

The Efficacy of Teacher Agency in L2 Writing Instruction: Insights from the EAP Classroom

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ABSTRACT

L2 scholars (e.g., Gao, 2010; Mercer, 2011; Ollerhead, 2010) have underlined the importance of teacher agency in making classroom instruction successful. This article reports on the findings of an empirical study on the efficacy of teacher agency in an EAP writing classroom in Bangladesh. Studying five EAP learners, this qualitative case study examined what aspects of writing instruction with teacher's agentive practices are useful and what students' perceptions are when the teacher employs agentive practices. The analysis of data shows that teacher's agentive practices were considered to be useful in the following aspects of EAP writing instruction: (a) instruction of grammar, (b) illustration of the purpose of writing, (c) raising awareness about audience, and (d) raising awareness about writing styles. Findings suggest that students perceived teacher's agentive practices positively for the following reasons: (a) it helped them apply the learned topics to their writing, (b) it provided a more complete process of learning, (c) it minimized the stress of learning, and (d) it minimized the difficulty of internalizing grammar rules. Based on the findings, this paper argues that teachers' agentive practices are helpful in making writing instruction more accessible to and meaningful for EAP students. Implications for teaching and learning are discussed.

KEYWORDS: teacher agency, EAP, L2 writing, student perceptions

Introduction

One of the common challenges second language (L2) instructors face is how to make instruction accessible to and meaningful for students. There might be many reasons for this. However, in an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context, the reasons behind this are as follows. First, EAP curriculum is intensive, requiring instructors to finish the lessons within a stipulated time (Alexander, Argent & Spencer, 2008; Jordan, 1997). This entails that instructors rush through the course materials regardless of student uptake. Second, the topics and content covered in an EAP course are pre-determined. Instructors select topics and content areas in an EAP course based on assumed student needs (e.g., Alexander et al, 2008; Caplan & Stevens, 2017; Charles & Pecorari, 2016; Flowerdew, 2013). This means that EAP curricula are prescriptive and there is little room for instructors to deviate from the lesson plans. Consequently, student concerns remain unaddressed (e.g., Benesch, 1999). Sometimes student concerns are overlooked so instructors can finish the curriculum on time. Another factor that also affects EAP teaching is large class sizes, which makes it difficult to implement an otherwise effective curriculum (e.g., Charles & Pecorari, 2016; Chowdhury & Kamal, 2014).

While these challenges are common in most EAP contexts, they are particularly prevalent in the writing classroom with such questions arising as: how to address students' grammar errors, how to provide effective feedback, and how to tailor classroom instruction to the texts students produce in specific disciplines. On account of this, striking a balance between what a writing curriculum dictates and what a classroom context needs becomes challenging for instructors. This requires that EAP writing instructors be flexible and adaptable in order for their instruction to be effective.

The conceptual framework of the current study derives from the above challenges in EAP writing instruction. Considering that agency offers instructors the flexibility of impromptu decision-making in response to classroom contexts, it was hypothesized that the incorporation of teachers' agentive practices in EAP writing classrooms would help address these challenges. Exploratory in nature, this qualitative case study was guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What aspects of writing instruction with a teacher's agentive practices are useful in the EAP classroom?

Research Question 2: What are the student perceptions about teachers' agentive practices in such a setting?

Review of related literature

Writing instruction in an EAP context

Writing and reading are the two most important skills that EAP programs generally focus on (Alexander et al, 2008), with the main goal of a writing course to help students develop effective written communication skills in academic contexts. Tribble (2009, 2015) has argued that EAP writing instruction can be divided into three approaches: social/genre approach, intellectual/rhetorical approach, and academic literacy approach. According to Tribble (2015), of the three approaches, intellectual/rhetorical and social/genre approaches are the most prevalent.

An intellectual/rhetorical approach to EAP writing requires that students have sufficient mastery over sentence-level grammar, for without correct grammatical forms, sentences they write fail to communicate intended ideas. Based on empirical evidence, Ferris (2001) in this regard has argued that "both instructors and students perceive accurate writing to be important in academic settings" (p. 302). For intermediate and high intermediate learners, grammatical accuracy is an important goal in L2 writing.

Grammatical knowledge is important to incorporate feedback into texts in process writing as well. Research has found that correction of errors is most effective for feedback that is "selective, prioritized and indirect" (Ferris, 2001, p. 302). Without students' knowledge in grammar such feedback practices (e.g., *indirect* feedback) are not effective. Considering that EAP students are expected to produce texts using a variety of sentence structures, knowledge in grammar is helpful to negotiate the meaning-making process in writing.

