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Teacher training for effective writing instruction: Recent trends and future directions

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Abstract

This paper presents a critical review on writing teacher training research and a reflection of best current practices and desirable directions for future writing teacher training. I argue that, currently, the focus has been placed on preparing writing teachers to teach aspects like vocabulary and grammar of academic prose, genre, written corrective feedback, and writing assessment. Such studies tend to emphasize on the written outputs, and ignore the writing teachers’ attitude to teaching, their educator identity, and their professional development as writing teachers. I conclude by suggesting opportunities that await these writing teacher training research programs in the future.

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1. Introduction

Writing teacher education tends to bring forward a change in the writing instruction in various aspects (Lee, 2010). In recent years, writing teacher education seems to have attracted more research attention. For example, a quick review of the Journal of Second Language Writing indicates that in the past four years (2007 – 2010) five articles relating to writing teacher education were published. Compared with 1992 – 2006, no published articles on writing teacher education could be identified.

In this paper, I try to give a summary of the studies pertinent to writing teacher education and provide suggestions for future research. This paper comprises three parts. The first part gives a brief overview of early studies in 2007 on teacher education, highlighting problems in research design. The second part focuses on the recent research published in 2010. I examine whether recent research is successful in addressing the weaknesses identified with the earlier studies. In the third part, I conclude by suggesting directions for future writing teacher training research.

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2. Discussion of Early Research (2007)

In this section, I review four published and most often cited studies on writing teacher education. In these studies, I investigate whether writing teacher education leads to teacher professional development and reflection on their own identity as teacher of writing. Second language writing researchers have paid little attention to what’s happening in writing teacher education, particularly, writing teachers’ professional development and their educator identity. Are these two issues addressed in writing teacher education studies that explore key areas in writing instruction, namely, vocabulary/grammar, genre, responding to student writing, and assessing writing?

In Coxhead and Byrd’s (2007) article titled “Preparing writing teachers to teach the vocabulary and grammar of academic prose,” Coxhead and Byrd introduced some software and websites to writing teachers to prepare them for teaching the vocabulary and grammar of academic prose. According to Coxhead and Byrd, the use of technology can help enhance the language aspect of writing instruction. They point out that language-in-use approach that adopts web-based resources can help writing teachers instruct the lexico-grammatical aspect when teaching academic writing. However, a major shortcoming of Coxhead and Byrd’s study is that no empirical research has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of the use of these software and websites in enhancing writing instruction and student performance in academic writing. Another drawback is that, although the software and websites are described by Coxhead and Byrd as having a positive effect on writing instruction, writing teacher education, the incorporation of technology and its relation to teacher professional development is not shown. Also, writing teacher reflection on their educator identity is not mentioned.

In “Genre Pedagogy: Language, literacy, and L2 writing instruction,” Hyland (2007) agrees with Coxhead and Byrd (2007) on the issue regarding language in writing pedagogy. Coxhead and Byrd believe that writing teachers shift the responsibility of teaching vocabulary to reading teachers, while Hyland perceives that many teachers are not sufficiently prepared to incorporate the teaching of grammar and vocabulary in a writing class. Many writing teachers in the United States not only neglect the language aspect in teaching writing, but also fail to analyze the text features or to introduce the genre of academic writing. Genre pedagogy is “explicit, systematic, needs-based, supportive, empowering, critical and consciousness-raising (p.151).” According to Hyland (2007), it is crucial to adopt genre-based writing pedagogies because “they pull together language, content, and contexts, while offering teachers a means of presenting students with explicit and systematic explanations of the ways writing works to communicate (p.150).” Similar to Coxhead and Byrd’s (2007) paper, a main drawback of Hyland’s paper is that no empirical research is conducted to investigate the effect of the genre-based approach to teacher education on teacher professional development. Although Hyland suggests that “an approach to writing teacher education informed by genre can encourage teachers to participate in their own professional development by providing them with opportunities to reflect on their own writing experience (p.162),” however, in his paper, writing teacher reflection on their educator identity has not been explored. Hence, there is no evidence which tells us that using genre-based approach in writing teacher education creates a positive effect on writing teacher reflection and teacher identity.

