

The Effects of Writing to a Real Audience in Situational Writing

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Abstract

This study examines the effects of writing to a real audience, with a focus on the extent to which situational writing becomes more meaningful for students, and students' awareness of purpose, audience and context increases as a result. Teachers worked with two intervention groups of Primary 5 students of different progress levels over the course of two years. The findings indicated that the majority of the students found writing to real audiences more meaningful compared to writing to the classroom teacher as writing to the latter was seen to be more for evaluative rather than communicative purposes. Both the intervention groups for high-to-middle progress students and low-to-middle progress students performed better than the control groups in the Primary 6 students' Preliminary Examination, although the difference between the control and intervention groups of the low-to-middle progress students was not statistically significant. Discussion of the factors accounting for the differences and challenges faced are presented. Overall, the approach of offering students opportunities to write to real audiences gave the students a better understanding of the audiences and made learning more enjoyable.

Introduction

According to the English Language Syllabus 2010, "language is a means of making meaning and of communication ... and language use is guided by our awareness of the purpose, audience, context and culture in which the communication takes place" (Curriculum Planning & Development Division, 2008, p. 8). One of the learning objectives stated in the syllabus requires students to generate and select ideas for writing and representing for a variety of purposes, audiences, contexts and cultures, and to produce a variety of texts for creative, personal, academic and functional purposes, using an appropriate register and tone (Curriculum Planning & Development Division, 2008). Thus, situational writing skills are introduced to Primary 5 students where students learn how to write reports, notices, letters and emails to various audiences while considering the audience as well as the context and purpose of writing. Examples of writing tasks using writing prompts include thank-you notes, reports of accidents, letters of complaint, invitation letters, and emails to imaginary audiences such as the Principal, the manager of an organisation, the discipline master or classmates.

When composing a piece of situational writing, students are taught to identify the purpose, audience, context and culture (PACC) during the planning stage as this determines the register and tone in which the students write. They also have to use audience-appropriate language, vocabulary and mechanics to convey the information. However, the process of writing these academic exercises is usually formulaic rather than purposeful (Wiggins, 2009). Even though imaginary audiences

are provided in these exercises, the students are still writing exclusively for a one-member audience – their classroom teacher. This may be a challenge for students in the planning stage where they are required to recognise the context and purpose of writing, as they are unable to empathise with the audience in these unauthentic situations. When completing these exercises, it is possible that the students respond to the assignments without paying attention to the imaginary audience and are not able to adapt their writing to the specific audiences (Cohen & Riel, 1989). There is, thus, a need to provide extended opportunities for writing with an emphasis on writing for real audiences and reviewing the outcomes of their situational writing skills.

This research project sets out to investigate whether writing to a real audience makes situational writing more meaningful and increases the students' awareness of PACC. For the purposes of this report, 'real audience' refers to an audience that is not the classroom teacher.

Literature Review

Regardless of the text type, students in the English Language classrooms typically write to a one-member audience – their teacher (Cohen & Riel, 1989; Lawrence, Niiya & Warschauer, 2015). Hence, writing tasks like continuous writing (narratives), journal writing and even situational writing, in which audience awareness is essential for effective communication, are all written with the teacher as the audience. The resulting lack of audience awareness found in school writing may impede the development of the social cognition skills needed to conceptualise different audiences (Cohen & Riel, 1989).

Research (Chen, 2013) has shown the positive effects of writing to audiences other than teachers as it “motivates students to translate their existing knowledge into audience-appropriate language” (Chen, 2013, p. 8). Block and Strachan (2019) investigated the impact of an external audience on second graders' writing quality. They found that the students produced higher quality writing when they were provided with an external audience than when writing to the classroom teacher. It was found that the children were more likely to use appropriate language and the information they provided was more accurate.

Studies have also shown that writing to a real audience motivates writers to empathise with the audience and encourages them to pay close attention to the context of the writing (Wiggins, 2009). Audience analysis, defined as “the methods speakers and writers use to draw inferences about the experiences, beliefs, and attitudes of an audience to make decisions about the organisation and content of their work” (Ede, 1984, cited in Cohen & Riel, 1989, p. 145) is a process that directs more competent writers to make decisions when writing (Carvalho, 2002). As writers take the audience into account, they are able to convey information more effectively to the audience using the appropriate mechanics.

