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Refining Students' Academic Writing Skills in an Undergraduate Foreign Language Teaching Program*[1]

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This article reports the findings of an action research study aimed at helping advanced English students refine their academic writing skills. The study was carried out with undergraduate students of the Foreign Language Teaching Program (English) at Universidad Surcolombiana. The methods used included process writing —outlining, revising, and editing with peers' and instructor's feedback—, as well as use of sources, content, grammar, coherence, cohesion and feedback.

Key words: process writing, academic writing, English writing instruction

Este artículo presenta los resultados de un estudio de investigación-acción, cuyo objetivo fue el de ayudar a los estudiantes universitarios de inglés avanzado de la Licenciatura en Lengua Extranjera-Inglés, de la Universidad Surcolombiana, a refinar sus estrategias en la escritura de ensayos académicos. Para ello se utilizó la escritura por procesos —con planeación, revisión, edición y retroalimentación por los compañeros y el profesor—, teniendo en cuenta además el manejo de las fuentes, el contenido, la gramática, la coherencia y la cohesión.

Palabras clave: escritura por procesos, escritura de ensayos académicos, enseñanza de la escritura del inglés

Cet article présente les résultats d´une étude de recherche action dont l'objectif est d´aider les étudiants de licence en Langue Etrangère-Anglais de l'Université Surcolombiana à affiner leurs stratégies pour l'écriture d´essais de type académique. Nous avons utilisé pour cela l'écriture par processus - planification, révision, édition et appréciations réalisées par leurs camarades de classe et par le professeur-, en tenant compte aussi de l'emploi des références, le contenu, la grammaire, la cohérence et la cohésion.

Mots clés: le processus de l´écriture, argumenter un point de vue, interpréter une histoire, proposer une solution, appréciation, cohérence et cohésion.

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago, writing instruction consisted of merely stressing correct usage and mechanics of the language while emphasizing the traditional modes of discourse like narration, exposition, persuasion, poetry, etc. In addition, writing instruction was seen primarily as lessons in spelling, punctuation, and the parts of speech (Allington & Cunningham, 1996). A more modern tendency indicates the need to write in academic settings successfully and emphasizes that writing courses should teach critical and imaginative thinking skills, along with revising and editing skills. Similarly, teachers are called to develop their students' critical reading skills and to help them to combine their own writing production with the use of related sources. Teachers' feedback, journal exercises, and collaborative workshops encourage students to write academic papers and then apply their critical reading skills to revise their own papers and those of their peers.

Nowadays, students of undergraduate foreign language teaching programs need to be able to write high quality papers for their academic coursework. Additionally, if they want to pursue higher education studies in their country or abroad they will be required to produce well-articulated papers in English. Consequently, one important issue has been the need to refine students' writing skills in those programs. Research on the subject has shown that students in general do not take reading and writing seriously enough throughout their college years, even if they are presented as course requirements. Students tend to delay academic tasks (procrastination), particularly writing assignments, which according to Onwuegbuzie & Collins (2001) has been associated with both fear of failure and task aversion.

Indeed, we as teachers often notice the difficulties our students face at an undergraduate foreign language teaching program when writing academic papers, especially when they are asked to summarize, paraphrase, cite and acknowledge sources, and use other specific devices relevant to academic writing. That is why we decided to conduct this project in an attempt to answer questions such as: How can process writing help college students to become better academic writers? How can critical reading contribute to refining critical

writing skills? What is the significance of peers' and instructor's feedback during the writing process?

This article will present: first, the theoretical framework; second, the methodology used, including participants, materials and procedures, and data analysis; third, the results and discussion; and fourth, the conclusions and pedagogical implications, and questions for further studies.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following theoretical assumptions have been identified as crucial for the development of this project: process writing, academic writing, critical writing, and coherence and cohesion.