Like Coxhead & Byrd (2007) and Hyalnd (2007), Ferris, in her paper “Preparing Teachers to Respond to Student Writing”, also mentioned the topic of language in writing but she focuses on advocating the use of the “approach/response/follow up” model in both pre- and in-service teacher education. Under this approach, writing teachers need to be aware of the main differences between teacher feedback and error feedback. Writing teachers do not need to correct all the grammatical errors made by the students, instead teachers should provide productive feedback focusing on content, ideas, and global organization rather than language-based feedback. Ferris’s paper looks like an instructor guide, outlining what writing teachers can do in each of the steps in the model of approach/response/follow up. Because no empirical research is conducted to test the effectiveness of the approach/response/follow up model, we do not draw a conclusion on whether the model helps contribute to teacher development. Writing teacher reflection on their educator identity cannot be drawn from Ferris’s paper.

Weigle’s (2007) paper titled “Teaching Writing Teachers about Writing Assessment” points out that currently the topic of assessment has been left out by many teacher education program worldwide. This paper is a sharing of
author’s experience of many years of experience of teaching writing, with a special attention to how to evaluate students’ written performance. Since this is a recount of the author’s experience of assessing students’ writing, like Coxhead & Byrd (2007), Hyland (2007), and Ferris (2007), Weigle’s paper does not attempt to use findings from empirical research and does not make a connection on how her paper links to teacher development. Writing teacher reflection on their educator identity is absent in Weigle’s paper.

3. Discussion of Recent Study (2010)

In this section, I analyze the only one study published by Journal of Second Language Writing which has addressed the drawbacks mentioned in the earlier studies in 2007. Also, I attempt to find out whether the results in the 2010 study are more conclusive in showing the impact of teacher education on teacher professional development, writing teacher reflection, and their educator identity.

To address the effectiveness of teacher education on teacher professional development, Lee (2010) conducted a study with four Hong Kong EFL secondary school teachers who have teaching experience ranging from 5 to 15 years. The main purpose of her study was to explore the teachers’ perspectives on their own development as writing teachers at the end of an in-service writing teacher course and to find out in what ways writing teacher education fosters teacher learning and professional development. The classroom research data and teacher interview showed that the writing teacher education course helped promote teacher professional development in various aspects, such as problematizing traditional models of writing and questioning the status quo, taking on the role of inquirers through critically reflecting their first-hand experience from classroom research, reading research papers on topics related to teaching and learning of writing, developing a writing habit, helping them construct new identities as writing teachers, and critically evaluating the need to balance idealism about good writing practices with the reality of classroom teaching. To sum up, Lee (2010) study has addressed the drawbacks mentioned in the earlier studies in 2007. Specifically, her study showed that teacher education has an impact on teacher professional development, writing teacher reflection, and their educator identity.

4. Conclusion: Future Directions

This paper presents a critical review on writing teacher training research and a reflection of best current practices and desirable directions for future writing teacher training. With regard to future directions, first, future research studies have to move away from theory and conduct more robust research, preferably qualitative research. However, it is still necessary to incorporate the insights given by Coxhead and Byrd (2007), Hyland (2007), Ferris (2007), and Weigle (2007), who are experienced writing teachers and writing researchers. Future writing teacher education research has to be conducted in authentic classrooms, where writing instruction on vocabulary, grammar, genre is meaningful for students because it has a clear purpose, that is, assessment. Such studies need to be longitudinal so that sustained writing teacher development can be observed. To make responding to students’ writing meaningful, pre- and in-service writing teacher education should reflect on and reinforce what is taught in teacher education and then emphasize the key issues in the secondary school classroom. Second, students’ writing behavior will not change unless the writing teachers show a change in their pedagogy. Writing teacher education needs to focus on a few salient issues and draw the insights from writing research. This selection of issues should be guided by teachers’ needs. Third, in writing teacher education, writing teachers’ goal and attitude to academic writing, response to students’ writing, and assessment, need to be taken into consideration. It is because their attitudes towards the above issues affect not only the way they learn, but also the long term commitment in enhancing their teaching of writing. To conclude, the three recommendations outlined above are realistic and practical directions that writing teacher training research programs can emphasize in the future. Instead of focusing on preparing writing teachers to teach aspects like vocabulary and grammar of academic prose, genre, written
corrective feedback, and writing assessment, it will be good for future research to explore writing teachers’ attitude to teaching, their educator identity, and their professional development as writing teachers.

References


