Improving Writing through Stages

Mejorando la escritura a través de etapas

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Writing as a means of communication is one of the basic skills students must master at the university level. Although it is not an easy task because students are usually reluctant to correct, teachers have great responsibility at the time of guiding a writing process. For that reason, this study aimed at improving the writing process in fourth semester students from the Engineering Faculty at the Universidad Santo Tomás, Tunja, Colombia, following the writing stages. Data analysis showed that writing improves if students can follow stages and receive feedback from the teacher.

Key words: Feedback, writing, writing stages

La escritura como medio de comunicación es una habilidad que los estudiantes deben aprender en la universidad y aunque no es una tarea fácil porque los estudiantes usualmente están renuentes a la corrección, los docentes tienen una gran responsabilidad en el momento de implementar un proceso de escritura. Por esta razón, esta investigación estuvo enfocada a mejorar el proceso de escritura en estudiantes de cuarto semestre de la Facultad de Ingeniería de la Universidad Santo Tomás – Tunja, Colombia – siguiendo ciertas etapas con respecto a la escritura. El análisis de los datos mostró que la escritura se mejora si los estudiantes pueden seguir instrucciones y reciben retroalimentación por parte del docente.

Palabras clave: escritura, etapas de escritura, retroalimentación

Introduction

Teaching writing in English as a foreign language is not an easy task since students usually think that writing is a complex process which they prefer to avoid. In my experience, students feel discouraged when receiving a paper filled with corrections and, of course, a bad grade, which might result in diluted interest towards writing and therefore, students could feel reluctant to be corrected. Hence, teachers have the responsibility to encourage students to feel comfortable when writing and involve them in this process; after students feel included as part of a writing project, they may show interest in improving this skill and the teacher is able

to make corrections as a usual classroom activity. This way, students can understand that writing is an endless procedure but one in which they can improve.

Considering the above explanation, this project aimed at improving the writing process of students in level IV English at the Universidad Santo Tomás de Aquino, Tunja, keeping in mind that each individual has the ability to write, but needs to be lead into writing exercises which must be based on their own reflections and intentions.

Statement of the Problem

After working with fourth semester students at Universidad Santo Tomás, Tunja, the researcher could identify the poor writing production in English and the lack of engagement in students' writing tasks by observing their attitude towards this skill and their papers which included incomplete, broken, and meaningless sentences. For these reasons, the researcher decided to lead the students' writing production by following stages proposed by Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987) consisting of a structured model students could use as a scaffold for writing in an oversimplified way. Hence, the stated research question was: *What might be the effects on the writing process itself of fourth semester students at Universidad Santo Tomás, Tunja, after following the writing stages proposed by Hamp-Lyons & Heasley (1987)?*

Literature Review

The main constructs of the project, writing, writing skills, approaches to teaching writing, and feedback were addressed and explained regarding their importance and the connection they represented in the proposal of improving writing.

Writing

As asserted by Smalzer (1996), writing must not be understood as a process to follow some stages that guarantee a competent written production, but instead, a process to encourage students to think more clearly and critically and to improve their own voices as writers. Hence, bearing in mind this assertion, I felt a sense of devotion, commitment, perseverance, and an organized procedure was what this project focused on; for that reason, the writing stages proposed by Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987) were adopted and helped ensure such competent written production. It claimed that through the stages, students could better shape their writing production by moving back and forth between the writing stages. In that way, the participants could fully realize their own writing potential.

However, there are many other authors who also proposed writing stages for performing writing tasks. For instance, Hyland (2003) states that the process for writing is a need to develop "student's abilities to plan, define a rhetorical problem and propose and evaluate

solutions" (p. 10) which can be interpreted as the guidance that teachers have to provide in order to develop strategies for generating, drafting, and refining ideas. Finally, Hedge (1988) stresses the importance of teaching writing stages because such teaching allow learners to see how they are progressing in their writing and get feedback from the teacher.

