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Improving academic writing through expressive writing

Abstract

This study focuses on expressive writing to develop higher education students' ability to write academic texts. Very often first year students not only find themselves in a new social environment, but they also have to get used to a new teaching environment. This study looks at academic literacy pedagogy as it is manifested in the understanding and experiences by tertiary L2 students engaging in the practice of expressive writing. The study was conducted among a group of fourteen students at a tertiary institution in the Western Cape and the aim was to develop strategies that could assist L2 students with English language writing tasks. Within a qualitative

research framework students' personal and expressive writing was analysed as an entry into academic writing. The degree to which this writing approximates academic writing is discussed. It is argued that classroom interaction and writing that centre on daily living and personal experiences (expressive writing) can support academic writing by providing practice in composing, developing, and analysing ideas.

Keywords: Literacy Pedagogy, Expressive Writing, Qualitative Study, Academic Writing, Academic Literacy

1. Introduction

Many researchers argue that learning English as a second language is decontextualized even when it is used in a communicative setting or is based on the authentic use of language (Hanauer, 2012; Kramsch, 2006, 2009; Widdowson, 1998). Kramsch (2006: 98) argues that by focusing on the cognitive, structural, linguistic, and communicative aspects of language learning, ESL pedagogy has lost the vision of “the flesh and blood individuals who are doing the learning”. This means that emphasizing language learning as an intellectual act has marginalized learners’ sense of individuality to the extent that their experiences, emotions, and personal expression are avoided in the language classroom (Alosaimi, 2014). This state of affairs is addressed in our study as part of the difficulty that language learners experience in order to express themselves meaningfully in the second language since they do not even display a sense of authorship and ownership.

It should be noted that any learning, particularly humanistic learning in an educational context is, first and foremost, language-based learning (Halliday, 1993, 1999a). The centrality of language means educational practice should acknowledge that “the development of desired mental skills is entirely dependent on the mastery of the linguistic pattern in which these skills are realized” and “that ‘knowledge’ itself is constructed in varying patterns of discourse” (Christie, 1989: 153). When viewed from a social cognitive perspective, the process of learning a second language itself is imbued with a ‘special’ significance. If a second language is used mainly for schooling, the language repertoire of multilingual learners needs to develop in very specific ways and domains, with home languages often restricted to personal and community life and the second language or LoLT restricted to the classroom.

In South Africa it is clear that the lack of developing cognitive academic language proficiency is one of the biggest stumbling blocks to achieving academic success (Weideman 2003: 56; Weideman & Van der Slik 2007). According to Bernhardt (1991: 235) “second language learners ... essentially have to ‘read to learn’ and ‘write to demonstrate learning’”. Both forms of literacy are substantially different from the reading and writing they would usually undertake/perform in home or community languages. The often highly abstract and decontextualized nature of academic literacies requires much more than merely ‘translating’ from a home or community language to a language of learning and teaching (LoLT). It seems necessary to support and strengthen students’ academic writing in a process which guides development towards abstract academic writing. Personal language and experiences serve to develop fluency and critical language awareness. The theoretical framework for such an approach will be discussed next, followed by a description of one attempt to develop students’ language proficiency, including academic language proficiency, by means of expressive writing.

2. Theoretical framework

In an educational context the influence of language proficiency on people's ability to express themselves is of vital importance (van der Walt, 2014). Myles (2002) argues that academic writing is believed to be cognitively complex in that the acquisition of academic vocabulary and discourse style is particularly difficult. In light of Myles' (2002) cognitive theory, we are led to believe that communicating orally or in writing is an active process of skills development and a gradual elimination of errors as the learner internalizes the language. Therefore, acquisition is a product of the complex interaction of the language environment and the learner's internal mechanisms, meaning that with practice, there is continual restructuring as learners shift these internal representations in order to achieve increasing degrees of mastery in L2 (McLaughlin, 1988; Myles, 2002).

Academic writing requires conscious effort and practice with composing, developing, and analysing ideas which mean that students have to acquire proficiency in the use of the language as well as in writing strategies, techniques and skills, whether they are writing in a home or a second language. The nature of academic literacy often confuses and disorients students, "particularly those who bring with them a set of conventions that are at odds with those of the academic world they are entering" (Kutz, Groden & Zamel, 1993: 30). Second language writers who may still be developing fluency in writing have to contend with grammar, syntax and vocabulary problems (among many).

