

# RESEARCH PAPER WRITING: THE TASK DEPENDENCY PRINCIPLE AS A TOOL IN DEVELOPING LEARNER INDEPENDENCE

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*The present paper sets out to examine the efficiency of the Task Dependency Principle (TDP) in teaching research paper writing for BA students in English Philology. So far the TDP has been used in teaching practical language skills to non-native speakers. It consists in giving students tasks which are based on previously accomplished tasks. The TDP has turned out to be very effective in teaching research paper writing skills as well. Implemented throughout one full semester of the research-in-progress seminar, coupled with the peer review and fostered by the focus on individually selected linguistic topics, the TDP has contributed to increasing the motivation of students and shifting from teacher- to student-centred teaching/learning.*

## 1. The scope and background of the problem

Teaching writing in L2, as a rule, presupposes a number of general and specific problems, the most frequent and well-known being a fairly slow progress of the students and inefficiency of teacher-centred approach, lecturing on 'what it should be' rather than focusing on each paper produced by the student and giving feedback directly to him/her. A number of those problems could be viewed as part of a more general issue of motivation, or rather, a lack of it. The issue of motivation has been raised on many occasions and discussed from many different points of view (see, for example, an extensive study by Dörnyei 2001). This paper is also concerned with motivation but is of somewhat narrower focus. I would rather begin with more practical considerations.

It is fairly well known that teaching writing in a group is often quite problematic, whereas an exclusively individual approach is costly. My experience of almost ten years of teaching writing has shown that group work is quite efficient, particularly with fairly advanced learners and applied on well-defined tasks, like research paper (RP) writing. Hence the present paper focuses on demonstrating the efficiency of the task dependency principle (TDP) implemented together with the peer review as a means to raise the learner motivation and shifting from teacher to learner focused approach. My major concern in this paper is the TDP and some peculiarities of its implementation. The TDP is seen as a number of related tasks, so that the first task leads to the second, the second to the third; each subsequent task is based on the completion of the previous.

To identify the problem more precisely, a more extensive background should be given. At the Department of English Philology of Vilnius University non-native students majoring in English start their courses in writing with the first year of study and go through several stages: from journal and essay writing to writing summaries, critiques, reports, analyses and syntheses to research paper writing. Throughout all of these stages there are several approaches applied: writing as a process, writing as a product and writing as a genre. The latter is the most important for RP writing. It is also the most demanding, particularly if writing is viewed as a social activity which aims at producing a piece of writing acceptable to the academic community and hence presupposing the awareness of the academic community (for the concept of academic community see Swales 1990). The approach sees writing as affected by cultural and rhetorical norms of the society and in many cases affected by L1 general composing skills (for more details see Furneaux 1998).

RP writing is taught after students accomplish other, simpler writing skills, like essay, summary, report writing etc. In the third year students go through the stages of RP writing (see Swales and Feak 1994) for the first time. During the research-in-progress seminar in the fourth year of studies students work in their selected research areas and meet to discuss their hypotheses, approaches and findings. Indeed, the seminar has a coordinative function, since each student works on his/her selected topic with his/her supervisor and the teacher of the research-in-progress seminar has to see to the papers produced in conformity with the departmental requirements and ready to be defended. A major problem of the course for a couple of years has been the students' lack of motivation of working in a group: they did not seem to be engaged in the discussion of other students' papers and sought the instructor's advice on their individual paper. Therefore, the process was rather teacher-centred and time and energy consuming on the teacher's part; however, in the long run, it turned out not particularly effective for the students either. As a result, group work was quite constrained due to a sufficient lack of motivation. Eventually, a solution was found, but the implementation took some time.

## 2. Hypothesis

Peer review and the TDP may help students increase their motivation of working in a group. That would entail improving students' RPs and raising their awareness of the audience and genre conventions, motivating them to work towards the final product, disciplining them and increasing their independence (for more details on learner independence and stages of attaining it see Mahili 2000 and Palfreyman 2000).

Peer review (also known as peer response, peer editing, peer evaluation) has been fairly extensively studied and acknowledged as a tool increasing student motivation and independence as a learner (see Bartels 2003; Cresswell 2000; Šeškauskienė, 2001), whereas the TDP, though present in many tasks in 'hard' sciences and in second language acquisition (SLA)<sup>1</sup> (Prinz 1996), has not been so extensively discussed in 'soft' sciences, particularly in relation to doing research and research paper writing.

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<sup>1</sup> The approach was amply demonstrated by Mr Don Dunmore during a series of workshops (February 2000) within the Project *English for Academic Purposes* launched by the British Council (Lithuania) in Vilnius.

### 3. Methods and materials

Methods of the present research included observation and action research. The latter, as defined in Nunan (1992, 17-20), is based on a methodology aimed at changing the situation. In this particular case, it pertains to introducing a technique fostering the students' motivation and independence in developing their RP writing skills. As a result, they should be able to benefit from a class discussion and produce their own research-based pieces of writing. The materials were produced exclusively by the students working in three groups of approximately 12-14 people.

