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Sommaire

Fostering English as a Foreign Language students' writing competence through community service activities

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Abstract

English Academic writing can be challenging for English as a Foreign Language students. Studies have shown that students may face problems in developing their skills in writing, and/or may lack motivation to engage into writing when the writing task does not meet their interests or needs. As a result, countless research has examined strategies of enhancing students' interest and competence in writing. This study explores how engaging students into civic activities can help improve their writing skills and motivate them to better serve their community. Students participated into various community service activities and were asked to share in series of written reflections their expectations, experiences, and outcomes of their projects. Through a qualitative research method, 36 Master students were observed, interviewed, and had their written prompts analyzed by the researcher. The results indicated that the experience was not only a highly motivated one for developing students' writing skills, but also one that permitted students to participate in civic activities in their communities. Before engaging in civic activities, students had poor writing quality and very little knowledge of civic education. However, throughout the project, students have improved their writing skills and have developed social engagement qualities such as agency and commitment. Implication of the study is advocacy for the implementation of civic engagement in the whole curriculum at university.

Key words: writing, EFL, Civic education, civic engagement

Introduction

Academic writing can be a perilous and challenging activity for most students and mainly for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. However, writing is one of the most important skills that EFL students need to master

in a second language learning situation. Further, it plays an important role in both their academic and professional life (Graham et al. 244). Academically, writing is a requirement in most subjects in high school and university. At the professional level, most job performance begins with the mastering of the different forms and types of writing, including academic essays, business writings, letters. Several research, however, have shown that when students engage into EFL writing, they face numerous challenges that can impede the successful production of satisfactory academic writing. Students are found sometimes to lack motivation or interest in the subject matter or to face difficulties developing their writing skills (Belkhir and Benyelles).

As a result of observations and concerns on students' interest in academic writing, developing effective instructional practices in writing teaching have recently been object of research (Brindle et al. 932; Troia and Graham 1720; Graham et al. 245). Researchers found that teachers of foreign languages, should develop strategies that will help foster students 's writing performance while enhancing their competence. Consequently, Effective instructional practices such as reading intervention, creative writing or use of digital means were suggested (Graham and al; Jiang and Lianjiang). However, few studies have examined how service learning can be incorporated in composition classes in English as a Second Language(ESL) programs in Mali. The aim of this study is twofold: firstly, this study aims at exploring how engaging students in service learning can improve their writing competence; and the second purpose is to investigate on students' attitudes when engaged in community service activities.

For that purpose, two research questions were asked by the study:

What is the influence of community engagement activities on English as a foreign language students' writing performance at university?

What are students' attitudes before, while and after their involvement in a community service project?

Literature Review

Research has shown that learning was more efficient when supplemented with experiential opportunities than learning with lectures and classroom learning alone, as it allows the learners to be in touch directly with the reality they are studying (Kolb 90). It disrupts with the traditional learning method in which learners are passive beings swallowing lectures to active actors equipped with the ability to cope with major social problems while being in touch with the community. It therefore implies the idea of learning while doing and engage the students into critical thinking and decision making about global and local matters.

There are several ways community engagement has been construed in relation to composition teaching. For instance, Paul Herlker proposed that composition classes be moved outside the classroom, to where students can engage in various community activities, as such writing newsletters, press releases or lobbying materials for nonprofit organizations (Herlker 72). Brack and Hall contend that composition being 'a subject with an empty content', students do not engage properly into activities that can change their mind or bring improvements in their lives (143). They further advocate for an innovative way of breaking down with routine of teacher-centered learning to that of active learner centered by combining composition and service learning (144). According to Bruce Herzberg, combining service learning and composition is the best way for students to apply in real life what they have learned. It provides students with unique opportunity to improve their writing and research skills (Russell 772)

Incorporating civic and community engagement into students' EFL writing curriculum can be an efficient starting point in engaging them into developing interest in writing, serving their community, and developing their leadership skills. It is also a way of enhancing students' awareness and concern of fundamental moral values and principles such as inclusion, protection of environment, fairness, respect of mankind. It is a way to prepare students into becoming better citizen imparted with a sense of responsibility, justice, and social engagement (Furgione et al 71). Efficient community engagement requires students to be equipped with civil skills, civic knowledge, and civic

mindedness (Furgione et al 73), skills acquired and develop through civic education.