The command of writing gives access to certain cognitive, conceptual, social and political arenas (Tribble, 1996). The person who commands both forms of writing and of speech is constructed in a fundamentally different way from the person who commands the forms of speech alone. Aristotle (1965-1979: 115 as cited in Colyar, 2008: 472) links writing to speech: "Written words," he asserts, "are the signs of words spoken". Thus, this type of linear theory which traces spoken to written words is certainly logical. Speech has preceded formal writing systems in the development of each individual, as well as in the development of social systems. However, in light of what Tribble (1996) states, learning to write is not just a question of developing a set of mechanical 'orthographic' skills; it also involves learning a new set of cognitive and social relations. Writing by oneself is typically grounded in the cognitive processes of planning, translating, and reviewing/revising, rather than merely translating ideas into written product (Abbott, Berninger & Fayol, 2012). Furthermore, through learning literacy during the schooling period, students learn to handle aspects of written language in different ways, creating subject-specific literacies (Christie, 2005).

Within subject-specific literacies, writing skills may be highly constrained by topic knowledge, knowledge about how to write or a particular prompt (i.e., the amount of prompt-based information) a writer needs or can process. Instructional reforms recommended in improving writing instruction are seen as a means to improve the thinking ability of students in academic subjects (often referred to as "writing across

the curriculum,”). In other words, there is a perception that the kind of writing students produce in school has a direct influence on the quality of thinking in which they are required to engage (McGinley, 1992).

Crossley et al (2011) find that writing skills may also be driven by working memory in the form of mechanisms such as storage and processing units for word forms, syntactic processing, phonology and orthography. According to Crossley et al (2011) expert writers have greater working memory capacity to devote to the writing process. Some theories attribute this capacity to expert writers possessing greater skill and knowledge about language and writing. Such working memory mechanisms operate alongside a set of executive functions that allow for the self-government of language (Crossley et al, 2011). Writing places high demands on working memory capacity and in order to avoid cognitive overload, writers have to develop effective strategies for managing the writing process (Galbraith, 2009). Williams (2012: 328) points out that taking more time and trying out unfamiliar forms of writing for oneself before submitting a piece of writing are two strategies that second language users of English employ.

McLaughlin (1988) and Myles (2002) have shown that students writing academic texts in a second language generally produce texts that contain varying degrees of grammatical and rhetorical errors, depending on their proficiency level. It is unfortunate that in many cases, L2 writers may have many ideas, but not enough language to express what they want to say in a comprehensible way. In an effort to improve the situation, current writing development practice places much emphasis on preparing students for subject-specific academic writing. The merits of expressive writing may be discounted by alluding to its egocentric credentials and may be seen as ineffective in fostering maturity of thought and objective writing. We argue that such criticisms ignore the principles and values of the important experiences that underlie educational development. These experiences should not be bypassed. Sullivan (2003: 43), with reference to the common practice at North American universities of starting a writing course with a personal reflection, justifies the choice for expressive writing as follows:

Those of us who teach personal writing, who begin our composition courses by asking students to write from and about a significant experience in their lives, do so because we believe the personal essay locates students in a topic and form that is familiar to them, that they have a decided interest and stake in, that they can write about with a sense of authority. We believe that writing about a significant experience provides students with an opportunity to engage in reflection, to consider important matters of purpose and audience, to practice and refine elements of craft.

This is also the approach followed by Carstens (2015), who uses personal writing in the form of a literacy narrative as a starting point or an important ingredient in the teaching of academic writing to linguistically diverse groups of students. In the case

of multilingual students, the L1 and the world of the L1 is also available to develop ideas. Often they have developed maturity in their home language writing. Myles (2002) believes that L2 writing instructors need to understand the social and cognitive factors involved in the process of second language acquisition and writing because these factors, including the degree of competence in home language writing, have a salient effect on L2 writing development.

