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## Teaching English Grammar Editing of Narratives to ESL Students by Using Grammar Clusters in Written Discourse

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For the last two decades grammar instruction has been ignored in many language classes due to the great influence of methods such as the “natural approach.” This results in the lack of accuracy in writing particularly among ESL students in academic settings. In order to overcome this problem, some researchers claim that using grammar clusters is an ideal approach for ESL students. In this paper, I try to examine the efficiency of teaching grammar using grammar clusters in different genres. After using my lesson sequence, I found that students could benefit from this kind of new instruction for editing their own writing after they have learned to notice and edit the grammar cluster used with narratives. When teachers present grammar clusters in context and have students apply this knowledge to their own writing, students can acquire complex grammar and sharpen their accuracy in writing more easily.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Since the strong impact of Krashen’s (1982) natural approach and communicative language teaching on second language acquisition, grammar instruction has lost its proper place in the language classroom during the last two decades. Many researchers and teachers argued that grammar instruction should be abandoned in writing classrooms (Lewis, 1993; Trustgott, 1996, 1999). This fashion results in a lack of accuracy in writing particularly among ESL students in academic settings. The students in this category should be able to perform academic literacy skills; they must understand textbooks and submit various types of written reflections in English. For the successful completion of these kinds of tasks, thorough grammar knowledge is second to none and as important as fluency or sentence complexity in writing for developing language competence.

In this paper, I employed the approach using grammar clusters in written discourse for

teaching grammar as an alternative way of teaching grammar more effectively for ESL students. First, I studied the necessity and advantages of grammar in context and then, in order to explicitly support the efficiency of this approach, I performed an experiment using an aspect of grammar clusters that are used in authentic narrative texts in college ESL classrooms. In the process, the followings are developed as the research questions.

1. How much do students improve in a verb editing exercise of a narrative after grammar cluster instruction?
2. How well do representative students edit their use of verbs in their own writing after grammar cluster instruction?
3. How do students feel about the approach using grammar clusters in written discourse?
4. What are the advantages and challenges of grammar cluster instruction with the narrative genre in writing classroom?

## **II . WHY WE USE GRAMMAR CLUSTERS IN CONTEXT FOR GRAMMAR INSTRUCTION**

Recently, many researchers (Ferris, 2003a; Leki, 1992; Shih, 1998) have agreed with the fact that grammar should be taught in L2 writing classes. One of the most prevailing ways to teach grammar is error correction on students' writing in the ESL environment. Ferris (2003b) and Frodesen and Holten (2003) also have performed much research on the effective feedback.

Even though the debate on the optimal way in giving error correction on students' writing is still on going, some of the suggestions for feedback from some research deserve to be considered. Among them, Ferris (2003a) provided evidence to show that students can benefit from error feedback from teachers. According to her, students can improve their accuracy of grammar in writing through error correction or feedback in many cases if there are several options kept by teachers. Among those options, two were very convincing in giving feedback on errors. First of all, the feedback should be given indirectly between multiple drafts using feedback forms such as underlining, circling, highlighting, or drawing, etc. because students can have time to think about their own errors before editing. Second, if the feedback is more focused on major categories of errors than other minor errors such as tense, word choice, and word form etc., the instruction of feedback should be more efficient.

Ancker (2000) also acknowledged the necessity of grammar instruction and suggested teacher should distinguish the type of error first and then give suitable feedback based on the clear objectives in each lesson plan. Moreover, the high level of correctness is really important in written texts for effective communication as Little (1994) pointed out.

Given these views, grammar does not seem acquired naturally and students should internalize the structure of a language to use the correct form through the instruction for a period of time. However, as seen in the literature mentioned above, instant, direct, and too much specific grammar feedback is not recommended. Furthermore, I can notice that there are several limitations in those approaches. First, the efficiency is still vague about which way of feedback is better than the others: implicit or explicit feedback, coded or uncoded feedback, etc. Second, feedback can discourage or discard student's motivation for acquiring grammar. As Martinsen (2000) suggested, students are likely to recognize the grammar as a win/lose game. Thus, if they have too much feedback from the teacher, the students are likely to discard the grammar study at ease. In light of this, feedback approach also has a restriction to teach grammar effectively. Third, giving feedback is too time consuming for teachers who particularly have large size class. Besides, many students also do not pay much attention to the correction from the teacher.

