DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LITERACY FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS THROUGH EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION WITHIN CCSS IMPLEMENTATION

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The implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and the significance of literacy skills placed by the Standards cause English language learners (ELLs) and their teachers to face a great deal of academic challenges. The present study examined how high-school-level ELLs' academic writing skills developed through content instruction, particularly using the three-step approach and the systemic functional linguistics framework. In each step, the participants were asked to produce an essay of narratives; these essays were analyzed. Results revealed that the participants' writing skills progressed from the first to final essays in general, and showed noticeable improvement in essay two, when direct instruction was implemented. It appeared, however, that all of the participants could not distinguish the differences between writing a summary and a description, a phenomenon that did not seem to improve throughout the three essays. Pedagogical recommendations are discussed.

Keywords: academic writing, English language learners, literacy skills, narratives, writing instruction

   With the dramatic increase in culturally and linguistically diverse students or English language learners (ELLs) across the country, teachers, administrators, and policy makers are being urged to seek solutions and teaching strategies to assist this increasing population. The passing of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 has raised concerns about ELLs' meeting the academic standards. Recently, instructional challenges that come from the implementation of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) have become another issue for educators of ELLs. The CCSS clearly indicate that the goal of the Standards is to prepare students to be university and career ready (Common Core State Standards Initiatives, 2014). According to the Standards, all teachers ought to be teachers of both language and content in order to be successful in helping students achieve the Standards with the linguistic rigor required. In addition, the CCSS place a high focus on literacy skills through which students need to be competent in writing for different purposes. In other words, students not only need to be proficient in reading texts, but also in analyzing and writing narrative pieces (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, 2014). As such, the implementation of the CCSS carries the existing academic challenges for teachers and students to the next level. Literacy skills have a significant place among the Standards. Students need to use the language, from lexicons to syntax, effectively; they also need to demonstrate their ability to read and write in different content areas. The purpose of the present study was to explore how ELLs' literacy skills were developed with content instruction. This study specifically focused on (a) how content instruction facilitates ELLs' literacy skills development, and (b) in what way these learners show academic language development along the language continuum.

Background

Second language teaching methods have been evolving since the 18th century, from the grammar translation method to the audiolingual method to the communicative language teaching approach, to name just a few of the many methods identified in the pedagogical evolution. Currently, with the increased emphasis on academic proficiency, a body of research indicates the importance of integrating language and content instruction in order for ELLs to be proficient in academic settings (Bailey, 2007; Collier & Thomas, 2009; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2008; Gee, 2007; Gibbons, 2009; Gottlieb, Katz, & Ernst-Slavit, 2009; Huang, 2000; Mohan, 1986; World-class Instructional Design and Assessment, 2010; Zwiers, 2008). But how do we characterize academic proficiency? To be academically proficient, students need to be knowledgeable in the language used in textbooks and school settings as well as have some familiarity with the specific language used in content areas (Krashen & Brown, 2007). Language learning through contexts also allows students to participate with increasing proficiency in social contexts. Thus, Integration of content and language instruction not only promotes students' academic achievement, but also increases their communicative competence. The advantages of integrating content and language instruction include motivating students' interest in learning, providing meaningful contexts, facilitating academic growth with the target language used, and becoming valued participants in communities (Mohan, 2001; Nordmeyer, 2010; Stroller, 2002).

There are numerous program models that provide content teachers with ways to embed content and language instruction. Snow (2001), for example, introduces models educators can adopt for content and language integration; these models include immersion, theme based, adjunct, and sheltered. The goal of these models is to help language learners gain content knowledge while developing target language skills. Another research-based model for language and content integration is the sheltered instruction observation protocol (SIOP) (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004; Short & Echevarria, 1999), in which the authors describe how teachers using this model effectively help language learners develop both content and literacy skills. The knowledge framework (KF) by Mohan (1986) is another way to systematically integrate content and language instruction. A body of research has demonstrated the effectiveness of developing students' content knowledge and academic language proficiency using the KF (Early, 1991, 2001; Huang, 2000; Tang, 1997). In addition, research studies have also provided evidence to suggest that the KF can be used in assessing students' development of content and academic language (Huang, 2000; Huang & Morgan, 2003; Mohan & Slater, 2005, 2006; Slater, Beckett, & Aufderhaar, 2006).