We agree with Sivasubramaniam (2004) that if expressive writing is neglected, ostensibly for the sake of promoting cognitive and thought maturity, then students may not be able to engage with writing in academic environments since it may seem like a kind of writing that is lacking in human emotions and feelings. We are therefore inclined to view cognitive development as a way in which the affective and actional dimension have a role to play. For that reason this article describes a project in which additional writing in the L2 did not necessarily focus on academic topics. To this end the concept of expressive writing is used to indicate a type of personal writing intended to increase students' involvement in and ownership of their writing, while honing language proficiency and accuracy. Expressive writing may be viewed as a manner of making connections between the 'known' and the 'new' on paper as well as being defined as writing for the purpose of displaying knowledge or supporting self-expression (Graham & Harris, 1989; Russell, Baker & Edwards, 1999).

3. Towards meaningful academic literacy instruction: a rationale for expressive writing

Higher Education practitioners often reduce learning to the mastery of certain forms of language use by merely offering 'academic support' or 'academic writing courses' (van der Walt, 2013: 7). Street's (2001) ideological model of literacy acknowledges that there are many literacies which means that students have to learn to recognize a range of literacy practices that are to be understood within other social practices and that are learned in order to satisfy the needs of particular (academic) literacy events.

It appears that literacy events involve concepts and social models regarding the nature of the event that makes it work and gives it meaning. Language is used to shape these values, beliefs and ideologies. When we teach the linguistic structures like grammar the literacy events involving concepts and social models regarding the nature of events, is realized in it. The foregoing discussion implies that language, or the knowledge of how language is used in different contexts, is fundamental to the study of literacy events. When we link this to Tribble's (1996) point (see above) that writing also involves learning a new set of cognitive and social relations, it seems logical that students learn literacy best and in the most productive way when their interest in the meaning and purpose of texts are actively engaged and linked to personal experiences and reflection. The success of the writing instructor, as Carstens (2015: 112) puts it, "would be measured by the extent to which the academic literacy lecturer is able to celebrate and utilise

indigenous knowledge and non-mainstream literacies in building confidence, and creating safe spaces for the acquisition of the literacies that carry academic capital". By asking students to write from their life experiences and beliefs, we attempted to avoid what Boughey (2008: 193) calls "the pathologising of students through the privileging of the texts which have traditionally comprised the university". Our intention was therefore to assign value rather than deficit to student writing even before it is read (or 'assessed') by the lecturer.

Expressive writing in this sense may/can be described as meaningful because it includes the participants' perspectives (Hanauer, 2012; Maxwell, 1996). Such meaningful literacy instruction views language learning as a process for "facilitating personally meaningful expression" and recognizes the language learner as "a living, historically situated, individual human being" (Hanauer, 2012: 1). Writing becomes a tool first, for divulging an individual's lived experience and history, and second, for reflecting on the continuous change in identity as it is shaped by social, cultural, linguistic, and political contextualization.

The priority that writers give to these two processes depends on the extent to which they are motivated to present a coherent self-image to the reader or to acknowledge their implicit disposition towards the topic and thereby realize the potential to change their view of themselves. Writing in the L2 may affect the balance between these two processes in a number of ways. On the one hand, the extent to which L2 writers are in a more self-conscious process when writing in their L1, may lead them to prioritise explicit planning processes more than they would in the L1. On the other hand, writers may find it harder to articulate their personal understanding in the L2 and their motivation to write may be reduced. It appears that if one of the factors that motivate writers is the sense that they are developing their understanding, then any reduction in their capacity to do this may reduce their motivation to write. Writing about personal and known events may free up cognitive space to utilise the available capacity to write.

4. Methodology

This study was conducted with 14 students in a first-year Communications skills course in the Construction Management and Quantity Surveying Faculty at Cape Peninsula University of Technology. Although the study relied on students volunteering to participate, the participants are broadly representative of the class as a whole (in other words no random sampling was done). Given that this is an English medium university; English takes on a major role, as all the subjects are taught in English. The group of students that volunteered to participate were a mixture of South Africans and citizens from other African states. Normally in the course of the year, students are expected to complete a variety of transactional and academic writing tasks. The writing tasks done in class are intended to promote receptivity to the experience of becoming a better academic writer in English.

