Abstract

Production of academic texts involves discourse and communicative competences, and specific cognitive processes, in which students use to face problems.

These difficulties are reinforced from primary teaching, since, in general, students are not properly guided during writing process. This article reminds some theoretic contributions on text production and, parting from teaching reflection, provides some guides for teaching. Specifically, suggestions focus on promoting the students’ ability to prepare written tasks according to the type of tests they are required to write, explanation and foundations of learning purposes, writing personal goals, and details of involved processes. Such aspects should be performed within a cooperative work between peers and teachers.

Key words: Academic text, writing, learning, teaching.
Introduction

Sebastian, a student about to enter the university, when explaining his way of writing states that:

I know that it is necessary to think very well what is wanted to say, and how to say it… how to start, how to end: I used to know that it was important to prepare a draft, but I almost never did it. Now, I know how to do it, and what it serves for. The matter is that it is more difficult. Sometimes I have to rewrite the whole text, although I had prepared a draft, because I realize that what I have written, is not exactly what I wanted to say … because I had not thought about its readers. It is necessary to think about many things at a time while writing. (Galavis, Novo & Rosales, 2004:60).

Parting from the narration by this student, I confirm that even after ending middle level the writer continues “learning to write”. Students learn to produce texts from the various education levels they are involved in. In particular, when they enroll the university, they find a new academic culture and discursive, which requires them to learn writing processes linked to unknown text types, and on novelty and complex contents (Carlino, 2005). Along the time, the students are expected to learn, and that they develop as writers, better competences for academic discourse (Tapia, Burdiles & Arancibia, 2003).

Teachers should engage from the beginning and along the students term in classroom, in teaching skills and specific processes involved in writing academic texts. That is, besides teaching disciplinary contents, teachers should occupy in producing actions for students to learn strategies of written production, their discrimination and self-regulation, based on the various types of texts and communication situations (Vasquez, 2005; Lacon de De Lucia & Ortega de Hocevar, 2008).

Taking into account the above considerations, first of all, it is important to present a general definition of academic texts, including processes and competences involved in their writing. Secondly, I will mention some difficulties shown by students in written process and their impact on teaching processes. Lastly, I will provide some guidance based on my teaching experience, aimed at improving written production by students.

Academic texts: processes and competences involved in their writing

As mentioned above, writing in the above education levels involves learning to produce texts which language is academic discourse, proper of the various courses. (Carlino, 2005; Castellò, 2009).

Cassany (2000), classifies academic texts as referential and representative, and states that their purpose is to become support and knowledge transmitters. Tapia, Burdiles and Arancibia (2003), define them as elaborated discourses, containing formal language, and accurate objective and lexicon; in addition, they mention that such texts are generally descriptive and argumentative, with a high degree of abstraction and semantic generalization, and information contained in them is presented on arranged and hierarchic basis, appealing to the intertext.
These concepts show that producing an academic text is not an easy task for the student at any academic level; and specially for those beginning higher education, and therefore, they face a new type of writing. Academic production is a complex activity, that involves thinking processes such as attention, reflection, selection, hierarchization, generalization and integration of information, and in which specific structural, stylistic, and communicative issues are of a great importance; these considerations become even more complex when writing in and for determined disciplinary scientific community. In other words, construction of academic texts involves placing into operation complex cognitive processes, and includes certain communicative and discursive competences.

Salvador Mata (1997), as mentioned in Lacon de De Lucia & Ortega de Hocevar, 2003), present basic assumptions that share some cognitive models regarding processes involved in writing:

a) Writing involves cognitive processes and subprocesses hierarchically organized, control of global process locating in the highest level.

b) Writing integrates information both in a single, and in various levels.

c) Composition is flexible, resousable, and interactive, and

d) There are external factors and internal to the subject that affect processes and production writing.

Hayes (1996), considers influence of motivation and effective component in writing, and value of reading as a main means in interpretation and review of the writing.