Writing Stages

Due to the abovementioned data, it can be asserted that Hedge (1988), Hyland (2003) and Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987) see writing stages as a fundamental methodology in the development of the writing skill in the process of helping students to improve.

On the one hand, Hedge (1988) maintains that writing demands a high degree of organization and accuracy and for that reason proposes five stages to overcome it. Figure 1 shows the stages recommended.

Hyland (2003) also proposes a series of stages (see Figure 2).

Finally, Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987) see writing as a three-stage procedure: pre-writing, writing and re- writing (see Figure 3).

After reviewing the different writing stages recommended by Hedge (1988), Hyland (2003) and Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987), it can be said that writing is not simply the correct usage of grammar, but all the aspects that involve creating a masterpiece. For example, mood, emphasis, development, choice of effective words and word combinations. Moreover, it is also necessary to know that these elements are not found out and applied all at once in a first attempt. Only through practice of the writing stages and having in mind what each stage implies can the individual begin noticing what their writing lacks.

Thus, considering the three abovementioned process models of writing instructions, I decided to select the model suggested by Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987), since this model simplifies some of the stages proposed by Hedge (1988) and Hyland (2003) into three robust stages. Furthermore, given the time students had for regular English classes, it was convenient to follow the last model.

Writing Skills

When we talk about communicative skills, we state them in the sense of being able to write, speak, listen, and read. However, when we deal with communicative competences, we should understand that each skill has sub skills in itself. In this case, this project looked for improving some specific abilities in writing such as independence, comprehensibility, fluency, and creativity proposed by Hampton (as cited in SIL International, 1999): Independence, in the sense of having students express their own ideas without much assistance. Comprehensibility, when they are aware they can be understood by themselves and the
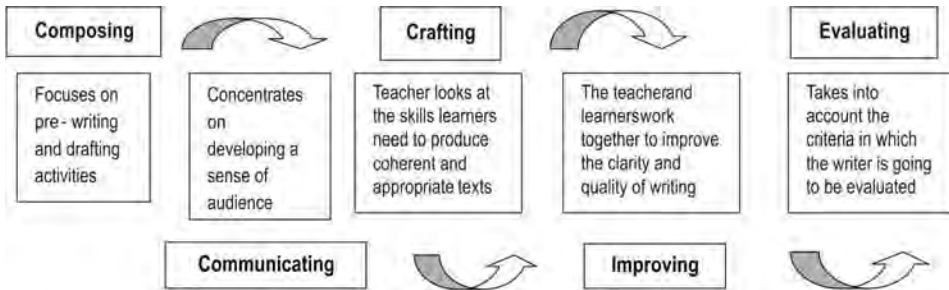
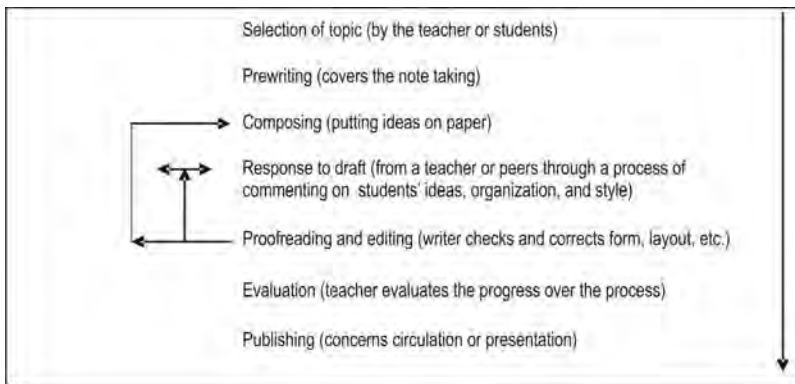**Figure 1.** Writing stages (Hedge,1988)

Figure 2. Model of the writing process (Hyland, 2003)

readers. Fluency, when their texts are easy to follow and well organized. Lastly, creativity, when the text belongs completely to the writer.

Thus, coping with skills in a given language means the ability to communicate at least with a minimum level of performance. That is why it is important to comprehend that any skill includes sub-skills which differentiate between handling a skill to communicate and communicating competently.