In an effort to illustrate students' growth in their writing capacity, we include samples of writing which should be viewed as 'illustrative stretches' (Willet, 1995: 480) of discourse that the students produced in their journals, class assignments and summary writing. By growth we mean an increase in sentence length and grammatical complexity. At this stage we would like point out that these three writing samples from each writing task are from the same students. In the description of writing tasks below we refer to these types of writing in the order in which they were completed in class. The journal writing continues throughout the semester without particular prompts or any formal assessment, although in the tradition of journal writing the lecturer respond to each entry.

The first and second classroom assignment built on student's personal experiences by prompting them to write in class, first about an interesting person that they met and second about a personal achievement. The final piece of classroom writing that we report on in this article is a summary and personal response to what they have summarised as a first entry into academic writing. All the classroom tasks have been assessed formally by focusing on macro elements, specifically argumentation, as well as micro elements including content, grammar and punctuation (see table below).

Table 1: Marking grid for tasks and summary

Content	10	
Grammar	5	
Punctuation	5	

The data have been collected over a period of a semester. During this period the students have been writing in their journals, performing various writing tasks and summary writing in class. The students' writing is controlled and has been observed during this entire writing period.

In this study we want to know whether there has been an overall improvement in writing proficiency and whether this proficiency shows in a specific piece of academic writing, namely the summary written towards the end of the course.

In the samples presented in the next section, a mixture of linguistic analysis and a readability score is used for analysing the students' writing to show the degree to which changes have taken place in students' writing. The Flesch-Kincaid readability score is used as a very basic tool that links word and sentence complexity to grade levels in the USA. The tool is available as part of the MS Word office suite.

Although readability scores are often ridiculed for reducing linguistic complexity to surface-level features such as word and sentence length (as the Flesch-Kincaid score does) (see MacNamara, Louwerse and Graesser, 2005), they do provide a simple measure that needs to be seen in the context of linguistic and contextual features. Shehadeh and

Strother (1994: 227) propose the following additional considerations when readability is determined:

- using context cues to trigger the experience and knowledge needed to understand the text;
- following schema theory by tying unfamiliar material to familiar information;
- writing a clear topic sentence introducing key words to be used in the paragraph; and
- replacing short, unknown technical terms with other lexical items or longer explanations.

Since expressive writing does not usually require the use of technical terms and personal experiences will be familiar, these considerations have been taken into account only where applicable.

5. Results

When students started the course it was assumed that they needed guidance in particular types of writing. However, their first piece of academic writing suggests that they have problems with accuracy and fluency, which need to be addressed more directly. The surface grammatical and syntactical problems hint at deeper issues with argumentative structure and personal engagement in writing. An approach where they are simply presented with 'more of the same' will probably not help them to develop more confidence in their writers' voice.

The following extract shows some of these problems: students are struggling with spelling, grammar, sentence structure and argumentation. The expressive writing intervention is prompted by students' first piece of academic writing which is a summary of an academic article. The examples presented below are emblematic of the types of problems that appear in this particular assignment.

- Student 1: Working together we can reduce pollution because we will do what is right when we work together. No owe will cause the pollution to our worlds.
- Student 2: The environmental pollution is not remarkable event, since the human start to stay in urban and rural area. They start to make places dirty, then Romans decides to make a place where they could put their dirty

- Student 3: Pollution began when ever person congregate into the cities. The Athenians removed refuse to dumps outside the cities, that led to the outbreak of viral diseases.

As can be seen in the case of Student 2, it is clear that “remarkable” is used in a way that makes little sense for the second part of the sentence, “...to stay in urban and rural area.”. The same can be said of “The Athenians removed refuse to dumps outside the cities ...” where the second part of the sentence does not follow logically on the first part. The author probably means that the outbreak of the diseases has led to the removal of refuse from the city.

In an effort to prompt students to engage at a more personal level with their writing tasks as well as to provide increased opportunities for writing, practice in the form of journal writing and personal writing seems like an obvious place to start developing writing proficiency. The examples below show the first journal entries written by students. Student writing is presented below as produced by them, with no attempt to correct their writing.