The Power of Three

In more recent research, Freeman and Freeman (2013) suggest a three-step approach to academic language development. The three steps in this approach, in which the purpose is to teach academic language along the language and content continuum, are to: (a) plan language objectives; (b) assess students' current language use; and (c) teach along the continuum, from activating students' current language to introducing new academic language to practicing academic language and to using academic language independently (Freeman & Freeman, 2013).

Another influential framework that focuses on linguistic and academic development is systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday 1975, 1994). The concepts of the theory include three functions: using language to create meaning (ideational), communicating with audience—writers or listeners (interpersonal), and creating discourse (textual). Applied linguists went further and put SFL into practice by illustrating how language educators can implement SFL in their language instruction (Feez, 1998; Macken-Horarik, 2002; Rothery, 1996; Whittaker, 2010). Gebhard (2010) explains that in the first step of the cycle in SFL, the students should be able to meet language objectives and understand linguistic patterns that may be used to create characterization in their own narrative. The second step requires students to comprehend the perspective of a character in a story and to write about that character by making

connections to previous language lessons. The third step allows students independence in creating their own narrative, which challenges their meaning-making abilities.

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of SFL in helping students develop reading, writing, and critical thinking skills (Coffin & Donohue, 2012; García, 2008; O'Dowd, 2012). Based on an SFL approach, Aguirre-Munoz, Park, Amabisca, and Boscardin (2008) generated a series of characteristics of academic language to guide teachers as they instruct and analyze students' academic writing. The characteristics are: (a) provide point of view about the characters; (b) use verb phrases and noun phrases; and (c) use transitions and clauses for sentence connection. The authors emphasize that having knowledge of linguistics features of academic language helps teachers differentiate and explain to students the language needed for effective communication in various genres

Linking Content and Literary Skills

Literacy skills are being recognized as essential for all learners to have in order to be successful in educational, social, and personal settings. Literary development, however, is a complicated process, requiring students to make sense of writing as well as express and contribute through their own texts (Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002; Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). Given this, it is important to examine the relationship between literacy development and content instruction. Huang (2000) investigated a group of ELLs' development of academic language, particularly on writing a classification essay through learning science. Huang reported that both the students' content knowledge and writing skills increased as a result of the integration of content and language learning. Similarly, Tsai and Shang (2010) studied students' comprehension level using content-based instruction and found that the participants' comprehension skills increased as a result of the content-based instruction.

ELLs are faced with the difficulty of both learning the language and building knowledge of complex grade-level content. Teaching these students involves expanding academic literacy. Considering the broad definitions of what academic literacy entails, Cumming (2013) explains it as multidimensional—containing sociocultural, linguistic, academic, and cognitive dimensions. Building on a student's academic literacy will help the student's knowledge of the content. Although a great deal of research suggests the benefits of integrating content and language instruction, research on the application and learning effects of embedding content and language learning remains limited (Davison & Williams, 2001; Huang, 2000; Nordmeyer, 2010). In addition, very few studies have looked into how content instruction promotes academic language development through literacy activities. If literacy plays such a significant role in students' success, especially with the emphasis on achieving the CCSS, teachers need to help students develop more than the basic literacy skills in order to be proficient and competent in academic and social contexts. Making meaningful connections through texts, grammar, lexicons, and pragmatic skills provides important ingredients that help students acquire the literacy skills necessary to be successful in college and the workforce (Colombi & Schleppegrell, 2002; Scarcella, 2003).

The purpose of the current study was, therefore, to examine how content instruction promotes academic writing. Specifically, this study applied the three-step approach, focusing on the three functions suggested by the SFL to help ELLs develop academic writing, particularly in writing narratives. To achieve this objective, two questions guided the study:

- R1: How does content instruction facilitate English language learners' literacy skills development?
- R2: In what way do English language learners show academic language development along the language continuum?

