



The Effect of Process-Oriented Writing on Text Quality and Students' Attitudes Towards Writing in a Third Language

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Abstract

Swedish students' proficiency in written production in a third language has proven to be insufficient (European Commission 2012). Despite its potential for language learning (e.g. Manchón 2011), writing tends to be a neglected skill in foreign language classrooms. Students are given few opportunities to produce texts (Knospe 2017). Therefore, students often feel insecure and lack strategies for text production in their third language. There are few in-depth studies of students' ability to reflect on and process their texts. In this study, we focus on process-oriented writing, by addressing the following questions: What impact does work with written production have on students' attitudes to text production? What effect does direct corrective feedback from fellow students have on writing accuracy? (e.g. Ekanayaka & Ellis 2020). To answer these questions, texts from 20 Swedish learners of German in upper secondary school (level A2-B1) were analyzed. The learners were working with process-oriented writing for three months, i.e. texts were revised after group feedback. They were also asked to fill in a questionnaire on background information and attitudes to the work with process-oriented writing. Our study contributes with information on writing practices in the foreign language classroom and the effect direct corrective feedback from fellow students has on writing accuracy. Contrary to results in earlier studies and our expectations, our study shows that the group feedback the students received on their texts only had a minor influence on their writing accuracy. Finally, we contribute with implications concerning research design and teaching practices, focusing on task design in writing activities in the language classroom.

Keywords: *foreign languages, peer feedback, written production, L3 German, process-oriented writing*

1. Introduction

A report from the European Commission regarding the language skills of European 15-year-old students in an L3 [2] showed that Swedish students achieved very low results in all skills in modern languages after two or more years of teaching. However, their lowest result was in written production. Thus, there is a need for improvement in students' writing in modern languages. At the same time, teachers seem to lack tools to stimulate writing.

In our pilot study [3], we investigate how process-oriented writing is implemented in a language class and how this work affects students' text production in German as a foreign language (L3). We start from a cognitive perspective on language learning. This is based on the assumption that learning a foreign language is a cognitive process that requires learners' attention when processing linguistic information in both input and output. In terms of students' text production, our project relates to research that explicitly examined writing instruction in modern languages [4], which can still be considered a rather unexplored area. Process-oriented writing is not a new concept in Swedish language classrooms, but it has mainly been applied in Swedish or English. One reason might be that there is a lack of teaching time in modern languages.

By analyzing text productions written in L3 German by 20 high school students, we examined the effect that the work with process-oriented writing had on students' attitude to written production and the accuracy of the texts. Their first drafts and the third, final versions of their texts (that had been revised twice after peer-review in small groups) were analyzed. In addition, two questionnaires were conducted, one which asked for students' background information and one which addressed their attitudes after the intervention with process-oriented writing.

The purpose of this pilot study is to evaluate methods and research design and to highlight aspects that are particularly important for task design in writing activities. We are interested in students' metacognitive reflections and comments on each other's texts and the impact on the quality of the revised texts. Writing instruction in modern languages is a rather unexplored area. Therefore, we want



to contribute with new knowledge in a field that is particularly relevant for teachers of modern languages.

2. Previous studies

Research shows that written production plays a major role in foreign language learning [8]. Writing should not be seen as the last thing you do when you have already learned a language, but rather as a tool for efficient language learning [7]. An advantage of written compared to oral production is that there is more time for reflection and rewriting. Written production also requires more focus on form [7]. Most studies show that learners use more complex structures and variation in their texts if they have time to plan their writing. Process-oriented writing also has the advantage that it is student-activating, creating an awareness of the language. When working with process-oriented writing, teaching focuses on the entire writing process and not just on an end product. Students comment on each other's texts based on given criteria for text form and content, according to a checklist or a response template. The comments can be written or oral or both. When it comes to activities that are associated with process-oriented writing, a study [6] showed that students' awareness increased and that they gradually found it easier to revise their texts. One study [7] also addresses the preparatory work for writing and the interaction between students while writing their text and most researchers believe that "it is this interaction, rather than the act of writing itself, that may be facilitative of language development". A recent study examined the impact of feedback and revision of English L2 texts on the accuracy of students' text productions [1]. The results showed that the students who received feedback increased the proportion of correct verb constructions compared to the control group. The group that also had the opportunity to revise before completing a new writing assignment made the biggest gains in terms of increased accuracy. The text revision had the greatest positive effect among the students who retained the corrected first draft when they wrote a new assignment.

