

IMPROVING RESEARCH STUDENT WRITING SKILLS: LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

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Резюме

Във фокуса на внимание в настоящата статия е подобряването на научноизследователските умения на магистрите и докторантите в областта на приложната лингвистика и методиката на чуждоезиковото обучение, както и оптимизирането на научното ръководство и съдържанието на подготовителните курсове, които университетските преподаватели им предлагат за повишаване качеството на техните научни дисертации. Опитът показва, че компетентностите, необходими на студентите за провеждане на самостоятелното научно изследване и написването на дисертационния труд, се развиват много по-успешно ако теоретичната им подготовка се съчетае не с отделни задачи върху чужда за тях проблематика и/или разглеждане и критичен анализ на произволно подбрани текстови образци от академичния дискурс, а с учебни симулации, свързани с провеждането на малко по мащаб научно изследване на конкретен проблем, касаещ научните интереси на студентите и/или преподавателската им практика и докладването му в научен реферат под прякото ръководство на научния ръководител през целия процес на работа - от идентифицирането на проблема и конкретизирането на изследователските въпроси и задачи до създаването на финалния писмен продукт и устното представяне на резултатите от изследването пред колегите, с последващо обсъждане и (само-)оценка на качествата на работата и усвоените академични умения.

Introduction

It has often been said that the best way to learn something is by doing it (rather than trying to internalize it by reading about how it is done or studying examples of good practice), and developing research writing skills is certainly no exception to this rule. However, if you are not able to relate to what you are doing, if you are simply imitating a model or trying to fill in a template with content that is not meaningful to you, your effort will probably still be in vain and the final result will fall short of the desired quality, as it will lack any personal relevance or significance for you. In addition, feedback on your performance will be far more comprehensible and edifying if you are able to reflect critically on your experience, building on the insights gained through peer review of your work and your tutor's scaffolding guidance.

Developing the research writing skills of students who are also pre- or in-service teachers is often quite a challenge for the tutor/trainer¹. Student writers often find it particularly difficult to transform intuitively felt truths about their professional practice

¹ If there is no special course in the university programme devoted to the development of the students' academic competence for carrying out and writing up research, this uneasy role is often taken over by the student's research supervisor.

or knowledge from experience into research data which could give the necessary credibility and validity to their claims². Structuring their empirical research, selecting and/or designing appropriate data collecting tools in accordance with their aims and carefully recording the results of the study for later analysis and interpretation are skills many have to learn before they actually set out to plan their own research. These needs appear to be of universal character, regardless of the students' academic level or educational background. And while academic skills for reading and critically reviewing relevant literature (incl. avoiding of plagiarism and/or copy-and-paste practices), or organising a set of references seem to allow (at least to a certain extent³) for training through involving students into a series of separate writing tasks on various topics and sample texts, generic research writing skills are much harder to develop in a similar fashion. The logic of the research procedure and the format of its report tend to be lost on the students if they do not have the support of content, gradually presented in interlocking steps, which they could find in some way meaningful to them and relate to their own experience and/or professional interests. Significantly, I have had many postgraduate students who excelled in their performance on discrete academic writing tasks on diverse topics and texts, and yet strangely found it extremely difficult to apply the same skills and transfer the gained knowledge (with the same precision and understanding) when it came to carrying out and writing up their own MA/PhD research.

We make the mistake of dictating problems and solutions, making people passive, colluding in the problem and dictating answers, rather than inviting them to empower themselves by entering the problem, and developing their own knowledge. (Burns 2010)

So, if time permits, a small-scale piece of [action] research on a topic of their own personal choice could provide a helpful training simulation for these students. Set

² A PhD student of mine once said that if he had known how much time and work he would have to invest in proving to the world something which to him was so obvious, self-evident and natural, he would have never dared to undertake this "Sisyphean task"; however, at the end of his academic endeavour he notably felt as empowered as Heracles to tackle the academic labours (the required academic research writing skills are indeed as varied as the ones needed for coping with the 12 Herculean tasks) and admitted that carrying out and writing up his research had actually helped him to see more clearly what was going on and thus even improve his professional practice and teaching skills as a result. This anecdote adds further support to what Lawrence Stenhouse, an Australian teacher and teacher trainer, once said: "*It is teachers who, in the end, will change the world of the school by understanding it.*" (Macpherson 1994:15)

