

A Survey of Developing L2 Academic Writing Confidence through Topic-Oriented Research

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Abstract:

This pilot study surveyed two groups of university-level English language students to explore whether writing a research-based essay in L2 would affect their self-reported confidence about the essay's topic. 35 students in a Palestinian university and 23 students in a Japanese university answered a pre-activity questionnaire, wrote a research-based compare/contrast essay and answered a post-activity questionnaire. The results were analyzed to determine changes in self-reported confidence and statistical significance. The Palestinian group reported improved L1 and L2 writing confidence but the Japanese group only reported an increase in L2 writing confidence. Although not all of the results were statistically significant, the authors concluded that L2 writing teachers should support student confidence in their writing courses and that more research is required to determine which assignments and activities can best accomplish this.

Introduction

Learners of English in academic writing classes typically learn a variety of essay

forms to develop improved writing skills. Ideally, one goal of second language (L2) writing classes is preparation for meaningful communication outside of the classroom. However, many researchers have noted that writing research papers, even in a student's first language (L1), can often be a frustrating, stressful and demoralizing process (Ballenger & Payne, 2003; Betancourt & Phinney, 1988; Faigley, Daly, & Witte, 1981; Sommers, 1982). Indeed, students may often experience a "distress associated with writing" and develop "a profound distaste for the process" of writing research papers (Madigan, Linton & Johnson, 1996, p. 295).

In a writing course, students may not only judge their own performance from the grades and feedback that they receive but also according to how confident they feel about their work (Beach, 1989; Graham & Harris, 2005; Pajares & Valiante, 2006). One clear implication is that writing teachers should be aware of how to develop students' writing confidence when designing courses, planning lessons or assigning work (Shaughnessy, 2004). Improved writing confidence can not only help students to address feelings of apprehension but also "serve students well when writing an essay because it engenders greater interest in and attention to writing, stronger effort, and greater perseverance and resiliency in the face of adversity. Confident students are also likely to feel less apprehensive and have stronger feelings of self-worth about their writing" (Pajares, 2003, p. 140).

As one consideration for an L2 writing course, a teacher should aim to help their students acquire the ability to persevere when encountering difficulties without diminishing the confidence they need to continue their work. Although it is vital to impart the linguistic and formal skills of writing to improve students' competence, they also require confidence to become more successful writers. Having good experiences with writing can enhance student confidence because "writing touches the heart of a student's identity, drawing its voice and strength and meaning from the way the student understands the world" (Fox, 1994, p. xiii). In this pilot study, the authors investigated whether L2 students can experience

improved writing confidence about a subject after they have researched and written on that subject. The authors believed that writing a research paper would help students gain increased familiarity with the paper's subject and the process of writing would provide them with a more developed and articulate understanding that they could use in the future. For the purposes of this study, the authors created a research and writing assignment on a topic which is relevant to students' daily lives, the environment and the global economy: comparing and contrasting the advantages and disadvantages of two different kinds of energy resources.

Literature Review

Improving academic writing abilities is not only a matter of sharpening a learner's academic skills. Writing, like much of learning, is an emotional activity in addition to a cognitive activity (Vygotsky, as cited in Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002; McLeod, 1987). Krashen (1982, 1985) determined that emotional factors such as anxiety and confidence can influence the affective filter, thus inhibiting language acquisition. It is also widely accepted that effective classroom instruction should try to minimize negative influences on students' emotions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

According to Bandura (1984, 1986), social cognitive theory is the hypothesis that knowledge acquisition is significantly affected by external experiences and interactions with others. Confidence, the beliefs that people hold about their own abilities (which Bandura calls "self-efficacy"), has a strong mediating influence on effort and may even be the most influential component of human agency (Bandura, 1984, 1986). Efforts which are interpreted as being successful have the most significant effect on raising one's own self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). In one review of the relevant literature, Graham & Weiner (1996) concluded that Bandura's view predominates in research on human motivation; they also found that self-efficacy may even be the best predictor of behavioral outcomes, superseding other forms of self-belief such as anxiety and perception of a task's

value.

To explore how self-efficacy is related to L2 writing, Pajares (2003) noted that studies attempting to measure self-belief reveal that “writing self-efficacy makes an independent contribution to the prediction of writing outcomes” (p 145). Pajares (2003) also found that confidence plays a mediating role between one’s abilities and one’s work; a learner with low confidence may struggle to achieve results that should be within their capabilities. Pajares & Johnson (1994) concluded that students’ confidence in their writing skills was a better predictor of their outcomes than their actual writing abilities. Other researchers have also determined that the way students interpret their own skills can act as a mediating influence on how they engage with texts and that higher confidence can lead to improved utilization of language skills (Beach, 1989; Faigley et al., 1985; Hull & Rose, 1989).