In addition to the above considerations, there is agreement among researchers regarding competences that every student should acquire to properly perform writing tasks: text, discursive and communicative competence.

Cognitive models of production written more are recognized and Hayes Flower (1981), Scardamalia and Bereiter (1987), Van Dijik and Kinsyh (1083) and Hayes (1996).

The following Castelló (2009), discursive text competence involves:

- Learning and regulating activities involved in text composition process;

- Involving reasoning processes, (defining a purpose, activating information on the topic, genre and textual writing), in writing;

- Organizing and verbalizing ideas;

- Reviewing and controlling the text; and

- Considering emotional and motivation issues

Regarding communicative competence, Castelló (2003, 2009), holds that writing

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1 The most known cognitive models of written production are Flower and Haayes (1981), in Bereiter and Scardamilia (1987), Van Dijik and Kinsyh (1083), and Hayes (1996).
is a flexible process, dynamic, and diverse, linked to the various communicative situations which motivate it. Thus, the idea that there are various contexts related to writing becomes important: one, which is created through writing, other, that influences writing, and the other, is the one writing is aimed at. In this same sense, communication competence is defined by Hayes, (1996, las mentioned in Lacon de De Lucia & Ortega de Hocevar 2008), as the ability of individuals to master writing (and speech) in various social practices. It is linked to fixing written production to certain destinataries, and try to achieve on them the expected effect. In other words, to organize ideas and review what is written based on a specific communicative situation.

Fernandez and Carlino (2010) in their article “¿what is the difference between reading and writing practice at the university and secondary school?”. They comment that university students face difficulty regarding text, discursive and communicative competences, necessary to prepare specialized academic texts. I will refer to this problem below. Vasquez (2005), comments that teachers discuss among their peers about writing difficulties faced by students entering the university, and asks ¿is it a problem of the student? What is the teacher role in this process?

It is normal that in daily job of university teachers express and listen to comments about students… they face serious problems in expressing their ideas in writing. The causes of these deficiencies use to be passed to previous levels of the education system. In this manner, higher education teachers consider that our task is to teach disciplinary contents, rather than involve ourselves in promoting activities aimed at developing strategies involved in written language processing and production (Vasquez, 2005:5).

Some research projects state that, in front of the task of writing any academic text, higher education beginners, in general, show a lack of familiarity with requirements and objective of such task; they ignore the nature of written composition process, and functional and structural characteristics of texts (Castelló, 2009). In addition, in terms of linguistic matters, in their writings, the students do not use to hierarchize information or distinguish between their own discourse from others’ discourse, and they show a scarce of integration among the various sources of information (Tapia, 2003).

Regarding processes involved in writing, students, in general, directly translate their thought to the paper, they do not use to plan what the write, or review their writing, and if so, it is very superficially, focusing themselves on words or textual phrases, rather than on the sense of the text as an unit (Arias Gundin & Garcia Sanchez, 2006). Students “use textual reproduction of sources, and ignore information processing in order to create autonomous, and meaningful texts, which re-build knowledge (Tapia, 2003:250).

I think that such difficulties in writing academic texts are not just the students responsibility; an important role is plaid by conditions faced by them in production of academic texts, increasing problems they are undergoing. In this sense, some studies have established that, in general, teachers fail to guide the students, on accurate and explicit basis, on how to write, that is, teachers do not promote use, supervision, and adaptation of linguistic processes, cognitive and physical involved in writing, and do not provide guidance regarding practice linked to each discursive community, either. (Calino, 2005).
Usually, students are required to prepare simple writings, for an addressee who usually is the same teacher, who intends to evaluate achieved learning (Castelló, 2009). Tapia et al., shows, as a result of his studies, that teachers when evaluating academic texts produced by the students, “privilege information accumulation, instead of critical analysis and processing by the student” (2003:256).