The intellectual/rhetorical approach to EAP writing is important to prepare students for various academic writing conventions. Students learn how to incorporate outside sources into writing in a manner that is academically acceptable (e.g., Alexander et al., 2008). Incorporation of sources into the texts is an important skill that students master as this is required in academic fields (e.g., Leki & Carson, 1995). Students also learn various rhetorical patterns (e.g., compare-contrast and cause-effect) appropriate for their field of study.

In a social/genre approach to writing, students learn how to write effectively in various disciplinary contexts (Tribble, 2009, 2015). This is especially critical to succeed in discipline-specific writing tasks (Alexander et al., 2008; Carter, 2007; Lea & Street, 2000). De Chazal (2014) suggests that in order to make texts persuasive, students are expected to use the appropriate style, tone, and voice. Also, they need to be aware of their audience. These skills require that students have knowledge about the rhetorical strategies of academic writing which teach them the effective rhetorical moves responsive to the specific disciplinary contexts (Russell, 1997, 1999).

The review above suggests that the objectives of typical EAP writing courses are well laid down. However, there are many factors that make attaining these goals challenging. First, because the time is limited and the stakes for students are high (e.g., Alexander et al., 2008), instructors are under pressure to cover the curriculum. As well, with large classes, especially in a writing course, it is not only difficult to address student needs, but also to teach the lessons to a fixed plan. As Chowdhury and Kamal (2014) have argued, a perfect curriculum is not enough to make EAP courses effective. Benesch (1999) has found that the pressure of coverage is a factor that determines to what extent students have the Q/A time in the classroom.

This points to an inherent challenge associated with EAP writing course delivery—although the main objective of these courses is to address students' writing needs (e.g., Charles & Pecarori, 2016; Flowerdew, 2013; Hamp-Lyons, 2001; Hyland, 2006), it is challenging, if not impossible, to account for all student needs in the classroom, for student needs are diverse and multifaceted. The practice of needs analyses cannot always account for context-specific needs. For one, although diversity is a given for any classroom, having multi-level students in terms of their English language proficiency is increasing in EAP (e.g., Caplan & Stevens, 2017; Fox, 2009). Multi-level classrooms are bound to have varying needs. Also, EAP students have interests in different academic fields, resulting in distinctive writing needs related to specific subject areas.

In summary, the discussion above suggests that a teaching approach that is responsive to constantly evolving context is essential for EAP writing instruction. L2 writing scholars (Casanave, 1995; Kubota & Lehner, 2004) have argued that the “context” of writing should be one of the important considerations in writing instruction, with Casanave (1995) highlighting the importance of the “local interactions” of the writing processes.

Teacher agency in L2 contexts

Agency is a quality that transforms an individual from acting mechanically to acting in response to the context of action. Agency in this sense is what differentiates humans from

mechanical objects. Ahearn (2001) defines agency as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act” (p. 112). In L2 contexts, Duff (2012) relates agency to “people’s ability to make choices, take control, self-regulate, and thereby pursue their goals as individuals leading, potentially, to personal or social transformation” (p. 414). These definitions serve to suggest that agency is a sociocultural attribute that helps make conscious decisions in an L2 teaching-learning context.

Mercer (2011) argues that two recent developments have put agency in the forefront of L2 research: (a) an increasing focus on learner autonomy and (b) the recognition of a “social turn” (Block, 2003) in explaining various L2 phenomena (p. 427). This stream of research maintains that L2 learners (and teachers) are important agents in language learning. Individuals involved in L2 learning engage in a bidirectional relationship with the context—they both influence and are influenced by each other (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Mercer, 2011). In other words, individuals not only react to an L2 context, but also work proactively to alter the context. Since agency is a socioculturally conditioned attribute, it has direct relevance to L2 research. While recent L2 research has explored the role of student agency in L2 learning, studies on teacher agency have been sparse. Considering that teachers play an important role in what goes on in the EAP classroom, it is important to investigate how teacher agency manifests itself in such contexts.

Teachers play crucial roles in making EAP learning successful in classroom contexts. What goes on in the classroom is determined by what activities teachers adopt as well as how they make students accomplish various tasks. Although scholars (Benson, 2011; Ding & Stapleton, 2016; Little, 2009) have underlined the importance of students’ autonomous learning, activities in a classroom are determined by instructors’ spontaneous decisions as to what the best course of action is at a particular moment. This is where teacher agency comes into play, offering insights into teachers’ decision making processes and subsequent teaching and learning outcomes.

In light of the above, teacher agency is important in classroom-based L2 pedagogy. As noted previously, empirical research on teacher agency has been sparse. However, based on the available literature it appears that a common thread that runs through the research in teacher agency is that agentic practices help instructors negotiate context-specific teaching challenges and make L2 pedagogy more efficient (Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Kitade, 2015; Van Huy, Hamid & Renshaw, 2016).