- Student 1: I didn't do my presentation maybe I'll be the first one tomorrow, so I have to get there early, because my lecture is very strict. I don't blame her infect because she is trying by all means to teach us a punctuality because it is very important.
- Student 2: This was a painfull day to me because I did brokeup with my girlfriend, the one I love and when I get her massage. It was like I am in a dream land I still going to come back it where I experience how painful to lose someone you love. But my brother was encorage me saying the she is not the only in the world I can move on with my life even though is not easy to me as he said.
- Student 3: My father's birthday is on the 10th of March. I still am thinking what gift to offer him. I got to find something before he gets back home (D.R.C.). He come here just for 6 days. Sometimes I get jealous because my father prefer visits our sisters I'm vool than coming to visit my brother and I in Cape. He always tells me there is no money in Cape But he promised to come in December just for us in Cape Town. I am so happy to hear that.

The journal entries show that the students have made a definite attempt to express themselves freely about aspects related to everyday living, where they write about their hopes, fears, joys, doubts, intuitions and initiations. We do not get the impression that they are involved superficially in their writing. They write in the first person and they pay

no attention to grammar and punctuation issues as is the convention with journal writing. The idea is for them to simply write without thinking that their entries will be assessed. The requirement to write in their journals is meant to encourage writing without the addition of assessment and correction. Journal entries are followed by assignments in which they are supposed to spend more time on revision.

The first assignment is still focused on their personal experiences without necessarily becoming too personal. The same students quoted above have been asked to write on the following topic: **Have you met anyone exceptionally interesting lately? Why was he or she so interesting?** This writing task still focuses on their personal experiences without necessarily being too personal.

- Student 1: I once met a young guy pilot who spoke to me about his studies how he started until the time he was called pilot. He said it was not easy for him because the studies cost too much and need too much reflexion. But the most interesting to me was explaining to me how pilots are responsible of many lives in their hand during the fly. Whatever crash can happen belong to them and they can also lose their lives.
- Student 2: I once met a sensei of karate in Cape Town. He could do anything that you can tell him to do for you. He was able to speak more than five languages including Chinese language. When I was next to him, I felt like I were important than anyone else in that building. This sensei was extremely good in his sport he inspired me, by the way he performed in it.
- Student 3: I once met a young Nigerian man in a bar, somewhere in Rondebosch. This young man is only 21, and is not studying. He is exceptional and interesting because he spends the most of his time in the Cape Town library. I have learnt a lot from him. He is able to relate all the African colonialism history since the beginning till the end. These days he is doing research in the neo-colonialism. He just told me that books are his secret and advised me to read a lot.

It is clear that students use the formulaic 'I once met... ' as an obvious topic sentence and a contextual clue to support comprehension. The key words of the instruction are repeated in the paragraphs, notably *interesting* (Students 1 and 3), *exceptional* (Student 3) and Student 3 uses the word *extremely* that can be seen as a synonym for *exceptional*. Students 2 and 3 continue to describe the place where they have met the characters, followed by their reasons for finding each of them interesting. Student 1 launches into the reasons right away. Despite many mistakes, Student 1 uses complex sentences, using coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. In contrast the syntactical structure demonstrated by Students 2 and 3 is simpler: the sentences are short with some

elaboration on the basic subject-predicate structure. Using the simple Flesch-Kincaid grade level tool, one gets some idea of the surface-level complexity of their writing:

	Grade level	Words per sentence (average)	Characters per word (average)
Student 1	7	17.2	4
Student 2	4.9	14.4	3.8
Student 3	6.3	12.7	4

Grade level scores for first expressive writing task

In the table below we include the marks for writing task 1 from the holistic marking sheet, (see the methodology section). These marks are a simple instrument to indicate to the students where they need to improve.

		Student 1	Student 2	Student 3
Content	10	5	6	7
Grammar	5	1	2	1
Punctuation	5	4	4	5
Total	20	10	12	13

In terms of grammar and spelling it is fairly easy to pick out problems, but more concerning are instances where it is not clear what the student means, for example when Student 1 says that the studies “need too much reflexion” or when Student 2 refers to “stretchers”.

In an effort to increase students’ opportunities for writing, they have to continue writing in their journals while doing assignments that focus more on academic writing. Their journal writing tasks always require a personal response, as in Assignment 2 where they are asked to describe the last time they have accomplished something great.