Based on the above, I believe that for the students “to learn how to produce academic texts”, it is necessary to rethink teaching processes. In this sense, I take what Carlino stated:

> It is necessary that the university provides readers who return to the students the effect that their texts produce. It is necessary that teachers engage in teaching to plan and review what is written, and help to anticipate the addressee’s point of view, in such a manner that in this process not only the product is improved but to guide its authors to use writing as a tool to think contents of each subject matter. (2005:31).

Therefore, teachers of basic school and middle, comment that students entering higher education should continue “to learn how to write”, which involves creating skills on what, how, and under what conditions academic texts are produced. In addition to being a subject of knowledge, writing also turns into a tool for thought and learning, since through writing, students may enter into a new world, both disciplinary and discursive; therefore, it is necessary to teach them to “learn these new contents parting from writing”. It involves not only teaching procedures, but also understanding writing from its epistemological function (Castelló, 2003).

Promoting, from teaching, development of epistemic function of writing will enable students to plan and replan their procedures, expanding on knowledge, use and fixing writing strategies according to their purpose, and task requirements, their limits, ability and preference, which involves both learning “on” writing or “to write”, and learn “with” writing or “what is written about”.

Parting from the above, and from teaching reflection on teaching writing to basic primary, and secondary students, the following is some guidance to improve learning written production, and epistemological function of writing, by the students.

**Some guidance to “learn how to write… by writing”**

To assist our students to write better, and for this practice to become a tool for knowledge building, learning discursive contents and disciplinary, we should prepare tasks or objectives for writing academic texts which meet explanation and foundations of its objectives, the type of requested text, development of goals involved in the document, and explanation and treatment of processes contained in production.

**Explanation and foundations of purpose of the task, and type of required text.**

It is important that, previously to the process of writing, the student understands the task they are supposed to prepare, the type of required text, (i.e. reading report, monograph, among other), their definition, classification and writing; also regarding communication competences they should acquire (i.e. describing, explaining, argumenting, justifying, etc.). Likewise, the task should clearly state materials parting from which the text is produced (i.e. bibliographic material, and audiovisual duly referenced, etc.).
Writing goals

For written production to bear sense for students, and for them to involved in the task, instead of writing with the single purpose of meeting requirements by the teacher, the students should be involved in real situations and meaningful which encourage them to write. It is important for them to be able to “write on” any topic that in addition to be related to the course itself, is interesting for them. Therefore, in the task of writing, parting from a central topic, a variety of topic options may be provided, for the students to select the one they wish to approach or expand; as well as providing the with the opportunity of approaching their own topics, adjusted to requirements of such task.

Likewise, the sense of the task statement is found in a “writing for” which involves real and possible purposes and targets, but not to the teacher in his role as evaluator of the produced text, such targets may be, for example, either peers of the academic year, or a senior year. The teacher may also provide a variety of pruposes of writing and auditories, to provide the students with the opportunity of selecting who they would write for, based on their own interests; in turn, this methods would allow them to adjust the writing contents, and their discursive and communicative competences tailored to their target, thus promoting their awareness of the various conditions impacting text production.

Explanation of processes involved in writing

Writing planning. It is important for the students to be able to prepare a plan preivous to writing, seriving them as a guiding scheme of written production. Such plan should include purpose, target, structure, communication competences involved in production, main topics or ideas to be developed, initial inferences, first postures and personal argumentations. The teacher should request this purpose to assist the students to organize, and anticipate their writing, and, to evaluate it, show both strengths and weaknesses. The students may also share their writing plans, in order to evaluate among themselves, in this manner, by reviewing their peers’ plans, the students may also rethink and improve their own ones.

Writing. When starting to write the students should retrieve the previous plan, and as they progress in their production, control that its contents and communication competences are the required ones. Generally, in production of academic texts, the students should perform selection, generalization, integration, organization and classification of information to include in their writing. The teacher should help them to understand, differentiate, and activate such processes (depending on the type of text they should produce).

Likewise, it is necessary that along writing the teacher guides the students to distinguish in the text, (i.e. through linguistic discourses, connectors, headings or text markers), speech recovered from sources and their own one. All of these questions may appear in the task, and be recovered during the writing process.

