



How to Enhance Students' Reflection Skills about Their L2-Writing Competence Using Portfolio and Self-Assessments

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Abstract

How can university teachers motivate their students to meticulously collect every single written text within one given language course? And to go beyond collection, how can language students be convinced of the importance of the confrontation with their own individual mistakes in written language concerning aspects like morphosyntax, lexicon, orthography, punctuation, not to forget stylistic coherence and textual cohesion? In this paper, we want to answer these questions and describe a course called German Language and Culture, designed for university students of the Bachelor programme Transcultural Communication at the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Graz, Austria. In the academic year 2015/16 the authors conducted this course at the advanced level of C1, attended by 26 students (25 females, 1 male), who study German as a foreign language. It took place in the summer term (March to June 2016) with six hours of lessons per week. The teaching methods applied to enhance students' reflection skills about their writing competence in German as L2 using portfolios and self-assessment will be discussed and critically evaluated in this article.

1. Introduction

For many years, we as authors of this paper, have been teaching courses for German Language and Culture at university level, sometimes dividing hours of teaching within one course, which was also the case in the one described here. In the academic year 2015/16 we conducted this compulsory subject within the Bachelor programme *Transcultural Communication* at the Department of Translation Studies at the Austrian University of Graz, called *German Language and Culture - Advanced I* in winter term and *Advanced II* in summer term, partly followed by the same international students. At the level of C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference students were taught German as a Foreign Language 6 hours per week (4 by Eva Seidl, 2 by Elisabeth Janisch), getting 7,5 ECTS credit points each semester. Some of the learning outcomes and expected competences acquired through this course are to

- understand complex textual structures from different text genres and infer implicit meanings,
- recognise and understand the cultural phenomena which are the basis for successful intercultural communication,
- produce appropriate (spoken and written) texts on a wide range of topics and for a variety of communicative situations,
- clearly structure and logically organise texts.

The workload for students, apart from at least 80 percent attendance of class sessions, consists of in-class group and pair work, presentations, self-study tasks, extensive reading and a variety of written and spoken language exercises. As for assessment and exam methods students are continuously assessed, have to do home and class assignments (alone or in groups), as well as two written exams each semester.

In the following we would like to discuss our approach to teaching this quite demanding course, aiming at the enhancement of students' reflection skills about their writing competence in German as L2.

2. Setting and course requirements

From March until June 2016 we taught 26 international students, concentrating on four topics, i.e. 1) arts and culture, 2) social norms and taboos, 3) environment and ecology, 4) economy and sustainability, within the course *German Language and Culture - Advanced II*.

2.1 L2 writing assignments

The students had to complete various in-class or home writing assignments requiring different text genres for each topic, which were evaluated according to the following aspects: 1) adequacy and appropriacy of expression, 2) stylistic coherence and textual cohesion, 3) risk taking and linguistic

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experimentation, 4) terminology and idiomatic range, 5) formal correctness in grammar, orthography and punctuation. In a rating matrix each linguistic aspect was given the same amount of points (i.e. 6, thus in total 30 points per writing assignment), stating clearly that none of them is considered more important than the others. Once corrected and provided with detailed individual written feedback by the teachers a corrected second version together with the original had to be handed in again by students one week later. In doing so, students were required to prove that they confronted themselves with their mistakes and errors, writing (or typing) the correct sentences or paragraphs by themselves, not only looking at the corrections made by their teachers.

At the end of the semester, a portfolio comprising every single writing assignment (original with teacher correction and second version corrected by students) was part of the course assessment. In winter term some students lamented the fact that most of the texts were evaluated and graded, inhibiting them from linguistic risk taking. Therefore, in summer term some texts were obligatory and were graded, and some were facultative, but still corrected and provided with detailed written teachers' feedback. With this agreement, in summer term students could collect in total about 10 texts in their portfolio, four of them being obligatory.

By forcing students to confront themselves with their texts when revising them, we tried to foster their competence of text revision, which we consider in accordance with Lehnen and Schindler (2010) [1] and Frank et al. (2013) [2] as a sign of handling competently and professionally the complex requirements of the writing process.