Approaches to Teaching Writing

The teaching of writing should be stated as a developed production by means of following a writing process, having in mind that this process must be learned and supported
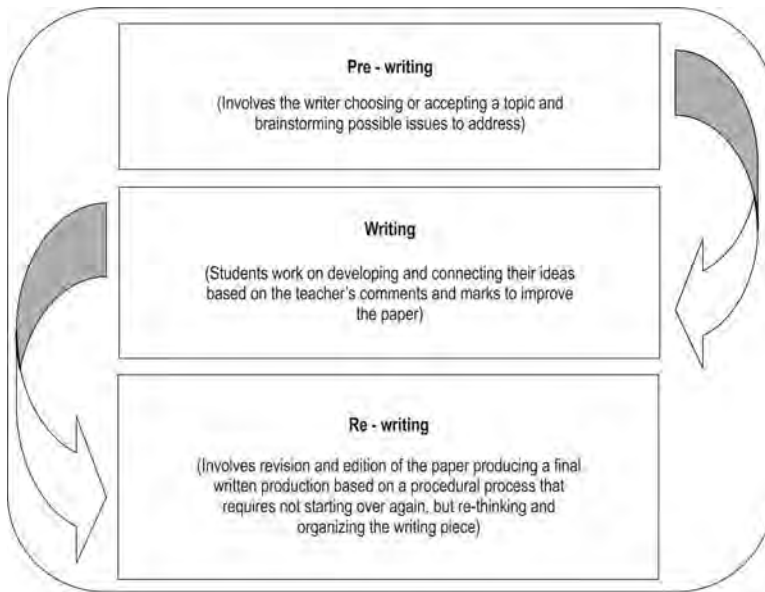
Figure 3. Writing stages (Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 1987)

by principles to guide that writing in an effort to increase cognizance of the writing skill and expectations from repetition.

Byrne (1991) stated the need to consider four approaches in teaching writing: focus on accuracy, fluency, the text, and purpose. The first approach takes place when students are asked to write about any given topic and mistakes appear in their compositions. This results from students being allowed to express whatever they wanted and without any help that guides them in this process.

Secondly, the fluency approach gives students the chance to engage in 'free writing' without bearing in mind any kind of mistakes they make once they are writing. The method that this focus introduces makes writers feel comfortable with writing and, consequently, this communicative skill turns into an enjoyable experience.

Thirdly, the focus on text approach allocates importance to the construction and organization of paragraphs in an attempt to cover the central problem in writing. In this way, students can write more effectively. Finally, the focus on the purpose approach states that there is a given reason to write. This means there is a purpose that can be taken as an excuse for students to write.

Feedback

During the students' learning process, teachers usually convey the performance of their learners through different techniques by providing comments through an oral or written form. The suggestions or feedback provided to students to improve a specific work gives them the chance to reinforce a given behavior as stated by McDonald-Mann and Buron (1999).

In the words of Brookhart (2008, p.7), "feedback is powerful given that it addresses both cognitive and motivational factors", which might be interpreted as a way to help students overcome their difficulties, considering that feedback might affect students' performance negatively or positively. Thus, in recognizing the importance of feedback, teachers must tailor responses with regard to increasing students' chances of improvement based on their differing needs by adopting a positive attitude towards students' writings.

Feedback in this project looked to give students a chance to develop their linguistic competence while having students self-correct their mistakes. Gulcat and Ozagac (2004) affirmed that the practice of re-writes is a must if teachers want to see any improvement in students. For that reason, a strategy for feedback adopted by the researcher in the current project was done through the use of an error correction code, to have students think about the kind of error they have made and by using these symbols, they were allowed to 'discover' what their mistakes were.

Methodology

This research can be classified as action research since, in accordance with Wallace (1998), action research introduces procedures in which teachers can solve professional problems and improve their pedagogical practice through self-reflection in order to make decisions for a better performance in the educational field. Accordingly, it was necessary to rely on certain instruments to collect the data e.g. research diary, students' documents, and a semi-structured interview.