Writing review. Conscious re-reading, and re-writing of the project/writing, is a metacognitive process (Morales, 2003), which allows learning on the act of writing, and on its contents. Through such review, “the writer must return one, and one more
time to the text in order to consider what the writing means…, writing is not what the reader does after thinking, writing is thought” (Murray, 1982, in Villalobos, 2005, 88).

When we part from the above considerations, it is essential that the teacher helps the students to become aware that, in one hand, writing is a resourcive process, and unavoidably many times they should rewrite information or their own ideas or postures, for writing to become more coherent, or bearing sense; in addition, in this process of review knowledge is rebuilt, and the students better learn about the contents they are writing about.

The students should be aware about the need and importance of reading, re-reading and re-preparation of what they are writing, and even the text they believe having completed, considering it as a unit of sense, but not just centrating on change of textual words or phrases. Therefore, the students should understand that review does not involve correcting the text at a single moment, that it is not just a matter of spelling, morhposyntax, or external improvement, but it also involves the stated ideas, and their organization within the discourse (Carlino, 2005). Therefore, the teacher should explain the task, certain suggestion for control of writing made by the same students, and overseen by the teacher, aimed at teachers in the necessary improvements.

In addition, if the students share their writing production with their peers, they may improve their texts by means of peers’ suggestions and their own reflections from reading other works, within the framework of the same task.

Carlino, 2003, in his research “Teaching to write at the University, comments:

(Review by peers) allows students-writers to learn to accept suggestions from readers, not as something that should be complied with by obeying any grading authority, but as comments to examine, and evaluate, that help them to assume their authorship, to decide on their own plan to improve the text, and, in this manner, to coordinate their intentions as authors with defects of their text on the reader.

In turn, if destinataries of writings with peers, reading with purposes exceeding correction (i.e. reading to get informed, to expand their skills on any topic to compare theoretic postures), feedback they provide upon reading the text may contribute the writers knowledge on rethoric effect on the writing. In words of Carlino:

Using review among peers along teaching is justified because, in the short or the long term, the ones desiring, will hear their voice in the respective disciplinary and professional fields, which will be better achieved if previously listen to from any colleague, comments to the draft of their ideas, and if they learns to review such comments from the perspective of its potential readers (2008:69).

**Final reflections**

Writing is a process which is not learned at once, and forever, but which becomes more complex in the various instances and situations that the student goes through, strongly depending on demands and social changes affecting this practice. In particular those students entering higher education, should learn production
processes involved in university culture. Preparing academic texts involves recognizing composition complexity, the sense that composition includes cognitive and metacognitive strategies for planning, production and writing review, as well as affective, motivation processes, specific discursive and communicative competences.

College students use to face difficulties in these processes and competences. Research shows that they mainly face problems related to planning, production and review of writing; they write very literally, and to properly integrate information. This is reinforced from teaching, since in general, the student is not oriented or guided in writing process, but just his result is taken into account and evaluated. In addition, little attention is usually paid to the need of teaching students how to fix their discourse to a particular communicative situation.

Parting from the reflection on my teaching experience in the area of humanities, in this article I mentioned several orientations to promote in students learning written production, and the epistemological function of writing. I think that it is necessary to state tasks of academic texts, which include explanation, foundations of stated objectives, definition, classification and structure of the type of required text, communication competences that should be developed, and materials parting from which students should write.

In addition, I consider that tasks should be created which involve own goals of writing, with topics interesting for teachers and students, and for real purposes and targets.

The task should explain processes involved in production, and developed under assistance by teachers and peers, taking into account planning, writing, and review.

I think that planning, implementation, and review of writing, taking into account task requirements, the type of text to be produced, involved communicative competences, purposes, topics and auditoriums, and recognition of limits, skills and preferences by the students, improve writing learning as complex and resourceful process, and also allow students to meaningfully and purposely learn the contents about the involved topic.

Bibliographic References


