
Teaching and Assessing Writing Using a Triage Approach

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Introduction

The word *triage* is a term used in the medical field to explain the “sorting of and allocation of treatment to patients...according to a system of priorities designed to maximize the number of survivors” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). The use of this word in this teaching tip denotes a prescriptive approach to assessing writing. The teacher is the doctor, the students are the patients, and the writing errors are the symptoms that need to be addressed by being sorted, prioritized, and treated. The Triage approach to a student’s writing process is a way to help students notice (Schmidt, 1990), recognize, and apply an appropriate treatment for their writing weaknesses.

This teaching tip can be conducted within a variety of learning situations. It can be applied to English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning situations that fit the post-pandemic era we currently live in or at the other end of the spectrum, a well-funded English for Academic Purposes (EAP) institution that includes tutors and language centers for learning. This article will focus primarily on explaining how to implement this teaching tip in a post-pandemic ESL environment where resources are limited.

The teaching tip is simple in its delivery. The teacher assigns students a topic to write about. Each student writes on the assigned topic, reviews their own work and a peer’s work, identifies writing errors within their own work and a peer’s work, compiles a list of writing errors which also includes errors listed from the teacher’s review, prioritizes what errors need treatment first, and then completes the treatment process using a three-pronged approach. The complete teaching tip can be repeated as many times as the teacher sees the need. Using this teaching tip will help students become better writers and build within them an awareness of their own writing strengths and weaknesses.

Literature Review

Much has already been written about corrective feedback, self-assessment and peer-assessment in L2 writing. There is evidence to suggest that in regards to corrective feedback, scaffolding the feedback for individual learners helps learners become more self-regulated and independent learners (Bitchener, 2012). Andrade et al. (2007) found that self-assessment or self-review not only helped the learners align expectations with the teacher, especially with the help of a rubric, but also eased the learning process. Other studies that focused on combining the self-correction and peer-correction techniques found that using both techniques simultaneously had a significant impact on reducing student errors and improving the quality of their writing (Yanti, et al., 2022; Ganji, 2009).

In addition to looking at research studies of the benefits of the different feedback techniques, it is important to define the principles of “noticing” and “self-regulated learning” since they are principles that this teaching tip shows as possible products of its implementation. Schmidt’s (1990) “noticing hypothesis” posits that learning takes place when learners become aware of their errors. In light of this, this teaching tip is designed to help learners become more aware of their writing errors during the different assessment processes. As for “self-regulated learning,” Pintrich (1995) suggests that a self-regulated learner is one who acts for themselves, has a goal in mind, and controls their own behavior, motivation, emotions, and thinking. Following the steps of this teaching tip, which seeks to combine the techniques of corrective feedback, self-assessment and peer-assessment for assessing writing, the principle of “noticing” as it pertains to language acquisition (Schmidt, 1990), and the principle of self-regulated learning as defined by Pintrich (1995), will assuredly create self-regulated and independent learners with the tools necessary to becoming more proficient and skilled writers.

Procedure:

Step One: In-class writing assignment: Present the class with the first in-class writing topic. The topic should be something that students have background knowledge in to trigger schemata; it can also be on a topic that is currently being discussed in class. The topic should fit the proficiency of the students. If students have lower proficiency in English, the teacher can assign a simple topic such as

“why do you want to learn English?” If the student is at a higher proficiency, the topic can be a little more complex; for example, *“write about three important lessons that you have learned in your lifetime about relationships or about yourself.”* For a higher academic English course the topic can be related to what is being discussed in class; for example, *“In our discussion of the ‘Allegory of the Cave’ we talked about ‘modern caves’ in our life. In a four to five paragraph essay explain how culture can be a ‘cave.’ Explain what you think some chains are that bind you to this cave.”* The length of the writing sample could be three to five sentences or a paragraph for lower proficiency students or a three to five paragraph essay for higher proficiency students. The writing can be timed to check for automaticity of the language or untimed depending on the needs of the students.

Step Two: Three Reviews and Identifying Writing Errors: After the writing activity is completed, the next phase of the triage approach begins. This phase deals with identifying what writing errors students are making in order to prescribe treatment. This consists of completing three reviews: self-review, peer-review (or online review), and teacher review. For each review, a writing review checklist (Appendix A) is completed.