Firstly, the *research diary* functioned as a tool to permanently record any important aspect, detail or information related to the focus of this study; based on what Burns states (1999), the research diary provides more subjective and personal reflections and interpretations of any event that occurred within the classroom setting. Secondly, *students' documents* provided information about their progress in writing, taking into account the process from the beginning to the end. Based on Burns (1999), students' texts allow teachers to review students' progress. Finally, a semi-structured interview was applied to collect more data such as strengths, weaknesses, and needs of the project to improve practical focus on the writing production. Based on Wallace (1998), semi-structured interviews combine a certain degree of control with a degree of freedom to develop the interview.

To begin implementing this proposal, a virtual space for the English class was opened in the university's platform for the first time. It was to be used in this instance by fourth semester students. There, they were provided the chronogram of the activities and different rooms to upload their writings and receive feedback. For the initial compositions, the students wrote, for example, about travel experiences, personal likes and personal preferences, among others.

With the aim of starting the process to improve writing, the participants uploaded their *pre-writing* to receive feedback on form and content. Then, they had to improve their writings based on the comments provided by the teacher, who emphasized to them the language they needed to master and content or expressions they wanted to know and to go over the next stage and, as such, scaffold the students' process through written feedback. Finally, their papers were returned so that they could make final adjustments (*re-writing*) based on the teacher's comments, thus completing the cycle of stages. Upon finishing each activity, students wrote informally their perceptions, likes, and feelings about this project.

For the second activity, the students had two options: the first one was about touristic places and the second about environmental issues. For this activity the process of feedback remained the same; this means the teacher provided two written items of feedback on the students' samples, one on the first stage and one on the second stage. Day by day, in the course of this project, students achieved something. For the outcome of each task, they received comments that allowed them to know how they were improving and how they could further their writing process.

Findings

For this analysis, the *Grounded Theory* approach was chosen. Hence, the data analysis procedure selected was offered by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), who proposed a procedure called *coding,* and after following the procedures listed and analyzing the samples collected through the instruments applied, three categories emerged: *shaping writing, managing language rules*, and *the role of feedback*.

Category 1: Shaping Writing

This category analyzes the results of a writing process after implementing two writing activities. It demonstrates that students tended to work better, in the sense of organization and content, if they followed a structured plan showing them what to do and how to do it before writing. Accordingly, Hyland (2003) asserted that writing is one of the most important skills that second language students need to develop and, therefore, it requires extensive and specialized instructions. For that reason, it was necessary for the researcher to be acquainted

with the approaches to writing proposed by Byrne (1991). It was important that students knew the techniques and activities the researcher decided to use in order to have them learn a specific skill such as writing.

Throughout the application of the writing activities, students followed the process including the stages proposed by Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987), which is evidenced in their documents. They also demonstrated how these stages supported them in improving their texts in an effort to shape their writing skill. The following two excerpts show the first stage (drafting) and third stage (editing), respectively; they were taken from one of the participants:

In our lifes, sometimes we can be in front of problems, for example, we could have problems in our houses, work or in the school. A problem can be presented in front of us in any moment. A very common problem could be with our family. It'd be because of us.

"In the time we are living, we can be facing problems without knowing how to solve. These problems can be in our houses, in our work even in the university. (S7)

The samples above illustrate how the student had a better writing production when he followed stages or steps. Therefore, another theme became important in the process of improving writing and it was related to writing skills. For example, mechanical skill, treatment of content, stylistic skill, and judgment skill (Heaton, 1991) were acquired and developed through the continuous practice to help students scaffold their writing. The command of writing skills was necessary because, based on Hyland (2003), these skills allow individuals to communicate ideas and information effectively. Figure 4 displays the procedure participants experienced during the process of writing.

In the research diary, the researcher highlights students' performances based on their documents. The research diary also supports the aforementioned paragraphs and the importance of following stages to improve a specific skill such as writing.