The importance of analysing the audience before writing is also stated in the English Language Syllabus 2010 in which “identifying the purpose, audience and context (which determine the register and tone)” is stipulated as one of the key writing skills in the syllabus (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2008, p. 75). While writers who are more competent are able to do this successfully, less skilled writers tend to be bound by the topic and hardly pay any attention to the audience. Thus, a less skilled writer is only compelled to consider the needs of the audience and situation more deeply in the writing process if he or she is asked to write to a real audience (Lawrence, Niiya & Warschauer, 2015).

This study sets out to answer two questions:

To what extent does the experience of writing to a real audience help to make situational writing more meaningful for the students?

To what extent does the experience of writing to a real audience increase the students' awareness of PACC?

Methodology

Subjects

This was a two-year research project. Two Primary 5 classes of students taught by the authors, who led the research, formed the intervention groups. The students, taught by the same two teachers, continued with the intervention when they moved to Primary 6.

Class A comprised 26 low-to-middle-progress students while Class C comprised 38 middle-to-high-progress students in English Language lessons. These two classes formed the intervention groups. Class B and Class D formed the control groups with 28 low-to-middle-progress students and 38 middle-to-high-progress students respectively. Two other teachers (not the authors) taught the control groups.

Data sources

The following tables provide information on the students' performance in English before the intervention. (An alpha [α] level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.)

Table 1

Mean Primary 4 Year-End Examination English marks of the students in the Low-to-Middle-Progress Classes

Group	Number	Mean (Out of 100)	Standard Deviation
Intervention (Class A)	26	81.75	4.82
Control (Class B)	27	81.11	4.80

Note: One student in Class B joined the school in Primary 5 so her Primary 4 results were unavailable.

As seen in Table 1, the mean marks for the two classes were very similar. The results of a t-test indicated that the marks of the two classes were not significantly different, $t(51) = .48, p = .63$.

Table 2

Mean Primary 4 Year-End Examination English marks of the students in the Middle-to-High-Progress Classes

Group	Number	Mean (Out of 100)	Standard Deviation
Intervention (Class C)	38	87.86	3.77
Control (Class D)	38	87.67	3.24

As seen in Table 2, the mean marks for the two classes were also very similar. The results of a t-test indicated that the marks of the two classes were not significantly different, $t(74) = .23, p = .82$.

The results therefore established that each pair of classes (Class A and Class B; Class C and Class D) were very similar in level before the intervention period. All the students in the four classes were girls and belonged to the same ethnic group.

The students from the intervention groups responded to a questionnaire about the whole process and their learning experiences after the intervention. The questions asked elicited information on the students' feelings on writing to real audiences, perceptions of their own awareness of PACC when composing a piece of situational writing, and whether they thought there were effects of audience awareness on their writing.

The situational writing results from the Primary 6 preliminary examination were also analysed. The task fulfilment marks which took into account the responses to PACC as well as the inclusion of key pieces of information stipulated in the questions were analysed. In each situational writing task, the students were required to write a short functional text to suit the PACC of a given situation. They also had to include some of the information provided in the picture stimulus when they were crafting their letters or emails. For example, when writing an email to the Principal of the school to inform him about an incident that had taken place, the key information that had to be incorporated into the email included the date of the incident, where the incident had taken place, what had happened at the school, and how the students involved in the incident felt. Hence, in addition to the assessment of the students' ability to determine the tone and register of writing, the inclusion of the key information was taken into account when the task fulfilment marks were awarded by the teacher.

The mean marks of the intervention groups were compared with the control classes of a similar progress level. This data was expected to establish whether the students in the intervention group were better able to develop the skill of conceptualising the audience by taking into consideration PACC and thus providing the correct information to the audience in the situational writing that was examined after the intervention as compared to the students in the control groups.