³ It is often argued that relevance of information from reviewed sources to one's own research topic is best assessed if we can somehow relate to that topic, and critical arguments sound more profound and truly convincing if we are familiar with the subject matter under discussion and we know what we are talking about.

in a familiar context, it takes the trainee through the various stages of research – from defining the scope of the study and refining the focus of research aims to data gathering and results interpretation – under the practical guidance of the academic writing skills tutor and/or the research supervisor. The internal logic of the research mechanism is thus no longer a black box and writing it up is less of spinning a yarn to fill the pages with cliché statements and/or poorly patched excerpts from the studies published by other researchers in the field and more of a thesis which writes itself up – an idiosyncratic narrative of verbal (and graphic) exponents to express the outcomes of the personal academic inquiry. Also, the presentation of research findings to peers and group discussion of results assist the students in making better sense of their research and in picking up loose ends in their work so as to make their arguments and conclusions more persuasive and convincing. Last but not least, writing up the research also allows the trainer (and/or the supervisor) and the trainee to discuss and review the conventions of the rhetorical structure and the academic style of the product⁴ – the thesis itself – while feedback is being tailored to address individual problems.

Intelligent action in complex situations is unlikely to derive from following given or universal models. [...] There are no ‘universal’ solutions to ‘local’ situations. Therefore we need to be guided by knowledge and experience from the people in the local situation. [...] We need to develop local knowledge that exactly follows the contours of the setting and circumstances we are in. [...] When people are aligned to their purpose, when the gap between values and behaviours closes, what people experience is ... a stream of ease. (Lewin 2001)

In other words, the synergy of experiential learning in a familiar research context and the critical reflection-on-action approach facilitated by the tutor/supervisor make the training simulation an effective format of improving the writing skills of novice research students, especially if they are also in- or pre-service teachers.

Discussion

For some research student writers the beginning – the selection of a research topic which merits serious attention and is worthy of academic study – is often the most challenging step of the writing process. For pre- and in-service teachers the problem is often aggravated by the fact that after spending years in apprenticeship acquiring professional competence through shadowing and modelling their own

⁴ As these tend to be culture-specific a contrastive approach is recommended should the thesis be written in a language different from the mother tongue of the student.

behaviour on that of their mentors' they tend to view their practice as a well fixed routine with little room for change, innovation and/or creativity (which go hand-in-hand with research), their success as self-evident or "logical" and their problems/failure as caused by factors beyond their control (e.g. their pupils' laziness or misdemeanour). If this is the case, critical reflection, which is a crucial element of the whole research process, could come very handy at this stage too in order to spark off some action/reflection on part of the trainee and generate ideas for research which would be meaningful to him/her and therefore more engaging – this is a much better alternative for the student writer than to passively await for his/her academic tutor/supervisor to suggest possible research topics which may or may not be relevant to their professional interests and/or prominent in their teaching context (contemporary educational and language learning settings admittedly being characterized by great diversity and dynamics).

Reflection means taking an attitude of inquiry and curiosity, to become aware of our practice, not just immersed in it. [...] To regard teaching as an experiment and to monitor one's performance is a responsible professional act. (Ruddock 1991)

So we should try to encourage the practitioner-researcher first to recollect and then to critique what has already happened – this takes some degree of audacity as some teachers are very set in their ways and have to go out of their comfort zone to question the validity of their routines. Doing this – and consciously applying high order thinking skills⁵ to assess their own professional competence, classroom performance and/or values, they could identify a problem to solve or some praxis to improve, or alternatively, they could explore the reasons and the steps leading to successful practice.

⁵ Examples of such HOTS (i.e. thinking skills which require more cognitive processing - cp. Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001) are critical thinking and analyzing one's practice, comparing and contrasting behavioral patterns and tendencies, reasoning and answering how- and why-questions, evaluating and exploring possible alternatives to solve a problem, thinking outside the box, creating and employing non-standard techniques to cope in novel teaching/learning settings, etc.