…I realize students' writings improved a lot since it can be identified [by] students' thoughts, point of views and their own way of writing…

…While checking students' documents, most of the students have been improving their writing, what means they are taking into account the teacher's feedback… (Excerpts 4 & 5, Research diary)

Finally, samples from the applied interview illustrate the participants' conceptions about working through stages to improve their writing. Consequently, the importance of the writing stages is demonstrated one more time in shaping the students' writing process. When asked if their own writing process had been modified, one of the students mentioned the following:

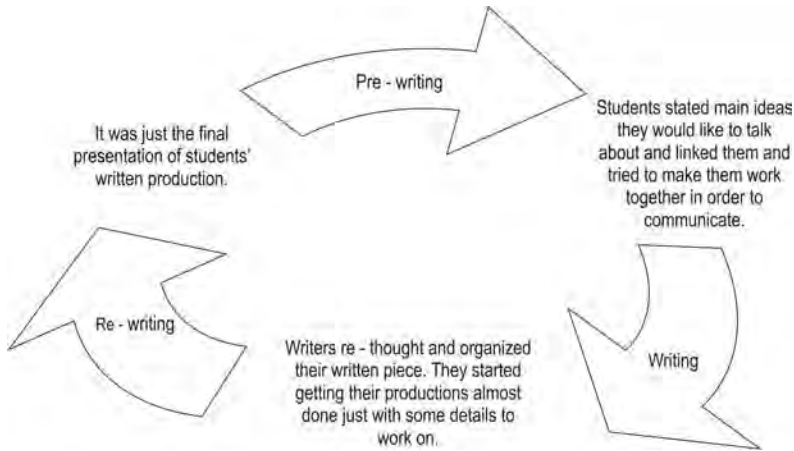Q1: Has your writing process been modified after following the writing stages proposed?

Figure 4. Writing process followed by fourth semester students

It has been modified, because from now on I follow stages, first, doing a brainstorming, which I did not do before, to have clearness about the topic we write and I think it has helped us. They have contributed to help us….on how to perform more in writing. (Excerpt 8, Interviewer 1- Question 1, S5).

Upon winding up this first category after following the writing stages, it was revealed how students received positive outcomes if input provided them the ideas to improve their writing skill. This means that students must be led to write by having a communicative purpose to do so, which might make sense to them. Not to forget that it is crucial to take advantage of their interests, styles, and needs to have them write. As asserted by Harmer (1991), "if we are working on solving communicative problems, well structured activities must be planned to have learners actively involved in the unveiling of any given concern by providing them with strategies and models as a way to solve a communicative problem like writing".

In writing it is crucial to plan a group of strategies which covers aspects such as attitudes and contents to persuade students to write. The core goal is not simply to make others write, but to guide them through the process of how to do it in a way that might help them improve and shape their skill or writing by practicing.

Category 2: Managing Language Rules

The name of this category is related to grammar issues, word selection and paragraph structure. Despite the fact that students made many mistakes because they thought English

language rules regarding grammar aspects were odd, it was evident that students did indeed like writing. Although they knew some rules, they did not understand why they perpetually made the same mistakes. Concerning this drawback, every question students had served as an expression of interest to improve and empower their writing. Although students had to accomplish certain stages in order to write a composition and shape their writing skill, following rule selection on grammar, word selection or paragraph structure was another process which became important at the same time.

This category emerged from the analysis of the data, given that the information gathered about students concerned language rules for the development of the two writing activities. However, the students now comprehend how grammar, word selection, and paragraph structure are issues not to avoid, but to deal with. The teacher's notes demonstrated students' worries.

…Another group of students feel worried about the use of grammar in their writing productions because they sometimes do not understand what was wrong in some parts.

… Interest towards raising awareness regarding grammar has been displayed by students… students ask for explanation about word order or tense or verbs depending on their writings. (Excerpts 11 & 12, Research diary)

From these field notes it is clear that, in spite of the fact that grammar issues, word selection or paragraph structure were not the focus, it was relevant how its rules are important in students' writing for building up meaning about reality that surrounds them in language learning.

