

English in Specific Settings

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A Process-Focused Approach to Writing

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Introduction

This article deals with a proposal for a writing course for freshmen. It is based on a writing needs analysis that was carried out in two different teaching centers, the Faculty of Odontology and the School of Physiotherapy, at the Universitat de València. The survey revealed feelings of frustration, and an enormous lack of confidence in the students. Competence in elementary writing techniques and English writing skills were also lacking even after many years of language study, which added to the other mentioned negative experiences.

We propose, therefore, a process-focused writing approach for freshmen. This will offer students the possibility to feel confident enough to overcome general writing difficulties before facing an academic writing course. We base our writing course strategies on a process-oriented and student-centred emphasis. This psychological support will help freshmen to overcome difficulties through the writing process.

Spanish scientists in general, who may read and understand an English text well enough, suffer from what Minot and Gamble (1991: 119) call “poor self-image or low self-esteem,” since they cannot write their own scientific research in English. At the same time, they are aware that writing in English “is part of becoming socialised to the academic community” (Silva 1990: 17). On the other hand, little or nothing has been done to address the needs of students. Traditionally, the teaching of writing in English as a foreign language at the university level has always played a secondary role in the learning process. White (1988: 5) goes even further when referring to this skill: “in some senses inferior to spoken language, writing was used as a means of reinforcing language which had already been dealt with in spoken form.”

We understand that a good syllabus should provide its students with the necessary tools and strategies so that they can compete in the scientific world. Nowadays, writing in English is one of the best ways to keep in touch and communicate with the rest of the international academic community,

since the international education policy has increasingly affected many countries who are joining forces in order to obtain better results in different scientific fields. Therefore, freshmen should obtain enough linguistic autonomy in writing to be able to face their academic and future professional tasks successfully.

Data Analysis: From a Negative Experience to a Proposal of Success

One of the most important tasks in planning a writing syllabus is to know the social and intellectual characteristics of the students. Once their writing needs are understood we can design an adequate course to cover the students' needs. This will enable them to face the course with a certain guarantee of success.

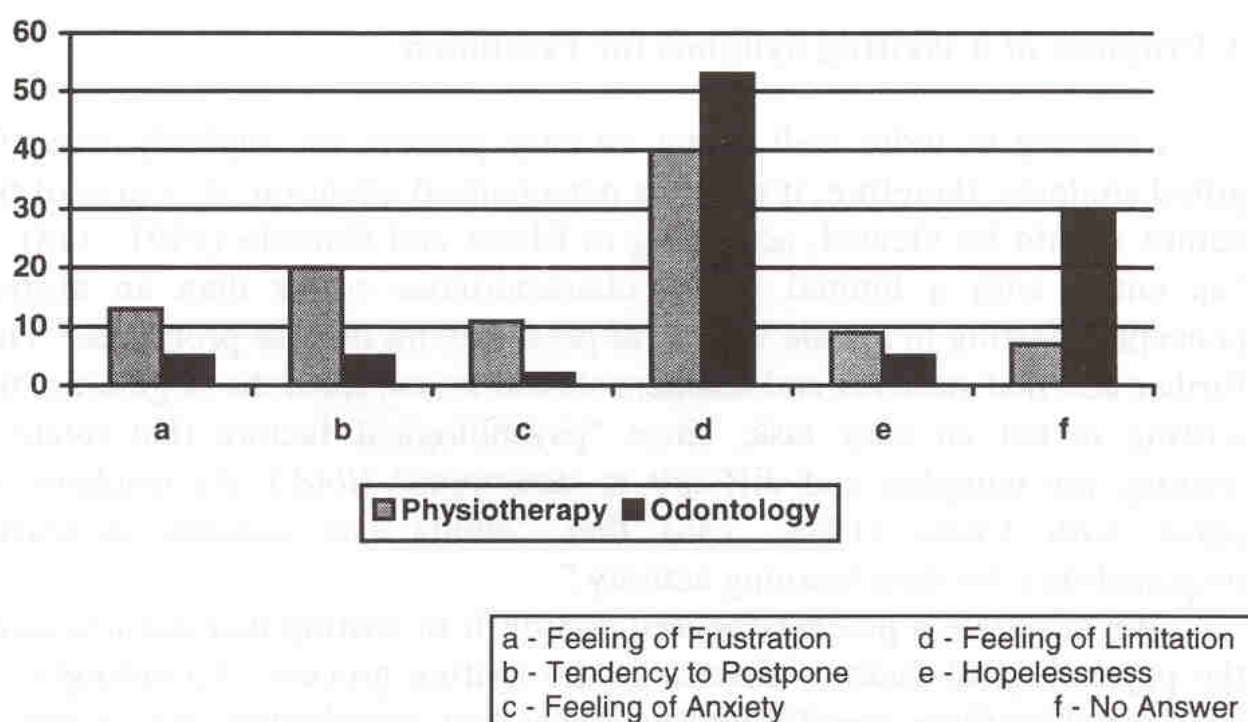
Our study, based on a sample of 74 undergraduate students (42 from Odontology and 32 from Physiotherapy), has revealed some significant data that can help us to assess and address their needs. According to the results, most of these students have obtained very high marks not only in English language exams in high school but in their university entrance exam as well. This can be explained by the fact that 76.1% (in Odontology) and 72% (in Physiotherapy) of them had studied English from 7 to 10 years; while 16.7% (in Odontology) and 25% (in Physiotherapy) had studied the language from 4 to 7 years; the rest did not answer or had studied another foreign language. Apart from taking the required English classes, many of these students have attended English as a foreign language in private language schools and/or have been to English-speaking countries to improve their language level.