3. Informants, material, and method

In this intervention study, 20 high school students in L3 German, 11 girls and 10 boys with an average age of 16.7 years, participated. The students had studied German for an average of 5 years. For a majority of the students, German is a school language that is rarely used outside the classroom.

The data collection began at the beginning of the semester in the autumn of 2020 and ended in January 2021. The students were given a writing assignment designed by the researchers. The assignment contained a picture and a short German text about Germans' travel habits as inspiration. The instructions stated the expected number of words (250–300) as well as some suggestions for topics to be included in the text. All instructions were given in Swedish. The students also received an introduction to the work with process writing: preparation, text version 1, correction 1 using the checklist, text version 2, correction 2 using the checklist, text version 3, correction by teacher. The last phase (text version 4) could not be completed due to the pandemic.

In the first preparatory step, students had to make individual digital mind maps on topics they intended to write about. These were made in Swedish to facilitate the actual flow of ideas. The first draft (text version 1) was written on the computer in German. The students were also asked to mention which sources (dictionary, grammar etc.) they had used. In the next phase, the students had to work in response groups (three students per group) to give oral and written feedback on each other's texts. As a starting point, they had a checklist on various features they should focus on. The checklist was provided by the teacher. In this pilot study, we compared text version 1 and text version 3, which had been revised twice.

Timeframe	Material	Number of documents
September 2020	Questionnaire 1, background data	21
September 2020	Mindmap	21
September 2020	Text version 1	18
September 2020	Correction 1	18
September 2020	Text version 2	16
October 2020	Correction 2	18
October 2020	Text version 3	18
December 2020	Correction by teacher	20
January 2021	Questionnaire 2, attitudes	21

Table 1. Data collection



For the compilation of the questionnaires, we used Google Forms. The answers to the closed questions were analyzed quantitatively using descriptive statistics. The open answers were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. The analysis of the student texts (versions 1 and 3) was done manually and the errors were listed according to a common error categorization. All data were compiled and analyzed quantitatively in Excel. We looked at the following error categories:

Error categories	Example	Comments
Capital letter on noun	Die *reisen nach *großstädten ist oft für *shopping und *erlebnis. (Student 13)	Failure to mark nouns, proper names, etc. in capital letters
Nominal phrase	Die schwedischen ist *ein reisende volk die reisen weltweit. (Student 3)	Mistake regarding the case, gender, number, pronoun, adjective or noun
Prepositional phrase	Ein Familie *mit kinder können zu Skansen fahren, und skansen ist ein zoo *mit viel tiere und *andere aktivitäten. (Student 18)	Mistake regarding the case, gender, number, pronoun, adjective, or noun
Subject-verb agreement	Die Schweden *reise auch zum sicher Länder weil sie denken über sich. (Student 10)	Mistake in subject-verb agreement regarding person and numerus
Lexical word	Meine Lieblingsländer für sonnen und baden *semester ist Italien, Frankreich und Spanien weil ich habe viele *minne von wenn ich *wo da. (Student 13)	Wrong word or expression in German, or a Swedish or English word
Word order in main clause	*Ins Sommer, viele Schweden reisen nach Südeuropa, genauer gesagt, oft nach Spanien oder Griechenland. (Student 2)	Wrong word order regarding verb placement in a main clause
Word order in subordinate clause	..., *das es ist sehr schön mit Ferien in warmen Ländern haben, (Student 4)	Wrong word order regarding verb placement in a subordinate clause
Unjustified tense change	Wenn ich war in Barcelona *geht ich mit mein bruder und mein vater auf ein fußballmatch und *sehen barcelona spielen, Sie *Verliert. (Student 13)	Unjustified change of tense, e.g. present instead of past tense
Verb phrase	Einige wollen die Hitze *gehaben, einige wollen die Kalt *gehaben (Student 2)	Omitted or incorrect form in a verb phrase
Missing word	Ich habe jeden Jahre *[] Ausland gefährt. (Student 15)	Omitted words in a sentence, e.g. preposition, relative pronoun
Other errors	Für Schwedische Jungen sind die Sommer is prima *für reisen und zu Festival gehen. (Student 19)	Errors that could not be categorized, e.g. errors in infinitive phrases

Table 2. Error categories (marked *)

4. Results

In the following, we present the impact that the work with process-oriented writing had on the students' attitudes and the linguistic correctness of their texts.