For the self-review assignment, students first complete the writing review checklist (Appendix A). This checklist draws their attention to strengths and weaknesses in their writing style. They then complete a second checklist, the grammar review checklist (Appendix B) by marking in the right-hand column the number of times each grammar error occurs. This helps them to identify common grammar errors within their writing sample. For the peer-review process, assign students a partner. Each partner will read the other partner’s writing sample, complete the writing review checklist (Appendix A), and then discuss with the writer any comments they made as they completed the review checklist. The peer-review assignment may take a little more teacher planning and effort if the class is being taught remotely. For the peer-review assignment in an online class, the teacher can assign each student a partner and connect each student with their partner through email, messenger, or any one of the online video applications available to students, such as, Zoom, google meet, skype, etc. If it is difficult for a student to meet with a peer using one of the online applications listed above because of

problems with low bandwidth, different time zones, or lack of resources, they could be directed instead to online resources such as Grammarly, ProWritingAid, and or WhiteSmoke, etc., for more input about their writing. Using one of these online resources would take the place of the peer-review. Some in-class teaching activities surrounding these online resources may be needed to help students become more familiar with the use of these resources. There are limits to what technology can do in comparison to a teacher; however, online software have been found to be effective tools for students editing their own mistakes (Cowan et al., 2014). Finally, the last review in the “three reviews” step is completed by the teacher. The same pattern can be applied to the teacher review. The teacher could meet with the students to discuss their writing strengths and weaknesses according to both the writing review checklist (Appendix A) and the grammar review checklist (Appendix B)

At the completion of the “three reviews” process, the student should have within their possession three writing review checklists and two grammar review checklists. From these checklists, they can complete a triage of their writing weaknesses. For the writing review checklists, students will look at all the errors identified in the three checklists and then identify the one that occurs the most. They will then focus on improving this error in step three. For the grammar review checklists, the students will look at all the grammar errors listed in the two grammar review checklists and count how many times a grammar error was committed. They then choose the grammar error that had the highest count as their focus for the treatment process.

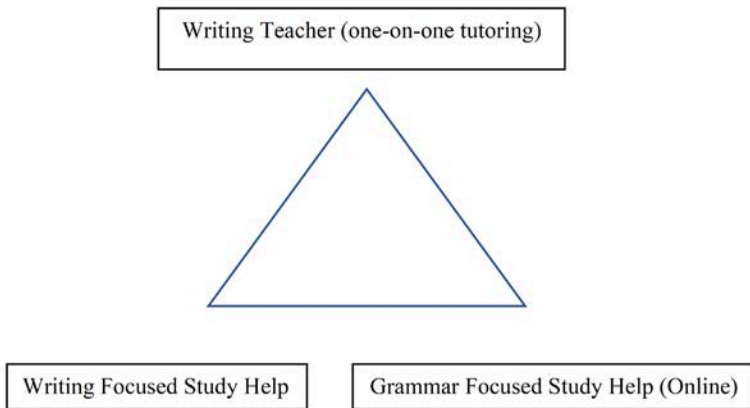
Step Three: The three-pronged approach: After the writing and grammar errors have been identified at the end of step two, the treatment is prescribed and step three begins. The treatment is a three-pronged approach. In this three-pronged approach, students will do three things to address their immediate writing and grammar problems. These three things can be adapted according to what resources are available to students. In this post-pandemic era where resources have become more readily available online (e.g., The Purdue Online Writing Lab, Grammarly, Grammar Girl), and remote conferencing is much more streamlined (e.g., Zoom, Google Meet, Skype), the three-pronged approach could be the following: meet

with writing teacher for one-on-one tutoring (instead of the tutor), study a writing strategy online (instead of attending a workshop at the institution's learning center), and work on a grammar weakness online (instead of at the institution's learning center).

Three-pronged approach for an ESL/EFL writing class with limited resources

Figure 1 shows a visual depiction of the three-pronged approach described in this teaching tip.