Process Writing

The value of process writing has been stressed by researchers who found that exploring topics through writing and sharing drafts with teachers and peers, resulted in a process of discovery which relies heavily on the power of revision to clarify and refine that discovery (Zamel, 1992).

As teachers incorporated process writing into their classes, writing became freer as a result of students' discovery activities, journal writing, and revision and editing stages. Translated into the classroom context, this approach calls for providing a positive, encouraging, and collaborative workshop environment within which students can work through their composing processes. The instructor's role is to help students to develop viable strategies for getting started (finding topics, generating ideas and information, focusing, and planning structure and procedure), for drafting (encouraging multiple drafts), for revision (adding, deleting, modifying, and rearranging ideas); and for editing (attending to vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics).

Central to process writing is the response from peers and instructors as students plan, revise and edit their work. Peer assessment is defined by Topping et al (2000) as an arrangement for peers to consider the level, value, worth, quality

or successful products or outcomes of learning from others of similar status. Peer response activities may include:

Writers discussing their topics in small groups.

Students interviewing each other about topic ideas, and revision plans.

Instructors conferencing with students both during class and outside of class.

Similarly, since texts do not evolve in a vacuum (Freedman, 1992), working in peer review groups enables students to realize that social, political, and personal contexts influence writing.

Even though process writing has been a step forward in the field of composition and has proved to be particularly helpful to EFL students, it is the responsibility of individual writers to identify and appropriately address the particular task, situation, discourse community, and sociocultural setting in which they are involved.

Academic Writing

The value of academic writing relies on the assumption that the students need to be prepared for academic work. It has been argued that students need to function in the sociocultural context of academia. Then the alternative would be to focus first on academic discourse genres and then on the range and nature of the academic writing task, in particular those aimed at helping the student socialize to the academic context and thus ensuring that student writing falls within the range of acceptable writing behaviors found in the academic community (Kroll, 1997). Nevertheless, two different views on academic writing have emerged recently. According to the first view, successful academic writing depends on transferring general writing skills to different contexts; therefore, writing teachers can best provide writing instruction. A second view holds that successful academic writing depends on general writing skills, but it is thought that discipline-specific instruction is essential as well (Kepler, 2005).

In English for academic purposes orientation, writing is the production of prose that will be acceptable at academic institutions, and learning to write is part of becoming socialized in the academic community – finding out what is expected and trying to approximate it. Three elements must be considered: the writer, the reader and the text. The writer is pragmatic and oriented primarily towards academic success meeting standards and requirements. The reader is also a member of the academic community who has well developed schemata for academic discourse and has views of what is appropriate. The text is a response to a particular task type that falls into a recognizable genre (Kroll, 1997).

Critical Writing

An important principle is that critical reading leads to critical writing, and likewise critical writing depends on critical reading. Critical reading is involved when students make judgments about the content of the reading by comparing it with information provided by the teacher or authorities on the subject, or with their own experience, knowledge, or values related to the subject. Ira Shor (1987) defines critical reading as the language that questions the social construction of the self. When we are critically literate, he asserts, we examine our ongoing development to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act on it. Critical reading questions many aspects inherent to the human being. It questions knowledge, experience and power. It questions the world and the way we make sense of it, power relations, discourses and identities. It makes us think critically about our actions and consider our own experiences. Critical reading raises questions, seeks alternatives, problematizes issues, and seeks explanations.

Critical reading has empowered the modern reader to be more than a passive recipient of information, as traditional reading made us believe to be our role as readers. Furthermore, we were under the impression that our ideas and experiences were irrelevant. Now we understand that although the author has the power to create and present the message, the reader has the power to recreate and the right to be critical by questioning and analyzing the message.

Most papers students write involve reflection on written texts - the thinking and research that has already been done on the subject. When students write

critically, they need to do a critical reading of sources and use them to reinforce their own judgment.