Teacher agency has consistently figured as an attribute that helps L2 instructors deal with macro-level policy dumping (e.g., Hamid & Nguyen, 2016; Nguyen & Bui, 2016). Instructors are dependent on their agentic practices to deal with challenges such as large classes, lack of resources, target language proficiency as well as training and professional development. For example, Martin (2005a, 2005b) studying English classrooms in Malaysia and Brunei has found that teacher agency plays an important role in making textbooks accessible to students. By employing their agentic practices teachers align the textbook content with local students’ knowledge and understanding of the subject matter so as to make English learning more “engaging.” Teachers’ agentic practice manifested itself when they employed what Martin (2005b) describes as “safe” practices in which instructors adopt teaching “practices that allow the classroom participants to be seen to accomplish lessons” (p. 89). Martin (2005b) argues

that safe practices are helpful as they allow teachers to annotate difficult content for student understanding with limited English proficiency that teachers themselves have. It may be relevant to point out that teacher agency plays an important role in the classroom when language-in-education policy changes in a country. A good example in this regard is Malaysia where language policy changes in 2012 led teachers to adapt to new realities in the classroom (e.g., Ali, Hamid & Moni, 2011; Rashid, Rahman & Yunus, 2017).

Teacher agency helps transform pedagogical approaches and incorporate student voices (Phyak & Bui, 2014) into the teaching and learning process. Researchers (Phyak & Bui, 2014) have found that through agentic practices educator-activists revived the minority languages in alignment with students' desires. This ensured pedagogical effectiveness as students were able to internalize the target lessons more enthusiastically. A more recent study by Colegrove and Zúñiga (2018) shows that a teacher's agentic self enables them to utilize dynamic teaching practices in the classroom, creating effective learning opportunities, in particular, for marginalized students. These studies underline that teacher agency is an important factor in making instruction effective in a context that is unresponsive to cultural and linguistic diversity. This aligns with the results of Ollerhead's (2010) study in which she found that teacher Paula overcame various constraints at the programmatic and institutional levels by exercising her agency, and made classroom lessons meaningful to her students.

Finally, research has shown that teacher agency helps create innovative solutions to pedagogical challenges (Kitade, 2015; Zacharias, 2013). Zacharias' (2013) study shows how an Indonesian English teacher made use of Google translate in delivering English lessons. With limited English proficiency and few resources, this teacher had to resort to agentic practices to ensure effective policy implementation in the classroom. Kitade's (2015) study reports on teacher agency in a Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) context. By tracking two CALL teachers' evolving affordances and constraints in L2 teaching through the use of technology, the researcher shows how teacher agency plays out in mediating L2 learning.

Although the investigation of teacher agency is relatively new the review above serves to suggest its increasing proliferation and importance. As can be seen, most research has focused on the efficacy of teachers' agentic practices in overcoming challenging situations in L2 instruction. While these studies provide valuable insights into general L2 instruction, none of these studies has focused on specific skill areas (e.g., reading, writing). The current study fills this gap by exploring a teacher's agentic practices in an EAP writing classroom in Bangladesh.

Research methods

Setting

This qualitative single case study took place in an undergraduate EAP writing class at a Bangladeshi university. This research method was deemed appropriate for the study as it involved an in-depth analysis of a bounded case of EAP writing course of a single program (e.g., Merriam, 2009). The participants were enrolled in a 3-credit introductory English writing course. The focus of this course was introductory academic writing, which included

short paragraphs leading to writing short essays. Although discrete point grammar was not part of the content of the course, the instructor was expected to answer student questions about grammar topics. The overarching philosophy behind this approach was that to incorporate teacher feedback into writing, students needed knowledge about basic grammar. During actual teaching practices, however, it was challenging for the instructor to strike a balance between teaching writing and grammar simultaneously. As instructor of the course, the author of this article adopted agentive practices as a strategy to deal with this challenge. While implementing the strategy, throughout the term notes were kept regarding the most common questions arising in the classroom. The instructor would use the most opportune moment to discuss the questions.

Participants

All participants of this study were enrolled in ENG 001 (pseudonym). There were five participants—two males and three females—all of whom were first-year undergraduate students at a Bangladeshi university. They were between 18 and 21 years of age and spoke Bengali as first language. Two participants majored in Business, while one each in Economics, English, and Computer Science.

Data collection and analysis

A qualitative single case study method, as discussed by Merriam (2009), was adopted while data were drawn from students' written texts and semi-structured interviews. Participants submitted their written papers and took part in approximately 1.5-hour long face-to-face interviews. The interviews were conducted by one of the author's colleagues, who was not familiar with any of the participants. This arrangement ensured that the information gathered was unbiased and reliable, and that participants were able to speak freely during the interviews without worrying about consequences with final grades. The interviewer had a background in English language teaching. Prior to interviews, the interviewer was provided with detailed objectives of the study and semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix). All interviews took place at the end of the term. Participants' writing samples and lesson plans were used as references during interviews. The researcher kept a journal throughout the data collection period, which was also used as an important reference during the analysis of data.

