

A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE WRITING ACTIVITIES IN ACTION PACK 10 TO MEASURE THE DEGREE OF THEIR CONGRUENCE WITH THE GENERAL GRADE OUTCOMES FOR THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE GUIDELINES IN JORDAN

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Abstract

The present study aimed at analyzing the writing activities in Action Pack 10 and measuring the degree of their congruence with the general grade outcomes for the English language guidelines in Jordan. The material of the analysis is the English language textbook for the 10th grade within Action Pack series. The researchers content-analyzed the writing activities in all the units in both parts of the book; they compared the content of these activities with the main five general outcomes for the guidelines of teaching writing in this grade. The results of the study showed that the second and the third outcomes, as listed in the third and fourth sections of the paper, ranked first with a percentage of 24.5%; second ranked the fourth and fifth outcomes with a percentage of 18.3% ; and finally, the first outcome ranked third with a percentage of 14.3%. The researchers presented some inferences that are related to the results of the analysis.

Keywords: Writing activities, Action Pack, Congruence, General Grade Outcomes.

Introduction

Wharton & Race (1999) state that extended writing is a skill in itself, one which many learners will need in target situation. It also provides opportunities for creativity and self-expression, which many learners appreciate. And it is, of course, an important part of overall language learning- it provides opportunities for conscious reflection that can play an important role in consolidating recent learning.

Hedgcock & Ferris (2009) indicate that writing, as an advanced productive skill, mainly depends on reading. Reading- writing activities enhance the learners' abilities to produce better and more accurate written products. They observe that the act of writing can improve one's thinking about writing, and they believe that people also learn to write by writing.

Omaggio (2001) suggests that during exploring various activities for teaching writing in the foreign language classroom, it is important to consider the many options that are now available to students and teachers, from the traditional tools of worksheets, workbooks, compositions, and journals to the use of CD-ROMs, e-mail, computer conferencing, word processors, and writing assistant programs. The researcher also offers several ideas for incorporating technology in the writing curriculum from the Novice to the advanced levels.

Brown (2001) refers to the communicative language teaching in which teachers learn more and more about how to teach fluency, not just accuracy, how to use authentic texts and contexts in the classroom, how to focus on the purposes of linguistic communication, and how to capitalize on learners' intrinsic motives to learn. He states that these trends and principles apply to advances in the teaching of writing in second language contexts. Brown also presents a number of specific principles for designing writing techniques. Among these principles are: making balance between process and product, connecting reading and writing, providing as much authentic writing as possible, and designing a frame of techniques in terms of prewriting, drafting, and revising stages.

Wax (2007) offers students a handful of tips and general principles to help them develop their writing skills. For example, students should pace themselves, plan then write, start in the middle, write crappy first drafts, not plagiarize, use instructions wisely, focus on communicating their purposes, proofread, and finally conclude something.

Beare (2011) emphasizes that the most important factor in writing exercises is that students need to be personally involved in order to make the learning experience of lasting value. Encouraging students participation in the exercise, while at the same time refining and expanding writing skills, requires a certain pragmatic approach. The teacher should be clear on what skills he/the researchers is trying to develop. Next, the teacher needs to decide on which means that can facilitate learning of the target area. By pragmatically combining these objectives, the teacher can expect both enthusiasm and effective learning.

Kumar (2008) gives some pieces of advice or instructions that help students be good writers. He starts by thinking over the topic, scribbling the points, structuring all these points in order, drafting few sentences for those points, expanding all noted points, and finally editing it.

Problem of the Study

Students in countries where English is spoken as a foreign language suffer in writing, which is a productive skill. In Jordan, most students, especially in public schools, find difficulty in writing well-organized pieces of composition or even single paragraphs. Thus the researchers attempted to reveal the extent to which the writing activities are congruent with the general outcomes in the guidelines of teaching writing in English as a foreign language, which in turn organizes the process of leading students to the desired level of writing in such stage (the 10th grade).