Intervention

The intervention started in Semester 1 when the students were in Primary 5 and continued into the first semester of Primary 6, a total of three semesters. The intervention groups were given authentic writing tasks where they were required to consider their audience as they completed the tasks. Students in these intervention groups were asked to write letters to various real audiences with authentic purposes. Some of the letters were delivered to the recipients while others were not. The intervention lessons were carried out in the following ways:

Primary 5, Semester 1

In Primary 5, Semester 1, the lessons focused on writing letters in an informal context. For example, the students were asked to write to their classmates and friends. The purpose of writing was to invite their classmates to participate in Artsation (an event organised by the Aesthetic department of the school) as well as writing to encourage their friends in the upcoming examination. A response from the audience was strongly encouraged. However, to tie in with one of the STELLAR units that was taught, the students also wrote to Mr Kunalan, a well-known local athlete, to express their admiration for his achievements. This required the students to write in a formal context.

Primary 5, Semester 2

The students were taught to write letters in a formal context in Primary 5, Semester 2. For instance, the students were asked to write to the teachers who took care of their group during the P5 Camp to thank them. They were also asked to write to the organising committee of Passion Pursuit – a programme where the students could choose to join an activity of interest after the year-end examination – to tell them what they had learned on the programme and provide suggestions for improvement. The letters were delivered to the respective teachers.

In another of the assignments, the students were given a stimulus, in this case, the reading of a newspaper article, as a trigger to direct the students to write to a specific audience. After reading an article about Mr Richard Branson, who became a high-flyer despite being a school dropout, the students wrote a letter to Mr Branson to tell him how they respected him for his achievements and what they had learned from him. The students also read about Ms Deni Apriyani who was the winner of the Migrant Worker Poetry Competition in 2017. They wrote to congratulate her on her win and to find out more about her life in Singapore. Before writing these letters, the students were informed that these letters would not actually be sent to the addressees.

Primary 6, Semester 1

The students were asked to congratulate their future selves on meeting their own expectations and imagine how they achieved this success. They also wrote to Barney, the purple cartoon dinosaur, with the purpose of telling him what they liked about their English teacher and how they would like their English teacher to coach them that year. Additionally, they wrote to the committee of teachers who had organised the trip to watch the Chingay performance to tell them how they felt about the event. Furthermore, they wrote to the Vice-Principal who had been newly posted to the school to welcome her. The letters were delivered to her and she responded to each student.

Findings

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative results from the questionnaire administered as well as the assessment results from the students' Preliminary Examination.

Questionnaire Results

After the administration of the intervention lessons, a post-intervention questionnaire was distributed to the students in the intervention groups. The results from the quantitative section are given in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Post-intervention Questionnaire – Quantitative Results

Questions	Yes	No
1. When writing to a real audience, I take extra care to ensure that I am writing in the correct context (e.g. writing to teacher is formal writing and writing to my classmates is informal writing).	95%	5%
2. When writing to a real audience, I take extra care to ensure that I understand the purpose of writing the letter.	95%	5%
3. When writing to a real audience, I understand better that the concluding statement should be linked to the purpose statement.	92%	8%
4. When writing to a real audience, I pay more attention to ensure that I write using the correct spelling and grammar structure.	92%	8%
5. When writing to a real audience, I pay more attention to ensure that tone used is appropriate (e.g. no contractions like I'm, can't, etc).	89%	11%
6. Did the experience of writing to real audiences help you understand the writing process of situational writing better?	91%	9%

Questions eliciting the students' perspectives were also included in the questionnaire to find out how the students felt about the entire process. The following presents the questions with relevant, sample student responses for each question:

7. Do you find writing to real audiences more meaningful compared to writing situational writing exercises (where the teacher reads and marks your work)? Why?
8. You have written to a number of real audiences. Who do you find writing to meaningful?

Sample student responses for Questions 7 and 8 are as follows:

Yes, this is because I know that I am writing to actual people and not just a piece of paper for

my teacher to mark.

I find it more meaningful than writing situational writing (SW). Unlike SW, the real audience can really appreciate what we write more. This is what matters to me so I find it more meaningful than writing SW.

Yes, by writing to a real audience, I feel I get to be more free with what I write. However, for SW, we have to follow a format and get a teacher to mark our work.