Upon completion of data collection, a working definition of *teacher agency* was developed as follows: teacher agency manifests itself when an instructor performs a contextually mediated act of student learning in the classroom (see Ahearn, 2001; Duff, 2012). This was used to identify instances of teacher's agentive practices from student interviews.

Audio-taped interviews were transcribed for analysis. Qualitative data analysis protocols (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used for analysis of data. In order to answer the research questions, interview transcripts and students' writing samples were read several times for themes to emerge by themselves (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). To illustrate, in the following interview excerpt, the participant spoke about how the teacher addressed her writing style, going beyond grammar issues, as an agentive aspect of teaching. This transcript was therefore coded as *raising awareness about writing styles*.

Researcher (R): What do you have to say about the way this course has been taught this term? Give me as many details as you can.

Participant 1 (P1): I like it.

R: Can you give more information? May be examples?

P1: He uses our writing for teaching...I mean when we have problems in writing, he would discuss and explain them as examples, no matter [we have it scheduled or not?].

R: Can you be more specific?

P1: *I know active and passive voice in English, it's not a problem for me. At least I know the rules. But I don't know how I don't use them correct ways. I did not even know what the problem was when the teacher told me about the problem in my writing. But when he explained I realize this. It's hard for me, but this way of explanation is [has] made me understand.*

Similarly, in the following example, the participant noted how classroom instruction helped him become more aware about the audience. Consequently, this excerpt was coded as *raising awareness about audience*.

Researcher (R): Tell me about what stood out for you in instructor's teaching. Just tell me anything about his teaching.

Participant 3 (P3): Teacher use our essays and discuss in the projector for everyone to see. He highlights the problems in our writing without our names [without mentioning anyone's names].

R: Can you explain how it helped you?

P3: It makes me more careful about readers—what readers, the audience want or understand about my writing.

R: Can you give an example?

P3: *Even though it is clear in your head it may not be clear for others, it helps me think like other people.*

A total of 33 codes were retrieved at the end of the entire coding process. These codes were then grouped under eight different sub-categories that are discussed with examples in the section below. To ensure the reliability of coding, the researcher recoded a portion of data two months after the initial coding. It was found that the results of the second coding were consistent with the first.

Findings

Research question 1: What aspects of L2 writing instruction with a teacher's agentic practices are useful in the EAP classroom?

Data analysis suggests that the teacher's agentic practices were useful for the following aspects of writing instruction: (a) instruction of grammar, (b) illustration of the purpose of writing, (c) raising awareness about the audience, and (d) raising awareness about writing styles.

Instruction of grammar

EAP instructors often find it difficult to determine the role of grammar instruction in writing courses. EAP scholars generally agree that some knowledge in grammar is essential for good academic writing skills (e.g., De Chazal, 2014; Jordan, 1997). But when and how to teach grammar is a point of contention—should discrete-point grammar be taught in a writing course at all? If so, which topics should be covered? The findings of this study suggest that teachers' agentic practices can play a role in incorporating grammar lessons into writing instruction. The findings provide insights into how grammar instruction can be integrated into writing courses. It appears that grammar instruction is most effective when it relates to students' individual writing. The following excerpt illustrates this.

Moving people to big cities in these days **are** due to some causes such as easy like, better educational for them and their children, and better infrastructure and technology in cities than villages. (Participant 2)

In the student essay excerpt above, the topic of discussion was subject-verb agreement. Finding similar errors in other student texts, teacher agency manifested itself and made the teacher take advantage of the opportunity to discuss subject-verb agreement as a topic for the day's class discussion. Considering the importance of this grammar topic for general writing skill development and its relevance to immediate context of student learning, the instructor chose to spend class time explaining subject-verb agreement rules in English.

During interviews, student participants reflected on the benefits of this teaching practice. They reasoned that this was most helpful because they could relate the grammar rule to their writing. For example, one participant noted:

I can learn this grammar [rule] from my writing [as opposed to contrived examples in textbooks]. (Participant 1)

Another participant pointed out:

The examples in the book is [are] not clear, so I cannot always follow it [them], but my own writing examples are clear to me, so it is easy. (Participant 3)

Indeed, it appears that helping students identify errors in their own writing and then explaining the relevant grammar rules mediate their learning process positively. This helps students connect to lessons and may even have a more lasting effect on them. Consequently, student uptake enhances.