In order to overcome these problems some researchers have claimed that using grammar clusters<sup>1</sup> in written discourse is an ideal approach for ESL students (Byrd, 1998; Celce-Murcia, 1997; Harlig, 1997; Reid, 1998) and they introduced the grammar clusters that can be found in various genres. According to Johns (2003), genres are very useful to learners and to teachers of composition because those who become familiar with genres expand their own writing more easily and correctly. While various kinds of methods are coming out for teaching grammar, Frodesen (2001) argued that ESL/EFL writers could learn greatly from the approach how various grammatical features and grammatical systems are used in authentic written texts. Byrd (1998) and Reid (1998) also suggested grammar instruction based on discourse studies in ESL writing class. Celce-Murcia (1997) emphasized the importance of grammar lesson not in sentence level but at the discourse level, pointing out the inconsistency of sentence based grammar within a CLT framework. In other words, in this new approach they adopted the new approach against traditional 'divide-up-the-grammar lesson.' Under the given circumstance, teaching grammar clusters using different genres is said to be one of the most effective approaches as an alternative way of teaching grammar especially in writing class.

### III. THE STUDY

The prior discussion has argued that grammar with context is an effective approach for

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<sup>1</sup> Grammar clusters refer to a group of grammatical features that can be found in each written text such as tense, phrases, and so on. For example, there are such grammar clusters as simple past tense related to foreground, other tenses related to background, proper nouns, and time words/phrases in narrative text. More detailed discussion on this subject can be found in Kim, Kwang Hyun (2006).

language acquisition in an ESL classroom. In what follows, I try to show how well the approach is applicable in the real classroom through the use of grammar clusters. I describe the whole process of the study and compare the differences between two test scores obtained from the pre-test and post-test. In addition to this, the students' editing ability is examined by editing their own writing. Finally, I report on the students' responses to this approach.

## 1. Participants

The participants for this study were 24 students of an ESL 265W class at Fresno City College during the fall semester of 2004. There were 10 female students and 14 male students in the class. This class was an ESL course which focused on writing/grammar and lasted 16 weeks. Most of the students were so called generation 1.5 from Mexico, Vietnam, Thailand, India, Korea, Lao, China, Hmong, etc. Generally, they seemed to have a fairly high oral proficiency which is called 'eye learner' but their literacy skill was still low.

## 2. Testing and Research Design<sup>2</sup>

For lesson sequence I chose a grammar aspect (tense) in the narrative essay since the usage of tense is one of the most difficult features for ESL students. Harlig (1997) pointed out that the use of authentic texts in teaching tense and aspect is not only a means contextualizing grammar, but is essential in acquiring meaning and use. After obtaining permission from the college and the instructor, I gave the students a pre-test on tense to check the degree of previous knowledge of tense. The test consisted of 20 underlined verbs and students were supposed to find the wrong forms and to correct them.

I then introduced the narrative genre briefly and gave lectures for two hours on tenses such as simple past and simple present in narrative essay using grammar clusters in several sample writings. In the classes, the students were given the sample writings to tell the correct usage of past tense after understanding the role of past tense and the differences with other tenses in narrative texts. The length of sample texts that I delivered was two paragraphs as Celce-Murcia (1997) suggested. She asserted that at least two paragraph length discourse-level examples are required for instructing each grammar feature successfully. During the lecture I tried to raise students' consciousness about the tense of verb by circling or underlining so the whole class could see on a transparency. Through this kind of intensive and recursive activity, students perceived specific features of the text and

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<sup>2</sup> For the detail of pre, post-test, and sample input that I used in the classroom, please see the appendix A-C.

practiced new words, phrases, and specific grammar structures (Willis, 1996). This was also referred to as the Focus on Form approach (White, 1998) where it was on a par with grammar teaching using grammar clusters in written discourse in the view that this input-oriented approach helps the learners' attention on a certain type of grammar cluster through enhanced input.