A high level of confidence can increase students’ level of learning autonomy (Brown, 2007) and their capacity for learning throughout life (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002). Since making mistakes is an inherent part of learning a foreign language, Lightbown & Spada (2001) argue that a willingness to engage in risk-taking is an important characteristic for successful language learners to possess. Self-confidence influences students’ willingness to take these types of risks in studying (Oxford, 1990). These findings should nonetheless be tempered by the observation that students whose confidence is too high may develop a skewed understanding of their own abilities and ignore guidance (Sekhan, 2001), which suggests that teachers should ideally be tactful, constructive and judicious in their feedback while remaining mindful of student confidence.

Confidence may also be a factor which affects disparities in writing performance between genders. Higher levels of writing confidence are typically reported among girls when compared to boys through middle-school (Pajares & Valiante, 1997, 2001). This confidence often changes in later stages of schooling, suggesting that external factors play an important role in developing student confidence

(Bruning & Horn, 2000). Similarly, Pajares (2003) argues that the influence of a society's beliefs about gender and gender stereotypes have a complex relationship with L2 learners' confidence.

Evidence suggests that the process of doing research can also be affected by confidence. McLaughlin (2003, p. 69) points out that supervisors and teachers play an important role in enabling a researcher to reach states of "intellectual security" or "clarity" which are vital for a writer to focus on the process of research, evaluate information and learn to write rationally. Dadds (1995) argues that emotion also plays a role in research by acting as a motivational force which stimulates action and commitment to effort. Confidence can therefore impact the process of researching and analyzing information which contributes to the quality of learning and writing (Henry, 1983).

Effects related to confidence have been noted in studies focusing on other forms of motivation as well. Pajares, Miller & Johnson (1999) found that self-efficacy has a strong moderating effect on writing apprehension. Activities which decrease anxiety may improve students' writing confidence and their willingness to take risks (Holmes & Moulton, 1995). Conversely, Scheier & Carver (1993) noted that when students have little confidence in their capabilities, pessimism can induce negative behaviors including reduced effort or avoidance of work.

A substantial body of literature therefore supports the idea that learner confidence is a significant but ambiguous variable in L2 acquisition, learner performance and writing. Furthermore, a teacher and environment can certainly play a key role in encouraging the attributes which enable a student to research and write well. Finding ways to improve learner confidence can therefore be considered a worthwhile goal for L2 language teachers but determining more specific ways of doing so remains an area for further exploration. Accordingly, the authors of this study wished to explore whether a research-based writing assignment can help build student writing confidence within the context of an L2 academic writing course.

Methods

Research Questions

Question 1: Does writing a research-based L2 essay increase student L1 writing confidence?

Question 2: Does writing a research-based L2 essay increase student L2 writing confidence?

Activity Procedure

This study was performed within the context of academic writing courses which had the aim of teaching different kinds of essays, conducting research and citing information. This particular assignment was a compare/contrast essay about the pros and cons of two different kinds of energy resources. This essay required research and citations for its supporting arguments. Students enrolled in these courses also practiced self-editing skills and peer-review activities during their work.

This writing assignment was preceded by a brief discussion in small groups about energy resources. After the discussion, students received a 6-point Likert survey (Appendix 1) in which they rated their own writing confidence in their respective L1s about energy resources and their writing confidence on the same topic in L2. After the survey was completed and collected, students received an introduction to the organization of a five-paragraph compare/contrast essay. Students demonstrated their understanding of the new essay format by choosing two kinds of energy resources and creating an outline for a 5-page essay which contrasts their advantages and disadvantages.

Writing these essays required research using libraries or online information resources. Students were also required to cite their references using appropriate notation. Depending on the course, the essays were revised in several drafting stages or with in-class peer-review. After a final peer-review activity and giving the final draft of their paper to their respective teachers, students filled-out a post-

activity 6-point Likert survey (Appendix 2) to ascertain whether their L1 and L2 writing confidence on this topic had changed after completing the assignment. The Japanese student group composed their essays as homework on computers and had opportunities to revise over several drafts. The Palestinian student group wrote with pen and paper followed by peer-review as part of their monitored in-class work. The essays were graded according to the same rubrics and standards that had been applied to their other writing throughout the semester. Some specific aspects of the assignment were modified to more appropriately match them with the overall objectives of their respective academic writing courses.