Yes, I find writing to real audience more meaningful as I am writing to that person and they might read it.

Yes, as by writing to real audience, I will put in more effort and it makes learning more fun.

I find writing to real audiences meaningful because I get to practise what I learned from my SW lessons and write with a real purpose.

These responses indicated that the students found it meaningful to write to real audiences for it had a real purpose and it mattered to the students that someone other than the teacher would read their writing.

For Questions 7 and 8, the majority of the students indicated that they felt that it was more meaningful to write to a “high-intimacy” audience – “someone with whom the participant has a close personal relationship” (Lawrence, Niiya & Warschauer, 2015, p. 204). For example, their classmates, the teachers and the Vice-Principal of the school and even themselves were audiences who were known to them. On the other hand, the students did not find meaningful writing to a “low-intimacy” audience, “someone or some audience unknown to the participant” (Lawrence, Niiya & Warschauer, 2015), like Barney, Mr Richard Branson or Mr Kunalan. In terms of the project objectives, student feedback indicated the value they placed on audience awareness which is a key consideration in situational writing.

Question 9 and some of the student responses are listed below:

9. Why do you find writing to them/him/her meaningful?

Writing to my classmate is meaningful as we go through similar experiences so it is nice to write to someone whom I can relate to.

It was interesting to write so formally to our vice-principal and it was a lot of fun to read her responses to us.

Our vice-principal is new to our school and I want to welcome her to our school.

I like writing to my future self as in future when I am struggling, I can read the letter and encourage myself.

Writing to my classmate to encourage her to never give up before the examination allowed me to give my friend encouragement and tell her that she can do it and don't give up.

It was meaningful to write to the teachers who took care of us during the P5 camp as they had to take care of us and I felt the need to thank them after all their hard work.

These responses demonstrated that the students could appreciate the purpose of writing to a specific audience. They could relate to the specific, real audiences and were able to develop empathy with them. Taking into account audience awareness, the students paid attention to the context and ensured that their writing fitted the purpose and audience considerations.

Question 10 and some of the student responses are listed below:

10. Overall, what was the experience like writing to a real audience?

I enjoyed writing to real audiences and I would love to do it again. It helps me to understand the process of situational writing.

It was a valuable experience for writing in the future.

It was a fun and new experience for me to learn how to write situational writing.

I had to pay more attention to whom I am writing this letter and what the purpose of the letter is.

As the letters would be delivered, I had to write carefully and try to reduce my spelling mistakes.

I had to ensure that I did not make a mistake because I did not want the reader to misunderstand me.

The students' feedback showed that the approach had the potential to prepare the students not only for the assessment but also for the reality outside the classroom. Writing to a real audience taught the students to take extra care to ensure that the conventions of format, spelling, grammar and punctuation were adhered to. Most importantly, the students indicated that writing to real audiences made learning about situational writing enjoyable.

Assessment Results

Table 4 shows the mean task fulfilment marks of the low-to-middle-progress students from both the control and intervention classes for the Preliminary Examination taken at the beginning of Semester 2, Primary 6. These marks formed part of the marks to grade situational writing. The task fulfilment marks were awarded to students according to how well they understood the purpose, audience and context, and how well the students were able to provide the key information stated in the question.

Table 4

Mean Task Fulfilment Marks of Low-to-Middle-Progress Classes

Group	Number	Mean out of 6 marks	Standard Deviation
Intervention (Class A)	26	5.38	0.80
Control (Class B)	28	5.04	0.88

As can be seen from the table above, the mean mark for Class A was 0.34 higher than that for Class B at the end of the intervention. However, the results of a t-test indicated that the marks of the two classes were not significantly different, $t(52) = 1.52$ at $p = .14$.

Table 5 shows the mean task fulfilment marks of the middle-to-high-progress students from the control and intervention classes in the preliminary examination.

