

WRITING THROUGH REFLECTION AND THINKING OF BULGARIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This presentation is intended to describe a study of 28 Bulgarian EFL University students' reflections on writing in Bulgarian and English in a composition classroom at Plovdiv University. Our thesis was that writing-as-a process is uniquely suited to promoting the skills of critical thinking and self-reflection. The study revealed positive results with regard to promoting students' critical reflection in the EFL writing. Finally, we make conclusions for EFL composition teaching.

Key words: Self-reflection, EFL, critical thinking, writing.

Introduction

As a basic writing composition EFL instructor, I have found that first-year students often use the term critical thinking as a sort of linguistic buzz word, having little idea how to accomplish this critical skill. Students often find critical thinking to be a foreign and difficult task, perhaps because it differs educationally from finding a single right answer. Because our society encourages forward progress and quick fixes and because critical thinking requires stepping back self-critically from the task itself to determine the best course of action, students may struggle with thinking critically. Critical thinking requires students to stretch themselves intellectually and psychologically, possibly taking two steps back before taking one forward. It requires students to dig and take apart their decision-making and justify their actions. Reflective thinking and writing, as Yancey has postulated, can contribute to a student's understanding of accomplishment because he/she must articulate that accomplishment (Yancey, 2008). In addition to articulating accomplishment, critical reflective thinking also focuses on how the process itself has progressed, mechanically and intellectually.

The present study was founded on the premise that writing-as-a process is uniquely suited to promoting the skills of critical thinking and self-reflection, since it is that very area of self-expression where ideas can be reviewed, reflected on and refined.

The purpose of the study was to promote critical thinking and reflection in the service of English as Foreign Language writing.

The theoretical background. According to Hanley, critical thinking, maintains, derives from both cognitive and metacognitive processes (Hanley, 1995). The cognitive skills operate with information and data, which are isolated, then encoded, integrated, organized, transformed, stored and retrieved. Metacognitive skills, on the other hand, are used in monitoring and controlling mental processes and the various states of knowledge (King 1995:16). To sum up, metacognitive skills take as their object the cognitive skills themselves, in that they involve the conscious, planned, informed, deliberate control of - how to think and what to think in order to maximize progress and minimize error (see Samalieva, 2008). Bernstein concludes that any theory of problem solving or critical thinking as an aspect of problem solving "must be grounded in a more socially based view of knowledge and cognition" (Bernstein, 1995:23). Likewise, Vygotsky maintained that true learning takes place in that area of intellectual functioning between the actual (current) developmental level (determined by independent problem-solving and thinking), and the level of potential development (determined by cognitive functioning with guidance from or in collaboration with more capable others (Vygotsky, 1978:86). Wade states that according to which writing is an essential ingredient in critical thinking instruction, since it promotes greater self-reflection and the

taking of broader perspectives than does oral expression (Wade, 1995). Suitable written assignments, she believes, can stimulate classroom writers to enhance their active learning spontaneously. Writing, especially the process approach, is, by nature, a self-critical one. It lends itself to the kind of introspection that would prompt students to reflect on their understanding, and to communicate their feelings about what they know, what they are doing, what they are struggling with, and how they are experiencing their learning (see Samalieva, 2000).

Methods

Data collection. One method were applied in the research - open-ended questionnaire.

Description of the experiment

Participants. Twenty eight students from Plovdiv University learning English as a foreign language in a process writing composition course (see Samalieva, 2000) participated in the experiment, their level of proficiency in English being intermediate.

Tasks. With the purpose to enable students to engage with subject-specific language and meaning in context, we endeavored to make writing lessons a "communication event" based on a common theme, and namely: "Writing about my writing". As a prewriting activity for this writing task, students were required to respond to an open-ended questionnaire (adapted by the Hawisher 1986, Deming 1987, White and McGovern, 1994, Quirke, 1999, Hazmi, 2006) the answers to which were intended to be incorporated by students in their essay "writing about my writing". These qualitative answers to the questionnaire were also used by the instructor (the researcher) as the data for the study.

The questionnaire comprised general, open-ended questions, to be answered partly in class and completed at home. The questions of the questionnaire emphasized that this was to be a self-reflection on how they normally write in Bulgarian and English. Students, in group discussion, talked about the issues posed, framed oral responses, took notes, and then wrote their full answers at home. Students returned their answers to the instructor before the next class.

Analysis. The open-ended data which the questionnaire elicited were manually summarized and counted in percentages for the purpose of identifying emergent trends and patterns.

Results and Discussion

Perceive the writing of English and Bulgarian: The results from first question (see appendix A) show that 60% of the students believe that they as very good writers in Bulgarian, thirty six as good, and only four are pointed out as fair. Seven percent and 25% of them describe themselves as very good and good writers in English, respectively. Sixty eight percent see themselves are fair writers (Figure 1).