Method

This qualitative case study took place in an intensive English course for ELLs at a public high school in the Northeast region of the United States. The emphasis of the course was on reading and writing. Adopting Freeman and Freeman's (2013) three-step approach to academic language development and

the three functions suggested by the SFL, the unit taught in this study focused on writing instruction in narratives, using the children's book *The Cat in the Hat* (Geisel, 1957). The writing samples produced by the participants were analyzed for the purpose of this study.

Participants

There were three participants in the present study, two in Grade 11 and one in Grade 12. The students were asked to compose a total of three narratives. The primary language, as well as the language spoken at home, for all three students is Spanish (Castilian). Student 1 (S1) was born in Colombia and had been in the United States for three and a half years at the time of the study. Student 2 (S2) had received formal education in English in her country prior coming to the United States, and had been enrolled in a U.S. school for four years before the study. Student 3 (S3) had been in the United States for 16 years and had been enrolled in a U.S. school for 10 years at the time of the study.

All three students varied in their levels of English language proficiency, basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), a concept developed by Cummins (1984). S1 was considered to be at a low intermediate level of English language proficiency. Compared with the other two participants, her English knowledge was minimal; it was reported that S1's main struggle in writing was to use verbs appropriately. S2 was considered to be at a high intermediate level of English language proficiency and S3 was at an intermediate level. Both S2 and S3 demonstrated sufficient understanding of the English language to communicate orally in most settings, but required some repetition and/or rewording of certain phrases in writing. In regard to their BICS, these students were capable of using everyday language to communicate with peers both inside and outside the classroom. As for their CALP, both students displayed weaknesses in writing more than in listening, speaking, and reading skills.

Procedure

Data were the three essays that each student produced throughout the unit. Adopting the three-step approach to academic language development by Freeman and Freeman (2013), this study focused on writing instruction on narratives. The three participants' writing samples were analyzed to demonstrate how the students' literacy skills were established and developed through the language continuum.

Step 1 consisted of two lesson plans, and the teacher developed lesson objectives for the unit. For step 2, the teacher asked the students to produce a writing task (essay one) in which they were to describe a character of their choice for about 15 minutes in order to activate and assess their current language use. From there, the teacher conducted an activity with students that introduced the concepts of *direct* and *indirect characterization* based on the reading *A Cat in the Hat.* During the reading, the teacher stopped at specific points to consider vocabulary, characters, and plot, as well as reply to the students' questions. The researchers created a writing rubric based on the linguistics categories developed by Aguirre-Munoz et al. (2008) to assess the participants' writing.

Following the analysis of the writing and the categories on the rubric, the teacher introduced the following language functions: (a) provide point of view about the characters; (b) use verb phrases and noun phrases; and (c) use transitions and clauses for sentence connection. Thus, Step 2 consisted of lessons focusing on the language/grammar features. Using the characterization notes from the reading and previously introduced language points, the students were asked to write about a character in the story (essay two). Upon the completion of the lessons, the narrative writing assignment was introduced to the students (Step 3), in which they were to write a narrative essay (essay three) on a character of their choice from the various readings and characterization notes.

Findings

The participants' writing essays were analyzed based on the language- and literacy-related categories developed by Aguirre-Munoz et al. (2008). All of the three participants showed improvement from essay one to essay three in terms of writing mechanics and grammar, and they did significantly better in essay two; there was, however, evidence of regression in character description. Of all the three participants, S1's writing showed the greatest improvement overall.

Writing a Narrative/Point of View

In regard to writing narratives, all three participants focused on writing summaries of the stories and their chosen characters in essays one, two, and three. [Note: Student errors in these quoted excerpts not corrected, but presented here as written.] All of them attempted to write a descriptive piece about their characters and switched to writing summaries of the stories or the characters toward the end in their first essays. S1 did not establish a strong point of view in her first essay; instead, she followed the topic and wrote about the facts of the character throughout the writing sample. For example:

> She had 2 sister and 3 brother. Her name of the sister was Dayana is the mayor then Brenda is the second and brother name was aaron, David, Johnathan and they always together, but something they sepraouted because they have different worked an different hour to going to the worked . . .