Another aspect of grammar instruction that instructor's agentic practices seem to have addressed is the timing of relevant instruction in students' learning process. Discrete grammar tasks may not always result in effective student learning since learners do not always apply grammar rules they learn to an immediate writing context. However, the findings of this study suggest that when the instructor drew grammar rules from student texts, the process underlined relevance to student learning. One of the participants noted that:

There are many rules in the book and I cannot remember all of them when I am writing. (Participant 5)

Another participant mentioned the following:

Sometimes when I do grammar practice, I do not know when I am [going to] use them, I am not sure, so I sometimes forget them. [It's] very hard to know exactly what rule you need to know when. (Participant 1)

Overall, it seems that the instructor's agentic practices helped create opportunities for grammar instruction that students could relate to writing. This would not have been possible had grammar items been taught discretely.

Illustration of the purpose of writing

Accomplishing good writing is not possible without a clear purpose. L2 writers are usually pre-occupied with producing error-free texts. As a result, this important aspect of writing is an afterthought for them. Findings suggest that teacher agency in the EAP classroom helped raise awareness about setting the purpose in writing.

I think that it is helpful—I do not have many problems about grammar but I have a lot of problem[s] with the content. Because I always make a lot of ideas, because I often repeat a lot in my essay and this kind of practice help[s] me organize my ideas and structures of my essay better. (Participant 3)

In the interview excerpt above the participant referred to a class activity in which the instructor initiated an impromptu discussion on the purpose and focus of writing. The participant explained that in spite of not having grammatical errors, his text suffered from lack of purpose. This participant further explained that one of his problems was that he had too many ideas. As a result, the main purpose of his writing would be lost.

Another participant mentioned that she considered “writing as writing”; that is, for her writing meant producing a lot of texts as she did not consider writing as a means of communicating meaningful ideas coherently. The following excerpt illustrates this.

I see writing as writing. I never think writing means something else, so I write as much as I can always. I do not think anything. But now I think, I am wrong. I have to plan for it and I must follow the goal. (Participant 2)

Noticing other students struggling with similar problems, the agentic self of the instructor prompted him to highlight this when they were receiving feedback. Although teaching “the purpose of writing” may be covered in class, emphasizing this particular point with reference to students' own texts seemed more meaningful to them.

Raising awareness about audience

Having a clear idea about the target audience helps contextualize the writing task. This helps students realize that every piece of writing is meant for communicating information with a target audience. The importance of audience while writing cannot be ingrained in students'

mind until they experience this at a practical level. The findings suggest that through the use of teacher's agentive practices students' audience awareness was enhanced. In order to implement this particular teaching technique, excerpts from student essays were projected on screen for the class to see and comment on. Students discussed the effect texts might have on an imagined audience. These exercises benefited students in ways that would not have been possible by explaining the notion of audience. The following interview excerpt illustrates this.

Even though it is clear in your head it may not be clear for others, it helps me think like other people. (Participant 3)

This participant explained although he knew that he had to write for a target audience, this wasn't clear to him until the instructor initiated an impromptu discussion on his texts that highlighted the intricacies of audience.

Another participant made the following remark about this particular agentive practice by instructor. She noted that this practice helped her raise critical awareness about audience in writing.

When I write it makes sense, but when I read with others on the [projector] screen, it doesn't make any sense. I really feel I was not thinking very hard when I write. When I read my writing with everybody in class it becomes more clear what I must do. (Participant 1)

Finally, another participant remarked that the activity related to audience helped make writing more meaningful and enjoyable to him. Realizing that his texts had to make sense to others, he noted that teacher's agentive practice helped him discover it.

I never thought what others think about my writing, I just write when I have to. But now when everyone reads [on projector screen], and finds problems, although I feel bad, but it's in good way. I now can see I must write more for others to understand; I will not write for my [own] understanding only. (Participant 4)

Raising awareness about writing styles

EAP students may feel frustrated due to the specific requirements of the academic genre. Making appropriate word choice, for instance, requires an advanced understanding about English language. The following excerpt from a student text illustrates this.

Children are the **colors** of our lives and **many people have changed their lives** when they have their first baby. (Participant 4)

This excerpt from student essay meant to describe the experience of the birth of his first child. At first reading, it might be apparent that the writer intended to use the word *colors* metaphorically. However, when read more critically, it would appear that the use of this metaphor may not collocate well for the intended meaning. On another level, it is also important for the student to note that metaphors are not commonly used in academic prose. This error thus created the occasion for instructor to delve further into the use of figurative

language in academic writing. The second highlighted part of the excerpt is an error related to subject and predicate. Although structurally correct, this clause would read more naturally if *their lives* is used in the subject position instead of *many people* as follows: *people's lives change when they have their first baby*. Stylistic errors such as these were common in student texts. Use of agentive practices enabled the instructor to bring this to students' attention as a useful instructional practice.