The most important concept in critical writing is argumentative writing (McCarthy, 1997). Argumentation has often been defined as the process of supporting or weakening a statement whose validity is questionable or contentious. When students write, they use arguments to support their premise. In critical writing, an argument is usually a main idea, often called a "claim" or "thesis statement," backed up with evidence that supports it (Perelman, 2000). And to be able to argue a position, some elements like evidence and audience should be considered.

Through evidence, students support their thesis. The strength of the evidence can make or break an argument. There are different ways to show evidence: through statistics, a logical development of points, something from the object being discussed (art work, text, culture, or atom), the way something works, or some combination of more than one of these elements (Perelman, 2000).

Audience is also an important aspect to be considered in an argumentative essay. It is necessary to anticipate the kind of reader which supposes the selection of tone, register, vocabulary and even the way the arguments are organized and presented.

Finally, one way to strengthen the argument and show that writers have a deep understanding of the issue they are discussing is to anticipate and address counterarguments or objections. By considering what someone who disagrees with the premise might have to say about it, writers show that they have thought things through, and dispose of some of the reasons the audience might have for not accepting the argument.

Coherence and Cohesion

Text cohesion reveals the writer's strategies used in the flow of papers. Connor (1996) defines cohesion as the use of explicit linguistic devices to signal relations between sentences and parts of texts. These cohesive devices are phrases or words that help the reader associate previous statements with

subsequent ones. Text flow does not depend on the grammaticality of the individual sentences, but on the way the information is presented in a sentence and how consecutive sentences link up - ultimately into the larger unit of the paragraph, and hence into a larger text unit, a section or chapter. Together these elements of the discourse are what engender the coherence of the text. Van Dijk (1977) argues convincingly that coherence is a semantic property of discourse, formed through the interpretation of each individual sentence relative to the interpretation of other sentences, with interpretation implying interaction between the text and the reader. Coherence is a property that the reader will discern in the text; it allows the reader to make sense of the text.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty-five students from the eighth semester of an undergraduate EFL (English as a Foreign Language) program at a Colombian public university took part in the project. This group of students came from middle-class families and their ages ranged from 21 to 25 years. Their previous experiences with writing had emphasized writing compositions, journals, letters and a brief introduction to writing essays evidencing unsatisfactory results in their writing skills, while they showed excellent development of oral skills as supported by their scores in the speaking section of the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (MTELP). This group of students was also going to take the ECAES (Exámen de Calidad de la Educación Superior) at the end of the academic year, and some were to pursue graduate education in their country or abroad, and consequently considered their writing competence as a necessity for their professional futures.

Materials and Procedures

Students were assigned three papers throughout the semester. The first paper emphasized arguing a position and it was submitted after the second week of the semester. No instruction was given in terms of aspects to consider during the writing process. There was not an outline, first draft, peer revision or

feedback from the instructor prior to students submitting their paper. In short, the purpose of this first paper was to serve as a diagnostic paper.

The second paper was submitted towards the eighth week of the semester and it dealt with interpreting a story for which they had to read a book (*The Fall* by Albert Camus). After reading the book they were to produce a thesis statement in relation to any aspect contained in the book and then defend that premise by presenting their respective argument with the help of external sources. Many of the students focused on the behavior of the main character in the story (Jean Baptiste Clemence) and contrasted how they would have reacted if they had been in the same situation. Some other students explored the incidence of French existentialism in the plot of the story. Others how the consequences of our past affect our present actions, based on what had happened to the main character in *The Fall*.

For the third paper, the students had to propose a solution to a problem they had chosen. The topics were about different issues, as the following titles indicate: *the school and the quality of education, Internet addiction, children and guns, encouraging young people to vote, being a virgin is to be unfashionable, the best people do the best things, preventing abortion, juvenile offenders need a chance, working mothers and successful children, mayor challenges, youth in danger, the phenomenon of teen pregnancy, school violence, children at high risk,* among others.

The topics students chose for the third paper were not imposed, thus giving room for individual preferences, interests, and background knowledge. In *A Comparison of Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of the Writing Process*, Keith (2006) shows that students value being creative and choosing their own topic.