Although analyzing language issues may provide principles that allow us to produce well constructed sentences, it is necessary to know how language rules work. This means that language teachers need to provide clear and effective feedback which students use to reflect on their mistakes. However, "rules are not enough without sagacity to make it mean whatever we want to" (Yule, 1985, p. 17). Finally, involving language issues, teachers must lead students to recognize how a language works in different cultures, but this practice must not be focused solely on meaning since students also need to learn what kind of rules a specific language brings in and how it should be used (Harmer, 1991).

Category 3: The Role of Feedback

This third category is called *the role of feedback*, since it dealt with the importance that students gave to the comments provided by their teacher and the role that these contributions played in students' documents.

As already stated in this report, it is important to follow stages to achieve a better composition. It was also explained how language rules play an important part in students' development. Hence, teacher support in the language performance of his/her students is

essential as well. In the students' samples the improvements in their writing are evident from the second stage (writing) until onward, which means that the writing process could not be completed if feedback had not been timely and meaningfully offered by the teacher. Having students accept their mistakes and self-reflect on them increased their awareness about the use of English as a foreign language. In addition, as stated by Brookhart (2008, p. 2), "Good feedback should be part of a classroom assessment environment in which students see constructive criticism as a good thing and understand that learning cannot occur without practice".

When asked about the importance of the feedback, participants provided the following answers:

Very important since the feedback let us correct our mistakes found in our texts and obviously, without feedback we would have the same mistakes during the different stages. (Excerpt 16, Interviewer 2, Question 3, S9)

The feedback was very important, because that way I could identify my mistakes and learn from them to avoid make them again; besides, I learn new words and a new way to write my papers. (Excerpt 17, Interviewer 3, Question 3, S10)

Finally, teachers need to continue searching for the best way to display writing activities that are appealing for students and help them understand that errors are part of the language learning process (Ellis, 1994). Hence, the duty of teachers, tutors, and instructors in writing is to monitor what kind of writing process students are dealing with and what their needs are. It is easier to aid students in improving their writing skills based on knowledge of their needs. As a result of a scaffold learning style, in this case writing, students are able to see their performance increase with every change in their papers as they become capable of expressing their own ideas and telling their own stories.

Conclusion

Different outcomes about how students considered writing were provided by the analysis of the implemented instruments, giving as a result the presentation of three categories: shaping writing, managing language rules, and the role of feedback.

Once these three categories were studied and evaluated, it became evident how they supported each other. In the category *Shaping writing*, it was discovered in the results that, if an individual wants to improve in the writing process, s/he needs a starting point at which to begin writing. When the teacher showed students a process that moved them in the direction of better writing, in this case by teaching stages which illustrated how to start creating their productions, they were encouraged to rely on their own capacity to write.

Connecting the *shaping writing* category with *managing language rules*, it is noticeable that from the initial moment, the writing stages pushed students into doing something about their writing deficiencies. They felt the need to know not only what process to follow in order to write (writing stages) but what kind of elements they needed in order to support the first category. In other words, the second category, which was about language aspects, became an important process in order for the participants to see how language issues supported the process of writing production. Stages were important because knowing what to do does not mean that you possess the elements to start writing.

Lastly, the first and second category, as has been briefly explained before, needed a very outstanding component: feedback. Then, *the role of feedback* category contributed in this project as a support of the process students followed to improve their writing. After all, it was very important to take feedback as an ongoing development and as a torch that guided the way as students organized their writing (writing stages) and what they used to deal with it (rules).

In conclusion, after reviewing all the data collected, it can be said that feedback was one of the main highlights in students' writing process. It is necessary to adopt a framework that allows a continuous process whereby both students and the researcher might follow each stage to know how the process is going and what kind of outcomes are being unveiled. Here is where feedback serves as a principle, ensuring a real connection of different aspects of writing that are required for any pedagogical research practice.

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