Another stylistic error noted by the instructor in student texts that prompted a follow-up class discussion is as follows:

Thus, the quality of education will be definitely decreased. (Participant 1)

The error in the above essay excerpt resulted from an incorrect use of passive voice. Although structurally correct, the sentence fails to communicate the intended meaning. Considering the importance of such sentence structures, the instructor initiated a follow-up discussion on voice in English. Structures such as this, when referenced in the context of students' actual writing, were easier to explain and more effective for student learning. Students seemed to find it easier to internalize the rules from their own writing. For example, the student who wrote the above sentence commented as follows.

I know active and passive voice in English, it's not a problem for me. At least I know the rules. But I don't know how I don't use them correct ways. I did not even know what the problem was when the teacher told me about the problem in my writing. But when he explained I realize this. It's hard for me, but this way of explanation is [has] made me understand. (Participant 1)

From the student remarks it appears that teaching grammar alone is not sufficient to address stylistic errors associated with writing. Instant feedback on students' own texts helps them identify such errors and internalize the corresponding rules. Instructors' agentive practices provided such learning opportunities to students.

Research question 2: What are the student perceptions about teachers' agentive practices in such a setting?

Findings indicate that participants perceived teacher's agentive practices in the classroom to be positive. They provided the following reasons why they thought teacher's agentive practices were effective: (a) it helped them apply the learned topics to writing; (b) it provided a more complete process of learning; (c) it minimized the stress of learning; and (d) it minimized the difficulty of internalizing grammar rules.

It helped them apply the learned topics to writing

One of the common concerns students shared during interviews was that there was usually little opportunity to apply what was discussed in the classroom to writing. Use of the teacher's agentive practices helped minimize this. For example, through agentive practices the instructor was able to make instruction more tangible. Consequently, students were able to apply what they learned to writing, which made a big difference in their learning process.

From the grammar book it is very abstract but in context it helps me see the use of the rule. In the context it doesn't remain just grammar it becomes the meaning from the entire sentence. (Participant 1)

In the excerpt above, the participant referred to the discussion on voice, which helped her identify grammar rules in the context of her own writing. She elaborated that although she knew the rules about voice, its application wasn't clear to her until the instructor explained it in reference to her writing.

Another participant noted that he had been studying grammar for a long time but he always had grammar errors in his writing. He contended that although he had good control over English grammar, somehow he wasn't able to apply it to his writing. This caused great frustration in his L2 learning process. Classroom feedback practices helped him see the connection between rules and their application to actual writing. The following interview excerpt illustrates this.

I have read grammar rules [for] a long time, when I was in Grade 3. But I still do not know what my writing problems are. Teacher marked many grammar problems in my writing. So it makes me frustrated. But this way [teacher's agentive practices] I can see and establish the connection [between grammar rules and their application to writing]. (Participant 3)

Finally, in the following excerpt another participant noted that she was never sure why she had to use a thesis statement in essays. Although she could summarize her ideas into a thesis of a sentence or two, she thought there were other ways to organize ideas as well. It was through feedback she had received during the whole class discussion involving explanations of the purpose of writing that she became clear of the usefulness of having a thesis statement. The following interview excerpt illustrates this.

I don't know why I write a thesis statement, but I know what is this. I can write this. But I can arrange my ideas other ways too. So why I write thesis statement? But it was clear when one day the teacher explained the purpose of writing. So I know now why [I need a] thesis statement. (Participant 2)

It provided a more complete process of learning

Somewhat related to the above, student writers reported that use of teacher's agentive practices in the classroom helped them experience a more complete process of learning. They explained that in a pre-planned lesson, instructors spend little time explaining the concepts derived from class discussions, since there is little room for deviation from the main topic. However, agentive practices afforded the instructor the flexibility to side- or back-track and provide students with more nuanced explanations. This helped fill the gap between what students had already internalized and the information they might have needed to get a more complete understanding about topics. In the following excerpt, the participant explained how the follow-up discussions afforded by teacher's agentive practices provided her with a more complete learning experience.

I can read the rules in grammar books many times, but I have problems, sometimes I don't know the rules. I think this [follow-up discussions] makes me..., I think I know them better and completely. (Participant 1)

Another participant remarked that class discussions helped her apply the various writing rules that were discussed. She commented that until one knew how to use the rules one learned, they were of no use. The following interview excerpt illustrates this.

Rules don't have any value [unless they can be applied]. I learned here how to use the rules. (Participant 5)

It minimized the stress of learning

The findings indicate that teacher's agentive practices provided students with additional support which made them feel less stressed. Language learning is stressful; EAP students become especially stressed since there is an expectation that they already have basic knowledge of English, and therefore, advanced writing skills. Findings suggest that providing students with additional support helps reduce the stress of learning. In the following interview excerpt, the participant explained how extra feedback on common problems helped reduce her stress.