Significance of the Study

The significance of the study emerges from the claim that it may assist teachers and curricula designers to prepare and design appropriate activities and tasks related to writing, which can help students to gradually improve their writing skills and reduce their stress and anxiety toward this productive skill. The study also may motivate teachers to come up with more suitable and effective activities that they consider more suitable to their students.

Questions of the Study

To what extent are the writing activities in Action Pack 10 congruent with the Writing General Grade Outcomes for the English Language?

This general question can be subdivided into more specific questions?

- a. To what extent do the Writing Skill Activities in Action Pack 10 urge students gather information and ideas from print and electric sources to organize and write in a variety of simple authentic contexts?
- b. To what extent do the Writing Skill Activities in Action Pack 10 enhance the students' abilities to write a series of paragraphs for a variety of specific simple authentic purposes and audiences such as short reports, narrative accounts, and presentations?
- c. To what extent do the Writing Skill Activities in Action Pack 10 assist students to use appropriate organizational patterns to create simple authentic written work?
- d. To what extent do the Writing Skill Activities in Action Pack 10 enhance the students' abilities to apply knowledge of the conventions of language (e.g., spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage)?
- e. To what extent do the Writing Skill Activities in Action Pack 10 train students to revise written work for clarity, correctness, and coherence with the assistance of peers and teachers?

Criteria for Analysis

The criterion that the analysts attempt to look for in the present study is the “Comprehensiveness Criterion” in order to determine the extent to which the phenomenon, which is here the degree of congruence between the Writing Skill Activities in Action Pack 10 and the Writing General Grade Outcomes mentioned in the General Guidelines, has been exposed.

Categories of the Study

The categories of the present study are derived from the five questions under study which are presented in table 1.

Units of Analysis

The units of the present analysis are the Writing Skill Activities in Action Pack 10. Each Writing Activity in starts with a pre- reading exercise, then there is the next part which includes planning for writing, and finally comes the Write and Check part.

Material of the Study

The material of the present study consists of the Writing Skill Activities in Action Pack 10.

Limitations of the Study

This content analysis study is limited only to the Writing Skill Activities in Action Pack 10.

Definitions of Key Terms

Action Pack 10: The student’s Book used in the Jordanian public schools to teach English, to the tenth grade students, as a foreign language.

Writing Skill Activities: the activities that the tenth grade students do before, during, and after the writing task.

Congruence: in this paper, congruence means the agreement between the writing activities and the general grade outcomes mentioned in the Guidelines for Teaching English in Jordan, and it means the comprehensiveness of these outcomes in the Student’s Book Writing Activities.

General Grade Outcomes: the goals that are desired to be achieved at the end of the 10th grade period. These five outcomes are listed in Table .

Methodology and Procedures

The analysts followed the steps below:

1. The researchers read the General Outcomes for the Writing Skill for the Tenth Grade in the “General Guidelines and General and Specific Outcomes for the English Language”.
2. The researchers surveyed the Writing Activities in the twelve units in Action Pack 10.
3. The researchers analyzed the three main parts in each Writing Activity (in some units the first two parts are integrated): Pre-Writing Activities, planning, and finally writing.
4. The researchers categorized each part in each activity in a separate group in light of the General Grade Outcomes (the categories).
5. The researchers estimated the frequencies of each category. And then found out the corresponding percentages in a summary table.
6. The researchers discussed the findings through presenting comments and suggesting recommendations.

Validity and Reliability

To establish validity, the analysts defined the concepts operationally to ensure the consistency of the analysis.

Moreover, the analysts followed the same coding procedures that are mentioned in the Methodology part.

To establish reliability, the analysts repeated the same procedures five days after the first analysis (intra- rater reliability). The consistency between the two analyses was very high (99%).

Design and Variables of the Study

The present study is a descriptive one since it analyzes the content of the material in the 10th grade English language writing activities. There are no variables since it is not an experimental or quasi-experimental study.