In many countries, such as America and Europe, civic education is integrated in the academic curriculum of students from primary school to the university (Railey). However, in Mali, civic education is taught at school from primary to secondary level in various forms and mainly through a subject called 'Education civique et Morale'(ECM). In other words, opportunity to teach and learn basic civic knowledge stops at the secondary level with the result of students lacking opportunity and motivation to learn and apply such skills at a tertiary stage. Further, as put by Furgione et al, throughout their academic experience, students should be given the opportunity to display their civic knowledge, skills and values into practical and reel problems in their schools, communities, and their countries; because their future civic abilities depends on what they acquire in classroom as students(73). Therefore, incorporating civic and community engagement in the classroom should be considered through EFL courses such as writing, reading or discussion. These subjects can serve as cornerstones in increasing students' awareness of social problems of their communities and prompting them into concrete actions. As noted by Entisar ,

> The EFL writing teacher can play an active role in raising consciousness and helping students understand their world by discussing the significance of sustainability, helping students appreciate and interact with their locations, engaging students in service learning, involving students in campus ecology and webbed environments (Elsherif 79).

Further, the educator role of teachers should exceed that of merely instilling knowledge to that of transforming their students into responsible leaders and decisions makers (Shaaban 204).

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research method based on participatory action research method throughout the data collection and the analysis. The main

aim of participatory action research is to bring change in practices by elaborating on a research agenda that actively involves both the researcher and participants in considering the research problems, the data collection, and the analysis (Cresswell, 2014). Designed to promote self-development and self-determination, participatory action research empowers participants to free themselves to certain societal constraints or power structures (McIntyre, 2007). The purpose of this study at hand is to work closely with participants(students) from the elaboration of their projects plans, to the implementations of the different activities involved in their plan. One outcome of the paper is to bring students into understanding the problems of their communities and share their experiences in writing on how they were able to take actions in their different projects. Consequently, students were involved in all the different steps of the study, from brainstorming the topics to analyzing the finding results.

Procedures

Prior to engaging with the projects, student participants discussed concepts related to service learning and community engagement in class with the researcher. Further, students were assigned to read and research about these concepts and its importance before engaging into the project. Students and the researcher brainstormed in class about subjects such as the environment, gender equality, disability, reduction of poverty, conflict resolution, education, to cite these few. A discussion then followed on how students can be engaged with the community to tackle such issues. At the end of the discussion, nine topics were retained, and students were divided into small groups of four according to their subject of interest. Provided that working with the community can sometimes be challenging and requires problem solving abilities, dividing students into groups was a way to assure that students would work collaboratively to solve problems they may encounter during their project's implementations. They were encouraged to discuss, share their views and report collaboratively on their experience.

The activities were carried out during eight (8) weeks. Students were asked to share in series of writing, their experiences, and expectations, before the project, during its implementation and after the project on the following questions:

Before visiting the sites

-In a paragraph describe the project you will be engage for this activity

-What do you already know about this problem?

-What cultural conceptions do you know about it?

-How important do you think dealing with this problem is?

-Have you ever visited the site or engage in similar activity before? If yes- for what? If no- why?

-What expectations do you have on this project?

At the site/ during the activity

-What are your first impressions? What is different than you expected?

-Briefly describe the site (the building/ the staff/ the organization/ date of creation/ mission)

- Describe your interaction with the community members (language used- strategies used to engage the conversation)

-What challenges have you encountered?

-How were you able to solve the problems you faced during the project implementation?

After site visit

What what is the most important thing you learned? So what - Why is it important that you learned it?

-What is the strength of the organization?

-What challenges did you face?

-What short terms and long terms solutions do you propose?

Now what - What are the short term and long-term goals now that you have had this experience?