Assignment two: **When was the last time you accomplished something great? Explain.**

- Student 1: The last time I accomplished something great was to work in the construction industry on the management level. It was hectic and challenging due to the languages but I finally cope to the atmosphere and made use of my education. I really learnt a lot and made me feel more comfortable about my career and myself. It was one of my dream thing to accomplish.
- Student 2: The last time I accomplished something great was when I got a job at Waterfront. I was very excited, it was the most remarkable day of my life. Getting a job as a waitron, to support myself was a great

achievement to me. I felt complete and independent because I got a job to support myself without having to rely on anyone. Being independent at a early age was a great accomplishment to me.

- Student 3: The last time I accomplished something great was when I was a soccer player. I scored 8 goal within 2 matches and I felt like a conqueror because that was not easy. Even a professional soccer player would never score 8 goals within 4 matches because it is not easy. That was my last great achievement in my life.

In the table below I have included the marks that the students obtained in writing task 2.

		Student 1	Student 2	Student 3
Content	10	7	8	8
Grammar	5	2	4	3
Punctuation	5	4	5	5
Total	20	13	17	16

Students start off their writing in a way that suggests oral rhetorical organization; repeating the instruction like one might do in a conversation to gain time before one comes up with an answer. However, these are also contextualization cues. The sentences are more complex, with all three students using coordinating and subordinating conjunctions. All three use the construction where the initial clause forms the subject followed by the correct form of the main verb. Student 2 uses this construction correctly three times. Student 3 uses the modal auxiliary *would* correctly in the conjunctive mood. With this second writing assignment, we observe an improvement in the flow of sentences. With Student 1, we understand that working in the construction company is hectic, but at the same time we learn that the student has benefited from his experience working in the company. The same applies to Students 2 and 3. We see a connection to the sentences and very little jumping around in their thoughts. There are a few errors, like missing words, spelling and use of the incorrect verbs, but nothing serious. The increased complexity is also evident in the Flesch-Kincaid reading levels:

	Grade level		Words per sentence (average)		Characters per word (average)	
	1 st task	2 nd task	1 st task	2 nd task	1 st task	2 nd task
Student 1	7	8.5	17.2	16.2	4	4.4
Student 2	4.9	7.8	14.4	14.8	3.8	4.2
Student 3	6.3	7.3	12.7	15	4	4.1

Flesch-Kincaid grade levels for the first and second task

Although there is not much variation in terms of words per sentence or characters per word, it is clear that the complexity of the sentences can be seen in grade level scores. The biggest change can be seen in Students 2 and 3, where the sentence length and presence of more complex ‘bigger’ words influence their grade level score.

In the next writing assignment, the students write a summary and a personal response to what they had summarize as a first entry into academic writing. The text they were supposed to use is on *Rape, Rage and Retribution*. We have chosen a summary because we want the students’ writing to be more analytical at this stage. We want them to condense information to a paragraph and for this to make sense.

The following data indicate how the students are able to develop analytical ability through expressive writing that focuses on the experiential aspects of response:

- Student 1: There is a high rate of rape in Indien. The young woman was rapted by the man called Hind Sind and after him it was then Juvenal. They raped her in the bus and the bus was covered with a cutain all the windows. The young woman was wouded in her intestinal. She couldn’t speak. The bus driver wanted to run away but the police was there. The young woman always wanted to become a doctor her friends was her books. She used to tutor the children. She had a sister who she would call for an hour once she had a problem. After her death 200 of student had a march in New Delhi. The Indien has moved to comical restration.
- Student 2: In India men treat women very badly and sexual abuse and rape to women is out of hand. Women are being raped and abuse by Indian politions and people in high power positions. Government in India has uped the time offenders would spend in jail hoping to decrease rape stats in their country. Major political figures such as Mr Mahut Magundi is very involeded in rape and awareness in the country. Rape is a violent crime and all offenders should spend time in jail if found guilty.

- Student 3: There were two women who got raped in India within a month. One of them got raped on the way from school. Their families are very worried about them because they thought that they are going to lose them. Justice is still carrying the investigation on their cases. The constitution on India says the rapist or criminals must rot in jail. The community members suggested that the rapists must be castrated or expelled from India. The police discovered that other lady was raped by someone who is close to the family. My opinion: I agree with community members.