Despite this academic background in English, the Physiotherapy group had not had previous experience in writing in English, and said they had never heard of writing techniques. As a consequence, this group of bright students showed negative psychological symptoms, such as frustration (13.3%), a tendency to postpone (20%), feelings of anxiety (11.1%), and of limitation (40%), and 8.9% of them felt it would be impossible to become good English language writers (no answer was obtained from 6.7% of the students).

In addition, as a result of this negative experience, most of these students (68.75%) declared that they were uncomfortable writing in English, although they were all aware that a working knowledge of this skill is necessary in order to succeed academically and, in the future, professionally if they want to keep up with new techniques and developments in their field of expertise.

These results significantly contrast with those obtained with the student group ($n = 42$) in the Faculty of Odontology who had just taken a course in which writing strategies had been emphasized. As shown in Figure 1 below, the main conclusion that can be drawn is that, compared to the Physiotherapy group, there is a significant reduction in terms of frustration (4.8%), tendency to postpone (4.8%), and feeling of anxiety (2.4%); in addition, while limitations increased (52.5%), their hopelessness remained quite low (4.8%).

Figure 1. Odontology and Physiotherapy Students Compared (in %).



The percentage in the “No answer” category (30.8%) corresponds to Odontology students, who had received approximately 10 lecturing hours on writing strategies: to a previous item in the questionnaire, 61.9% of them had answered they felt somewhat confident writing in English; while in Physiotherapy, with no previous strategy training, 68.8 % of the students surveyed did not feel confident writing in English.

We think that the best pedagogical approach to satisfying their needs is to eliminate apprehension by basing a general writing course on sincere, friendly and permanent student-teacher interaction. This would reduce their anxiety and reinforce positive feelings.

However, learning to write is always very complex and difficult; so much so that, as J. S. Ritchin notes, it cannot be merely described “as a tidy,

predictable process with predictable results” (quoted by Minot & Gamble 1991: 122). We are, at the same time, optimistic and share Stephen’s (1982: 1) opinion that freshmen should understand that writing is a skill they need in order to survive.

This long and sometimes tedious process will nonetheless help to demythologise the heretofore held belief that writer was synonymous with creator. It will help to get rid of the mistaken notion that writing is a prestigious talent that one acquires at birth (Oshima & Hogue 1991: xiii). Writing a scientific paper in English cannot be improvised and requires a great amount of practice and personal commitment.

A Proposal of a Writing Syllabus for Freshmen

Learning to write well is not an easy process for anybody, even for gifted students; therefore, it requires personalised attention. A course of this nature should be viewed, according to Minot and Gamble (1991: 118), as “an entity with a limited set of characteristics rather than an abstract concept, referring to a wide variety of persons with diverse problems.” They further add that students and teachers should know, from the beginning, that writing is not an easy task, since “psychological factors that relate to writing, are complex and difficult to determine” (*ibid.*). As teachers, we agree with Cross (1981: 238) that “adults can assume increasing responsibility for their learning activity.”

We advocate a process-focused approach to writing that acknowledges the psychological factors inherent in the writing process. Accordingly, we shall consider three specific writing stages that complement one another as part of the learning process.