Participants

The first author's class was comprised of intermediate Japanese-speaking freshmen attending a private foreign language university, $n = 23$; (18 female, 5 male). These students were enrolled in a liberal arts department with a focus on international studies. The class took place in the second semester of a two-semester introductory academic writing course which fulfilled part of the students' foreign language and writing requirements. The class had the objectives of improving academic writing skills by teaching students how to write a range of brief research papers with support and notation.

The second author's class was comprised of intermediate Arabic-speaking Palestinian freshmen and sophomores attending a large public university, $n = 35$; (31 female, 5 male). These students were enrolled in an English language and literature department. The class took place in the second semester of the year and fulfilled requirements for advancement through their program. The class had the objectives of improving academic writing skills by teaching students how to write a range of academic essays with support and notation.

Data analysis

The pre-activity and post-activity data used in the analysis were collected with a

6-point Likert scale; its scores ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* and its numerical values ranged from 6 to 1, respectively. Statistical analysis used a t-test assuming two unequal variances to show significance between the samples; the pre-activity and post-activity surveys were anonymous and could not be paired. The data were analyzed with Microsoft Excel (2016) Data Analysis Toolpack Add-in.

Results by class

First Author:

Table 1.1 (L1 = Japanese) Research Question 1

	Pre-activity (n= 23)	Post-activity (n= 23)	Difference
Mean	4	3.69	- 0.31
Median	4	4	0
SD	1.27	1.29	+ 0.02

As noted in Table 1.1, students initially judged their confidence about their L1 ability to write about energy resources with a mean of 4 out of a maximum of 6. However, the data show a decrease in student confidence to a mean of 3.69 after the writing activity. Distribution, as reflected by the SD, increased by .02. The p-value suggests the results are not statistically significant ($t = 0.8019$, $df = 68$, $p = 0.2134$).

Table 1.2 (L2 = English) Research Question 2

	Pre-activity (n= 23)	Post-activity (n= 23)	Difference
Mean	2.82	3.3	+ 0.48
Median	3	3	0
SD	0.93	1.32	+ 0.39

As noted in Table 1.2, students initially judged their confidence about their L2 ability to write about energy resources with a mean of 2.82 out of a maximum

of 6. The data show an increase in student confidence to a mean of 3.3 after the writing activity. Distribution, as reflected in SD, increased by .39. The p-value suggests the results are not statistically significant ($t = -1.4105$, $df = 65$, $p = 0.0830$).

Second Author:

Table 2.1 (L1 = Arabic) Research Question 1

	Pre-activity (n= 35)	Post-activity (n= 35)	Difference
Mean	3.62	4.51	+ 0.89
Median	3.5	5	+ 1.5
SD	1.66	1.33	- 0.33

As noted in Table 2.1, students initially judged their confidence about their L1 ability to write about energy resources with a mean of 3.62 out of a maximum of 6. The data show an increase in student confidence to a mean of 4.51 after the writing activity. Distribution, as reflected in SD, decreased by .33. The p-value suggests the results are statistically significant ($t = -2.3649$, $df = 68$, $p = 0.0104$).

Table 2.2 (L2 = English) Research Question 2

	Pre-activity (n= 35)	Post-activity (n= 35)	Difference
Mean	2.85	3.65	+ 0.8
Median	3	3	0
SD	1.39	1.43	+ 0.04

As noted in Table 2.2, students initially judged their confidence about their L2 ability to write about energy resources with a mean of 2.85 out of a maximum of 6. The data show an increase in student confidence to a mean of 3.65 after the writing activity. Distribution, as reflected in SD, increased by .04. The p-value suggests the results are statistically significant ($t = -2.4548$, $df = 65$, $p = 0.0083$).

Discussion

A comparison of the means in Table 1.1 shows a decrease in L1 confidence (4 to 3.69) after completing the assignment. A comparison of the means in Table 1.2 shows an increase in L2 confidence (2.82 to 3.3) after completing the assignment. Despite the fact that the p-values for Table 1.1 and Table 1.2 show that the results are not statistically significant, the change in mean in Table 1.1 (-0.31) suggests that the Japanese participants' reliance on L1 may have decreased after starting work on the assignment while their reliance on L2 may have increased. Nonetheless, the decrease in student L1 confidence was unexpected and determining possible reasons for this decrease is beyond the scope of the survey instruments.

A comparison of the means in Table 2.1 shows an increase in L1 confidence (3.62 to 4.51) after completing the assignment. A comparison of the means in Table 2.2 shows an increase in L2 confidence (2.85 to 3.65) after completing the assignment. The p-values for Table 2.1 and Table 2.2 show that the results are statistically significant. This indicates that the majority of Palestinian students expressed improvement in both L1 and L2 writing confidence after completing the assignment.