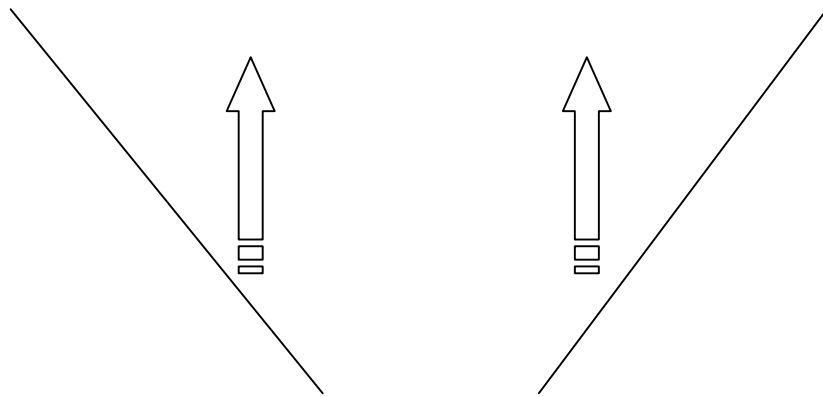


Diagram 1: *Bloom's taxonomy – the cognitive domain* (adapted from Jessica Pilgreen's simplified Bloom's taxonomy visual⁶)

Understanding is significantly increased if trainees are prepared to share their research interests and concerns, and peers are involved in decoding their riddle and in offering ways of interpretation based on their own experience. Additionally, at this stage reading up some relevant literature is extremely helpful in clarifying aims, narrowing down the research focus and defining the scope of the study, as well as in the development and refining of research questions and claims/hypotheses. Research student writers now much better appreciate the need to sift the information they find in their research-focus literary sources and discard irrelevant details, while subordinating the interpretation of pertinent ones to their own research objectives. Producing a brief literature review also ties in well with the process of designing and planning the details of the following empirical research. For the purposes of the training simulation, the literature review need not be very comprehensive or even complete – its only function is to provide a model for later use, which would be improved on in the writing up of the real thesis under the guidance of the research supervisor.

The role of the academic tutor/trainer in scaffolding the next stage – the planning out of the empirical research and selecting and/or designing (and piloting) of appropriate data collecting tools in accordance with the set aims – is essential. If this task is successfully completed, research student writers can be trusted to carry out their studies relatively independently, at their own pace and drawing on their own resources, carefully recording the results for later analysis and interpretation. It should be noted

⁶ <http://meandmylaptop.weebly.com/2/post/2012/07/simplified-blooms-taxonomy-visual.html>

here that for the purposes of the training simulation the research can take the format of a small-scale case study, ignoring considerations of sample size and the related statistical validity of findings.

I have found the following research plan template very useful for helping research student writers organize and map out their empirical research design:

Working title:		Aims: <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>	
Focus: <i>What's my concern / the problem I wish to solve / the object I want to study?</i>			
Research interference & factors of influence: <i>I think that if I (do what?)...</i> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>			
Hypothesis: <i>...(the following things) might happen as a result</i>			
Needed data: <i>What kind of evidence can I produce to show what is happening? (Remember to triangulate data in order to increase the validity of your findings and claims.)</i>			
Research cycles			
Cycle №	Aim <i>(the rationale)</i>	Data collection procedure <i>(the action taken to collect data)</i>	Documenting <i>(data collection tools)</i>
1.	[Gathering of evidence 1 + Analysis of data 1 to assess the situation/problem and identify variable(s) / factors of influence]		
2.	[Building on Cycle 1, planning possible solutions + Implementing the solutions / change + Gathering of evidence 2] – NB: <i>each solution is implemented and studied separately from the rest</i>		
3.	[Evaluating data 2 in order to measure progress / determine the effect of the implemented change]		

Usually it takes research student writers more than one draft to get it right, incorporating the trainer's feedback into the process of revision, but when this plan is actually implemented into their own piece of research (and not just left as a hypothetical outcome of a trial endeavour during the research skills training) the trainees can better realize and appreciate the logic of its components and the significance of forward research planning in general.

