

ACADEMIC WRITING: FROM STUDENT LEARNING TO TEACHER LEARNING

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0. Introduction

This paper reports on the Writing University Project carried out at the Department of English Language and Literature, Ss. 'Cyril and Methodius' University, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia in collaboration with the British Council Macedonia. It aims to show that by creating a 4-year writing syllabus, the participants in the project improved their skills as teachers and to a certain extent changed their beliefs about writing as an activity embedded in culture, while at the same time catering to the needs of the students. The first part of the paper expounds on the perceived goals of the project and delineates the process of creating the teaching materials for the writing course. The second section focuses on peer-review, and the final section deals with the effects of the project in terms of teacher development.

1. Background of the project

Before the onset of the project, students that studied English language and literature had EFL composition in their third and fourth (final) year at university, two classes per week often taught by native speakers. In their writing classes these instructors were responsible for finding or creating their own materials. The perceived problems were the following: there was too much emphasis on error correction and grammar practice. Writing was considered to be just another tool to test student's language competence in a narrow sense, and was not taught as a skill in its own right that increases cognitive development. Moreover, students lacked awareness of the formal conventions of writing between Macedonian and English which are different in many ways, for instance, differences in rhetorical standards, layout and punctuation. Finally, students persistently failed in their literature exams.

2. Ultimate goals of the project

As any teacher knows, the ultimate goal of foreign language education is becoming literate in the target language together with one's own. So, to that effect the main aim was to give students structured and systematic writing instruction in English. This is not to say that the students had not had any previous writing instruction in their mother tongue. Rather, they had not been given any patterns, or 'schema' on ways of organizing their thoughts and ideas.

One important goal which was interwoven during the whole project was the movement towards teacher education. There was a constant overlap and movement back and forth from student learning to teacher learning.

3. Methodology

The methodological approach adopted in the project was classified as action research, the principle idea being that teachers can solve professional problems and improve their practice through 'reflection on action' done through the systematic collection of data, and subjecting the data to reasoned analysis. The results of the analyses can then become a basis for decisions about further professional action. Action research involves discovering facts rather than making judgments.

4. Learning from designing our own materials: Creating the 4-year syllabus

A pedagogical shift occurred away from the traditional, product-based writing courses to a process-oriented approach to writing. This approach to writing emphasizes the psychological processes and skills involved in writing rather than the text being produced. The new materials had to be 'tailored' to the specific needs of students at the English department. In order to help meet students' real-world needs the essay types assigned in composition classes in the fourth year are included in the official syllabus, these are a job application, cover letter, Curriculum Vitae, e-mail and business letter. We were also aware of the fact that the students already had a solid foundation of writing in their mother tongue, so we could build on this knowledge base, i.e. transfer of learning could occur.

A systematic study of writing was being implemented encompassing the writing process in all its stages. Students were constantly reminded that writing is a *process* and that the first draft cannot be perfect. The focus was on *why* the writing is being done, developing and making students aware of the *sense of purpose* underlying any piece of writing, and developing a *sense of audience*, or *who* the piece of writing is being written for. The students had not been familiarized with these important concepts in their previous writing instruction. Care was taken to sensitize students to the confusing differences that exist between the writing conventions in Macedonian and English. For instance, the level of formality or register, and the accepted method of laying out arguments in persuasive writing vary considerably.

The text-based tasks introduced students to a variety of text types, and their aim was primarily to highlight patterns of organization and to help students identify dominant patterns in each text. Students need to be able to perceive these ‘higher order’ macro-structures in discourse in order that they can organize a text clearly and logically. The analysis of the texts involved both holistic processing, i.e. gaining an overall impression, or top-down processing, and picking up detailed linguistic clues, or bottom-up processing.

The 4-year syllabus was mapped out for each year separately and all the units were clearly laid out including the linguistic skills and writing knowledge that each unit provides. The first year of composition instruction is devoted to writing paragraphs, whereby students are taught how to write topic sentences, how to develop a thesis statement and compose short descriptive or narrative pieces. In the following two years, the students are introduced to a variety of text types/patterns including situation-problem-solution-evaluation, chronological order, comparison/contrast, for/against, hypothesis-evidence-conclusion. However, they are also encouraged to experiment with hybrid forms. Care is taken that students learn how to incorporate information from published sources into their own writing, and adhere to specific length requirements.

5. Using Peer Review in the ESL/EFL Writing Class

One of the important aspects of English Language Teaching that we had the opportunity to explore in more depth during the project was using peer review in the ESL/EFL writing class.