### 4. Results and discussion: how did it all work?

BA students in English Philology write their papers in accordance with Swales' well-known IM-RAD model (introduction, methods, results and discussion). The TDP has been applied in teaching how to write the introduction, which, according to Swales and his followers, is based on the CARS principle (create a research space) and consists of the following moves and steps (adapted from Swales and Feak 1994, 175):

Move 1. Establishing a research territory. It subsumes the following steps:

- Step 1. Claiming centrality (optional), e.g.:
  - (1) *Recently applied researchers have become increasingly interested in ...*
  - (2) *The study of...has become an important aspect in the area of...*
- Step 2. Making topic generalisations (optional), e.g.:
  - (3) *The category of voice is taken here to refer to...*
- Step 3. Reviewing items of previous research (obligatory)

Move 2. Establishing a niche

- Step 1A. Counter-claiming *or*
  - Step 1B. Indicating a gap *or*
  - Step 1C. Question raising *or*
  - Step 1D. Continuing a tradition.
- Examples: (4) *However, little research has been done...*  
(5) *It would seem that further investigation is needed in...*  
(6) *Still the research has been quite controversial...*

Move 3. Occupying the niche

- Step 1A. Outlining purposes
  - or* Step 1B. Announcing present research  
(one of the two—1A or 1B—is obligatory)
  - Step 2. Announcing principal findings (optional)
  - Step 3. Indicating the RP structure (optional but recommended)
- Examples: (7) *The primary focus of this paper is...*  
(8) *The experiment is designed to...*

It is hardly any news that writing introductions of research papers is one of the most time-and-energy consuming tasks and often takes its final shape after the remaining sections of the RP have been completed. In the course of TPD implementation, for teaching purposes the homogeneous introduction was split into its constituent parts and the sequence of producing them was changed.

In other words, students started writing their introductions from one of the middle parts, rather than from the very beginning. In addition, each stage was interrupted by peer review and after completing each task students received feedback from their peers. Then they moved on to another task, which was based on the completion of the previous. So as a result of 'reshuffling', the steps-and-moves scheme acquired the following shape:

1. Move 1 (territory), step 3: reviewing previous research
2. PEER REVIEW
3. Move 1 (territory), step 1 and/or step 2.
4. Move 2 (niche), step 1: practicing the techniques of indicating a niche, choosing the best and incorporating it into the Introduction.
5. Move 3 (occupying the niche).
6. PEER REVIEW

So, the moves have remained in their required positions; however, steps have been displaced. For example, reviewing previous research, which is one of the most complicated and extensive tasks, is completed first and then submitted for review. The second peer review session is only arranged after the remaining shorter sections are completed.

Peer review sessions are organised in the following way. Students' written pieces are sent out by e-mail to the rest of the group three working days before the workshop. Each student has his main reviewer in the group, who provides an extensive review in class. All other peers join in the class discussion. Each time no more than 4-5 papers are reviewed. Then students proceed to their next task, which is based on the previous: they write a small section on claiming centrality section or topic generalisations, which is attached to the literature review; then they establish a niche and occupy it. Subsequently, the second peer review session follows. Overall, the aim of RP writing is attained by following the general principle of narrowing the topic and identifying the niche for one's own research. Graphically, it can be represented as a set of blocks, each of them placed on top of the previous and narrowing towards the niche, as in Figure 1 below:

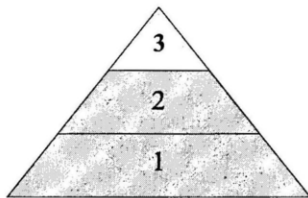


Figure 1. 1. Previous research. 2. Niche identification. 3. Filling in the niche

Students, to be able to produce block 1, or reviews of previous research (or literature review, LR) and subsequent peer reviews based on similar parameters, were given the following checklist with the key questions identified:

1. LR: is there any clearly identifiable principle of classifying the sources?
2. LR: is there any transition from one paragraph to another (one idea to another)?
3. LR: is there any evaluation given to any literature sources? What are the evaluative words?

4. LR: *is there any synthesis of ideas made? How (what is the wording)?*

5. LR: *Are there any hedges used?*

6. LR: *are there too many/too few quotations? Excessive/limited/lack of criticism? Any suspicion of plagiarism?*

7. LR: *language and layout—written rather than spoken language, academic style etc.*

The review of previous research is considered as one of the most difficult tasks requiring knowledge and skills of general writing principles as well as summarizing, synthesis, evaluation etc. Having produced their literature review, students were supposed to send out their papers for their peers by e-mail. The idea was at first taken by the students as a challenge; also they felt a little scared. Their fear was not totally ungrounded. Indeed, the reviewers of the papers were very critical, particularly at the beginning, and the discussion fierce. In some cases students did not fully realize what was expected from them and whenever asked to review their peers' papers, remained quite indifferent abstaining from any comments and evading any opinion.