1. First Stage: To Recuperate Students’ Confidence for Future Writing Adventures

We propose that one of the most important teachers’ roles in a writing course of these characteristics should be to establish a positive and motivating atmosphere with regards to the learning process and help students to be less sceptical and apprehensive. In the past, these negative perceptions of writing made students desert, delay or become too discouraged to carry out the process. Therefore, our strategy for this early writing stage, during the first week of the course, is to adopt a policy in class that would help to nurture a sincere and trustworthy relationship between teacher and students.

Health Science students generally have a very pragmatic attitude and are reluctant to spend extra time recapitulating formal grammar points and going over activities that they have been doing for years. Adult students tend to be pragmatic learners and thus look for immediate application and results (Hashimoto 1985: 84). The best attitude at this early stage of the process is to show great interest in students' compositions. We should feed their minds with positive comments which, according to Schroeder's (1973) research, will stimulate the task of writing in English. Although this opinion is based on elementary school children, our own teaching experience corroborates Schroeder's assessment in that it is also counterproductive to overemphasise the negative points to adult sensitive learners. During this early writing stage, too much pressure on students can make them drop out, or become reluctant or unable to write compositions in English.

It is during these crucial beginnings that the teacher should transfer confidence to the students' writing ability. However, at this stage, the teacher should concentrate on helping the learners "posing questions about purpose, audience, and organisation ... and develop confidence in their ability to solve problems and make decisions" (Reigstard 1985: 73). Therefore, we should focus on instructing unskilled writers in pre-writing strategies such as brainstorming, free-writing, listing, matching, etc.

In this first stage, we want students to focus on writing stories and narrating personal experiences. Students can choose their subjects of interest, such as music, their own country or region, etc., rather than writing analytic essays. This allows students to find pleasure in writing about subjects they are familiar with or are interested in, and would like to share with others. This approach is recommended by Costello (1990: 22) who says that, in a course of these characteristics, one of the best ways of stimulating writing and getting students to be more productive is to "write short stories."

2. Second Stage: Input or Receptive Period

In the first stage of the writing course, the students would have the opportunity to explore their capacity, and their own writing ability in English. After that difficult period (in which the teacher has helped students to forget their previous negative experiences and to rely on a positive attitude towards writing), the teacher will feel rewarded because most students react positively to the teacher's efforts.

In the research carried out in the Faculty of Odontology, the students (after having taken a course of this nature) showed less negative drawbacks

(see Figure 1 above); however, we could still detect some shortcomings, which is logical in a short term for non-native writers of English.

The students' conscientious work during the first part of the course was, nevertheless, very productive. As Cleary (1991: 484) notes, we can describe the students' attitude towards this experience as reflecting "feelings of competence, self-determination, and satisfaction," which provided them with enough mental balance for them to assess the possibilities of success at writing in English. These receptive feelings towards the process subsequently reinforced their minds for future writing tasks. According to Buley-Meissner (1989: 4), these positive feelings are linked "to the increased personal satisfaction which they seemed to derive from writing."

This second stage, or input, focuses mainly on sample reading activities that enrich students with enough adequate linguistic content for them to be able to do their writing assignments. At the same time (in the way this written discourse is structured), students are thus motivated to learn how to use appropriate vocabulary, as well as sentence form and ideas. All this will help students to generate and express new ideas (see Davies 1992).

The utilisation of some target genres within the writing process, however, "is not intended to encourage simple copying of models but rather to develop awareness and sensitivity to style" (Davies 1992: 13). Likewise, Gorrell (1987: 57) further states that "when students have no clear sense of what they're striving for, they need an exemplary model, a guide, a shortcut through endless trials and errors."

Therefore, the combination of these two activities, reading and writing, will assist students towards becoming proficient writers. Students need to be aware of the importance of the reading/writing circular process, which involves silent and dull tasks, such as collecting, selecting, classifying material, which provides them with enough information to produce a first draft. Earlier reading activities are essential in order to reach this point. Students will be aware that several drafts are necessary before producing the final copy.

Drafting is an activity of discovery in which students put together their ideas collected from previous reading and from their own experience and knowledge. Most students enjoy this activity since they are not under pressure to concentrate on punctuation, spelling, grammar, etc. However, during this writing and rewriting process, some students become apprehensive because of doubts related to linguistic structure, and as a result they are tempted to abandon the endeavour. Therefore, at this stage, the teacher's support is very important for students to overcome discouragement, which helps them to follow the different steps of the

learning process. In our opinion, a well-structured proof-reading, imitation, and paraphrasing assignment will provide better results during the writing learning process than error analysis and control.