Initially, we referred to the peer review process as: 'peer correction/assessment/evaluation', when we realised that we should switch to less threatening ways of labelling it, such as 'review' and 'feedback'. We noticed that referring to this activity as correcting something which has been mistaken, rather than commenting on a piece of writing in order to improve it, influenced not only ours, but also our students' attitude towards peer review.

While training students to effectively use peer review for improving their early drafts, we discovered a number of advantages. Apart from being useful feedback (which has been confirmed in a research about peer review (Rollinson, 1998), where 80% of the comments given by peers were considered valid), peer review is also specific, as opposed to teacher feedback, which is more general; thus, it can be seen as complementary to teacher feedback. Moreover, it has proved to be student-friendly: peer audiences are seen as more sympathetic than the more distant and possibly more judgemental teacher audience. It also helps students become self-critical, and becoming a more critical reader of others' writing may make students more critical readers and revisers of their own writing. What is more, it provides a responsive 'real' audience, and it is this constructive, valid and meaningful feedback which in turn gives writing context and purpose. Finally, peer review helps develop awareness of socio-cognitive skills, as negotiating and/or exchanging comments fosters many communicative behaviours.

However, we encountered certain challenges of using peer review in the ESL writing class. These need to be taken into consideration before introducing students to peer feedback. The first drawback is the fact that the peer response process is a lengthy one, as it entails: reading a draft (often more than once); making notes; phrasing comments (either in a written form, sometimes in collaboration with another writer to reach a consensus, or in an oral form, engaging with the writer in a feedback circle). The second challenge is students' beliefs. Many feel that their peers are not qualified to act as substitutes for the teacher and critique their writing; they do not trust the accuracy, sincerity and specificity of their peers' comments. Others are not confident in their own ability to give constructive comments on either their peers' language or writing competence. Unless properly introduced to and trained in how to do peer review, students can also be uncertain as to its purpose and benefits (not only cognitive, but also social and affective). Some find the social interaction demanded by peer review threatening; they do not think they can handle the co-operative, collaborative aspects of peer review; they tend to withhold critical comments either to maintain group

harmony by not hurting anybody's feelings, or because they are reluctant to claim a degree of authority. The teacher's role is yet another limitation in the process. Sometimes teachers may find it difficult not to interfere by providing feedback in addition to that of student readers, which might in turn reduce student motivation and commitment to their own responding.

Most of the problems listed above can be alleviated by: properly setting up the group and adequate training, i.e. coaching students in the principles and practices of effective peer group interaction and response because only then will the students have a chance to constructively practise critical thinking, while complementing the teacher's comments and providing valuable feedback for the improvement of both their peers' and their own writing competence.

6. Teacher development

The benefits from this project for the team proved to be manifold. One aspect included enhanced student-teacher interaction (listening to and validating students' opinions). In the course of the project students became active participants in the materials design by giving spontaneous comments throughout the year and by critically evaluating the pilot material at the end of the year (by use of questionnaires and interviews). Another aspect implied better teacher collaboration. As we all shared the same quality, working with enthusiasm and motivation, meetings and discussions were approached to as a professional development strategy. Exchanging ideas and, in most cases, expressing opposing views demanded a great degree of tolerance and respect especially when it came to reaching a final decision. Finally, everyone felt a positive upgrade of both their research and organisational skills. From the very beginning we felt that we had none of the research skills needed to carry out such an ambitious project. Therefore, we were first trained to design data collection instruments. Then, we applied these techniques in order to elicit factual data (through questionnaires) or attitudes and experiences (through interviews) regarding interesting or problematic areas. The obtained data, which consisted of our students' remarks, was carefully analysed and the results shaped the future materials. In addition, being a partner in a four-year-project demanded performing certain roles such as organising seminars and reporting on our progress.

7. Conclusion

Having all things considered, we can conclude that while attempting to facilitate our students' writing, we too became part of the learning process. We realised that through teaching writing we also learnt how a second language is acquired, how to reflect on actions related to syllabus planning and use them as a starting point for continuing improvement through monitoring and evaluating the effects, how to use research as a natural extension of the teaching practice and eventually be more confident in our own ability to implement changes successfully.

In future, we intend to focus on three major activities. First, writing text books for all four years of undergraduate studies need to be published. Second, following the changes in the secondary education, the materials need to be modified once writing is established as a compulsory subject. Perhaps the most ambitious plan is the setting up of a University Writing Centre which will establish and maintain regional contacts and networking, develop writing activities resource bank/database (e.g. an on-line database), undertake small-scale research projects related to second language acquisition of writing and cater for the needs of students from other departments and faculties.

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