Next, the students took a post-test in the same structure of the pre-test. After finishing both tests, I measured the students' ability to apply their new knowledge when writing and editing a story based on a sequence of pictures. In this task, students first created a narrative story<sup>3</sup> based on the sequence of pictures. Then they had about 10 minutes to check and underline their own writing whether the usages of the verb needed to be corrected. Finally, I distributed questionnaires that are consisted of 10 questions rating the attitude level of the students with likert scale to see the satisfaction of the participants.

The data was analyzed by comparing the score of the pre-test and post-test to assess the students' learning. The result is measured as a means of effectiveness of grammar teaching in context. Besides, I examined the students' writing and editing task of three representative students in the class. In a similar vein, the teaching technique will be evaluated by passing out a questionnaire to study students' satisfaction and attitude toward the approach that I adopted.

### 3. Results

The score frequency between the pre-test and post-test of tense editing is given in Figure 1. This demonstrates an improvement in grammar task by showing the score difference in each test.<sup>4</sup> Particularly, the score range between 16~20 displays clear discrepancy from 5 to 13 students.

Figure 1 shows that the scores obtained are significantly different (6 points) in both tests. The average score of the pre-test is 10 while post-test score appears to be 16 out of 24 respectively.

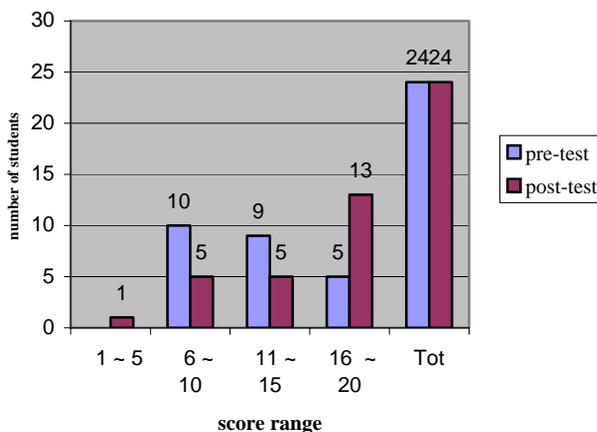
Along with this result, I also selected three writing samples from the different levels of groups depending on how well they made and edited their own writing after a grammar cluster instruction. And most of the students' writings could be classified into three groups - advanced, high-intermediate, and intermediate - by the criteria of text length, verb form,

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<sup>3</sup> Narratives generally include traditional storytelling in fiction and tales as well as history books, case studies, etc. For this reason, narratives often contain past, other tenses as the grammatical features.

<sup>4</sup> Through the observing the class for 4 weeks, I tried to measure the level of the participants of the study and chose each test after discussing with the instructor. Thus, it is safe to say that the level of two tests is quite same.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Score Frequency Distributions for Pre-test and Post-test of Tense Editing**



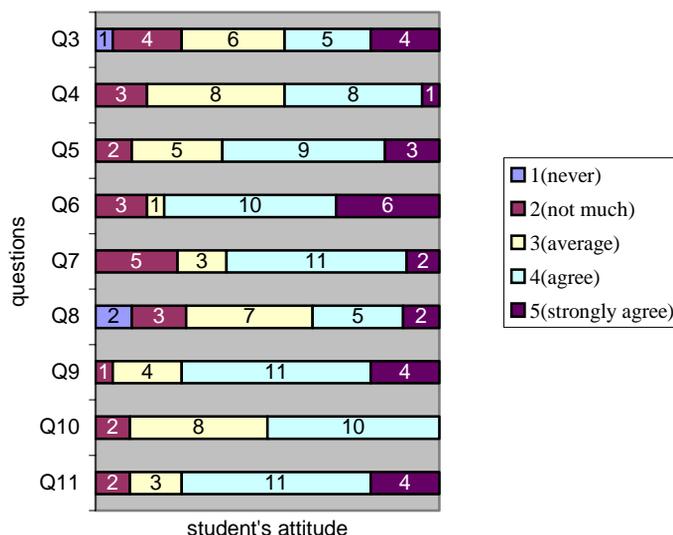
tense shift, and so on. In these sample writings, each representative student first recognized the verb form in the narrative story that they made. Since they practiced the form-based approach through such activities as underlining the tense verb, tense shift, making a narrative story, etc., they showed the ability to notice the story was organized based on past tense in the narrative essay: *They invited to Mr. Smith, The couple woke up very early to start, It seemed perfect and on time for the next, They decided to pass at the dining-room.* While checking the verb forms, the students showed a difference in their sample writings, though. Two students in advanced and high-intermediate significantly displayed the ability to correct verb tense usage as needed: *They all shake (shook) hands happily, The food disappears (disappeared), Mr. Smith have (had) a dinner party.* However, an intermediate level student showed a problem to edit mistakes in her own writing although she seemed to understand the basic tense in narrative writing. In many cases students did not make many mistakes in using verbs possibly due to the grammar in context within the grammar clusters approach during the lesson. However, one consideration is that two students in the class had little knowledge of verb forms and tenses as well. At this point, the teacher may find some students require more specific/basic grammar lessons particularly in ESL classes and some EFL classes. Analysis of a narrative writing sample in the way described in this study can also be used as a diagnostic tool in a writing class.