After writing the first paper, a survey (Appendix 1) was administered to detect the processes students had gone through when writing the first paper. Soon after this information was collected, students were given instructions regarding the second paper. Contrary to the first paper, this one went through a more detailed process. Students had to produce an outline, submit it to peers and the instructor for feedback, then produce the first draft which was exchanged

with a classmate during the peer revision workshop, following the process writing steps (Appendix 2). Once students made the necessary corrections and considered the suggestions given by both peer and instructor they elaborated the final draft and submitted it. A second survey (Appendix 3) was administered at this time aimed at looking into the positive and negative aspects students had found in the past in relation to the writing process. It was also at the end of the second paper when the course instructor interviewed some of the students whose papers the instructor had considered as critical cases due to details such as lack of coherence, cohesion, supporting details, etc. Students were asked to submit copies of every stage of the project (outline, first draft, peer revision form, etc) and these became the main data to carry out the analysis in the next stage of the project. There was a final survey (Appendix 4) to determine students' attitudes and perceptions towards the end of the course.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, each one of the three papers was reviewed taking into consideration some categories that emerged during the analysis of the three papers.

Table 1. Categories of Data Analysis

ORGANIZATION	CONTENT
Grammar	Use of sources Thesis statement
Sentence combining (cohesion)	Evidence supporting the thesis
Paragraph structure	Text flow
Connection between paragraphs (coherence)	Treatment of counterarguments and objections
Conventions (spelling, punctuation)	Conclusion

In terms of organization, the emphasis was on grammar analysis, sentence combining, paragraph structure, connection between paragraphs, spelling, and punctuation. A workshop on grammar was carried out in which the most common problems were treated. In relation to content, the existence of a

thesis statement, evidence supporting such a thesis, text flow, treatment of counterarguments and objections, and conclusions were analyzed. Attention was paid to the progress students had made between the first draft and the final draft in the second and third papers.

In general, the data was analyzed and the two instructors' feedback was contrasted. Although there were some different viewpoints between the two in relation to the existence of a thesis statement in some of the papers, they reread and analyzed again those particular papers and reached a common conclusion on the matter.

Data was also analyzed in terms of sources as students had to use different sources and reference their respective authors. Finally, data was also analyzed in terms of their peers' feedback. Essentially, it was done through surveys and interviews to determine how peers helped each other to improve their papers. Some categories emerged as data was analyzed, coming from the analysis of the papers and the information collected in the interviews.

The different sources of information were triangulated and some hypotheses stated. These hypotheses were grouped in the five major themes of the results; sources, organization, content, feedback from peers, and the students as writers, which will be presented and discussed in the next section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sources

In many cases students did not provide a citation for the different sources they used. In contrast, some papers had an excessive use of consecutive citations almost without including the students' own insights. Some of the citations in the reference list were not in the text or vice versa. The instructor's feedback reflected the lack of students' attention in regard to the correct use and acknowledgement of sources as the following questions indicate: *Where are these sources in the text?, Where are your comments for this citation, your interpretation?, Where does this citation begin and end?, What purpose does this citation serve?, Where is this author in the reference list?,* etc.

Even though the three papers failed to be entirely correct regarding the use of sources, students showed a lot of improvement in the third paper compared to the first two. In most of the papers the number and quality of sources they used was adequate. Unfortunately, for many students the Internet became the main source due to the lack of materials in English available at our local libraries. However, as Crystal (2001) indicates, we have to be firm about the need for caution and insist that only a few websites are reliable. That is why, several attempts were made to make students aware of and be able to evaluate, revise, and criticize the online sources they were to incorporate into their papers. For example, the information had to come from a reliable and credible source (a university, a prominent institution, etc) or from a well-known authority in the respective field.

