Chapter II
Assessing the Benefit of Prewriting Conferences on Drafts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on a comparative study of face-to-face (FTF) and written electronic (WE) conferences as pre-writing activities in the English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. Twenty-seven intermediate to advanced students participated in the study over a 4 week period. Latent semantic analysis and corpus linguistics measures were used to compare the extent to which the first drafts incorporated the terms and ideas introduced during the 2 types of conferences. Although no difference was found in the length, or semantic or lexical complexity of first drafts, the results indicated greater lexical and semantic similarity between FTF pre-writing conferences and subsequent drafts. In other words, students made better use of the terms and ideas introduced during the FTF conferences when individually writing first drafts. Reasons why this may have been the case are suggested, and directions for further research are offered.

INTRODUCTION

Whole-class discussions or class conferences are often used in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classrooms to generate language and ideas about a topic. This pre-writing stage usually is viewed as particularly important for ESL writing students who typically have a relatively restricted vocabulary. The rationale behind pre-writing conferences is that students can use the language and ideas generated by group members in their subsequent individual writing.
This chapter reports on a study that compares the length, and the semantic and lexical complexity of first drafts written after two media for pre-writing conferences: traditional face-to-face (FTF) conferences and written electronic (WE) conferences. The research questions under investigation are (1) “Do both types of pre-writing conferences result in first drafts with equivalent textual features?” Moreover, this study compares how well ESL students make use of language and ideas generated during the two types of conferences when individually writing first drafts. Therefore, the second research question is (2) “Are both types of pre-writing conferences equally beneficial in helping students generate language and ideas for use in subsequent writing?”

WE conferences are a useful way to stimulate second language students’ active participation, language practice, and language learning. Research has demonstrated that compared to FTF conferences, the WE setting leads to participation that is more balanced among group members (Beauvois, 1998; Chun, 1994; Fitze, 2006; Kern, 1995; Warschauer, 1996). Students who do not participate much in FTF discussions tend to participate more in WE conferences (Fitze, 2006; Warschauer, 1996). WE conferences tip the balance of participation away from the teacher and towards the students, allowing students to take more control of the discussion (Chun, 1994; Fitze, 2006; Kern, 1995; Sullivan & Pratt, 1996). Moreover, ESL students in WE conferences practice a wider vocabulary of words related to a writing topic (Fitze, 2006); and participate in discussions that are of greater lexical complexity than FTF discussions (Fitze, 2006; Warschauer, 1996).

Finally, WE conferences, particularly with both native and non-native speaker participants, lead to negotiated interactions with a focus on form in which the ESL students’ attention is directed to discrepancies between their interlanguage and the target language. These interactions can have a beneficial effect on ESL learners’ lexical and syntactic development (Blake, 2000; Lee, 2004; Smith, 2003; Toyoda & Harrison, 2002).

Researchers have begun to explore how participation in WE pre-writing conferences might also benefit second language students’ subsequent writing. For instance, Sullivan and Pratt (1996), Braine (1997, 2001), and Ghaleb (1993) used holistic instruments to quantitatively compare the value of WE and FTF conferences to students’ first and final drafts. Unfortunately, taken together, these studies failed to demonstrate a consistent trend of effect of pre-writing environment on the quality of first drafts. In particular, Brain (1997, 2001) and Ghaleb (1993) both reported higher scores for first drafts composed after WE conferences. In contrast, Sullivan and Pratt (1996) reported higher scores for first drafts that followed FTF conferences.

Sullivan and Pratt (1996), Ghaleb (1993), and Braine (1997, 2001) assessed the quality of first drafts with holistic scales even though holistic scales evaluate writing in terms of features not normally incorporated into first drafts. For instance, holistic scales award higher scores for features such as high level discourse organization, and grammatical accuracy and complexity (e.g., Educational Testing Service, 2006). However, contemporary writing teachers ordinarily instruct students writing first drafts merely to get ideas on paper and to begin to narrow and organize them (Reid, 1993). According to process writing theory, when writing first drafts, students should primarily be concerned with the inclusion of appropriate content and should not be overly concerned with grammar or organization (Elbow, 1973; Reid, 1993; Zamel, 1982, 1983). As a result, one must question if these holistic instruments were appropriate for evaluating first drafts; and indeed, question any claims that drafts written following one type of conference were superior to drafts written following the other.

In light of process writing theory, an analytical instrument suitable for assessing the quality of first