

The usefulness of process-oriented writing in enhancing writing skills as a component of communicative competence among upper secondary school students

Helen Hint^{ab1}, Anni Jürine^{ac}

^a *Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, University of Tartu*

^b *School of Humanities, Tallinn University*

^c *Estonian Military Academy*

Summary

Introduction

Communicative competence is listed as one of the eight general competences in the national curriculum for upper secondary schools (GRÕK, 2011) and constant developing of communicative competence is required in the programmes of every subject field. Communicative competence has been assessed among first-year university students (Ehala, Kerge, Lepajõe & Sõrmus, 2010, 2015) and in basic school (Kikas & Toomela, 2015; Soodla, Puksand & Luptova, 2015). However, there have been no systematic studies in Estonia that observe and assess the level of communicative competence among upper secondary school students.

As the notion of communicative competence is extensive and complex, it is difficult to assess and develop it in a single study. Thus, in this study, we focus on students' writing-related practices and conceptions as one component of the communicative competence. We proceed from the idea of process-oriented writing, which emphasises the process of text production, but not so much on the end product (see Badger & White, 2000). This writing conception is in line with Bazerman (2009), who characterises writing first and foremost as a mode of collecting and organising ideas. Previous research also suggests that process writing has a positive effect on text production competence (Sengupta, 2000).

The aim of this study was twofold. Our first aim was to create a communicative competence assessment tool and check the quality parameters of this instrument. The second aim was to assess the effectiveness of a process-oriented writing intervention on upper secondary school students. More specifically,

¹ School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Narva mnt 25, Tallinn, 10120 Estonia; helen.hint@tlu.ee

we wanted to see whether the intervention led to changes in writing-related practices and conceptions among students. This study is part of a project that investigates how to develop general competencies in upper secondary school.

Study I: The assessment tool

Sample and data analysis. All the data in this study comes from a three-year longitudinal study conducted in several Estonian schools. Participation in the data collection was voluntary. For testing the validity of the assessment tool, answers from 680 students from 16 different schools were collected in the first year of the study. For re-assessing the instrument in the third year, data from 191 students were used.

For assessing the instrument, an explanatory and confirmatory factor analysis was carried out in R (R Core Team, 2020).

Instrument. A novel writing process questionnaire was constructed explicitly for the needs of Estonian upper middle school context, based on two previously conducted studies. First, the EUWRIT survey (Chitez, Cruse & Castelló, 2015) was used to generate the 'writing process scale' of our questionnaire. The 'attitudes scale' was compiled based on Lonka et al. (2014) Writing Process Questionnaire. The questionnaire enabled us to collect data about the practices that students use to complete writing assignments (taking feedback into account, rewriting and revision, text planning) and about the attitudes and conceptions related to writing (procrastination, writer's block, perfectionism, innate ability). The initial instrument included 37 five-point Likert-scale questions.

Results. The initial instrument captured three factors related to the writing process and four factors related to attitudes towards writing. However, as the quality parameters of initial assessment instrument were not excellent ($\chi^2/df = 3,38$, RMSEA = 0,086, CFI = 0,77 for writing process scale and $\chi^2/df = 3,05$, RMSEA = 0,077, CFI = 0,9 for assessments scale), we continued to improve the instrument during the project. It turned out that the three-factor model is appropriate for the writing process scale. However, in the attitudes scale, two factors – perfectionism and writer's block – fell under one single factor in the final model, also resulting in a three-factor model (procrastination, writer's block and innate ability). This indicates that for Estonian students, perfectionism and writer's block are related to very similar feelings and attitudes, in contrast to Lonka et al. (2014), whose Writing Process Questionnaire showed them as clearly separate factors. Nevertheless, these factors are closely connected, as perfectionism may be just one reason for writer's block (Boice, 1993).

Study II. The writing-process intervention and its effect

Sample. The changes in students' communicative competence were compared based on those students' responses who completed the writing process questionnaire through all three years of the study, or at least on two occasions. Forty-seven students who participated in the intervention were from test-school. The number of students from control-schools and their response times are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The sample included in assessing the effect of the intervention

	10th, 11th and 12th grades	10th and 11th grades	10th and 12th grades
Test-school	n = 47	–	–
Control-schools	n = 31	n = 25	n = 37

Data analysis. Descriptive statistics of each dimension's mean values were used to compare the participants' answers across three years in order to see changes in their writing-related practices and attitudes. Due to the small size of the sample, the mixed-effects linear models with random slopes for schools and participants did not converge. Therefore, it was unfortunately not possible to test the statistical significance of these changes.

Intervention. The intervention was designed to develop process-oriented writing practices. The intervention was a writing task that included the elements of the writing process, mostly peer feedback and revising. The intervention was conducted on two occasions: once during the writing of a longer research paper (five months in 11th grade; 2019) and whilst writing a shorter research paper in the history class (two weeks in 12th grade; 2020).

Results. The results suggest that the test-school student's responses in the writing process scale improved in the areas of rewriting and text planning. At the attitudes scale, we also noticed a small movement towards better conceptions regarding writing, especially in the dimensions of writer's block, perfectionism and innate ability. In contrast, in the answers given by control-schools students across three years, no evident positive changes emerged. Remarkably, a steady decline in control-group students' attitudes occurred at the attitudes scale, since the 12th grade students' assessments had changed towards more disadvantageous conceptions. Based on the small but gradual changes in the test-school students' self-reported assessments, we concluded that the process-based writing intervention effectively lead students to better writing practices and attitudes.

Discussion and conclusions

First, we demonstrated in this study that the constructed assessment instrument is a valid tool for determining the upper secondary school students' practices and attitudes related to writing. Second, we also concluded that the writing process intervention effectively develops the upper secondary school students' writing competence. After the intervention, students reported that they are more prone to apply the elements of process-oriented writing: they tend to plan their texts and practice more rewriting. It has been shown that such behaviour characterises more experienced writers (Van Waes, Leijten & Van Weijen, 2009). In addition, healthier attitudes towards writing assignments are important not only because they lead to better writing practices, but also to the more general well-being of students (e.g. Lonka et al., 2014). It is important to stress the teacher's role in the students' writing process. Studies indicate that the positive effect of the writing process only appears when a teacher pays attention to the strategic development of the elements of the process (e.g. Hovardas et al., 2014; Dean, 2005). Furthermore, teachers should clearly mention that the strategies are not task-specific but are well-applicable in different writing contexts. To sum up, we suggest that upper secondary school students benefitted from the process-oriented intervention method, and it helps to enhance at least one aspect of their overall communicative competence.

Keywords: general competences, communicative competence, process-oriented writing, conceptions of writing, writing practices, upper secondary school