

**AN ACTION RESEARCH ON FOSTERING REFLECTIVE THINKING FOR
WRITING IMPROVEMENT**

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ABSTRACT

This study grew out of a puzzle “how can we encourage ELT Freshman students at Çukurova University to take on the responsibility and authority to improve their written products?” . Thus we are going to reflect on the tools (i.e. learning logs and self assessment letters) we used for reflection-on and -in action, the problems we encountered and how we tackled them.

ÖZET

Bu çalışma Çukurova Üniversitesi İngilizce Öğretmenliği birinci sınıf öğrencilerini yazma becerilerini geliştirme sürecinde sorumluluk almaya teşvik edebilmek için uyguladığımız yöntemleri içermektedir. Ayrıca makalede bu süreçte karşılaştığımız sorunlar ve üstesinden gelebilmek için yaptığımız uygulamalar tartışılmıştır.

This study grew out of a puzzle “how we can encourage ELT Freshman Students at Çukurova University to take on the responsibility and authority to improve their written products?”. Our overriding purpose was to help students to think, understand and accordingly make decisions about their own writing going through the same cycles of action research as the researchers. Thus, the presentation tells the students’ and our action research experience, the problems we encountered and how we tackled them.

Freshman ELT students at Çukurova University are offered writing courses four hours a week for two semesters – each lasts 14 weeks. Despite all the efforts of the teachers and the students, the outcome usually is not satisfactory enough to complete the expected tasks for further courses, i.e. answering essay exam questions, writing research papers, etc. Therefore, we decided to investigate our puzzle by engaging in an action research cycle. Reflection on the nature of the writing program that we offer and the review of the history of the educational change have shown us that we – the writing

teachers – focused only on the transmission of the pre-determined content (i.e. we inform students about the qualities of a good piece of writing and then assign students a topic to practice the newly learned items. Finally, having students done this, we give written feedback) (Wallace, 1991). However, this prescriptive mode of writing courses has given only short term results (Lamb, 1995). That is, this kind of feedback does not result in a real change in students' further written products. We have observed that the students continue to repeat the same mistakes. We have also realised that in writing courses, students' sense of ownership for their improvement is a prerequisite for a change to take effect. Thus, we have decided that we should provide opportunities for the students to create their own agenda for improvement which should be student-initiated.

The first question then was how we could meet the requirements of this new scope of writing course. Firstly, there was a need for a change in teacher role. To facilitate the demands we would have two main roles, that of a guide and that of an informant, supporting students at each point of the cycle either in group work or at individual consultations. Furthermore, we decided that our level of involvement was to be determined by the expressed needs of the students. Thus, within this scope, it is not the teachers providing students with the ready-made solutions for the pre-determined problems, but it is the students using their awareness of their own writing practice determine the specific areas to be developed and formulate their own agenda for the betterment of their written products.

The next question then was how to enable students to formulate their own agenda for writing improvement. In order to achieve this aim, we decided to use a **process approach** to writing improvement. Process writing is described in cycles, and consists of rehearsing, drafting and revising. These cycles are not necessarily sequential and discrete but recursive. As Decker and Kathy (1985) explain, a writer may be revising and realise that he needs to brainstorm for more information. He then applies the rehearsing strategy again to help him collect more material. Likewise, the writer may revise early in the writing process and again several times later as the writing progresses. Secondly, within this process approach, we decided to use two main tools for students to become aware of what they are learning and what they can do with what they have been learning. Reflecting on related literature and research, we realised that we could achieve this aim through involving our students in the use of **learning logs** and **self assessment letters**. The learning logs give students the opportunity to step back and think about their written products in order to become aware of their own strengths and weakness and if necessary, plan action steps to remedy the problems in the light of what they have learned (Swartzendruber-Putnam, 2000). In practice, we asked the students to write at least a paragraph after each session, focusing mainly on the following points:

- The topic of the session:
- In this session, I have learned.....
- From now on, I am going to,

The second reflective assignment was the self assessment letter. During our writing course, the students were asked to write a total of six essays on various topics. When the students felt they completed each of their essays, they submitted their products accompanied by self assessment letters which reflect the students' own evaluation of their written products on five main areas (content, organisation, vocabulary, language use and mechanics). While going through the writing cycles, students had the opportunity to have individual conferences when they felt they needed. At the same time, the students also checked each other's papers using a composition profile (see Appendix) provided by the teachers at the beginning of the term.

Enabling students to be reflective in their learning logs and self-assessment letters about their writing abilities and their written products was the basic problem we faced during our writing course. Students' learning logs were just like the summaries of what was done during the sessions, rather than reflections of their thinking processes concerning their individual problems related to the newly learned items and the future action plans to remedy the problem stated. We mean, when we went through the students' learning logs, we observed that students became aware of the rules of writing an essay. However the way they reflected what they have learned shown us that they were not able to put the newly learned input into practice. For instance, the following piece taken from a student's learning log shows that although this student is aware of the steps to be followed when writing a paragraph, and is able to demonstrate this knowledge in his/her entry, in practice s/he is not yet able to produce a qualified piece.

