

Take it Step by Step: Following a Process Approach to Academic Writing to Overcome Student Anxiety

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Abstract

As one of the productive skills, writing is among the most challenging for language learners. Increased opportunities for study in European universities through Erasmus programs and in Anglophone tertiary institutions has made it necessary to place more emphasis on writing skills in Turkish universities. This has made it inevitable that Turkish universities include academic writing as part of their curricula. Considering that even non-native speaking (NNS) scholars have been reported to face challenges with academic writing not usually experienced by native-speaking (NS) writers (Gosden 1992), it is not surprising to see that this activity causes a great deal of anxiety for undergraduate and graduate students. This paper explores the effects of using a multiple-draft process approach on reducing the students' anxiety levels, as they relate to the academic writing process. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and written reflections by students.

Background to the Study

As one of the productive skills, writing is among the most beneficial yet most challenging for language learners. Writing is an indispensable component of an academic environment because when engaged in writing, writers are not just unconsciously putting words down on paper, but rather they are continuously developing ideas and changing plans about their ideas. While explaining the act of writing as a process, Zamel (1983: 167) also touches on the cognitive and creative aspect of writing:

Through the act of writing itself, ideas are explored, clarified and, as this process continues, new ideas suggest themselves and become assimilated into the developing pattern of thought. Understanding that writing may be recursive, non-linear, and convoluted, writers are able to modify or even discard chunks of discourse or original plans as they review their writing, consider its function, and distance themselves from it in order to meet their readers' expectations.

In fact, writing is seen as important for the development of the thinking and organizational skills of second language writers, as well as helping them to test hypotheses about the new language by providing a time to process meaning in a less stressful way compared to oral production. Writing is a multifaceted skill which involves many elements which impinge on each other. This aspect of writing has been presented by Raimes (1983: 6), who suggests that producing a written product is not a simple skill but a rather difficult and complex skill, which forces the writer to simultaneously consider numerous factors such as content, word choice, audience and grammar, among others. However, earlier approaches to writing did not recognize the complex nature of writing and paid more attention to certain aspects of the writing skill while ignoring others. Until the 1970s, most writing approaches were text-oriented and focused mostly on characteristics of the written text. Zamel (1976) criticized writing classes in the 1970s for paying too much attention to control and guidance, and the confusion of grammatical ability with writing ability.

In a process approach, on the other hand, writing is seen as a problem-solving activity which is non-linear, exploratory and generative, and as 'recursive rather than uninterrupted and left-to-right' (Hyland 2002). Thus, the cognitive aspect of writing is also taken into consideration in the process approach.

The concept of process writing in L2 was first introduced by Zamel (1976) who believes that an emphasis on the process of writing would be beneficial for L2 writers as well as L1 writers:

Finally, teachers of writing, whether ESL or English, should continuously strive to provide that instruction which best meets the real needs and abilities of individual students. While this instruction might still entail some indirect teaching concerning particular structural problems, language study and rhetorical considerations, the primary emphasis should be upon the expressive and creative process of writing. The experience of composing could in this way have a purpose, that of communicating genuine thoughts and experiences. ESL students could begin to appreciate English as another language to use, rather than just a second language to learn. (Zamel 1976: 76)

Thus, the process view approached writing as a developmental activity in which there is a process of development in both organization and meaning.

Elements of writing such as invention strategies, writing multiple drafts and receiving formative feedback from various sources became important (Matsuda 2003). These elements of the writing process are discussed by Coffin *et al.* (2003: 34), in terms of prewriting, planning, drafting, reflection, peer/tutor review, revision, additional research or idea generation, and editing and proofreading.

Purpose of the Study

This paper explores the effects of using a multiple-draft process approach on reducing students' anxiety levels, as they relate to the academic writing process. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and written reflections by students. The Department of English Language and Literature at Karadeniz Technical University (KTU) is a relatively new department with a history of ten years. Students at the department study for five years, including a preparatory class, towards a degree in English Literature. Students can also attend a Teaching Certificate Program and choose to become English Teachers. Education at the department requires written project work and oral presentations by the students on various subjects ranging from English Literature to Language Teaching.

The academic writing course is a one semester course. The course follows a process approach. Students study both Modern Language Association (MLA) and American Psychological Association (APA) style formats, including information about how to avoid plagiarism and proper ways of citing sources used. Students are guided in database searches through university library databases. The activities that structure the course are listed below:

- Subject selection.
- Proposal writing (first draft – teacher and peer feedback – final draft).
- Annotated bibliography writing (first draft – teacher and peer feedback – final draft).
- Introduction section (first draft – teacher and peer feedback – final draft serving as the midterm exam).
- Literature review (first draft – teacher and peer feedback – final draft).
- Data collection (depending on subject).
- Writing the results and discussion section (first draft – teacher and peer feedback – final draft).

- Handing in the finished paper as final exam.

Most of the students expressed a high level of anxiety when they were told the major requirement of the course: Each student had to complete an academic research paper of about 10 to 15 pages on a topic of their choice, which had to follow either of the two writing styles: MLA or APA. The papers had to include references to credible sources – books and articles on the selected topic.

Method

Students were given a semi-structured interview in order to find out about the effects of using a process approach on reducing student anxiety. They were asked questions about:

- How they felt at the beginning and at the end of the course.
- Factors causing anxiety.
- Factors which helped them cope with their anxiety.
- Useful components of the academic writing course
- Their suggestions for improving the academic writing course.