2.2 Reflection skills about L2-writing

The main focus, however, was on our students' reflection skills, which is why they had to deliver a written reflection on the hoped-for development of their writing skills in the course of the semester, analyzing every single written text, provided that they had meticulously collected them, thereby demonstrating key competencies like self-organization and self-competence. But why require students to write reflectively? In an academic context, critical reflective thinking is vital and reflective *writing* is evidence of reflective *thinking*. [3] Yet, thinking reflectively is no easy task at all. It demands complex mental processes, taking a critical stance toward oneself, it "implies the use of metacognitive skills (thinking about thinking)" and "requires individuals [...] to take responsibility for their actions." (Rychen/Salganik, 2005: 9). [4] Ideally, asking students to reflect on their L2 writing skills results in the enhancement of various competencies.

They have to take a close look at their writing assignments' text quality by analyzing and categorizing errors, but also highlightening textual strengths, while confronting themselves with their capacity of time management, in order to meet submission deadlines for first versions and revised texts. In addition to reflect on their L2 writing and self-organization skills, we think that it is necessary for them to reflect on their own learning, on their willingness to take responsibility for their learning outcomes and, in the first place, to *be able to reflect* and to write reflectively at all. As Hampton (2015) puts it, "[g]enuinely reflective writing often involves 'revealing' anxieties, errors and weaknesses, as well as strengths and successes." [3] To think about one's learning, i.e. having metacognitive knowledge, is crucial as it helps learners to better understand and direct their learning. If we as teachers want to take the *shift from teaching to learning* seriously, we should support our students in their efforts to become self-directed learners. Thielsch (2001: 65) states that "[t]his need to self-direct one's learning is characteristic for adult learning, even if the young adults that enter universities often don't have the competencies to do so." [5]

To foster self-directed learning, assuming personal responsibility for their academic performance and to enhance the skills to think and write reflectively, we adopted the approach of asking written reflections at the end of the course, described above. Being aware of our Bachelor students' need to be guided in doing so, we made the writing process with its different stages itself, various writing strategies and types of personal writing style a subject of discussion in class. In addition, students were provided with an information sheet about the meaning and purpose of reflective writing, delivering hints and prompts aimed at hopefully being inspiring and motivating to hand in the requested reflection at the end of the semester.

3. Findings and Discussion

First of all, out of 26 students 23 actually handed in the portfolio together with the reflection on the development of their L2 writing. We were confronted with some feelings of stress and irritation from the students' side for being asked a reflection and a self-assessment of their writing competence. It seems that most of them are used to writing assignments as evaluation or examination tools, so that having to use L2 writing as an instrument for *thinking* and *clarifying* one's thoughts didn't meet their expectations. Some found self-assessment really hard, being used to years of external assessment by

teachers at school and university, and some of them were reluctant to compliment themselves fearing to *show off*.

Reflective writing in an academic context is an opportunity to build rapport between student and teacher, based on mutual respect and fairness. We experienced a clear desire for guidance and support in the reflection process, for recognition and appreciation, but most of all for mutual understanding and trust. These were the prerequisites, necessary for our students to open up about their thoughts and feelings regarding their academic performance, as the task we wanted them to fulfil required a balancing act between self-opening and self-protection. Shortcomings in this kind of approach are e.g. the risks that some learners embellish their performance thinking that they have to present themselves as excellent or, on the contrary, that definitely excellent students who are not willing or not able to realistically self-assess their work underestimate it, showing no signs of self-confident public self-portrayal.

Our data show that most of the students handed in impressively reflective texts. They found the correcting and revising procedure quite demanding, but worthwhile and very helpful for an increased self-awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. Some wrote about the painful yet eye-opening experience of confronting themselves with their smaller and bigger failures, representing a starting point for a detailed action plan to work on their German language skills. What we didn't expect to read a lot of times was a very honest analysis of possible reasons for errors, like lack of concentration, time pressure or simply sloppiness. Seven students also addressed the topic of types of personal writing style, previously discussed in class, when talking about the different degrees of difficulty between writing assignments in class or at home, and related them to their own writing preferences.

4. Conclusions

The potential of the above described approach is great, as it offers benefits for both students and teachers. [6] Students can discover an instrument for critical and clarifying thinking that could accompany them their whole lives, whether private or professional. In some way, they will always have to make comparisons, make judgments or take decisions based on reflective considerations. For teachers, students' written reflections can be of invaluable help for a better understanding of *their* way of thinking, of seeing and perceiving teaching and learning activities. In our case, we learned, inter alia, about the importance of a) teacher support and motivation as well as b) a very clear and detailed task formulation for inspiring writing assignments in higher education.

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