However, step by step they got involved into the process and had a number of questions and comments. Some of them were quite critical and it took some time to make them aware of academic conventions of expressing criticism and main types of hedging. At this stage the impact of L1 culture (Lithuanian) was quite well-expressed: either straightforward criticism or none at all. Eventually, the students realized the advantages of classroom discussion of their papers, became less defensive and more open to other people's ideas. They also learned how to hedge and remain quite critical at the same time. In fact, they went through the three stages in developing the learner autonomy (see Mahili 2000): awareness raising, monitoring and autonomy. As a result, students became naturally involved in the process of writing their own papers and got used to giving feedback to their peers following the academic conventions. At the same time, they became more aware of the genre conventions, including the consideration of the reader's needs. The teacher's role also changed—s/he became less involved in small details of each paper and/or repeating the same comments on the development and structure of the paper to many people. Thus, his/her function became more coordinative; comments on individual peculiarities of the papers were given by the students' peers.

## 5. Major difficulties

There were at least two problems identified in the process of TDP and peer review implementation: lack of discipline and problems with politeness strategies in the discussion. The majority of students managed to send out their papers by e-mail to their peers; however, many of them did that only the last day before the class or failed to do that. The reasons for failing to conform to the requirements ranged from different ailments or inability to plan their work to technical problems, like not having access to the internet at home or computer problems. This obviously led to perturbing the process of discussion in the group. The second problem was more concerned with L1 writing and culture conventions and took some time to overcome. One of the stimuli was a BA paper on hedging in research articles in English and Lithuanian, which was discussed in class and clearly identified quite marked differences in expressing criticism in the two cultures.

## 6. Conclusion

The blending of the TDP and peer review, implemented with the help of electronic devices (e-mail) has turned out to be very effective in solving the problem of motivation of working in a group of fourth year students of English writing their BA RPs. Despite occasional technical problems (people do not have access to the internet at home, computers tend to break etc.), it has been very efficient particularly in the following aspects:

- It fosters learner autonomy and shifts the focus from teacher to learner.
- Step-by-step nature of the TDP gives time to think on the progress and raises the motivation of the student.
- Working in a group helps identify similar problems and seek for common solution strategies.
- The TDP and peer review in particular raise the students' awareness that they are part of academic community.
- In the long run, the TDP contributes to helping students express their views and give arguments, become independent thinkers and writers.

If viewed in a broader context and in the framework of further prospects of research, the TDP could be implemented in writing other sections of an RP (e.g. discussion, another time-and-energy-consuming task) and take other forms. For example, the peer review could be produced in writing and only then discussed in class. Also the TDP and peer review could be transferred to other writing courses, especially those based on other cultures, for example, could be implemented in a writing course taught for students of Lithuanian. The latter would be a little constrained due to the lack of research done in the area (on hedging, structure and language of an RP etc.), but on the whole, still possible.

In broader terms, the TDP contributes to seeing writing as a skill developed at the university and for the university (for accomplishing different tasks, like summary, report or critique writing), as well as in one's career beyond the university walls.

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## **MOKSLINIO DARBO RAŠYMAS: UŽDUOČIŲ SEKOS PRINCIPAS KAIP ĮRANKIS BESIMOKANČIOJO AUTONOMIJAI SKATINTI**

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjamas užduočių sekos principo (USP) efektyvumas taikant jį anglų filologijos programos bakalauro studijų pakopos rašymo kurse. Iki šiol USP naudotas tik praktinei negimtajai kalbai mokytis. Jo esmė sudaro užduočių seka, kurioje paskesnė užduotis remiasi ankstesne.

Susidūrus su studentų darbo grupėje motyvacijos problema, kai kiekvienas iš jų rašo individualų bakalauro darbą pagal pasirinktą temą, mėginta pritaikyti USP bei recenzavimo metodą (peer review) darbui grupėje rašant mokslinio darbo įvadą. Swales'o CARS modelio seka buvo kiek pakeista, tarp sudedamųjų dalių įterptas studentų recenzavimas.

Papaiškėjo, kad USP, taikytas kartu su recenzavimo metodu, yra labai efektyvus skatinant darbą grupėje, o kartu ugdo studentų motyvą rašyti pasirinktą individualų darbą. Sistemingas recenzavimo metodo taikymas padėjo studentams įsitraukti į kritikų/recenzentų vaidmenį.

USP ir recenzavimo metodas paskatino studentus rašant darbus atsižvelgti į skaitytoją, suvokti save kaip akademinės bendruomenės dalį, poreikį laikytis vieningų akademinėjų normų. Jis taip pat perkėlė daugiau atsakomybės už mokymosi procesą studentui.

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