S2 demonstrated an attempt to describe the chosen character, but her essay one lacked depth and details of the character. S3 also tried to describe the character, but only touched the surface without providing the details of the character or how he felt about the character; the sample jumps from a small description on the character to a summary of the character's life. For example, at the end of the essay he wrote, "At the end the prime minister and natalie get together and went home."

The second essays of the three participants still demonstrated summaries of the stories, rather than a character description. As a whole, however, all of the participants' second essays were the strongest in terms of providing their point of view of the character. For S1's writing sample, there was no focus on a centralized character in the second essay, but instead just pieces of a summary. In regard to S2's second essay, even though her writing sample was still a summary, there were signs of improvement and a greater attempt at writing descriptively. Her essay two showed signs of improvement from essay one because she was able to create a central and clear idea throughout the essay; it had as well great structure, which was organized into various paragraphs. S3's essay two indicated that he lacked depth of personal ideas and there was limited description of the character, but he included a range of feelings and traits of the character. For example, he wrote,

> The cat was afraid.
> The cat was sad and said I have another game that you would like it.

In analyzing the participants' third essays, their writing samples showed further regression from essay two in writing narratives. Although S1's final essay showed an attempt to create a central idea for the writing sample, and there was an attempt at creating a topic sentence—"Love actually is a good movie and good book"—the participant was still summarizing instead of describing a character. Compared to essay two, S2's third essay showed a sign of regression in her narrative of her chosen character, and character details were missing. Instead, S2 continued to focus her writing on providing facts about the character. Regarding S3's third essay, there was a clear regression between essays two and three in the description of the characters. The participant provided a summary of what the character did in general rather than describing the character's traits in depth.

Sentence Variety

All of the participants' first essays fell into the developing category for sentence variety. The sentences were simple in structure and lacked transitions. S1 showed in essay one that her academic language

needed improvement and that she was struggling to describe her character in a cohesive manner and attempted to describe the character of her choice using remedial descriptions and simple sentences. For example, she wrote, "Nataly is a good person. She live in France with his family. She had 20 years old."

In this example, S1's writing style is not cohesive; there is no transition word. In contrast to S1, S2 used a combination of simple and compound sentences with limited transitions. For example, S2 wrote, "One day, Augustus met hazel, he fell in love with her and even though Hazel didn't want him to be near her she fell in love with him too."

Unlike S2, S3 used a majority of simple sentences with no transitions. He also produced many run-on sentences, just as S1 and S2 did in their first essays.

All of the three participants greatly improved in sentence variety in essay two. There were, however, many errors in these attempts to create complex sentences. S1's second essay displayed signs of progression in writing mechanics, but her academic language is still developing. There was a major improvement, especially on using more complex sentences, in essay two. S1 attempted to vary her sentences by using transitions and complex sentences, but made many mechanical errors, producing run-on sentences. An example of this is: "The fish is nervous again because doesn't want to T1-T2 in the house and the fish changed to afraid because T1-T2 destroided the house and her mother of sally's not in the house."

S2 demonstrated a major improvement in the use of sentence variety with appropriate transitions in her second essay. There was a variety of sentence structure, using both simple and complex sentences when needed. She displayed such ability by using complex sentences and passive voice, as shown in this sentence: "At the beggining, the kids were amazed by the cat, but later they were terrified because he destroyed their house."

S3's second essay consisted of a mix of simple and compound sentences, but there were still many run-on sentences and incorrect use of prepositions in the writing sample. His attempts at using conjunctions and variety of grammar features, however, showed signs of improvement from his first essay.

Sentence variety in essay three for all three students was similar to that in their second essays. S1 continued to attempt varying sentence structure, which created more complex sentences than essays one and two, even though there was still error—for instance, "She was so happy by the situation that she come back to the United States and he is in London he was so happy with her and when he stay in the airport and he kisses her in the face."

In S2's final essay, she tried to expand her academic language by writing in a variety of sentence structures. Similarly, S3 continued to use various sentence varieties, and his sentence structure improved by using more transition words, such as "so," as in this excerpt: "They want to be together but they don't want because both work together. So when somebody works for you . . ."

The student attempted to write complex sentences, but his major issue was having numerous run-on sentences and fragments, which was similar to the findings in all three participants' final essays.