-What have you been able to accomplish in your community engagement? (Fund raising/ sensitizing peers of other member of the community-donations?

Table1- presentation of groups and activities

Groups	Projects
1	Visit an orphanage
2	Teach free English classes
3	Visit a center of people with Intellectual disabilities
4	Visit a center of displaced population
5	Visit a center of people with visual disabilities
6	Visit a recycling center
7	Sensitize students in gender equality
8	Organize days of trees planting
9	Offer free writing lessons to undergraduates

Participants

Students enrolled in the first year of the two different Masters' programs in the Department of English from the faculty of letters and Humanities of Bamako were purposely selected to participate in the study. The researcher selected master students because she assumes that they will have a better

understanding of the importance of engaging and serving the community. The students were then presented with the purpose of the study, upon which the researcher obtained their consent to participate to the study. A total of 36 students participated in the study with 15 females and 20 males.

Data collection

Multiple methods of data collection were employed in this study. Throughout the study, data were collected through in class observations, focus group interview recordings, and written prompts collection. During the span of the project, students were required to discuss in their respective groups the activities they have done and to reflect on them in their writing. Since one of the purposes were to foster students' interest into academic writing, they were then asked to reflect on their observations, experience, and outcomes of the project. The prompts were then collected by the researcher for analysis. Further, students were interviewed prior to, during, and at the end of the project, to gain insight of their views and thoughts (Reason, 2005) before and after the project. Three interview sections were organized by the researcher. One before the students began their sites visits, the second one after their second visit and a third one on their last visit. All the interviews occurred in class according to the availability of students. Each group for the different projects constituted a focus group to be interviewed. Each interview lasting approximatively 20 to 30 minutes. After, the recordings were transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

All the recorded were transcribed verbatim and coded for analysis. Both the interview transcript and the written scripts were analyzed using content analysis (Patton, 2002). Initial salient themes were developed from the separate data (i.e., observation notes, interview, and students written productions), before being compared for triangulation. To reduce bias,

participants were involved in all the steps of the data analysis and the findings were shared with them for accuracy and credibility.

Findings

1-Prior to the projects

The data analysis of the interview transcripts and students writing prompts before they engage in the project have revealed the following three themes: lack of confidence, ignorance, and fear.

Lack of confidence

Prior to the project, the data analysis revealed that most students lacked confidence in their writing skills. Before students engage in this project, writing was not part of students' daily activities. Many would write solely in exam situations or when being assigned to by teachers. Consequently, they scarcely write on daily basis. Further, having observed students while they are writing in class and the analysis of students written prompts before the project revealed that their essays were in poor quality characterized by poor vocabulary, incoherence of ideas and recurring grammatical mistakes. In addition, some students showed concerns of sharing their writing with their peers or the researcher because they lack confidence in themselves. In the interview, the students shared as well that they had not much interest in writing before the project, because they could not find stimulating topics that will reveal their reality or their cultural surrounding. For example, one of the participant Aziz, shared with the researcher:

'Writing is a crippling activity for me. I can stare my paper for many hours, without being able to write a sentence. I know that if I develop a habit in writing frequently, my writing skills as well will improve, but sometimes I don't find any motivation in doing so.'

Ignorance

Before starting the activities of this project, many students admitted that they lack knowledge in civic and community engagement. Only a few of the students really had some conception of what it meant to be civically- minded or to have civic competence before the beginning of the project. Most students admitted that it was important to serve their community but claimed that they had never engage in such activity. For instance, when asked to share their knowledge about civic engagement before the projects, Moussa responded in the following terms:

> "I 've never engage in a civic engagement project before. When l was small, the teacher used to tell us in moral lessons the importance of caring and service the community, but I need to do some research now and understand all the concepts around it before this project. At the university, it is very rare for us to talk about such issues, so I really can't say exactly what it is all about."

Moussa was not an isolated case, another student, Lassi believed that civic or community engagement is a concept borrowed from Europe or America where it is incorporated in the curriculum of most universities. He thinks that because it is not implemented in Malian universities, many students are ignorant of such concept.