Figure 1. Three-pronged approach



Writing Teacher (one-on-one tutoring):

For the first part of the three-pronged approach, students can either meet with a writing tutor, if one is available, or meet with their writing teacher. This may mean more work for the teacher; however, the benefits of a one-on-one session with students is very valuable to a student's learning (Grasha, 2010). To prepare for the tutoring session, students should have with them the following: their writing sample, all of their completed checklists from step two, and an idea of what writing and grammar weaknesses to discuss with their teacher. The writing and grammar weaknesses should have been chosen from step two. It should be the

most frequently noted errors written on their checklists from the self-review, peer-review (online review), and teacher review.

During the tutor session, the tutor (or teacher) will go over the student's writing sample first with the student, then look over the checklists the student brought to the appointment. The tutor will ask the student what topic they wish to discuss (giving students some control over the appointment) and then proceed from there. They will then discuss a few writing and grammar tips based on the topics of choice to help the students with their writing and grammar. The suggested timing of the session is 30 minutes with a possible extension on time if the need arises.

Writing Focused Study Help:

The next two prongs of the approach are made up of the writing and grammar focused study help. These two areas are separated for the purpose of this teaching tip to allow for a more focused form of study. The topic for the writing focused study should concentrate on the conventions of writing (i.e., structure, topic sentences, style, etc.); for example, if the writing objective was a paragraph, did the student follow the paragraph structure and include a topic sentence, supporting details, and a conclusion. If the writing objective was an essay, did the student follow the essay structure and include a thesis statement, introduction, correct rhetorical pattern, etc. In an environment with limited resources, the teacher could record a workshop on a specific topic and have students watch the recording and complete some assignments on the assigned topic at a later time outside of class. As the teacher, you could also provide online resources for students to study. One such online resource is: Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL Purdue, 2022). This website has resources on academic writing, writing style, essay writing, paragraphs and paragraphing, etc. This is a great resource for students as it is rich in useful writing information.

Grammar Focused Study Help:

The grammar focused study help is a companion to the writing focused study help. The grammar focused study help can include topics such as subject verb agreement, verb tense, articles, modifiers, pronouns, prepositions, etc. It is also recommended that students choose the topic for this section from the feedback they received from the two reviewers in step two of the triage approach (see Ap-

pendix B). As the teacher, you could create a list of online study help resources for students to choose from based on the grammar review checklist (Appendix B). Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL Purdue) provides study help on many grammar topics for English as a Second Language Learners. Some of the topics listed on the OWL Purdue website specific to grammar are: Combining Sentences, Nominalizations and Subject Position, Prepositions, Pronouns, Punctuation, Paraphrasing and Summary, etc. The website also includes OWL Exercises such as: Grammar Exercises, Punctuation Exercises, Spelling Exercises, Sentence Structure, Sentence Style, Writing Numbers, and ESL Exercises. This website is very useful not only for writing focused study help, but also for the grammar focused study help angle of the three-pronged approach as well. Other resources available for grammar study help can be found on YouTube such as, JenniferESL, Bob the Canadian, or EF podEnglish, etc. It is recommended that the teacher study these videos beforehand to help tailor the online resources to the student's needs. Resources available online target different proficiency levels and different topics so finding what fits your student's proficiency and grammar needs best would make this treatment of their writing errors more effective.

The purpose of the writing focused and grammar focused study help is two-fold, it provides learners with online resources that they can revisit at any time during their studies thus creating self-regulated learners, and it strengthens or solidifies the information that the student has learned from their teacher during the writing teacher session. Repetitiveness of key concepts can eventually lead to automaticity because of familiarity. Having multiple points of contact on a subject can also act as "checks and balances" for the student so they are hearing about the same topic from multiple experts rather than just one.

Step Four: Reporting: After students have completed the three-pronged approach, they will write a report (in essay format) detailing what they did for each of the three points in the triangle. This helps the student to track their learning process similar to what journaling does, and gives them another chance to revisit what they have learned and hopefully display their learning through their writing. The first paragraph will state the topic of the in-class essay, the feedback they received from the reviews, and a list of the three things they did to complete the Triage. In the body of the essay, they should describe their tutor session (or teacher session),

what grammar weakness they studied, and what they learned in the writing study help website or workshop. The last paragraph will be what they learned from this Triage process and whether they feel there was any improvement in their writing. From these reports, the teacher can assess the student's writing and examine how well they have applied what they have learned from the Triage assignments. The reporting step of this teaching tip is important for students. It is a self-reflection of their own writing which is integral to the learning process as it allows the student to keep track of their progress and growth in their writing.