I think this [the use of agentive practices] helps, because common mistakes when we wrote the thesis statement, when the teacher gives feedback we know oh here's my mistakes, when you show many statements, it shows many errors and I am not always thinking about these errors anymore that give me headache. (Participant 5)

Another participant commented on instructor's incorporation of various topics into classroom discussion, even though they were not part of the course syllabus.

The teacher even taught us what is not in the syllabus because we needed them. This makes it easy for me and I learn clearly and without [being] afraid. (Participant 4)

It minimized the unpredictability of learning language rules

A common challenge for many L2 learners is to encode different language rules in a manner that is comprehensible. Considering that English has myriad irregular grammar rules and expressions, explanations are often necessary so students can overcome the challenges these irregularities pose. Instructors need to explain the differences between regular and irregular constructions of various English forms. Findings suggest that agentive practices afforded the instructor to explicate grammar rules that were confusing to students (e.g., articles in English, unwarranted passive forms, the use of static verbs). This made learning about L2 writing most helpful. One participant noted the following in this regard.

I did not know why passive voice doesn't work, but when he [the instructor] explained on the [projector] screen now I know the reason. It is really helpful.

(Participant 1)

Another participant explained that after the instructor's explanation, she realized that there was always a reason why certain rules were followed in a language. This was not clear to her until the instructor explained this in class.

When the teacher show[s] it on the screen and explained I know there's [a] reason why this rule exist[s] even if it is confusing. I am not confused anymore.

(Participant 5)

In sum, the findings above provide insights into the efficacy of teacher's agentic practices in an L2 writing classroom. It appears that teacher agency is helpful in making classroom instruction more meaningful for and accessible to students. Student perceptions suggest that they view instructor's agentic practices positively and they believe that it helps enhance their learning.

Discussion

Considering the small sample size and short duration of the study the implications derived from findings need to be discussed cautiously. As well, one has to keep in mind that many implications may not be generalizable and will warrant further research. In spite of this, it can be said that the current study provides important insights into the efficacy of teacher agency in the writing classroom in an EAP context. The findings underscore that a teacher's agentic practices can help make classroom instruction more effective. With various challenges facing EAP instructors, especially those in the writing classroom, the findings provide directions with regard to how limitation of resources as well as curricular constraints can be somewhat mitigated by teachers' efficient handling of the teaching context. It seems that teacher agency plays an important role in helping instructors make the best out of a context of teaching.

From the findings it appears that some of the difficult choices that EAP writing instructors have to make with regard to selection of grammar items, feedback practices, teaching students about the purpose of writing, and importance of audience awareness can be accommodated if they use agentic practices—finding an appropriate moment to introduce these important but least discussed concepts. To illustrate, while it is not possible to discuss all grammar items in the classroom given the time constraints, instructors can focus on grammar errors that appear to affect most number of students in the class. It has at least two important benefits. First, student writers will see the relevance of attending to a specific grammar rule since it directly relates to their writing. Second, it will also draw students' attention and interest, considering its applicability to their writing development. Similarly, agentic practices help make instructor feedback on student writing more focused and specific (e.g., feedback on Participant 2 and 4's texts), which in turn, makes writing instruction more engaging. As the findings suggest, teaching the purpose of writing and importance of audience awareness in the EAP writing classroom can be implemented by whole class discussions using projector screens. When students engage in learning as a group, it reduces the stress of learning (e.g., Participants 4 and 5). In short, learning in the EAP writing classroom takes place more productively when students can make connections between discussion points and what they struggle with in their own writing.

Employing teacher's agentic practices helps create an effective ecology of L2 learning (e.g., van Lier, 2004, 2008) as well. To illustrate, when teachers use their agency, they take cues for instruction from the classroom itself, instead of following a hard and fast lesson plan. This allows them to employ their impromptu decision making abilities and connect their teaching with learners' *real* rather than *assumed* needs. On one hand, this allows teachers to focus on issues that are important for student learning in *the* classroom, on the other, students who have already mastered these topics can test the depth of their learning by participating in various classroom activities. In other words, through identification, creation, and application of practical activities within the context of EAP writing, instructors can provide students with experiences that are more complete and rewarding. This helps instructors build an organic relationship among instructional planning, learning tasks, discussions and tests. In a traditional EAP classroom in which instructors follow pre-planned lesson plans, students' actual needs and classroom activities may diverge. But when instructional practices are drawn from specific teaching contexts, learning activities tend to converge with student needs.

It also appears that students appreciate classroom instruction that has direct relevance to their immediate learning challenges, even if this means that the instructor deviated from predetermined lesson plans. The efficacy of teacher agency, thus, seems to be reciprocated by students' willingness to adapt to such teaching environments. This might seem to be the norm at least in contexts in which the current study took place.