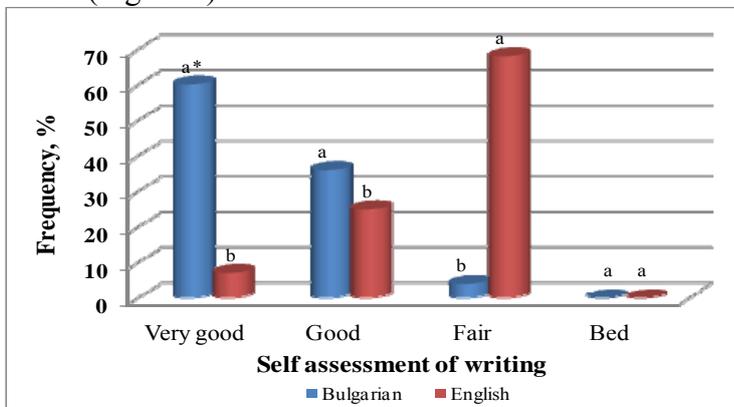


Fig. 1. Students' views about their writing.
* a, b, c ... - степен на доказаност при 95%.

This moderate perception of the sample as to whether or not they, are very good and good writers in Bulgarian and English is not unexpected since writing in mother tongue and foreign language is a challenging task.

As for the word "revision" (see appendix A – question 2), 71% of them pointed out "correction" and 26% - "discovering mistakes".

These findings are in connection with our previous research with other

University EFL groups (Samaliev, 2000) and indicate that “correctness” (the mechanical, superficial, manifest elements of writing) is the feature that students focus mainly on when composing and revising.

All of the students (100%) see writing as a way of communication with others. Concerning question 4 (see Appendix A) seventy two percent of the students often write to themselves or keep personal diaries.

How the students see Writing Process in Bulgarian and English: Thirty nine percent of students start writing spontaneously in Bulgarian (Figure 2). The primary differences between the process used by 69% of the students for writing in English and Bulgarian are located in structure and content (see appendix B – questions 1 and 2). When asked if they plan before they write (see appendix B, question 4), 41% of the students responded in the positive, pointing out that the process takes place in their minds, while 72% say it occurs on paper on the spot. Interestingly enough, the main concern of 72% of the subjects when writing (see appendix B, question 5), is collecting and arranging ideas, whereas 61% focus on grammar and 52% on spelling.

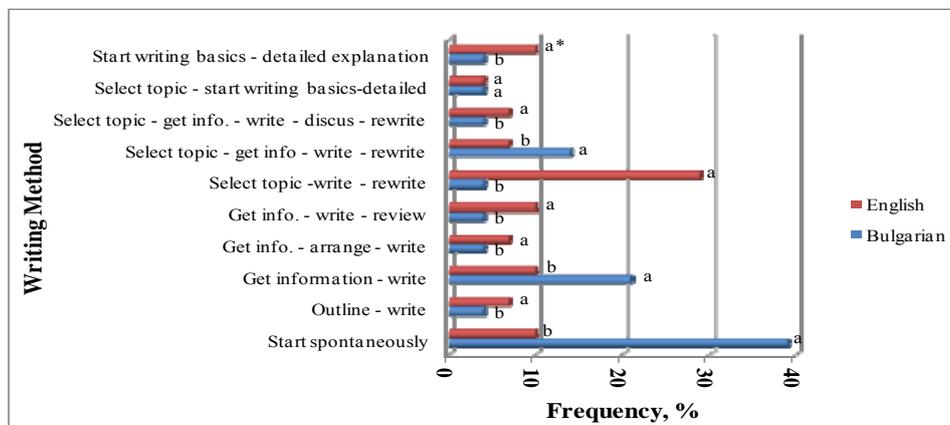


Figure 2. Methods used in writing both in Bulgarian and English.

* a, b, c ... - степен на доказаност при 95%.

As for reviewing the first draft of writing (see appendix B, question 6), 81% of the students respond in the positive. Seventy two (72%) percent of them focus on reviewing the whole topic, not only the important aspects. The main concern while reviewing is focused on grammar as reported by 72% of the students, while 68% concentrate on spelling and 59% on punctuation (Figure 2).

Feelings towards Reviewing and Writing in Bulgarian and English (Appendix C): Concerning the student's feelings towards writing and reviewing, 28% of students say that they are careless while 14% feel upset when writing in English. Only 21% of respondents feel excited about writing revision. The feelings of the subjects towards reviewing and writing in Bulgarian are divided between excitement (28%), and carelessness (28%). Seventy three percent of the students feel it is fair and relaxing to write the first draft of any topic. When it comes to finishing writing the first draft, 62% of them feel relaxed and 41% have a sense of achievement. Letters constitute the most enjoyable type of writing in both Bulgarian and English for the subjects, while 66% of them do not enjoy writing about difficult or unfamiliar topics that are unrelated to life.