Noun Phrases

The students' usage of noun phrases improved from essays 1 through essays 3. While S2 and S3 displayed an understanding of noun phrases in their first essays, S1 showed significant signs of improvement from essays one through three. Throughout her first essay, S1 attempted to use many singular noun phrases. S2 demonstrated her knowledge of expanded noun phrases in essay one. The examples below show this use:

He was an excellent basketball player . . .
Augustus Waters is an intelligent teenager who had have a difficult life.

In the first example, S2 expanded the noun before it, whereas in the second example, she expanded the noun both before and after. S3 mainly used simple noun phrases in essay one with a few attempts to

use expanded noun phrases, but with some errors. The sentences below show how S3 used expanded noun phrases in essay one.

The prime minister is a man who lives in the white house at London.

He's in love with a woman who works for him.

The second essays for all three students displayed minimal progression from their first essays. S1 and S3 continued to use singular noun phrases and attempted to use more of them, while adding only a few complex phrases. On the other hand, in her second essay, S2 demonstrated great improvement in using expanded noun phrases effectively and appropriately most of the time.

In "The Cat in the Hat" story, which was a funny story, the cat was the one who caused all the problems.

In my opinion, the cat is an animal with a lot of good and bad traits, but that is what made him unique and incomparable.

In these two examples, S2 added additional information, such as "an animal with a lot of good and bad traits . . ." to expand on the noun.

The final essays for all three students again displayed slight progression. For example, S1 portrayed a broader attempt at using expanded noun phrases, writing, "Sam going to school and found a beautiful girl." The expanded noun phrase in this sentence is "a beautiful girl." S2's use of expanded noun phrases remained stable compared to her second essay. S3 also demonstrated his progress in using expanded noun phrases in essay three, although they contain grammatical mistakes.

Verb Phrases

There were clear difficulties in using verb phrases for all three participants, with many problems in their essays using appropriate subject-verb agreement and inconsistent verb tense. S1, for example, in her essay one stated that "She had 20 years old." S2's first essay also displayed an inconsistent use of verb tenses. For instance, she began a sentence in the present—"Augustus Waters is an intelligent teenager . . ." Then she switched to the past—". . . who had have a difficult life." Similar to S1 and S2, S3 also had a problem using consistent verb tenses and correct subject-verb agreement in essay one. He wrote, for example, "So they got together, go out together."

All three students needed improvement in verb phrases in essay two. S1 still struggled with the correct usage of subject-verb agreement, and her verb tenses were not consistent. There were not as many of these errors as in essay one, but there remained many errors in verb phrases. For example, ". . . the kids is too bored for play in the house in this place so go away in my house because you play is not funny for this day . . ."

In essay three, all three participants continued to display a lack of understanding in using the appropriate verb phrase. Although S1 showed traces of improvement from essay two to essay three in verb phrases, there were issues with subject-verb agreement and verb tense. Similarly, the final writing samples of S2 and S3 also showed confusion in using consistent verb tenses, which fluctuated from past to present. For example, the first two sentences of S3's essay were written in the present tense, then the tense switched to the past:

She is new worker of the prime minister. She works for him and she is also in love with the prime minister. So Natalie sent to the prime minister a letter saying lovely things; when the prime minister read it his emotions turned into happiness . . .

Analysis

Overall, the three student's first essays were not advanced in their academic language and mechanics, but there was an attempt at writing descriptive passages about the characters of their choice compared

with essays two and three. All of the second essays were longer, and there was more of an attempt at writing with an expanded vocabulary and with more complex sentences, but the descriptions of the characters declined; all three students wrote more of a summary than a description. Essay two also included more subject-verb agreement errors compared to essay one, with the exception of S3, who did not have any errors in using subject-verb agreement in essay two. All of the students' third essays were summaries, with an attempt at increasing their academic language.