Significant differences exist between the two student groups so it is difficult to apply observations of one group to the other. For instance, the Japanese cohort wrote their papers over a series of weeks in multiple drafts and were guided by regular teacher feedback; they also began their research earlier in the assignment. In contrast, the Palestinian students composed their essays in class and did not benefit from doing multiple revisions over a period of weeks. Additionally, the Palestinian cohort sometimes used less-scholarly resources to conduct their research; the Japanese cohort was encouraged to use more scholarly resources and their course involved an emphasis on making citations and judging the appropriateness of supporting information. These distinctions in the courses mean that some dissimilarities in survey results between the two groups could

be related to the different ways in which the assignment was implemented and the different resources that students could access for research.

Another possible factor for some of the differences in survey outcomes is that students' intellectual processing of a writing topic may be related to their level of L1-based knowledge about that topic. As was observed by both authors during the semester, some participants used L1 information sources to develop an initial understanding about energy and began to do L2 research after progressing further into the assignment. This suggests that some students used L1 information sources to bridge the gap between their lack of L2 knowledge and the demands of the essay, perhaps because it is easier to do research in L1. Teachers may therefore wish to address a heavy dependence on L1 during research by encouraging students to use more L2 sources. Perhaps teachers can accomplish this by using grading incentives, requiring a minimum amount of L2 research or creating activities which assist students in doing more L2 research. For example, one teacher at the second author's university explained that she uses activities which decrease writers' dependence on Arabic and increase their use of English, such as in-class discussions of audiovisual materials or group discussion activities with student facilitators (L. Dikeidek, personal interview, March 3, 2018). This teacher believed that her students are more vocally-oriented so speaking activities help them engage in L2 more effectively before writing. More research needs to be done to understand the impact that particular assignments, activities and teacher feedback can have on building student confidence in L2 academic writing courses.

Study limitations

Larger sample sizes are always preferable in quantitative research; larger samples are more likely to yield more reliable results. The student cohorts involved in this project were relatively small and it is difficult to find correlations within these samples. Survey distribution and collection for the first author involved

two instances of lateness due to student absences. More significantly, the second author's semester was hampered by student council strikes, university employee strikes and disruptions to classes from political unrest in late 2017 (Palestinian University Employees' Federation of Unions, 2017, December 20). The second author initially intended to include 5 sections of the academic writing course but only 3 sections managed to return the surveys as initially planned. This unexpectedly resulted in fewer participants taking part in this study, interruptions in the completion of writing assignments and delays in returned surveys. Additionally, the participating students only received assessment for their L2 writing but not their L1 writing. Individuals reporting a higher degree of L1 writing confidence may have therefore felt more positive about their L1 work. Receiving more critical feedback about their L2 writing may have led some students to report a reduced degree of L2 writing confidence.

Conclusion

Even for experienced learners of English, writing can be a frustrating and time-consuming activity which is made more challenging by the formal aspects of academic writing and the demands of doing research. The impact of confidence upon the development of writing skills means that building student confidence is an important component of an effective L2 writing course. The authors therefore believe that teachers should invest time to create classes and activities which develop the self-assurance and risk-taking that students need to improve their writing skills. The authors also believe that further research is needed to improve understanding of what kinds of activities and assignments are most effective in developing L2 writing confidence. Because students often rely heavily on L1 sources during research, they may require increased encouragement to undertake the challenges of using more L2 research sources. Perhaps this can be accomplished with grading incentives, explicit assignment requirements about research or carrying out topical in-class discussion activities as part of a writing

assignment. Finally, the authors believe that more research is needed to further explore the interactions between the research process, the writing process, in-class activities, L1 confidence and L2 writing confidence. A better understanding of these issues can help teachers strengthen their support for students' writing skills and more adequately prepare them for writing throughout their lives.

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Appendix 1:

Energy Resources

Fall 2017 #1

	Strongly agree			Strongly disagree		
I feel confident writing about energy resources in (Arabic / Japanese).	6	5	4	3	2	1
I feel confident writing about energy resources in English.	6	5	4	3	2	1

Appendix 2:

Energy Resources

Fall 2017 #2

	Strongly agree			Strongly disagree		
I feel confident writing about energy resources in (Arabic / Japanese).	6	5	4	3	2	1
I feel confident writing about energy resources in English.	6	5	4	3	2	1
	Always			Never		
I read about energy resources using resources from the library.	6	5	4	3	2	1
I read about energy resources using resources from online scholarly journals.	6	5	4	3	2	1