Writing and Reviewing Difficulties in Bulgarian and English (Appendix D): Collection of information and ideas is considered by 59% of the students as a major difficulty they face when writing in both Bulgarian and English. For 52%, it is linking and arranging ideas, while 39% regard grammar and structures among the language difficulties in writing. The most difficult task seems to be writing and reviewing long texts (66%).

Sixty two percent of the students mention that there is a relationship between enjoying writing a topic and its easiness. Enjoyment is directly proportional to easiness. Among the difficulties they mentioned when writing are linking and arranging ideas (29%), reviewing ideas (12%) and other general difficulties (11%). In previous experiments research with other University EFL groups Samaliev (2000) establishes that the difficulties are experienced in discourse organisation, paragraphing and cohesion, as well as by some still at the lower levels of language, and in writing at length.

Concerning their behavior when they face difficulties, 79% of the students declare that they refer to other sources when they face difficulties in writing, while 19% of them express their need for help.

Conclusion

Reflective metacognition, like writing, is a process with components such as review, reflexivity, and cognitive analysis, which require practice throughout the semester in order to maximize a learner's potential for growth and change. To be effective, reflective thinking should be bound up in the philosophy of writing as a whole, recognizing that the development of reflective ability is highly individualized and creatively cognitive.

The procedure followed in this study aimed at supporting students in composition class in their thinking and reflection activities. The students do a great deal of pre-writing discussion. They had learned more about the writing process. They write substantial answers to the questions of the questionnaire in which they are asked to think and write about their writing. The teaching strategy included teaching the skills of writing a first draft, which, at the same time, would involve reflection, introspection and a reciprocal communication of impressions, as well as meeting the aims of the writing course.

The study cannot claim that the students achieved complex, deep-level metacognition given their limited means of self-expression. They, however, reflected on, and expressed, their thoughts and feelings about their writing and their writing tasks. Furthermore, it is evident that any claim for having engendered reflective and thinking skills would require proof of permanent, sustained change, and that the skills could be transferred to other areas of reflection and cognition. This kind of proof delves into the realms of cognitive psychology, something that needs to be researched more thoroughly in a future.

To sum up, instructors should be committed to afford of EFL writing students greater opportunity for introspection, sharing and communication.

Along with writing, reflective analysis can become a lifelong habit that leads to better decision-making, more skilled writing, and continued intellectual growth.

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APPENDIX

The questionnaire: Reflecting on my writing

A. How you see writing in Bulgarian and in English.

1. What kind of writer are you in Bulgarian and English (very good, good, fair, and bad)?
2. In your point of view, how important is writing in Bulgarian and in English for your future job?
3. What does the word "Composition" and "Revision" mean?
4. Should you look at writing as a way of communication with another person? Why? Why not?
5. Do you ever write to yourself? Do you sometimes keep personal diaries?

B. How you write in Bulgarian and in English.

1. How do you write (a topic ...etc.) in Bulgarian and in English? What method or process do you follow when you write?
2. Is there a similarity or a difference between the way (or process) you follow when you write and the process approach that we already discussed?
3. Do you do anything in particular when you start the first draft of any topic?
4. Do you plan before you write? If the answer is 'Yes', do you plan in your mind or on paper? If the answer is 'No', how do you set about writing?
5. When you write, what is your main concern? Is it grammar, spelling and punctuation? Is it content (i.e. the ideas that you want to express or writing on something interesting)? Is it arrangement of ideas (i.e. that there should be an introduction, conclusion and recommendations; that is smoothness of ideas)?
6. Do you review (i.e. read to correct/ edit/ change/ polish/ rewrite) the first draft of any topic?

C. Your feelings towards reviewing and writing (in Bulgarian and in English)

1. How do you feel (upset/ excited/ or careless) when you have to write any topic in Bulgarian and in English?
2. How do you feel when you write the first draft of any topic?
3. How do you feel when you finish writing the first draft of any topic?
4. What are the subjects that you enjoy/do not enjoy writing?

D. Difficulties that you face when writing and when reviewing (in Bulgarian and in English).

1. What are the difficulties that you face when writing?
2. What are the types of writing (i.e. a task or a written work like writing letters, writing a text or writing short notes) that are the most difficult to you? Is there a relation between how much you enjoy a type of writing, and how difficult that type of writing is? Is this relation always there or is just sometimes?
3. What are the types of writing (i.e. a task or a written work like writing letters, writing a text, filling forms or writing short notes) that are the most difficult in reviewing? What are the types of writing that are the easiest in reviewing? Is there a relation between the difficulty of reviewing a type of writing and how much you enjoy that type of writing and its subject, and how difficult that type of writing or the topic on which you are writing is?
4. What do you do when you face difficulties in writing or in reviewing? Do you leave writing or reviewing for a while and then go back to it later? Do you refer to notes or other resources? Do you refer to books? Do you give up and turn in your work?