Notwithstanding the fact that students often view these exercises as being somewhat artificial, these pre-writing and writing tasks are important in that they do not condition the writing process or limit originality and spontaneity. Greenberg (1992: 139), speaking about writing and rewriting, quotes Nabokov as having said: "I have rewritten –often several times– every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers." If, at this moment of the course, students seem to be aware of the process and understand that in writing an essay it is necessary both to draft material and to revise it, we will have accomplished one of the most important goals of our first proposal.

Another important activity for the teacher is that of increasing linguistic monitoring. Students, at this stage of the process, are receptive and mentally prepared to accept the teacher's comments and linguistic criticisms about their written drafts. At the same time, according to our own research, students have already left behind some of their frustration and anxiety. We understand and agree with Freedman (1987) in that the teacher's monitoring and attention during the process helps student writers to improve.

We, therefore, propose to enhance a creative atmosphere, in which teachers offer psychological support throughout the entire process, in which the students concentrate on the different learning tasks.

3. Third Stage: Revising Organisation and Sentence Structure

The learning tasks in the earlier stage was based on gathering ideas and supporting data from their reading, adding and deleting material, expanding and elaborating on generalisations; clarifying the implications of ideas, and crossing out irrelevant details.

The revising activity is a dynamic strategy, in which critical reading initiates the important and different monitoring activities, such as evaluating and reworking former ideas and giving supporting details, as well as checking spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, and grammatical structures.

In the past, proof-reading grammar and spelling were the most important tasks during the writing process. Today its immediate urgency is not as pressing. From our experience we can state that Health Science students reject this tedious and frustrating activity. We, therefore, advocate Hull's "intuiting" or "consulting strategy" (quoted by McCutchen, Hull & Smith 1987: 140) as adequate alternatives to the old system that once made

students focus on the supreme task of learning spelling rules above all. Furthermore, computer software can perfectly help students overcome most spelling deficiencies. Therefore, we believe teachers should not be harsh in judging or correcting students' spelling mistakes. As McCutchen, Hull and Smith (1987: 139-140) have stated, "instructors must do more than understand the source and systematicity of errors, they also must teach these students strategies that enable them to correct errors." In addition to noting the errors, Hendrickson (1978: 397) found that providing the correct form had no statistically significant effect on a student's writing proficiency. Likewise, after researching with an experimental group with information on the kind of errors made, J. Lalande's (1982) conclusion—mentioned by Fathman and Whalley (1990: 180)—showed significant improvement over the control group, whose errors were simply corrected.

Learning grammar strategies in a writing course for Health Science students should be based on a practical application of grammar rules for students' compositions. It is often suggested that grammar should be taught systematically with applications. In this respect, Neuleib and Brosnahan (1987: 29) come to the conclusion that students can make "significant progress in writing, including surface structure and punctuation, without any kind of instruction except in sentence-combining exercises and essay writing."

Therefore, we encourage students to communicate and use the language, regardless of the errors they may make, because it is preferable to them not communicating as a result of linguistic insecurity. Many students expect to have their grammar and spelling mistakes corrected, for they are accustomed to tasks aimed at measuring accuracy rather than fluency. However, there are many others that prefer to focus on the organisation of ideas and content, rather than specifically on grammar.

It is obvious, therefore, that while we have an obligation as teachers to cover both areas, we must also allow for the needs of the students in our approach. In this way, it is imperative that we maintain the students' level of interest while at the same time we present them with the necessary material for their progress. Sensing that they are improving, students are more prone to delve deeper into the language.

Concluding Remarks

In the last decade, studies and investigations in the field of writing have increased enormously. There is recognition among scientists and researchers in general of the relevance and important role of writing as a vehicle for

promulgating information. Our research has revealed that the writing process may be considered as one of the most difficult skills in language learning and it is indeed a challenging task for both native and non-native speakers.

In view of these difficulties, our proposal is based on a methodology focused on psychological strategies mainly in the early stages of the writing process. This psychological approach can provide the students with positive feelings thereby raising their aptitude for writing and helping them to minimise the initial linguistic difficulties temporarily and presenting them with a certain degree of optimism as to their chances of achievement. Our research has lead us to believe that when the initial pitfalls (feelings of powerlessness, frustration and incapacity) are overcome, the students become highly motivated learners and feel secure enough to continue the process. At the same time, the teacher's role gains in importance for the suggestions, revisions, motivating, etc., help students to improve their writing. It is in this light that we see the importance of teachers whose comments on the writing done especially by non-native freshmen students are intrinsically positive.

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