Figure 2 displayed the result of surveying the satisfaction of the approach that I employed in the class. 20 students responded to the questions in the questionnaire<sup>5</sup>. According to Figure 2, most students (80%) agree with the approach that was given for grammar instruction. Particularly, 30% of students strongly preferred the approach as

<sup>5</sup> See the appendix D for the questions.

shown in question 6 and half of them answered that this approach was a better way than general grammar explanation as an instruction as in question 10.

**FIGURE 2**  
The Number of Responses Distribution for Each Question



Questions 1 and 2 asked the general attitude on writing and reading for students. Most of them showed that they like to read and write in English. For the amount of the sample reading, 15 students agreed that it was enough for understanding tense shift of verbs in question 7. As seen in question 9, 75 % of students felt that they improved their knowledge after the lecture using grammar clusters of verb tenses in narrative essays. Furthermore, 15 students answered that they felt this approach was also helpful for understanding the organization of narrative essay as in question 11. On the whole, it seems that students are satisfied with the grammar clusters in discourse for learning grammar knowledge.

#### IV. DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

In this study, I argued for the efficiency of input oriented grammar instruction using grammar clusters in written discourse. To show this, I did an experiment in an ESL classroom to gather supporting evidence. As seen in Figure 1, students benefited from the teaching that I adopted here and showed an improvement in editing the past tense in narrative essays. This is also suggested by the students' editing task on their own writings after they learned to edit for tense in the context.

While other output-oriented grammar instruction like error-correction method has some problems as mentioned in section 2, there are quite a few advantages for teaching grammar using selected grammar clusters from different types of authentic texts. Most of all, students can learn very accurate usage of grammar in context. The grammatical distinctiveness in the genre would be a foundation for starting a grammar lesson. While reading and analyzing the grammar clusters provided repeatedly in good sample writings, students can try to acquire complex and unusual grammatical patterns through frequent recognition of each grammar cluster in the cognitive-based processes.

Unlike the ways that are provided in error correction, it can be said that students can perceive with ease the idiosyncratic feature of each grammar cluster in the text owing to this enhanced input and intensive practice provided. Namely, grammatical patterns in written discourse can serve as a source of important examples of grammatical features that can give students more choices when creating new text. This was demonstrated in the students' writing results in the previous section. Namely form-focused approach elevates students' awareness of grammar features for later writing tasks without needing a large amount of teacher feedback.

As Martinsen (2000) suggested, students feel like they have a huge obstacle when they have too much feedback about grammar in a writing classroom. However, those students-oriented activities in grammar instruction using context may contribute to lowering the students' affective filter. This was well reflected in the result of the questionnaire in Figure 2. Furthermore, in an advanced level class, students may not only apply the grammar features but also edit grammatical elements in their own writing as in the task that was given in the class.

I presented grammar lessons for ESL students who were getting post-secondary education under the EAP (English for Academic Purpose) as well as in an EFL environment. However, the scope of sample writing can be extended flexibly to any genre depending on the students' needs in writing. This is another good point of this approach. That is to say, students can focus on different genres depending on their interests or needs. For example, students can be businesspeople or public officers who want to practice writing in ESP situations. For businesspeople to provide types of business letters and related grammar as sample writing is a good way to teach grammar.