Table 5

Mean Task Fulfilment Marks of Middle-to-High-Progress Classes

Group	Number	Mean out of 6 marks	Standard Deviation
Intervention (Class C)	38	5.63	0.59
Control (Class D)	38	5.05	0.90

As can be seen in Table 5, the mean mark of Class C was 0.58 higher than that of Class D at the end of the intervention. From the results of a *t*-test comparing the results of the two classes, it appears there was a highly significant difference in the marks between the two classes, $t(74) = 3.32, p < .01$.

The implications of the findings are discussed in the following section.

Discussion

The findings from the open-ended section of the questionnaire showed that the experience of writing to a real audience helped to make situational writing more meaningful. The students viewed writing to real audiences as having communicative purposes whereas writing to their classroom teacher was deemed to be purely evaluative. Moreover, a number of students felt that it helped to reinforce their understanding of situational writing and made learning more enjoyable.

The students also highlighted that they preferred to write to real audiences who had a closer personal relationship to them. The authors contend that this is because writing to these people was analogous to real-life writing and there was a higher possibility of them reading the letters and replying to the students. Thus, producing such realistic writing is more meaningful to them (Onchera & Manyasi, 2013). Therefore, it is essential for teachers to bring real-life purposes to writing (Morales, 2017), in particular for situational writing, and not have students just writing to the teacher in response to generic prompts.

The quantitative analysis of the questionnaire indicated that students were more mindful of their audience when writing to a real audience. The majority of the students reported that they developed an awareness of their audiences and paid special attention to ensure that the purpose of writing was communicated correctly. Audience awareness also led to students being more likely to take into consideration the context of writing (formal or informal) and to make decisions about the appropriate writing format. Furthermore, according to the students, thinking about an audience, other than the classroom teacher, and reading their responses motivated them to pay more attention to the mechanics of writing and the aesthetic presentations of the letters. The teachers noticed that the handwriting was, on average, tidier and students made fewer corrections. This attention to presentation was perhaps a result of the students' awareness that their writing would be read by someone other than the classroom teacher (Cohen & Riel, 1989).

The assessment results indicated that the mean task fulfilment marks of classes in the intervention group were higher than those of the classes in the control group. They were better able to identify the PACC of the writing and made fewer errors than the control groups. The higher marks showed that the students in the intervention groups were more likely to have used the correct salutation and sign-off, included the appropriate purpose and concluding statements as well as used the correct conventions of format in the given context. Additionally, these students were better able to include the relevant details and information to meet the task requirements when composing their letters.

However, the statistical analysis of the data indicated that the difference in marks between the

two low-to-middle progress classes was not significant. The possible reasons as to why the results were not more significant statistically could include the fact that the intervention period was too short for Class A. Being a class that comprised low-to-middle-progress students compared to Class C, which had students of middle-to-high progress, more time might have been needed to revisit and consolidate the key learning concepts with these students.

Nevertheless, based on these results, the approach of giving the students opportunities to write to a real audience in order to promote the students' capacity to develop audience awareness in writing by taking into account PACC appeared to be a success. The experience of writing to real audiences gave the students a better understanding of the audiences and helped the majority of the students to apply this understanding during the writing assessment. Hence, they were able to convey the information more effectively (Lawrence, Niiya & Warschauer, 2015). When writing to real audiences, the students in the intervention groups had a greater awareness of their audiences and thus were more likely to store the context details in their long-term memories more efficiently, allowing them to draw on this knowledge at a later period (Magnifico, 2010).

One of the challenges faced by the intervention teachers was that it was not easy to create opportunities for the students to write to real audiences. They had problems looking for real audiences for students to write to, particularly for formal writing. The real audience had to be someone who did not mind receiving letters from so many students at a time.

Conclusion

Students learn more effectively when their situational writing is directed to real audiences and for real-life purposes rather than practices where they write to their teachers or imaginary audiences for evaluative purposes. When writing to real audiences, students become aware of the audiences for their written work and work on their situational writing skills in accordance with PACC.

With students finding it meaningful to write to real audiences in situational writing, further studies could look at the impact on the quality of the students' continuous writing like narratives when their work is published on online interactive platforms where an audience can read and comment on their stories. The potential of writing a narrative to a real audience other than the teacher audience could be explored to see if students consider the audience as they write and to examine the effect on writing fluency, word use and mechanical errors.

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