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is that teacher agency seems to help students' *noticing* of important language forms and help their L2 development. According to L2 scholars (e.g., Chapelle, 1998; Richards, 2006; Schmidt, 1990) noticing is an important criterion of L2 development. It helps learners internalize the new language input. Considering that an input becomes an intake only when learners are made aware of the target language forms, teachers' agentic practices can play an important role in helping students identify and learn essential writing conventions and grammar rules. The findings of this study show that student writers appreciated the use of teacher agency in helping them identify the cause of their L2 learning difficulties. For example, participants shared how the instructor's deviation from the main course of teaching in order to explain various grammar rules or written expressions helped them follow these topics more effectively. The findings thus confirm that the use of teacher agency helps learners *notice* important L2 forms.

From an instructional point of view, while agentic practices provide instructors with more freedom in the classroom regarding what needs to be done in a specific context, this implies that instructors themselves have to reciprocate by taking responsibility of choosing the tasks that are relevant to student learning. This puts the onus on instructors in making sure that they make the right choices under pressure and without the advantage of having a structured approach to classroom instruction that comes with concrete lesson plans. Consequently, successful employment of teachers' agentic practices will require experience and continuous reflection on the part of instructors.

This implies that instructors have to be open to learning from trials and errors and continuously reflect on what works best in the classroom. This also implies that teacher-administrators have to be more flexible and accepting of an open-ended curriculum and

instructional practices which would be a departure from a traditional, lesson-plan-based curriculum. Considering that program administrators invest a lot of resources in developing curriculums, including lesson plans, this may not come as a welcome change. However, as recent studies (e.g., Colegrove & Zúñiga, 2018; Kitade, 2015; Ollerhead, 2010; Phyak & Bui, 2014; Zacharias, 2013) on this have shown, teachers' agentic practices have yielded success, especially in micro-level L2 policy implementation, e.g., classroom instruction. Since instructors are intimately related to various constraints in a classroom context, agentic practices help them overcome the challenges associated with these constraints.

Finally, the implementation of teachers' agentic practices has implications for future research. For example, it would be important to know what the commonalities and differences are in teachers' agentic practices in different EAP contexts based on various factors such as learners' proficiency levels, backgrounds, specific language skills, and class sizes. It is possible that certain agentic practices may work well in large classrooms, whereas they may not be as suitable in small classes. Similarly, certain agentic practices may be useful in a writing class, but may not work very well in a listening class. Research on these issues will provide clearer pictures of how teacher agency plays out in different teaching contexts. In this connection it is interesting to note that most teacher agency research up to this point has taken place in contexts where it is typical to have large class sizes and teachers often have to deal with constraints of teaching resources. L2 research has to build on the recent work to see how this particular classroom dynamic plays out in other contexts around the world.

Conclusion

The current study has been able to provide insights into how teacher's agentic practices play out in an EAP writing context and student perceptions regarding this. It is clear from the findings that teachers' agentic practices can help instructors overcome certain constraints in the classroom by making lessons more relevant to student learning, classroom tasks and discussions closely related to students' immediate needs, and instructional practices more flexible. Because the enactment of teacher agency largely depends on an individual's personal reflexes it is difficult to generalize common practices. On the same token, individual instructors need to be observant and must adopt a critical outlook while engaging in classroom practices.

Finally, it must be reiterated that considering the small sample size and shorter duration of the study, the findings must be interpreted cautiously. Similar research with a larger sample size needs to be conducted before the results can be generalized. In addition, to enhance the reliability, future studies should incorporate different and additional data sources. That said, the current study has been able to provide useful insights into how teachers' agentic practices can play an important role in making EAP writing instruction more meaningful for and accessible to students.

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Appendix

Semi-structured interview questions

1. Can you tell me about the instructional practices in the writing course you are taking this term?
2. Tell me about what you have learned in this course. Explain how this learning took place.
3. How useful has this course been for improving your writing? Give examples.
4. Tell me about what stood out for you as far as the instructor's teaching is concerned (you are not evaluating your instructor; just tell me anything about the instruction that you found new, helpful, odd, and/or different).
5. What did you do when you had something in the class that you did not understand? Give me the details with examples?
6. How useful was the instructor's teaching techniques throughout the term? Was it effective? Why/why not? / Was it not effective? Why/why not?
7. Would you like other writing instructors to follow the teaching techniques used in this course? Why/Why not?
8. Do you feel that all your questions were answered in the class? Please give me the details with examples?
9. What difficulties, if any, did you face in the course? How did you overcome them—please give details with examples.
10. Sometimes the instructors may have discussed topics that were not part of the course outlines—do you think this was useful for your learning? Why/why not?
11. Overall, what do you have to say about the way this course has been taught this term? Give me as many details as you can with examples.