It is worthwhile to mention that though on the surface noun and verb phrases may seem to be a low-level feature in academic writing, in actuality, especially for an ELL, there are multi-layered concepts in both that need to be taught through direct instruction in order to be applied to academic writing. For example, one of the challenges for beginning ELLs is the use of articles (the, a, an) and when each is used with a noun (Miller, 2005). This concept then is directly applied to the concept of count and non-count nouns because students incorrectly use articles with non-count nouns. ELLs need to be directly taught the difference between a count and non-count noun because many ELLs apply the concept of articles to all nouns when there really is a difference. Therefore, when it comes to academic writing, an ELL teacher continuously needs to assess whether or not students are correctly writing noun phrases because it is a concept that is not directly taught in ELL instruction.

As for verb phrases, teachers need to look for shifts in verb tense in students' academic writing. What makes nouns and verbs not low-level features is the concept of subject-verb agreement, which many ELLs struggle with in writing (Nayan & Jusoff, 2009). Correct use of subject-verb agreement by the participants in this study was assessed; errors representing direct use of nouns and verbs were found. Nouns and verbs are a constant in academic writing, and as teaching English as a second language requires direct instruction on the concepts of nouns and verbs, assessing their appropriate and correct use in academic writing is essential.

Discussion

After analyzing the three essays of the three participants with a focus on their literacy skills, it was found that the results varied among them. The highest level student (S2) demonstrated the most development in writing skills, specifically in sentence variety and use of transitions. It must be taken into consideration, however, that this student did have formal English instruction in her country prior to entering the United States. Thus, understanding and assessing students' prior experience, whether it is in their native language or the target language, are essential for all teachers because having an awareness of the role of the students' background knowledge on their writing skills helps teachers plan and teach lessons effectively (Daoud, 2015; Echevarria & Graves, 2015; Peregoy & Boyle, 2013).

In the study, the three participants' language proficiency levels as well as the quality of their writing samples vary. Such a finding suggests the importance of providing modification of instruction and assessments for all ELLs, especially when there are students with various levels of language proficiency in a particular setting. It is necessary for teachers to differentiate literacy instruction based on students' language proficiency levels in order to build on their prior knowledge related to a particular literacy task (Chapman & King, 2009; Daoud, 2015; Peregoy & Boyle, 2013). A developmental writing rubric with the same linguistic categories—namely, sentence varieties with transitions, noun phrases, verb phrases, and points of view—can be used. This way, teachers are able to evaluate students' writing ability on each category individually according to their language developmental stage (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013).

In the study, the purpose of Step 2 was to assess students' prior knowledge on character narratives based on the objectives established in Step 1. A suggestion we can make for future instruction is to also assess students' knowledge of the linguistic categories in this step. Thus, to make optimum use of the three-step approach, teachers should have specific objectives for each lesson during Steps 1 and 2; for example, a teacher can focus on developing students' literacy skills in describing a character for a lesson

outcome. When students grasp the concept of narratives, the teacher can concentrate on sentence variety or other language features for another lesson. .

In the first essay, all three participants performed at either the level of needing improvement or developing, though they did make an attempt at describing their character of choice, and used simple sentence structure. All three displayed similar writing errors in essay one, which included run-on sentences, fragments, misuse of prepositions, inconsistent verb tenses, subject-verb agreement errors, and lack of sentence variety. In essay two, there were less descriptions of their characters and more of a summary for all participants. Even though the students were trying to write more complex sentences, only S2 was able to reach the Exceptional level on the rubric for the sentence variety with transitions category. It would have benefited the students if they had first mastered the task of simple sentences, then progressed to complex and compound sentence structure.

Based on the analysis of literacy skills over the three essays, it is interesting to note that all three students performed the best on essay two. A major possibility for this occurrence could be directly related to the focus of the classroom instruction and essay topics. In essays one and three, which were produced after Steps 1 and 3 of Freeman and Freeman's (2013) three-step approach, students were instructed to select any character of their choice and describe the character. The participants had the freedom to select any character they wanted, and the selection was based solely on any novel or story the students had read either inside or outside of the classroom.