Results and their Discussion

Table 1 presents the frequencies and the percentages of the Writing Activities (Appendix B) that are congruent with the General Grade Outcomes (Appendix A) in Action Pack 10.

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of the activities that are congruent with the General Grade Outcomes for the writing skill in Action pack 10.

| No. | General Grade Outcomes | Frequency | Percentage |
|------------|--|------------------|-------------------|
| 1. | Gathering information and ideas from print and electric sources to organize and write in a variety of simple authentic contexts. | 7 | 14.3% |
| 2. | Writing a series of paragraphs for a variety of specific simple authentic purposes and | 12 | 24.5% |

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| | audiences such as short reports, narrative accounts, and presentations. | | |
| 3. | Using appropriate organizational patterns to create simple authentic written work. | 12 | 24.5% |
| 4. | Applying knowledge of the conventions of language (e.g., spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage). | 9 | 18.3% |
| 5. | Revising written work for clarity, correctness, and coherence with the assistance of peers and teacher. | 9 | 18.3% |
| Total | | 49 | 100% |

Discussion of the Results of the First Question

As table 1 illustrates, there are seven units out of the twelve units in Action Pack 10 that urge and demand students to gather information and ideas from print and electric sources in order to organize and write in a variety of simple authentic contexts. This means that more than half of the total number of the presented units focuses on following and producing ideas. Nevertheless, the percentage of the frequencies for the activities that are intended to achieve the first General Grade Outcome does not exceed 14.9% of the total activities. Below are few chosen examples on these activities:

Task: you are going to write an online guide recommending eating places for visitors to your town in Jordan. (electronic source), unit 1, P.18.

Task: you are going to write a reply to an email an a phone text message. (electronic source), unit 11, P.9, P. 79.

Task: you are going to write an opinion composition about money. (students read a printed article, print source), unit 9, P.79.

The analysts believe that this percentage is sufficient since more than half of the units in the book under study introduce such beneficial knowledge sources, which represent the modern technological techniques for learning. Students should be acquainted with such sources and they had better be encouraged to resort to modern technology in receiving and producing various thoughts and opinions it is crucial that such activities should be applied and practiced, not skipped, in order to familiarize the students with these samples in writing: this cannot be implemented without the honest initiation of a devoted teacher. Unfortunately, a few teachers do not pay attention to the writing activities in the different stages and some of them find no problem in ignoring them.

Discussion of the Results of the Second Question

All the twelve units introduce paragraphs that differ in their purposes and audiences, and simultaneously these purposes are simple and authentic.

The percentage of the distribution of such activities is 25.5% of the total frequencies for all the writing activities, which constitutes a sufficient and an acceptable proportion. The following examples are taken randomly from the four modules, each module consists of three units.

Write a general review in about 100- 300 words. (students choose a book and then they write a review), (module 1, unit 2, P.25).

Write an application form. (Module 2, unit 5, P.47).

Write your own magazine advertisement for a new invention which will save time in your school and your home. (Module 3, unit 8, P.73).

Write your story in 100- 120 words using your plan. (Module 4, unit 12, P.103).

The analysts believes that the writing activities in Action Pack 10 present a series of paragraph types for a variety of specific simple authentic purposes and audiences. Each unit introduces a new paragraph writing form to convey simple authentic purposes. It is obvious that the diversity of such forms contribute to achieving the second General Grade Outcome in the Guidelines for the English language.

Discussion of the Results of the Third Question

The analysts believe that the third question is related to the second one since the purpose of writing determines the organizational pattern. Therefore, both questions gained the same frequencies, and consequently the same percentage. The purpose cannot be separated from the pattern, thus, in each unit in the four modules every authentic purpose is delivered via an appropriate organizational pattern that suits. This creates a more enjoyable atmosphere for both the students and the teacher since repetition is avoided.