Example I:

“... From now on; when writing a point or topic sentence I'll try not to make mistakes that undermine my chances of producing an effective paper.

I am going to use some key words or word in my topic sentence. By using details I'll support the idea expressed in the key words.

I am going to construct my topic sentence after I have decided what details I want to discuss.

I am going to start with a general topic or a general idea of what I want to write. I will make a list of all the limited topics I can think of that fit under that general topic.

I am going to use specific details rather than general words. I will explain my idea by using specific details clearly.

I will try to use all of these steps for writing effectively. Especially I will try to give some specific, personal, and realistic details in my paper. For explaining my idea clearly to the reader I must use those steps in my paragraph or essay”. [Sic]

In addition to this issue, we also realised that most of the students filled in their logs for the sake of completing their assignments. That is, students' use of logs stayed at the level of a mechanical tool reflecting surface level understanding of the newly

learned items rather than a tool for writing improvement, as shown in the example below.

Example II:

“Topic of this session: essay writing

In this session: I have learnt how to organise and write an essay. Firstly I set a thesis for my opinion. Then wrote some supporting ideas that support my thesis. Then I come to the body. I developed my thesis and its supporters. Lastly I made a conclusion that summarised whole view. From now on, I am going to write more things with an essay”. [Sic]

Looking back, we assume, we might have misguided the students to be descriptive rather than reflective in their logs. We believe this might be due to both the format given at the beginning of the term and/or the recurrent use of logs after each session. For example, the prompts given for the logs limited the students only to the main ideas covered in the sessions rather than helping them to write about the specific feelings, experiences, problems, evaluations. To remedy the above stated problems, we asked the students to write in their logs on weekly basis without considering the format given. We also decided to discuss with students the difference between reflective and non-reflective statements taken from their own logs. These workshops helped the students to become aware of the expectations of the teachers. Here are a few examples of learning logs where the students wrote thoughtful entries that not only help us monitor their progress but also help them think, understand and make decisions about their own writing:

Example III:

“... I can’t write down my ideas on paper easily. Because I don’t know how to start writing. In the introduction, I can’t write what I think. I have difficulty in accumulating my details. I will use prewriting techniques to generate my ideas, to help me go about the process of writing”. ... [Sic]

Example IV:

“... I have learnt how to write and organise an essay, what the topic is, what supporting ideas are ... etc. Before I couldn’t recognise that what I could write is not an essay or even a paragraph; it is just a brainstorming or a draft of a thought. Also I had thought that the main points are grammar and vocabulary, and using both of them I could write good essays. Shortly I wasn’t aware that even I didn’t know anything about writing”. ... [Sic]

These examples demonstrate not only the students’ newly-gained ability to identify their problems in writing but also determine a plan of action for writing

improvement. The second problem was related to the use of self assessment letters at the beginning of the course. With our second tool, i.e. self assessment letters, we wanted our students to take on the responsibility and authority to improve their written products. That is, with the help of the criteria stated in the composition profile, we wanted them to think critically about their writing in order to gain understanding of their writing ability, and thus become better writers. As Pianko (in Swartzendruber-Putnam, 2000) states, “The ability to reflect on what is being written seems to be the essence of the difference between able and not so able writers from their initial writing experience onward”. However, in practice, self assessment letters of our students turned out to be reduplications of the profile provided instead of reflections of their consciousness of the quality of their products and their writing ability, as shown in example V:

Example V:

Evaluation of “My Books”

Content: Excellent to very good – It is knowledgeable and substantive. I stated real and true reasons. I developed my ideas clearly. I am relevant to the topic.

Organisation: Excellent to very good – I expressed my ideas fluently. I stated my ideas clearly and supported them. So it is well organised. There is logical sequencing.

Vocabulary: Excellent to very good – I chose my words effectively. So I could express my ideas clearly.

Language Use: Good to Average – It is affective but there are simple constructions. Meaning didn’t obscure but there some errors in prepositions and articles.

Mechanics: Good to Average – Meaning didn’t obscure. But there are errors in punctuation. [Sic]

The earlier examples of assessment letters have shown us that students need guidance and time to gain the habit of reflective thinking when evaluating their written products. We realised that without cultivating critical thought, developing writers’ language and promoting depth of thought students’ assessment letters would not turn out to be a learning tool. Thus, we involved our students in workshops to promote quality in their written reflections. In those workshops, we brainstormed questions good writers may ask when thinking about their work (Who is my audience?, Does the introduction hook the reader?, Can the reader perceive the writer’s plan?, Are the ideas connected? etc.); and we showed model letters which helped students to better understand the thoughtfulness that good writers exhibit. With model letters we tried to demonstrate the difference between thoughtful and superficial letters with a special focus on language use. Moreover, we also pointed out to students that although we had provided them a profile as a guide while evaluating their works, what we expect from them was a reflective letter which might include issues such as their favourite parts of the piece, any weaknesses they see in that particular piece, to what extent they think they were successful in using the new techniques etc. as well as five main areas stated in

the profile. These efforts resulted in an increased awareness and deeper thinking in the students as reflected in the example below.