It is a challenging and important task for teachers to find a suitable text that contains enough examples of grammatical clusters in a way. However, if teachers use the corpus software<sup>6</sup> that has a function to sort out the text depending on a certain form, they can gain the text more easily. Along with this, teachers should perform a needs assessment to make

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<sup>6</sup> For narrative reading, visit [www.storybase.net](http://www.storybase.net). This site introduces a software that is an interesting attempt at indexing narrative situations.

better choices of texts that correlates well with students' primary purpose for learning English. For this issue, Reid (1998) also pointed out that teachers or curriculum coordinators in EAP programs should have a critical ability to select materials required for different levels or purposes of classes in order to prepare accurate text materials for grammar lessons in the composition classroom.

Likewise, teachers also need to employ this approach to low-level students with texts that fit their level. However, a mini grammar lesson, which is related to certain kinds of grammar clusters, should be done particularly for low level students before analyzing grammar in the text for more effective grammar instruction. For example, since tense and aspect of verb are one of the hardest grammatical concepts to ESL student to identify, students need to self assess their prior knowledge of tense through an editing task of a narrative essay. By the same token, the activity such as text conversion, which students rewrite a short text in a present tense to a text in a past tense, is a good method for low level students whereas creating a text in a multi-draft approach is good for advanced students (Frodesen, 2001).

Ultimately, grammar ought to be taught in ESL as well as EFL classroom. As for L2 speakers, they should have time to internalize the grammatical rules from English. This kind of process cannot be activated naturally in writing processes. Unlike many other output-oriented approaches such as error-correction on grammar teaching, it seems to see the straight bond to students' knowledge in grammar teaching using discourse. Thus, as observed in the experiment performed in this paper, it is possible to say that grammar instruction using grammar clusters in the different genres gives good reasons for helping students acquire and sharpen the complex grammar. And teachers should consider written discourse as a main tool in teaching grammar instruction of L2 writing. In this study, I focused on tense in narrative essays for only ESL students. However, the narrative grammar clusters could be extended to the various kinds of grammatical features such as demonstratives, aspect, articles, existential "there" sentences, it clefts, etc. relying on class level or objectives for Korean students.

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## APPENDIX A

### Pre-test

Direction: There are some mistakes in the underlined verbs in the following story. Find and correct them.

This is a story about two friends, James and David, who travel together. While the two friends are traveling, they had seen a bear walking toward them. James, being so scared, climbed up into the tree, forgot all about his friend, and hid himself. David realized that he has no chance single-handed against the bear so he pretends to be dead, since he heard that a bear will never touch a dead body. While David was lying down, the bear is coming to his head, muzzled and snuffed at his nose, ears, and heart. He immovably hold his breath, and finally the bear was walking away. After the bear had gone, James comes down from the tree and asked what it was that the bear has whispering to him. James was thinking that the bear says something to David. David was replying “the bear bade me have a care how I kept company with those who leave their friends in the lurch.”

*From A Harvest of World Folk Tales*

## APPENDIX B

### Post-test

Direction: There are some mistakes in the underlined verbs in the following story. Find and correct them.

Rocky Lyons never tires of hearing about “The Little Engine That Could.” Last Halloween his parents find out just how much the story means to him, and to them. Rocky’s Dad, Marty Lyons, was away playing football for the New York Jets. His mom, Kelly, is driving home through rural Alabama with five-year-old Marty, Jr., known as Rocky, asleep beside her. Suddenly, their pickup truck hit a huge pothole. It bounces out, flips over, and falls down a hill to the bottom of forty-foot ravine. “I had blood all over my face and in my eyes, and I thought I was blind,” Mrs. Lyons recalls. “I told Rocky to get away because I thought the truck might explode.”

The boy obeyed-and then ran back to try to pull her from the wrecked car. “Come on, Mom. I can help you get up the hill. I can push,” he says. All of 4 feet and 2 inches and 55 pounds, Rocky began to push his mother up the slope. “Gosh Mom, I bet you weigh a thousand pounds,” he said. Even in pain, Mrs. Lyons has to smile at that. But halfway up the hill, she tells her son she could go no farther.