Here are some sample example on the organizational patterns introduced in the Writing Activities in Action Pack 10:

Task: you are going to write a list of instructions for playing a game. (Unit 4, P. 43).

Task: you are going to write a formal letter to a Jordanian organization... etc. (Unit 6, P. 55).

Task: you are going to write a letter to a friend, telling him/her about a recent event. (Unit 10, P. 91).

Task: write your own text messages. (Unit 11, P. 97).

The analysts believes that the writing activities in Action Pack 10 offer the students a valuable chance to see and imitate a package of practical patterns that they can make benefit from in authentic situations later on beyond the borders of the classroom. This is the ultimate goal of the Communicative Approach which is supposed to be followed in teaching English as a foreign language in Jordan through using the Action Pack Series.

Discussion of the Results of the Fourth Question

The fourth question investigates the degree of applying knowledge of the conventions of language such as spelling, punctuation, grammar, and usage in the students' writings. Table 1 shows that seven units out of the twelve units require the students to check these conventions carefully, which constitutes 14.9% of the total frequencies of the other General Grade Outcomes. The analysts believes that confirming checking such conventions now and then through more than half of the units (7 units) train the students to deal with them automatically.

In the units in which there is no reference to the language conventions, justifications can be offered. For example, in unit 5, the students are asked to fill an application form which requires no punctuation marks, spelling or grammar correction. In unit 11, there is no demand to check spelling, grammar, or punctuation; this might be explained as an expected behavior to the nature of the writing purpose and organizational pattern in the unit in which the students are asked to write text messages where abbreviations and special symbols are usually used.

However, in unit 7 the students are required to write an article for a school magazine but there is no reference or a reminder to checking the language conventions. The analysts suggest that in such a writing piece, attention should be paid to spelling, punctuation, and grammar because the product of the writing process in such a case must be accurate and neat. At the same time, the analysts may find an excuse for such lack; since most units remind and direct the attention of the students to these conventions, it is expected that in this advanced stage the students have become aware of them and are able to check independently. Below are some chosen samples on the writing activities that require the students to check their spelling, punctuation, and grammar:

Check spelling, grammar and punctuation, then make changes and corrections. (Unit 1, P.18).

Check your spelling grammar and punctuation. (Unit 4, P. 43).

Now check your spelling, grammar, punctuation and style. (Unit 8, P.73).

Check spelling, grammar and punctuation. (Unit 12, P.103).

Discussion of the Results of the Fifth Question

Table 1 shows that the activities that ask students to revise their written work for clarity, correctness and coherence with the assistance of peers and teacher constitute a percentage of 19.2% of the total frequencies of the other goals' activities. Nine units present a part that require students to exchange ideas and writings among each other and discuss any differences of opinions, information, instructions, or other points.

The analysts believe that encouraging pair and team work in the writing activities is sufficient since there is a continuous reference to the procedure of exchanging written work and involving peer guidance and cooperation in most of the units. Three fourths of the whole bulk of the writing activities in Action Pack 10 directly motivate students to make use of others' thoughts, opinions, pieces of advice, and suggestions. Thus, it can be concluded that this outcome is sufficiently met and covered with an acceptable percentage.

Examples on activities that demand mutual revision of already written works:

Exchange instructions with a partner. (Unit 4, P.43).

Now check your article and exchange it with a partner. (Unit 7, P.67).

Exchange reviews with another student. Does your partner's review give you enough information? If not, ask him/her questions. (Unit 2, P.25).

Inferences

The analysts believe that all the General Grade Outcomes, that are stated in the General Guidelines for the English language in Jordan, are sufficiently covered and included in acceptable distribution and proportions through the writing activities in the twelve units of Action Pack 10. The analysts suggest that extra homework – writings that are related to the presented topics are demanded in order to ensure the students' developments and mastery of such types of paragraphs. Of course this is the job and the responsibility of the teacher.

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