Trainees' having completed and thoroughly discussed their research plans with the tutor and/or supervisor and peers does not yet mean total withdrawal of the support for them – tutors/trainers need to be available for individual consultation, should the

implementation of the research design encounter some unforeseen obstacle and/or require certain modification in view of the patterns/tendencies detected during the analysis of initial data in Cycle 1 for example. Research student writers should learn to carefully plan their research, but they should also be alert and flexible while carrying it out and closely monitor research progress so that if the need arises to be able to think on their feet and adapt the plan (especially the data collection procedure and research tools) to the dynamics of the research situation.

Reflecting on the data collected, analysing them and then interpreting findings also requires some skill on part of the research student writers. The most challenging task for most of them seems to be commenting on the gathered data (making inferences, generalizing from research finding, comparing results to expectations and/or other similar studies, etc.): this is probably because they assume that just presenting them neatly in tables and graphs (along with some verbal explanation) lends sufficient support to their claims. Therefore, inviting research student writers to produce a draft version of this part of the research report for the tutor to review and offer some constructive feedback is really important⁷: the tutor can build on what is correctly done but also probe or cue the student so as to outline significant patterns and tendencies in the findings and suggest possibilities for further consideration/reflection and improvement. Such critical comments and practical guidance on part of the trainer are much more effective than re-writing whole passages from the student's narrative in order to embellish it (content- and/or structure-wise)⁸ or just giving the report a good or a bad holistic mark: in this way, the student, who is the best expert in his/her own field, is enabled to grow academically as a research writer and empowered to later meet the requirements and the challenge of the "bigger" task (the MA/PhD dissertation itself) successfully.

In addition, the presentation of research findings to peers and group discussion of results – during which pooling of professional knowledge and academic experience along with constructive criticism are nourished with the tutor's help – also assist the students in making better sense of their research and in picking up loose ends in their

⁷ Sometimes even some very small details – like the labelling of graphs or not repeating the information already displayed in tables in the verbal comments – require attention.

⁸ This is often done in the sincere belief that such feedback will provide the trainees with a good model to follow; however, the fallacy in that spoon-feeding approach is that research student writers are often deprived of the edifying experience of thinking and/or acting independently.

work so as to make their argumentation more comprehensive and better structured⁹ and their conclusions more persuasive and convincing. It is often said that in order to gain a deeper understanding of a complex matter you should try to explain it to someone: communication can structure our thought and thus facilitate the interpretation and writing up of the research data. Furthermore, this oral presentation of one's research to a critical audience provides an excellent training opportunity for the trainees for the oral defence of their future theses. The activity is equally enlightening for the "listeners" / "critical friends" as it is often much easier for them to learn from the analysis of errors and self-discovery of untapped potentials than from trying to imitate examples of good practice and/or finding fault with their own piece of research writing. Besides, the diversity of problematic aspects discussed in the group (incl. ones they may not have encountered otherwise while focusing on their own case studies) and "lessons learnt" enriches the trainees' generic research writing competence and broadens their repertoire of academic skills for conducting and writing up research.

Conclusion

To sum up, a training simulation that involves research students in carrying out and writing up a piece of small-scale research on a topic of their choice and provides them with hands-on experience of every step of the research writing process, is of great practical value to novice research writers. It is an excellent opportunity which helps them to reflect on and understand the process of research writing better and, as a result of that understanding, to make the necessary changes and improve their academic skills and practices. If the training simulation is a part of a course on writing for academic purposes, then we have the added value of research student writers sharing learning and learning from each other during this trial. For applied linguistic students who are also in- or pre-service teachers the synergy of experiential learning and the critical reflection-on-action approach implemented in the training simulation has a boosting effect not only for their academic research writing competence, but also affects favourably their professional growth and performance in the classroom, making the transition from theory to practice smoother and more meaningful for them and

⁹ Again note that the rhetoric structure of the thesis and the style of the academic discourse tend to be strongly influenced by the educational and cultural context. In case research student writers come from a different academic background and tradition, some attention needs to be devoted to developing micro-level writing skills (incl. linguistic exponents such as verb tenses, modality, etc.).

turning them into daring reflective practioners capable of fostering educational change and improvement.

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