Twenty-six first year students participated in the semi-structured interviews. The students were also asked questions regarding their educational background. In terms of prior experience with writing in English, 65% of the students stated that they had no experience with writing in English, while only 35% stated that they had some experience through simple writing tasks they were engaged in during English classes. However, none of the students had previous experience with academic writing, either in English or in Turkish.

The first question on the questionnaire read: 'When you first started attending academic writing classes and were assigned a writing project, how did you feel?' As a response, a majority of the students (92%) stated that they felt anxious and negative. Only two students (7.6%) stated that they felt positive and self-confident, and two students (7.6%) did not provide a response. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of students' responses to Question 1.

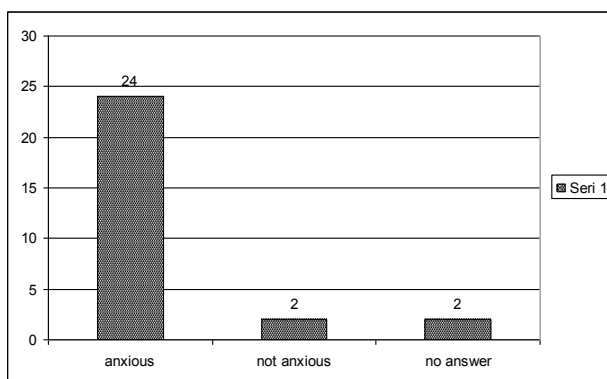


Figure 1: Initial feelings of students about academic writing.

This finding is in accordance with the researchers' previous experiences with Turkish students' attitudes towards academic writing, which probably stems from the fact that they have no prior experience, either in writing in English or in writing academic texts.

The second and third questions investigated which aspects of academic writing students found to be the most anxiety producing and alternatively the most anxiety reducing. The questions were open ended and an analysis of common responses revealed some patterns in student attitudes. According

to students, the most anxiety provoking aspects of academic writing were the complexity of writing rules or conventions, unfamiliarity with academic writing, and lack of sources or inability to find useful resources for their paper. The required length and time constraints were also reported as anxiety provoking factors.

Regarding factors which reduced anxiety, the first factor which stood out among responses was that students progressed step by step and had an opportunity to apply each step. These students felt they genuinely learned the steps and how to apply them, rather than simply learning them in theory. Secondly, student responses indicated that having clear instructions from the teacher about the assignments they needed to write for the academic writing course reduced their anxiety. Other factors which were reported to reduce student anxiety included the following: researching the topic, having the opportunity to select their own topic, doing writing and revision exercises, and realizing that MLA and APA styles have consistent rules.

The fourth question investigated how students managed to cope with their anxiety about academic writing. The most commonly used strategy reported by students was collaborating with classmates, followed by writing repeatedly and using self-motivation techniques. Other useful activities were studying rules of MLA and APA styles, analyzing others' work, and searching for and finding information on the subject.

The purpose of the fifth question was to find out whether there was a decrease in the anxiety level of the students from the first time they started taking the academic writing class to the time when they finished writing their paper. According to the responses, a majority of the students (65%) did not feel anxious about academic writing after completing their paper. Of the remaining students, 27% expressed that their feelings had not changed and 7% did not provide a response. Figure 2 illustrates side-by-side, students' feelings about academic writing before and after finishing their paper. As can be seen from the figure, the initial anxiety of the students regarding writing an academic paper diminished significantly during the process of writing the paper.

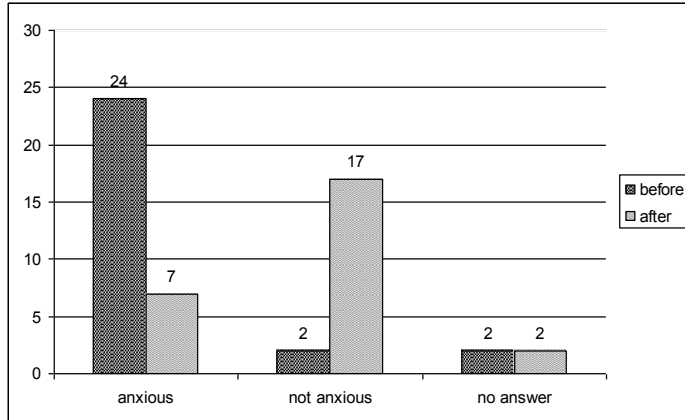


Figure 2: Initial and final feelings of students about academic writing.

The last question in the student questionnaire aimed at taking students' suggestions on how the academic writing class could be improved. A majority of student responses were positive and constructive with only a few students expressing dissatisfaction. The suggestions made by students included the following: being provided with more sample papers to be analyzed, giving two separate sections of the course devoted to MLA and APA styles, giving the class in two semesters (one being theoretical and the other one being practical), and increasing the resources at the library so that students could access more information about their subjects.

Conclusions

In order to reach conclusions regarding the academic writing class and the process approach implemented, the responses in the questionnaire should be considered in relation to each other. We could consider the fact that generally students' anxiety levels dropped in relation with the responses to Question 3 on the questionnaire about factors which relieved students' anxiety. Doing so brings us to the conclusion that the decrease in students' anxiety could be linked to some practices applied in the academic writing course, such as providing students with opportunities to progress step by step while writing their paper, applying each step with repetitive writing practices and getting help from peers. These factors, described as anxiety reducing factors, are components of the process writing approach, which the teacher implemented in the academic writing class.

As a conclusion, in order to decrease student anxiety, which is a very common problem in academic writing classes, using a step by step implementation of the process approach with revision, rewriting and peer feedback practices, could yield positive results. As reflected by students, it would be additionally useful to include more activities for analyzing sample papers which would provide students with more insight into academic writing.

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