Effective paraphrasing is one of the most difficult writing skills that college students must learn and demonstrate; in fact, many of the citations in the students' first essays suggest their preference for using a source's exact words (Shirley, 2004). Nevertheless, the final results showed that in general, students were able to use someone else's ideas or thoughts and expressed them in their own terms or words (paraphrasing), and to properly acknowledge and give credit to other sources when necessary.

Organization

Grammar

This project shows that students experienced problems with grammar in all three papers. Some problems persisted during the length of the project, even though some intervention to treat the most common and evident mistakes was taken soon after the first and second papers. Some of these mistakes had to do with word order, prepositions and gerund, omission of *it*, use of *-ing* in verb forms, word forms, use of *its* instead of *it's*, *as* vs. *like*, *due* vs. *since*, *other* instead of *another*, use of article *the*, word choice (use of *wait* instead of *expect* or *hope*), sentence structure, nouns in place of adjectives, third person singular, and the use of contractions in formal writing.

Biber (as cited in Hinkel, 2002), states that in academic texts the use of the past tense is relatively infrequent compared to that of the present tense. The same author also states that frequencies of third-person pronouns considerably exceed those of the first and second-person pronouns. In addition, agentless passive structures are used far more often than passives with by-phrases. After writing the three papers, students were able to find evidence that seem to confirm some of the features of academic writing as described by Biber.

Hedge (2002) and Ellis (1993) state that grammar cannot be acquired naturally, and instruction is needed regarding explicit attention to grammatical forms and rules. Ellis also claims that adults should be encouraged in self-correction, describing and identifying their own mistakes, a skill which can be developed through regular practice. This can help students to notice differences between their own production and the target form. The grammar in context also showed the need to cater for individual differences, since not all the students showed the same grammatical mistakes in their works. As a result, two workshops were carried out to reinforce the most frequent mistakes according to individual differences, giving feedback in and outside of class and providing experiences which encouraged interactive, realistic message-focused output.

Coherence and Cohesion

Many of the annotations written by the course instructor were related to changes made to accentuate his interpretation of the coherence. Some of the papers evidenced problems such as: lack of transitional words between paragraphs, paragraphs that were almost one page long, one or two-line paragraphs, inadequate text flow (*many interesting ideas but they don't quite fit into a whole, clearly stated but it is disconnected from the main argument*), excessive use of commas instead of periods, reference words that did not make sense, inadequate sentence length, redundant phrases, etc. To exemplify, the papers revealed that students have a decided preference for a sentence starting with personal subjects and this type of sentence contributes little to cohesion. Park (2005) highlights that EFL writers also need to be aware that in contrast to reading, writing requires a thorough knowledge of the usage of each word. Reading should be an opportunity to ensure accurate vocabulary use in writing.

After the first and second papers, there was a series of workshops to practice coherence and cohesion and to analyze the problems detected in the papers. As with grammar, these workshops gave us the opportunity to cater for individual differences and to focus on coherence and cohesion problems in a contextualized way, dealing with students needs. It was obvious that not all the students experienced the same problems, and there were some critical cases where a lot practice and feedback was needed to tackle text organization accordingly. Another factor that seemed to be present affecting coherence and cohesion was competence in English as students with a high command of the language showed very little inadequacy in coherence and cohesion.

Content

Content refers to how much the papers conveyed the meaning intended, if they were correlated to the competences of arguing a position, interpreting a story and proposing a solution, i.e. if the writers used convincing arguments to support their thesis statement or if the solution proposed was appropriate. Content also involves how the different parts of the papers, (attention getting, introduction, body and conclusion) were articulated and relevant to the whole paper.

Table 2. Elements of Content in the Three Papers.