Further, even though many students admitted being aware of the existence of the different issues we raised in the different projects, part of their ignorance was how they could engage in solving such problems or taking actions to improve them. Many admitted they did not know that with their state of simple students, they could participate in improving the lives conditions of their community. This concern was shared by one student, Sali, in the following terms:

> 'Before this project, I thought that just political leaders or famous people engage into such activities. I didn't know that as a student I could serve my neighboring community. Now I know that by simple gesture I can achieve a tremendous change in my society. I have learned that it can consist of simple activities such as clean up exercises, raising funds to support a group of people, joint programs with other groups on campus, encouraging members to run for

student offices, speaking to members on the importance of voting among many others.

Fear

Another important theme that emerged prior to students' engagement in serving their community is fear. Some students shared with the researcher that before engaging in this project, they had apprehension about the project. Some claimed that they were frightened by the idea of failing to achieve it, others did not know what strategies they could use to get access to the sites or communities they are serving. Further, the data analysis has revealed that students were holding some misconceptions and stereotypes about certain communities because they have never thought in engaging with such communities. For instance, one student, Moussa shared his apprehension before the project:

> 'With my group, we are visiting a center for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. To tell the truth, I don't know what to expect. I have never been in such a place before.'

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2-During the project

While students were engaged into serving the community through on sites activities, the researcher was collecting and analyzing the impact of the project on them. The analysis of observation and interview data, as well as the written prompts of students have revealed the following themes: **determination and collaboration.**

Determination

An overall change in mindset was evident in many of the students throughout the project. The researcher has observed a transformation both in students' mindset, behavior, and writing; the students were becoming more determined

and eager to participate to the project and work collaboratively with their peers. One participant, Oumou shared with the researcher:

> 'I am involved in a recycling project; I am learning so much from it that I am very determined to carry on the project. I made a lot of research about it; we visited two recycling sites, and I am so impressed. With my group, we are now participating to the protection of the environment, and we cannot wait to share all what we have discovered with the rest of the class'.

This idea of determination was supported by another student when he explained that from the onset of the project, he could foresee the way the project would change his life and that of the community he is serving.

> I am now determined to be civically engaged and to help my community on every possible occasion. Now that I am engaged in such a project, I have learned the benefit and importance for both the one serving and the served.

Determination was also seen in students writing habit. The researcher has noticed that students were more engaged into writing and were keener to write and share in class. For instance, one student Djene noted that with her involvement in this project, she has cultivated the habit of keeping a journal in which she could record all the activities and her experience on the project:

> Every time we visit our site, I jointed down in my journal my experience, observations, and conversations I have. This project has helped me to keep this habit and develop into a better writer. I try to keep record of all what I can share with my mates and with my family.

Collaboration

The data analysis has revealed that collaboration was a very important concept to students for achieving the project and having a positive result. As the project unfolded, many of the students saw how collaboration, especially regarding decision-making and problem-solving, was greatly beneficial in reaching the intended goals. Throughout the project, students found it important to collaborate to choose the topics, decide on the groups and engage

in solving problem on sites. Most shared with the researcher the importance of relying on the group and working collaboratively on the project. For instance, Aliou noted:

> Collaboration has been so important for us in this project. I remember before we start, we were all working individually, but as we were discussing, we understood the importance of bringing our ideas together and working as one man. We were able to engage other students into fund raising and donations and all this through collaboration.

Students were also highly collaborating in class writing activities. Most of the interactions and discussions were taking place in class. Students were collaboratively drawing on their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and composition to brainstorm and organize their essays. Aicha shared with the researcher that thanks to collaboration, she is more confident in her writing and the group was able to produce essays of good quality:

> Before this project, it was difficult for me to write. But in our group, we all share ideas during our writing activities and so I am more confident, and it is easier for me now to write. It has improved my writing tremendously.

After the project

At the end of the project, the researcher has noticed students' perception of civic engagement has tremendously changed. By observing the students and by analyzing their reflections, the researcher was able to identify three themes: **commitment and agency, empathy, and self-confidence**.