Essay two, which was written after Step 2 of the approach, was handled differently. Because students had direct instruction on the characters and were asked to describe one of them, a possible conclusion for the best performance on essay two could be that it was the only writing essay based on direct classroom instruction. Research suggests that ELLs benefit from direct instruction that is an important part of literacy development, especially skills that are necessary for literacy or academic tasks (Carlo et al., 2004; Ferris, 1995; 2002; Genesee, Lindholm-Leary, Saunders, & Christian, 2006; Stuart, 1999). Direct instruction includes demonstration, input, feedback, and other scaffolding strategies (Goldenberg, 2008). The noticeable difference in the participants' essay two that made it stronger than one and three was the inclusion of more specific detail and depth of personal ideas. Again, this could be related to the direct classroom discussion about the characters, whereas there was no direct classroom discussion about any of the characters selected in essays one and three.

The question here is: How much direct instruction is sufficient? From the present study, one essay definitely is not adequate, because all three participants seemed to regress in certain areas, such as in description of the characters or having only a slight improvement on their writing skills. Lee and VanPatten (2003) suggest that teachers should focus on one language feature at a time during instruction; thus, a recommendation for teaching grammar would be to limit the focus to one category or topic at a time. By focusing so specifically, it will be easier to see what students know and what they need more practice on, thereby better directing teacher instruction. If the teacher is looking to assess a writing assignment for specific categories, it would be helpful to both the teacher and students to create the writing rubric and share it. By doing this, the teacher is setting clear expectations for the students, and students will become aware of what they will be focusing on. Then, by teaching one category at a time, the teacher's instruction is more directly focused.

In considering the results of the present study, there are other recommendations that can be made for future classroom use. Sometimes it is necessary to reteach the grammar instruction. It is easy to assume that because students have advanced to the next proficiency level, they have mastered the previously learned grammar instruction; this is not always the case, however. Some students may have learned the grammar but either did not yet master it and need more practice or simply just do not remember it; therefore, it can become necessary to go back and teach previously learned grammar. For example, there was an assumption in this research study that all students knew what simple, compound, and complex sentences were and could write them appropriately. This knowledge was essential in being able to teach

students how to incorporate sentence variety. When sentence variety was reviewed, it became apparent that not all students could recall simple, compound, and complex sentences. Revisiting language features allows students to receive more instruction and provides them with opportunities to develop their thinking processes about the language (Cappellini, 2005). Hence, before sentence variety instruction could begin, the teacher needed to return to simple, compound, and complex sentences. Once that information was reviewed, the teacher could move on to the next step. Echevarria, Vogt, and Short (2008) suggest that teachers should spend time on reviewing mechanical details in each lesson and have students apply the skills during peer and self-editing. Including an editing process in writing instruction facilitates students' growth in awareness of the appropriate writing features necessary for a specific writing task (Peregoy & Boyle, 1999, 2013; Samway, 1987; Urzua, 1987).

In the study, the real issue is seeing that there was a struggle and that something had gone wrong with the students' understanding of certain literacy skills. Thus, based on these findings, a foundational suggestion we offer about teaching writing narratives is to first teach the students what the difference is between a summary and a description. Then, the students can practice making complex sentences and/or verb phrases based on meaningful contexts. Finally, once those two concepts—summary/description and complex sentences—are mastered, the teacher can move onto conjunctions, commas, and combining sentences.

As demonstrated in this study, one of the first steps in teaching academic writing to ELLs requires a step-by-step approach in most cases, in which the previously learned concepts of noun and verb phrases are applied in teaching sentence structure. For example, compound and complex sentences cannot be taught before students are taught simple sentences. From here, the language builds on the continuum from simple sentences, to compound to complex, and then to forming paragraphs. This research study focused on writing that was developed along this continuum. First, through direct instruction, simple sentences were presented, which led to compound sentences and then complex sentences. Students were asked to produce sentence variety in their writing using the learned concepts, and the writing was analyzed to assess students' progress from starting with simple sentences and working along the continuum to incorporate compound and complex sentences, as sentence variety is an essential piece of academic writing.

Conclusion

Through this study, we examined how integration of content instruction facilitates high school ELLs to acquire academic language, particularly on writing narratives. We also discussed how teachers can make good use of the three-step approach and the SFL framework to tackle the challenges as a result of the linguistic demand placed by the CCSS as well as to develop effective lessons that assist ELLs with their literacy skills in a high-school setting. Our future work will continue to explore how the same approach could be applied to teach ELLs at various grade levels and other genres.

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