In the table below I include the marks that the students have obtained in their summary.

		Student 1	Student 2	Student 3
Content	10	5	7	7
Grammar	5	0	3	1
Punctuation	5	4	4	5
Total	20	9	14	13

It is clear from these paragraphs that students still struggle with accuracy, but our view on the data presented here is that the students have definitely understood the texts and they are confident to give their own views on the subject matter. Students 1 and 2 start with a thesis statement which is typical of a more academic register. These statements also provide context for the discussion that follows. Students 2 and 3 conclude with their own opinion, although Student 2 does this in an impersonal manner. Since these are summaries, the expectation that they explain technical terms (such as *chemical castration*) is unrealistic for this type of writing. Student 3 seems to be stuck in a narrative mode and this piece of writing seems the most problematical as academic writing. If we look at the structure of the argument as presented by Students 1 and 2, there is a thesis statement, followed by detail of the case and concluding by showing how India is moving towards restoration. We see the consistent use of tense, like *was wounded*, *was raped* (unlike Student 3, whose tense switches cannot always be justified). We see that their paragraphs are not perfect, but we understand what they are trying to say.

Compared to their expressive writing, the Flesch-Kincaid grade level shows that Student 1 is writing at a lower level compared to the first two expressive writing tasks (also reflected in the holistic score), but Students 2 and 3 have again increased the grade level of their writing. Since the writing task is one of the first *academic* tasks, we have expected a drop in performance, but the students appear to have benefited from the additional journal and autobiographical writing.

	Grade level			Words per sentence (average)			Characters per word (average)		
	1 st task	2 nd task	3 rd task	1 st task	2 nd task	3 rd task	1 st task	2 nd task	3 rd task
Student 1	7	8.5	4.1	17.2	16.2	11	4	4.4	3.9
Student 2	4.9	7.8	9.5	14.4	14.8	17.4	3.8	4.2	4.4
Student 3	6.3	7.3	7.4	12.7	15	12	4	4.1	7.4

Flesch-Kincaid grade level scores including the final writing task

6. Discussion

The purpose of the project has been to enable students to attempt to “construct a semiotic universe that links linguistic signs not only to their dictionary referents but also to these learners’ knowledge of the world” (Lantolf, 2000: 149). In light of what they have done, their learning of a second academic language appears to have progressed as a control process of the semiotic clues offered by the foreign or second language, which leads to the very fact that the text indicates their capacity to appreciate the multiple points of view that they related to others and to themselves (Vygotsky, 1978; Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995; Lantolf, 2000: 133-135).

The content that evolves through their writing provides evidence of their commitment to responding by writing. This we see in their writing tasks, for example where they voice their views on meeting someone exceptionally interesting and accomplishing something great, Student 1: “...was to work in the construction industry on the management level.”, Student 2: “...when I got a job at Waterfront.”, Student 3: “...when I was a soccer player.” We get the sense that these appear to be great achievements to them, but their writing also indicates their increasing ability to step into the role of the writer. This is evident in their summary writing task, where the students systematically depict the situation and give their opinion. In the case of Student 1, the personal opinion is hidden, but s/he still presents the facts of the situation followed by its consequences: “The Indien has moved to comical restration.” Both Students 2 and 3 offer opinions as to the consequences of the situation they sketch. Student 2 states that: “Rape is a violent crime and all offenders should spend time in jail if found guilty.” Student 3 very briefly states: “My opinion: I agree with community members.”

Our study views their writing engagement as a continuous process of development. Therefore, we underline our belief in a writing engagement as evidenced in the writing process of the students in our study. We do not believe that personalization of writing can materialize in the absence of a love of writing; but, more importantly, the students’ responses to writing tasks indicate their “appraisals of pleasantness or appealingness of agents, activities or objects in the language learning situation” (Schumann, 1999: 37).

Although there is not a straight line of improvement from the expressive to the first academic piece of writing, there does seem to be evidence of increasing sentence complexity and argumentative structure to the writing. The considerations that we have taken into account in addition to the Flesch-Kincaid scores, show that students are slowly adapting and developing the linguistic tools necessary to compose a piece of academic writing. The purpose is not merely to develop academic literacy, but also to foster feelings of commitment to writing: putting themselves in the text in the form of using the first person or venturing an opinion.

