and what topics they like to write about. While using mentor texts to improve ESL learners' writing, ESL instructors are expected to ask students to meta-cognitively analyze their writings and mentor texts, identify writing crafts or strategies of mentor texts, and think about how to apply these writing crafts or strategies from mentor texts into their writing. Last but not least, as writing is a long-term process, if time is allowed, ESL teachers could start from sentence-level writing (i.e., word choice, figurative language) to paragraph-level writing (i.e., coherence, topic development) when using mentor texts to support their students' English writing.

Appendix A

Spring Break

I would not be able to forget the prosperous and high-tech-surrounding city. I would not be able to forget the majestic and torrential water fall. I would not be able to forget (slip from) my precious memory of the tour to San Francisco.

After staying in the bus for 5 hours from Los Angles, I finally arrived the financial center of Northern California, San Francisco. There are variety of skyscrapers building around the city, especially the twin peaks, which are the remarkable sign of San Francisco. Besides the thriving economy, I also received a strong academic atmosphere, The Stanford University. When I first stepped in the campus, the decorative churches, the green grass, the historical architectures emerged in my vision and I felt infinitely proud of myself though I did not really attend this university.

As I approached the downtown of San Francisco, I visited the famous sighting seeing, The Golden State Bridge. It is one of the longest bridge in Unite States, which always appears from the fog; fortunately, the weather was quite good that day and had no fog. I can clearly saw how long the bridge is and hear transportations rapidly crossing the bridge. When I walked to the middle of the bridge, the place where many people jumped out of the bridge and found the god of death, I looked down and a wind blowed my head which made my frightened because of the horrent distance between the bridge and the river. I wonder how could some daredevils have the braveness to jump out of the bridge.

For traveling, great mountains which make you relaxed are indispensable. Further from the San Francisco city, about couples of hours driving, there is a miracle place called Yosemite National Park. Besides the polished stones, the deep valleys, the most magnificent is the water fall, pouring melted water from 3000 feet height. Revolving moisture, the grand water fall seemingly like an angel wearing a white long dress (petticoat). What surrounding me are oak trees as tall as the trade center, birds flying in the sky and chrysanthemums spreading their fragrance. It seems only heaven can have this peaceful scenery, and I was in the heaven at that time. Not only the water fall gave me comfort, but also the majestic mountains provided me a vivid sense of vision. I was standing the middle between two tremendous mountains, and a breeze blowed my shirt, making a sound like whisper. Staying in the serenity mountain, breathing the pure air, I was meditating: what a life!

So worthy the tour I have experienced, and it would be a treasure enriching my life. It was 6 pm and the sunset still illuminated my way to the destination of the tour: Los Angels.

Appendix B

1st Phase Mentor Text--Abha Dawesar: *Babyji*

Scaffolding to write San Diego

MY ORIGINAL TEXT

- San Diego is nice city. Here has beautiful sceneries attracting tourists to travel, comfortable academic environment welcoming students and scholars to study and romantic stories moving people around the world to tear.

READING LIKE A WRITER

MENTOR TEXT

- Delhi is a city where things happen undercover. A city where the horizon is blanketed with particulate pollution and the days are hot. A city with no romance but a lot of passion.

READING LIKE A WRITER

- San Diego is a city where miracles happen. A city where the coast is zigzagged with cliffs and coves and the sun is shining. A city with no noise but comfortably competitive academic environment. A city with no flaunt but inspiring romantic stories.

Appendix C

John's writing of San Francisco

READING LIKE A WRITER

MENTOR TEXT

- Delhi is a city where things happen undercover. A city where the horizon is blanketed with particulate pollution and the days are hot. A city with no romance but a lot of passion.

READING LIKE A WRITER

San Francisco is a city where technology *treasures* happen. A city where people created ~~unique~~ unique lives which are the main people working in special styles. A city where there is full of passion to innovate.

A city where there involves an atmosphere of technology.

Appendix D

1st Phase Mentor Text 2--Henry Beston: *The Outermost House*

John's Writing of His Experience in Yosemite National Park

READING LIKE A WRITER

MENTOR TEXT (P95)

- I walk, and no terns come swooping down at me out of the dunes, scolding me for my instrusion on their immense and ancient privacy; no sandpipers rise at my approach, wheel over the inner breakers, and settle down again a hundred yard ahead.
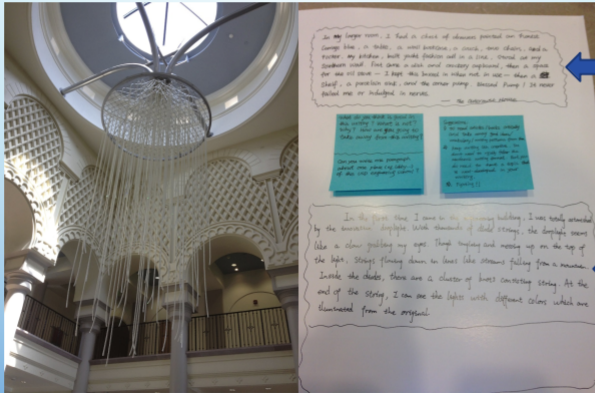
READING LIKE A WRITER

The clouds revolved, and tangled around the peak. Creating a sense of miracle. Seemingly like a ~~diamond~~ emerged from a pair pearl of white gloves. ~~Winds~~ Blowing my hair, Winds are ~~Slalpping~~ Scratching my ~~clot~~ jacket. ~~and~~

Appendix E

2nd Phase Mentor Text: Henry Beston--*The Outermost House*

Appendix F

3rd Phase Mentor Text Sentence

Title of mentor text:
Author of mentor text:
Mentor text possibility: At the sentence level
What do my student need to know "reading like a reader"? (comprehension/vocabulary)
Reading like a writer (editing purpose: grammar, capitalization, punctuation, spelling)
Reading like a writer (revision purpose: Craft elements-metaphors, similes, alliteration, hyperbole etc.)
Student writing example

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