“Oh, Mom, think of the little rain: I think I can, I think I can, I think I can. That’s what it said,” he insisted. They start up again. Finally, they crawl to the highway, where a passing car take them to the hospital. Rocky’s mother had two broken shoulders and needed 70 stitches to close the wounds on her face. Without her son’s perseverance, she’s sure she would have bled to death.

*From Newsweek*

## APPENDIX C

For Lecture

### *Sample 1*

Pamela, a young college student, **was traveling** to a country in Africa on Quantum Airlines, but first she **had** to take a connecting flight from Denver to Los Angeles, the international flight’s city of departures. She **arrived** at the Denver airport only to find that the flight to Los Angeles **had been** canceled earlier, thereby forcing her to miss her plane. The arrival time of the later plane, however, **was** dangerously close to the departure time of the Quantum flight to Africa.

Upon arriving at the Los Angeles airport, Pamela **ran** to catch the departing flight. As she **arrived** at the gate, she **saw** the door closing. When she **asked** the gate attendant to let her board the plane, the airline employee **said**, “Sorry ma’am, but once the gate has been shut, we’re no longer allowed to board any passengers. You’ll have to get the next flight.” Pamela usually **cried** when she **was** angry, but this time, her face **reddened** and her rage **was** visible.

### *Sample 2*

Though his father **had been** a television producer when he **lived** in Vietnam and his mother **had been** a dancer and an actress, neither one **was** happy when their son, Xuan Tri (Dustin) **decided** to become an actor here in the United States. They **thought** Dustin should be an engineer and they **worked** hard to pay for his college. In fact, they **went** on paying for his college tuition for more than a year after he **had dropped** out because they **thought** he was still in school. When they **found** out he **had been** taking acting lessons and auditioning for TV roles, they **were** very angry and disappointed.

### Past time Narrative Grammar

(1) **Foreground knowledge** (what happened in the story): simple past tense    cf) past progressive

*e.g.*

(2) **Background knowledge** (additional information): past perfect (present, present perfect)

*e.g.*

## APPENDIX D

Questionnaire

*Thank you so much for participating in my survey. Please answer the questions as honestly as possible.*

*Your background*

Age: Native country: Male or Female

Native Language:

- 1. Do you enjoy reading in English?** Yes No
- 2. Do you enjoy writing in English?** Yes No
- 3. Do you think grammar needs to be learned separately from reading or writing class?**  
1(never) 2(not much) 3(average) 4 (agree) 5(strongly agree)
- 4. Did you get the grammar that you need through text context?**  
1(never) 2(not much) 3(average) 4 (agree) 5(strongly agree)
- 5. Is having many readings for learning a certain grammar cluster more useful for your grammar knowledge and writing ability?**  
1(never) 2(not much) 3(average) 4 (agree) 5(strongly agree)
- 6. Do you think that reading a sample reading is helpful for improving your grammar skill?**  
1(never) 2(not much) 3(average) 4 (agree) 5(strongly agree)
- 7. Was the amount of reading provided enough for you to understand tense shift of verbs?**  
1(never) 2(not much) 3(average) 4 (agree) 5(strongly agree)
- 8. Do you think grammar instruction should be done before reading a sample reading?**  
1(never) 2(not much) 3(average) 4 (agree) 5(strongly agree)
- 9. Do you feel any improvement after learning tense shift in the text (or from context)?**  
1(never) 2(not much) 3(average) 4 (agree) 5(strongly agree)
- 10. Do you think this way is better than regular grammar instruction (general grammar explanation)?**  
1(never) 2(not much) 3(average) 4 (agree) 5(strongly agree)
- 11. Do you think this approach is also helpful for understanding the organization of narrative essays?**  
1(never) 2(not much) 3(average) 4 (agree) 5(strongly agree)
- 12. If you have any difficulty in learning grammar through the text provided, please specify.**

Applicable levels: post-secondary education

Key words: narratives, grammar clusters, input-oriented, accuracy, grammar editing, written

discourse, context, accuracy

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