Grading:

Initially, for the in-class writing activities, grading is pass or no pass. Students must complete every step of the Triage process to pass. Grading writing assignments using a rubric is pushed to later in the school year when the teacher feels students understand the rubric, the expectations of the teacher, the course, and the institution. Because of the Triage assignments and the feedback provided from their peers, tutors, and teacher, students are better prepared and more aware of the expectations of the teacher and of the writing course. It is at this point, as students' writing and the teacher's expectations begin to align together, that grading begins in earnest.

Preparation

To prepare for this teaching tip, you will need to find instructional videos online that provide specific writing instruction based on the writing review checklist (Appendix A). You will also need to find grammar quizzes or instructional grammar videos of common grammar errors that students make based on the grammar review checklist (Appendix B). Collecting these online instructional help videos will make it easier for students to complete the writing focused and grammar focused study section of step three. You will also need to prepare paragraph or essay topics for the timed in-class writing activities.

Materials

To complete the "three reviews" step, you will need to provide a writing and grammar checklist for learners (Appendices A and B). These checklists can be long and exhaustive, or simplified to the goals of each writing task. For the

teacher review, if you have a rubric that you would like to use, you could use this to complete the teacher review (see Appendix C). You could also use Appendices A and B for your teacher review. Using the same checklists for all reviews in step two will give students a clear picture of what others see as their most frequent writing errors. They can then compare this to their own self-review checklist. It can also lead to a clearer understanding of the student's writing and grammar weaknesses and places the treatment in step three directly where it belongs, on the areas that need fixing.

Conclusion

This teaching tip works best if it is repeated throughout the length of the course. In this way students are working on different writing and grammar study helps and seeing a tutor or the teacher multiple times throughout the length of the course. Although the three parts of the three-pronged treatment (writing teacher/tutor, writing focused study help, and grammar focused study help) never change each time students complete this teaching tip, what students do specifically with each treatment does change. Each time they see the writing teacher or tutor, they are discussing something specific to them that was decided on after reviewing the self-assessment and the peer-review. Each time they choose a specific grammar rule to study, they are focusing on a different area of weakness in grammar. The three prongs of the approach have purposely been chosen, not only to help students improve their writing skills, but also to help them become self-regulated learners.

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About the Author

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Appendix A

Sample Writing Review Checklist

Peer Review Checklist Handout

Name: _____

Peer Review One: Introductions

- _____ Does the introduction effectively introduce the topic or problem, not just jumping to the thesis?
- _____ Does it provide necessary background (history, definition, description, factual/historical, shared experience, narration, theory)?
- _____ After providing effective background and creating a need for the thesis, does the writer effectively introduce and state that thesis?
- _____ Is the thesis stated in one sentence?
- _____ Does the thesis address the topic directly and limit the topic with a central idea (an opinion, idea, or attitude about the topic)?
- _____ Does the thesis present or hint at the logical development of the paper? If not, is it followed by an explicit statement of development to guide the reader through the paper?

Peer Review Two: Essay Structure

- _____ Does the paper follow the organization hinted at in the introduction?
- _____ Do the topic sentences provide the main idea for each paragraph, have a controlling idea, and clearly relate to the thesis statement?
- _____ Do paragraphs flow naturally from each other? Do the paragraphs seem to appear in a logical, understandable order? Will they smoothly and convincingly move the reader from the introduction to conclusion?
- _____ Does the essay effectively use an appropriate rhetorical pattern?
- _____ Does the conclusion go beyond a restatement/summary to bring the essay to a satisfying end using an effective style (i.e., recommendation, prediction, quotation, result), and avoid new support or ideas?
- _____ Is the essay unified with information in each paragraph directly related to the topic sentence and thesis?