Papers	Attention getting techniques	Thesis statement	Evidence to support the thesis statement	Reiteration of the main argument in the conclusions
Paper 1 Arguing a position	0	12	14	4
Paper 2 Interpreting a story	2	17	11	10
Paper 3 Proposing a solution	15	25	25	15

N=25

The first paper showed lack of attention getting techniques, little knowledge of thesis statement (only 12 papers out of 25 showed a thesis statement), and a lack of evidence to support the thesis statement since only 14 papers presented arguments to support their thesis. In the second paper, 17 students had a thesis clearly stated, while 8 did not. Unfortunately, some students simply stated an evident fact from the story which did not constitute a thesis statement of any sort. As for the third paper, all students defined the problem very clearly in the introduction of the paper, fifteen used attention getting techniques, and all of them used different kinds of data to support their arguments (examples, statistics, and data from research studies), whereas only 15 students presented a very clear conclusion.

In the outline of the second and third papers, some of them presented a compilation of facts, or a long list of citations, rather than a thesis that could be argued and defended with supporting reasons. In other cases, although the thesis was well established at the beginning of the paper, the supporting reasons were in some cases missing or consisted of a series of disconnected ideas which did not reflect the purpose of the paper. With the exception of a couple of papers, many failed to use the attention-getting technique in the second and third papers. That is to say, students began their paper with the thesis statement or the supporting reasons right away but did not successfully introduce the readers to the central theme of the paper.

In relation to development, the three papers showed the need to be more consistent with aspects such as: *ideas that did not make sense, confusing arguments, relevance of comments, lack of supporting details, treatment of objections and counterarguments, supporting details inconsistent with thesis statement, etc.* Likewise, Jenkins (1999) advises that to convey the orderliness you want in a paper, you must see the whole before you can alter its parts. You must see the total composition before you know what elements are missing, what paragraphs need strengthening, and what sentences need removing. Indeed, it is by reviewing and changing, and then by more reviewing and simplifying, that you reach perfection, at least in terms of what you want in your article.

In the conclusions all three papers showed the need to reiterate the main argument developed in the body of the paper and to use the main evidence in

the conclusion. Even though there was significant improvement in the third paper, the conclusions still needed to be expanded in a couple of papers.

Feedback from Peers

In this study, students' feedback changed considerably from the second to the third paper. In the second paper, students tended to give more importance to the instructor's feedback, in several cases they simply ignored the feedback given by their peers. One hypothesis for this could be that of task difficulty. Given that the second paper was more challenging, the students paid attention to the instructor's feedback only. They did not seem to recognize authority from their peers. While in the third paper the feedback given by peers (Appendix 4) matched that of the instructor.

Feedback from peers and instructor in the third paper involved all aspects of academic papers: use of sources, content, grammar, text organization, etc. Feedback from both instructor and peers emphasized the use of linking words, the development of ideas, the use of examples to reinforce arguments, the lack of more supporting information, the reiteration of the thesis statement in the conclusions, students' own insights and reflections to enrich the paper, etc. These all proved that peers showed awareness and knowledge of all the components of a good paper. All in all, we agree with Van den Berg (2006) when he says that in college, most students take assessing the work of their fellow students seriously, and include the peer feedback in the revision of their work. During the peer revision workshops, students provided feedback in an evaluative manner. For peer assessment, we recommend a combination of written and oral feedback.

Research on EFL writing has shown that students' feedback on peer writing can be more valuable than instructor's feedback (Cumming, 1985, as cited in Reid, 1993). Through peer feedback, students learn to identify their audience and analyze the social context in which their audience will react to their writing. As a result, students adopt the perspective of their audiences and try to assess their writing in terms of how their readers may react to or comprehend their text.

The Students as Writers

To sum up, the results were quite satisfactory if we look back at our main goal of helping students to refine skills in academic writing. The major difficulty of the students as writers was organizing ideas and paragraphs, a claim made at the beginning and at the end of the course. They also expressed that being aware of the aspects of the writing process helped them in their task of writing papers. At the motivational level, when students were asked how they saw themselves as writers at the end of the course, 47% of them said they saw themselves as good writers, while 29% said they still needed more practice and 24% said they considered themselves bad writers. This shows that students' attitudes as writers at the end of the course were satisfactory considering our initial goal of helping them to refine their academic writing skills.