Example VI:

“ ... The content of “Unpardonable Mistake” lacks the more specifically needed details and examples. For instance, I should have described the living room in meters instead of saying “the living room is smaller than it should be to create visually definite picture....

...The essay is well-organised and the ideas have smooth flow as there is perfectly logical sequencing. Cohesion was supplied through such connectors as “besides, neither, initially, eventually” which create connection among ideas. It is furthermore, adequately supported by various examples....

... Vocabulary is very good to me. I tried hard to choose effective words and use in proper contexts. Remarkably, I employed some sophisticated words like “magnificence, blunder, and susceptibility” which, I believe, made the essay distinctively colourful...

... As for the language use, I spontaneously exceeded the limits for complex constructions by making one sentence joining five different clauses together. This probably made you lose your interest and curiosity to follow. But still I feel I have attempted effective, complex structures in addition to attentivity to the tense, subject-verb agreement....

... Mechanics, eventually, is not so good. Even though the meaning suggested in the essay is clear to understand, in some transitive sentences I missed punctuation and capitalisation which might make it difficult to see where the beginning and ending of my sentences are....”

In conclusion we should say both we, the teachers, and our students have learned a lot from this action research cycle. We learned that having our students to take on the responsibility and the authority to improve their written products is not impossible but it really takes time, teacher guidance especially at the beginning of the writing instruction and a new role to be taken by the teachers. As for the students, most important of all, they learned that writing is not an in-born skill or a natural talent but it is a process can be improved through time and effort. The following are the reflections of what the students think about this new learning experience:

“... By the beginning of this semester, my attitude towards writing course began to change. I realised that writing is not a natural gift but a skill which can be learned or improved by working on it. ...”

“... In the past, thinking myself untalented, I hated all kinds of writing tasks. But now I have provided myself with the belief in my own capability for writing.... I understand that writing is a skill which can be improved, and one can produce something good if s/he struggles faithfully. ...”

“... Many of the students write something and leave it until it is handed in teacher. Who do you think checks his/her writing before giving it? We know this but we don't do. But our class do this in a different way. We wrote evaluation letters or essays of ourselves. These show how much we improved our writing skill and how much we know ourselves. ...”

“... Most important of all, analysing and evaluating my own written pieces gave me advantages. Firstly, I had a chance to comment on my own writing. Thus I found the problems on by own, without an instructor's help as it was beforehand. So I could make predictions about ways of solution. This was easier, more logical and quicker to follow to tackle with the problems. This is just like testing the taste of a food, which I cooked, and adding salt and pepper in it....”

“... Also this activity is very good, because I learned how I will evaluate my students' papers in the future....”

References

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Appendix

Composition Profile

CONTENT

Excellent to very good: knowledgeable, substantive, through development of thesis, relevant to assigned topic

Good to average: some knowledge of subject, adequate range, limited development of thesis, mostly relevant to topic but lacks detail

Fair to poor: limited knowledge of subject, little substance, inadequate development of topic

Very poor: does not show knowledge of subject, non-substantive, not pertinent, or not enough to evaluate

ORGANISATION

Excellent to very good: fluent expression, ideas clearly stated, supported, succinct, well-organised, logical sequencing, cohesive

Good to average: somewhat choppy, loosely organised but main ideas stand out, limited support, logical but incomplete sequencing

Fair to poor: non-fluent, ideas confused or disconnected, lacks logical sequencing and development

Very poor: does not communicate, no organisation, not enough to evaluate

VOCABULARY

Excellent to very good: sophisticated range, effective word choice and usage, word form mastery, appropriate register

Good to average: adequate range, occasional errors of word form, choice, usage but meaning not obscured

Fair to poor: limited range, frequent errors of word form, choice, usage, meaning confused or obscured

Very poor: essentially translation, little knowledge of English vocabulary, idioms, word form, or not enough to evaluate

LANGUAGE USE

Excellent to very good: effective complex constructions, few errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions

Good to average: effective but simple constructions, minor problems in complex constructions, several errors of agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions but meaning seldom obscured

Fair to poor: major problems in simple/complex constructions, frequent errors of negation, agreement, tense, number, word order/function, articles, pronouns, prepositions, fragments, run-ons, deletions, meaning confused or obscured

Very poor: virtually no mastery of sentence construction rules, dominated by errors, does not communicate, or not enough to evaluate

MECHANICS

Excellent to very good: demonstrates mastery of conventions, few errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, paragraphing

Good to average: occasional errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, paragraphing but meaning not obscured

Fair to poor: frequent errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, paragraphing, poor handwriting, meaning confused or obscured

Very poor: no mastery of conventions, dominated by errors of spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, paragraphing, handwriting illegible, or not enough to evaluate