Peer Review Three: Framing Method

In the body paragraphs, does the writer 'frame' the paragraph in this way:

- _____ begins with a topic sentence?
- _____ introduces the source?
- _____ Uses the source? (whether paraphrase, quote, statistic, whatever)
- _____ Cites the source? (don't worry about this step right now)
- _____ Comments on it before moving on?
- _____ Repeats the above steps if another source is introduced?
- _____ Closes the paragraph with a reiteration of the topic sentence-though not in the same words?

Peer Review Four: Style and Conciseness





- _____ Does the essay use appropriate style?
- _____ Does the essay avoid announcing or the use of unnecessary words or phrases such as: *I think, I believe, In my opinion...*?
- _____ Does the essay communicate ideas clearly with consistent language?
- _____ Does the writer use vocabulary that shows variety and consistent precision in form and meaning?
- _____ Do the sentence structures show variety, complexity, and sophistication?

Appendix B

Sample Grammar Review Checklist

Name: _____

Essay # _____

Symbol Chart for Grading Comments		
Symbol	Writing Concern	A Problem in Your Paper
	New paragraph	
cap	Capitalization	
ss	Sentence Structure	
inc	Fragment (Incomplete Sentence)	
ro	Run-on sentence	
...	Add more details	
?	Meaning not clear	
redun	Redundant	
wdy	Wordy (unnecessary words)	
	Missing a word	
	Omit word	
()	Words not needed/wrong	
	Word order	
wf	Word form	
vf	Verb form	
wc	Word choice	
vt	Verb tense	
pp	Preposition (missing/wrong)	
art	Article (missing/wrong)	
pn	Pronoun (missing/wrong)	
sp	Spelling	
s/v	Subject – Verb Agreement	
s/pl	Singular – Plural Agreement	
c/nc	Count/non-count error	
“ ”	Quotation Marks	
App	Apostrophe	
c	Comma	
cs	Comma splice	
;	Semicolon	

Appendix C

Sample Writing Rubric

Essay Rubric (Adapted from the CSU English Placement Test (EPT Scoring Guide, was created by Mary Wardell and Silverio Haro; <http://www.csusm.edu/lwap/lessessayrubric.html>)

	<p style="text-align: center;">A. Command of Topic</p> <p>5 Essay addresses the assignment, demonstrating both understanding of the literal meaning of the text and the ability to interpret meaning beyond the literal meaning.</p> <p>4 Essay addresses the assignment, showing understanding of the literal meaning of the text.</p> <p>3 Essay attempts to address the assignment, but misses some element of the literal meaning of the text.</p> <p>2 Subject is generally clear but does not always keep to assigned topic.</p> <p>1 Essay does not directly address assigned topic.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">B. Argument Development</p> <p>5 Essay convincingly asserts an analytical thesis and carefully develops related ideas in coherent, sequential paragraphs, providing convincing textual and other evidence.</p> <p>4 Essay asserts a thesis and develops related ideas in coherent, sequential paragraphs.</p> <p>3 Essay presents a recognizable sequence of ideas though the thesis is omitted or paragraphing and structure are faulty.</p> <p>2 Essay relies on unrelated generalizations, vague argument, uncertain information.</p> <p>1 Essay is not coherent, showing little development of or relationship among ideas.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">C. Conventions and Style</p> <p>5 Essay demonstrates facility with the conventions of academic writing and uses appropriate style.</p> <p>4 Essay generally shows facility with conventions of academic writing and generally uses appropriate style.</p> <p>3 Essay shows minor problems in following conventions of academic writing or using appropriate style.</p> <p>2 Essay presents problems in following conventions of academic writing or using appropriate style that hinder reader understanding or writer credibility.</p> <p>1 Essay is unacceptable in its style or ability to follow conventions.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">D. Control of Mechanics</p> <p>5 Essay is generally free from errors in word choice and mechanics.</p> <p>4 Essay may have a few errors in word choice and mechanics.</p> <p>3 Essay has an accumulation of errors in word choice and mechanics.</p> <p>2 Essay is marred by numerous errors in word choice and mechanics.</p> <p>1 Essay has serious and persistent errors in word choice and mechanics.</p>
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Appendix C: Used with permission