In addition, Light (2003) argues that students believe they learn most effectively when writing instruction is organized around a substantial discipline. The traditional type of writing exercise "Write a five-page essay about what you did on your vacation last summer" offers little help. He also adds that students urge more writing instruction in a substantive context. Their ideal is to combine writing instruction with writing assignments in a particular discipline. This view is also worth considering in the development of writing instruction over the upcoming years.

CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Within the aspect of organization, we can conclude that there is a need to treat grammar in context according to students' needs. Schneider (2005) affirms that language lessons structured around local issues and concerns can be successfully linked to explicit grammar focus. In addition, exposing students to authentic written samples of academic writing may help them to become aware of the structure of academic texts, and therefore such lessons can have the potential to raise students' awareness of critical issues in the world around them. Even though the mistakes students made in the first paper were dealt with immediately, there were prevailing mistakes in the other papers.

Also, students should engage in self-correction more often in their writing process since describing and identifying mistakes is a skill that can be developed through regular practice. Training in self-correction in the written mode as Obilinovic (1985) indicates should contribute to the improvement of accuracy over time. And most importantly, gaining control over their errors gives students the confidence to explore writing rhetorically. Thus teachers can help students to help themselves improve their writing at the local level (grammar, mechanics) and to gain confidence at the global (rhetorical) level (Carlini, 1990).

In relation to content, the construction of a thesis statement, the use of attention getting, the reiteration of the main argument in the conclusions, and some other aspects which generated difficulties especially in the first paper were progressively overcome with the development of the other two papers. Accordingly, students' knowledge of the process of writing can be increased through instructional strategies and daily writing practice. In regard to revising and editing skills, Austin (1987) points out that students who show a greater knowledge of the process of writing show a greater facility in revising.

Students seemed to be satisfied with the results of the project and were prompted to listen to recommendations made at the end of the course. These recommendations were meant to improve and enrich their writing process in relation to the competences of arguing a position, interpreting a story, and proposing a solution.

Again, students showed greater difficulty with the second paper in comparison to the other two papers, which they found relatively easier. Many of them attributed this to factors such as the lack of experience of writing an essay based on a book, the lack of familiarity with the topic, the fact that they were not used to producing a thesis statement and the struggle it represented. Several students expressed that this experience was just an initial step into the complicated and ever challenging task of writing.

Regarding peers' and instructor's feedback, we can affirm that most of the students took into account the suggestions given by the instructor in the first drafts when editing and proofreading the final drafts. Since extra feedback

and instruction allow students to make greater gains in organization and argumentation, as well as in the linguistic accuracy and complexity of their writing (Abbuhl, 2005), the feedback given by peers made significant contributions. It was likewise remarkable to see how instructor's and peers' feedback coincided especially in relation to content.

Students claimed they gained knowledge of the writing process and improved their writing skills. Most found the course instructor's assistance helpful and the practice in general beneficial, and therefore ended up seeing themselves as better writers. Research in the field reveals that students who improve the most in writing describe it as an intense process. They work with a professor, or with a writing teacher, or with a small group of fellow students who meet regularly to critique one another's writing. The longer this work-related engagement lasts, the greater the improvement (Light, 2003).

In connection to pedagogical implications, this study showed that by giving the right feedback and undergoing a process approach to writing, students can become good writers. Consequently, the need to create networks at the university in order to design a scheme to implement process writing early in the program of study in undergraduate foreign language teaching programs constitutes an urgent goal nowadays.

Equally important is to generate additional motivation for students to write. It is advisable to publish the students' papers in a magazine or journal of the university or elsewhere. This is an activity that could engage students to write for a real audience and inspire students in lower classes to start formulating their own paper topics.