4.1 Students' attitudes

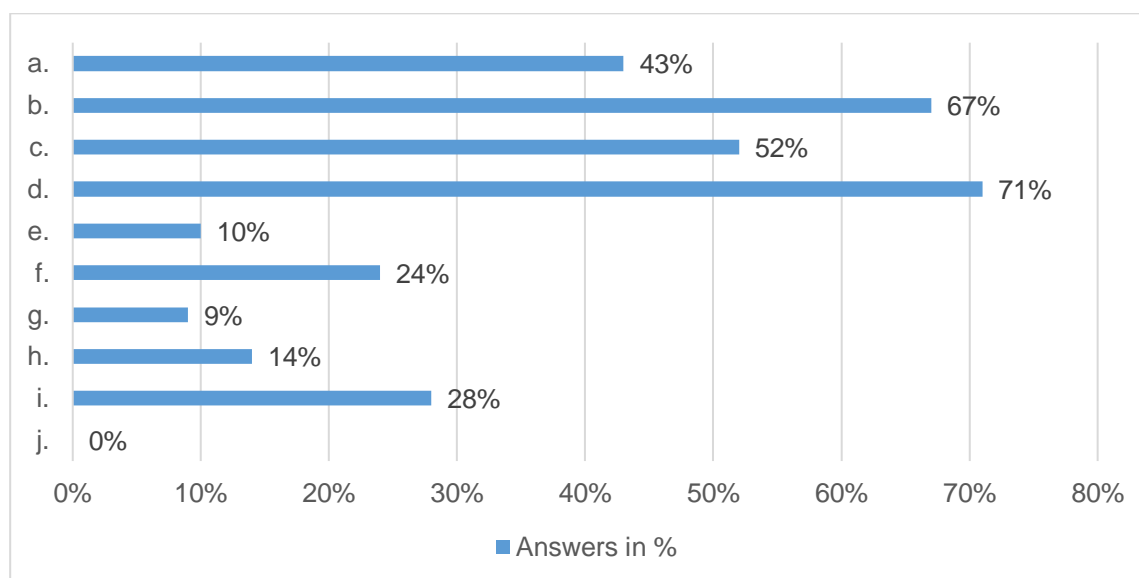
The student answers in the questionnaires show that the work with process-oriented writing had a positive effect on the writing process. The students felt that they had become better at planning, writing coherently, avoiding expressions they could not write correctly, and reflecting on their writing.



They found it very useful to have time to reflect on their texts and to pay attention in response groups both to their own and others' mistakes.

Fig. 1 Students' answers: What did you learn when working with process-oriented writing?

- To plan my text (9)
- To think more about the content and structure of the text (14)
- Linguistic accuracy (11)
- To be aware of one's mistakes and difficulties (15)
- To learn to write better by commenting on the mistakes of others (2)
- To get better at German word order (5)
- To become better at writing verbs correctly (2)
- To look up words in dictionaries (3)
- To find and use expressions in the text task you were given (6)
- Other: (0)



The work in response groups made the students reflect on the language and made them aware of their own and others' mistakes. Their attitude to text production and awareness of the writing process was positively affected.

4.2 The linguistic correctness of the texts

Although the students' attitudes were very positive, our analysis of their texts showed that the work in response groups had less effect on the accuracy of the texts than expected. Although the students worked with a checklist, there were still 680 out of 948 errors (72%) left when we compared text 1 with the final version 3. The errors regarding subject-verb agreement decreased by a third (32%) and capital letters of nouns by 50%. On the other hand, there were few improvements concerning errors in nominal and prepositional phrases as 83% of these errors remained in both categories. Regarding word order, main clauses were corrected to a lesser extent, even though the students stated that they focused on this. On the second occasion with student response, they gave few comments on the texts.

5. Discussion and didactic implications

Overall, the survey shows that students were able to identify several benefits of working with process-oriented writing. However, the accuracy of the students' text productions improved to a lesser extent. Working in response groups may have influenced the students' confidence when criticizing and commenting on each others' texts. The few comments also suggest that the students were not able to give enough feedback on accuracy. We conclude that students do not get enough practice in writing



texts in a foreign language. If students are to be able to develop their writing skills, they must be given more opportunities to write texts and different types of texts. We propose the following:

- More explicit corrections than just the marking of mistakes by underlining are necessary for students to notice and understand feedback.
- The teacher must make sure that the students understand and can identify the grammatical structures and categories that they should focus on.
- Feedback needs to lead to students reflecting on the language, not just to correct mistakes.
- Students must be trained in giving feedback, e.g. by joint correction of model texts.
- The work in response groups needs to be trained so that students dare to correct each other.

Only by working continuously with the writing process, one can expect measurable effects on students' writing development. More research on process-oriented writing in foreign languages is needed.

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