Commitment and Agency

Students were gradually very committed to their project and to being involved in civic activities. Throughout the project they carried different activities such as cleaning their campus or their neighborhood, planting trees, recycling, visiting a center for people with disabilities, fundraising for displaced

population…At the conclusion of the project, students have acquired enough knowledge and experience to deal with such issues. Many have shared with the researcher their commitment to continue carry on the activities beyond the project. In one written sample one student Suleyman wrote:

> This project is a life changing for me and my community. From the time I started it I have become a different person. Now I know better about civilly issues and I am committed to carry many such projects around my community. With my friend, we have created a club and we are planning to meet once every month to discuss issues in our communities and take appropriate measures. For example, along with our project which consist of fighting against gender-based violence, we are trying to sensitize women about corona virus, and we occasionally distribute masks for free. I am very proud of what we are achieving.

More than commitment to continue taking actions, the researcher has noticed that students were changing into actors of change. Like Suleyman, many other students have engaged by the end of the project into appropriate actions that could impact the lives of their communities. Some were engaged into fundraising, others into donations of material and clothes and some others into sensitizing their neighborhood in actions to preserve their environment or keep it clean. The students reported the change they were able to propel thanks to their engagement in the project. Amy shared:

> We have planted 10 trees in our university and every day we water them and others around campus. The other teachers also are very proud of what we are doing. I will continue those actions and I will talk around for better actions as well.

Empathy

At the end of the project, many students have developed a sense of empathy for their communities, specially those involved with communities that needed to be assisted. Through observation and by analyzing students interviews and written prompts, the researcher has noticed that students were depicting a feeling of caring about others and helping them. In the question about the outcome of the project, many have raised the importance of long-term actions

towards such population from them and from policy makers. They have stressed the importance of implementing robust social actions to improve the lives of the community. Along with these actions, students were able to raise money and engage into social actions for displaced population or orphans. One of the students, Mark shared with the researcher:

> I was absolutely moved when I visited the orphanage and I saw all these children that are left to themselves. With my group, we were able to engage into fund raising and we bought some milk and cereals for the kids. In the coming days we are planning to collect clothes and bring to them.

Self-confidence

The final analysis of students written prompts has revealed that students have acquired better habits of writing and with them better writing qualities. The researcher has noticed that students' writings were logically coordinated and were respecting unity and coherence. Further, the students shared with the researcher their confidence in writing about their experiences and sharing them with their peers. Thanks to the writing habits they have developed, students were able to easily write about the project, their experience, and ways forwards. Engaging in these projects have also help students develop their research skills and their confidence in engaging in research activities. Students have shared that they have acquired habits of researching and reading about civic topics, and they have more confident in engaging in research.

Implications and conclusion

This study examined how engaging students into community activities can help improve their writing difficulties, and their perceptions on serving their communities. Throughout the stages of student's engagement, they were asked to share in written scripts their views prior, during and after the project. The results have revealed that students have different perceptions before they

engage into serving their community and at the conclusion of the project. Before engaging in such project, students were ignoring what it means to be civilly engaged and therefore they were afraid to fail in their achievements. However, gradually as students were advancing, they have learned the importance and the benefits involved in civic engagement both for them and their communities and have developed qualities of agency, commitment, and empathy. After the completion of the project, most students focused on how to conduct research around current issues and act, resolving problems found within the school, community, and nation, authentic projects with civic engagement related goals. Further, the researcher has found that the project has tremendously improved students writing skills. Students have acquired the ability to plan, investigate and visit the sites for research purpose. Further, students have learned how to write about their investigations by researching and documenting about their topics. They have also learned how to use the process writing techniques and other writing features such as coherence and unity.

This study has revealed that when students are given the occasion to practice outside of the class what they learn in class, they are more prompt to response positively. Further, when students are engaged into civic engagement activities, their academic level improves, and they become better citizens. Therefore, it is important to think about implementing civic engagement in the whole curriculum of EFL. Students will enjoy learning the language while serving their communities.

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