Students need to know when they are performing well and when they are not, and they need to know how to take corrective action. There is a variety of ways for instructors to transmit their response; in dialogue journals, group conferences during class workshops or outside of class, written comments on student drafts, and student teacher conferences and conferencing face-to-face, usually outside the classroom where the student can express individual needs through dialogue. These activities were used throughout the project and showed how effective they can become.

Despite the difficulties such as inadequate use of sources in the first paper, there were better results in the second and third papers. Unfortunately, there were still a couple of ideas and insights in the papers that constituted evidence of plagiarism. Price (2005) says that students caught plagiarizing in middle or high schools usually get a second chance, but plagiarism in the adult world is much more serious. College students in the United States can fail classes or be expelled from school. To make students conscious of the effects of plagiarism is not an easy task, since they see it as a fast and easy alternative to paraphrasing the ideas or citing the corresponding source. But we need to encourage students to acknowledge sources when necessary and avoid plagiarism. In brief, the plagiarism problem can be dealt with in many ways; teachers should be vigilant, students must be aware of the acknowledgement of sources, and penalties for those who are caught must be clearer (Price, 2005).

Questions for further studies

It is necessary to explore more how coherence and cohesion of texts could be of more help in the writing production. Also, further research in terms of the role the first language plays when writing EFL papers seems to be of great importance. Another related issue is how the knowledge students have of rhetorical devices, writing competences, and previous experience in writing in their mother tongue may affect their writing in English.

It would also be relevant to explore to what degree students value peer feedback compared to instructor feedback, since they usually tend to underestimate the suggestions given by their fellow classmates, probably thinking in terms of who will eventually grade their papers.

Likewise, the internet as a reliable source in doing research, and the attitudes we as teachers should assume to fight plagiarism is doubtless another issue of common concern and further research.

The potential benefits of emphasizing academic and critical writing from early stages in the foreign language learning process might constitute another relevant topic for further research. Sommers & Saltz (2004) argue that students who make the greatest gains as writers throughout college, see in writing a

larger purpose than fulfilling an assignment. Instead, they see the value that appropriate writing represents in their future lives.

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APPENDIX 1

On the Writing Process

1. How did you decide to select this topic?
2. Describe the process you went through to write this paper?
2.1 What was the easiest part of writing this paper?
2.2 What was the most difficult part of writing this paper?

APPENDIX 2

Peer Revision Work Shop

Does the entire piece create one dominant thesis statement and is it sufficiently narrow?

Does each paragraph support the thesis statement?

DEVELOPMENT

Do the paragraphs and passage contain enough supporting details to enhance clarity

and contribute to unity?

Are the logical relationships clear? Can the information be easily outlined?

COHERENCE

Are ideas clearly connected from sentence to sentence and passage to passage?

Are transitions used to help ideas and images flow smoothly?

CLARITY

Do words, sentences, and passages clearly express ideas?

ORGANIZATION

Is the essay easy to follow?

Does the opening fail to prepare readers for the main argument?

Does the ending reiterate the thesis statement?

The best part of this paper was…

When I finished the essay I thought…

One suggestion I want to make to improve the appearance is…

How does the essay convey the use of the APA style (margins, indentation, spacing,

list of references, in text-citations, etc).

APPENDIX 3

Attitudes Towards Writing, Previous Experiences

1. What do you consider most difficult about writing in English?
2. Why? In retrospect, what might have influenced you?
3. In your previous experience what practices have been effective in helping you become better writer?
4. According to your previous experience which practices have been negative and have hindered you from becoming a good writer?
5. How do you see yourself as a writer?

Appendix 4

Students Attitudes at the End of the Course

1. What problems did you encounter in relation to writing process throughout this course?
2. What still troubles you about your writing? Why?
3. Of the three essays (First: Argue a position, Second: Interpreting a story, Third: Proposing a solution) which one did you find:
    More challenging
    Easier
4. What was helpful for improving your writing?
5. What did you gain in relation to your writing process this semester?
6. How do you see yourself as writer in English now?