Our intention with the writing tasks given to the students is that we wanted to bring about a positive reinforcement that would enhance the self-esteem of the learners (Clark, 1980, 1987) by focusing on personal and daily experiences. The study attempts to demonstrate that by promoting expressive writing the students will not feel threatened when they have to write in a language that is not their mother tongue. Students have to realize that being able to write properly can be a gratifying experience and in that way help to minimize their debilitating anxiety. Such a feeling gets in the way of learning, and the purpose was to rather develop the experience that putting in effort might be the difference between success and failure, helping them do better (Kleinman, 1977; Scovel, 1978, Sivasubramaniam, 2004). It appears that when students realize that their commitment to accomplish something is contingent on their further mastery of the language, instruction can be provided to meet those emergent language needs and that this situation can create the sort of classroom ecology in which language-based instruction can be received profitably. This in turn can define the purpose of language teaching which will then help the learners reach the stage where they can operate autonomously and use their autonomy as a stimulus for further classroom exploration.

Our data point to a development of rhetorical maturity which requires a definite need to redefine rhetorical maturity. Cognitive maturity in writing needs to factor in egocentric writing as a basis for promoting alternate views of reality and knowledge. Without a variety of views cognitive development might come to mean *uniformity* of thought rather than *maturity* of thought characteristic of the diversity and liberty that every educated human being seeks to express (Freedman, Pringle & Yalden, 1983: 102).

7. Conclusion

We found that the writing experience indicated in the students' responses, supports a social view of writing and requires that students use their own experiences to assign a personal view to their writing. This is also an acknowledgement of Boughey's assertion that "the actions undertaken by students to learn, therefore, are deeply related to their identities as individuals *outside* the university and how they understand 'outside' contexts" (2008: 197). In light of this point, we are led to believe that a 'right' writing method, resulting in an individual's interpretation of texts, may variably be seen as results affecting the social events both in and outside the classroom.

The students' journal entries offer verifiable support for promoting students' capacity for interpretation of expressive writing. It should be stressed again that the students' capacity for interpretation is an outcome of a process of involvement of what they believe and have experienced. The data indicate students' personal involvement when they:

- develop hypotheses about the world (for example when Student 2 writes: "Being independent at an early age was a great accomplishment to me.");
- become aware of human experiences (for example when Student 3 notices that somebody "is exceptional and interesting");
- develop the ability to think about the various aspects of human existence (for example when Student 1 elaborates on the victim of rape in India by saying, "The young woman always wanted to become a doctor her friends was her books."

We conclude that often we focus our teaching on options that affect 'meaning' rather than give an impression of the writer. Thus, we focus on helping students manage the presentation of their information rather than a presentation of themselves. We believe that as educators we are learning that such interpersonal aspects of writing are not simply an optional extra to be brushed up when students have gained control of summarizing, synthesising, handling citations, and so on; they are central to academic argument and to university success (Hyland, 2002). In addition, we are left with a consciousness and of our role to help students develop their awareness of the effects of self-mention, enabling them to recognise the choices available to them *and* their impact. We argue that this understanding will enable our students to gain better control over their writing and meet the considerable challenges of academic writing in a second language.

Our impression was that our students have developed a sense of purpose for their writing, the way they approach their writing and revising, and the way they conceive of themselves, rhetorically, in relation to their intended audiences. A focus on their ability to write expressively on personal and community topics led to a gradual improvement in sentence and rhetorical structure which has supported their academic writing development.

We believe that our study could be viewed as one which constitutes an internalist perspective on knowledge and expressive writing. This form of writing could promote the process of experiential learning and encourage a sensitivity for structuring an argument by presentation of the facts and responding to them.

Based on the arguments presented above, we assert that language is not merely linguistic but 'eminently aesthetic' (Lantolf, 2000: 152) because it is meant to realize higher emotional and mental processes through the potential it offers for lived experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1995). It appears that only then can the use of language empower human beings into understanding the need for constructive educational and social change in their societies as a preparation for democratic citizenship (Freire, 1972; Rosenblatt, 1995).

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