Writing a first-degree paper: Tensions and teacher scaffolding

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Abstract

The 2030 Agenda demands that Higher Education Institutions review how they produce knowledge, and the first step is to review how they promote the development of research competencies. This study reports an experience of accompaniment for writing an initial degree project, considering the students' perceptions regarding research and written feedback as scaffolding in producing texts associated with research. Its central question is: What are the tensions students face in writing their first-degree work, and how does the feedback provide them with scaffolding to face them? Case study and qualitative approach according to the principles of SOTL practice. One teacher and ten students participated. Data are interviews and teacher's written comments. Results

identify the tensions reported by students and how written feedback provides adequate support through contextualized and personalized interventions. Implications and projections are discussed.

KEYWORDS: SCAFFOLDING, FEEDBACK, RESEARCH METHODS COURSES, STUDENT EXPERIENCE, STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING.

Introduction

The 2030 Agenda challenges Higher Education Institutions to review their modes of knowledge production to orient them towards multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinarity. The first step to meet this challenge is to review how institutions promote the development of research competencies declared in their normative frameworks (Hessen & Schmelkes, 2022; UCH, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Studies in the Latin American and Caribbean region show that investigative competencies are developed through curricular activities (Romaní-Romaní & Gutiérrez, 2022) and that traditional teacher-centered teaching is an ineffective methodology for this purpose; instead, these competencies are better developed in curricular activities that "teach to investigate by investigating" (Rojas & Méndez, 2017). In this sense, the conception of teaching as a scaffolding process in which the teacher is a mediator of activities that the learner will then perform autonomously (Rogoff, 1990) is an adequate theoretical-practical tool to promote the development of these skills.

Research materializes in written texts that must conform to standards and be inscribed in a field (Navarro, 2021). The production of texts at the university is a significant challenge for students; writing is a tool that includes or excludes them from participating in the university culture (Ávila et al., 2021). Therefore, the quality of the mediation teachers provide to students who write to communicate their

research activity is crucial. Among the most effective mediation tools is feedback (Rogers, 2023). From the perspective of mediated learning, feedback can be conceptualized as an intervention in the "Zone of Proximal Development" of learners characterized by adjusting to their specific needs and progressively increasing their responsibility in the process (Van de Pol, 2010).

On the other hand, research involving university students has emphasized the importance of analyzing phenomena "through the eyes of the students" (Tinto, 2017).

In order to understand research experiences, it is necessary to consider the dispositions and representations of the students themselves (Saéz et al., 2024).

The present study reports an experience of accompaniment for writing an initial degree paper. It considers two dimensions of the experience: the students' perceptions of the research and the teacher's written feedback as scaffolding in producing texts related to the degree paper. The following research question is posed: What are the tensions students face in writing their first-degree work, and how does the feedback provide them with scaffolding to face them?

Method

A case study (Stake, 1995) and a qualitative approach (Creswell, 2003) was conducted. It follows the five principles of practice of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Felten, 2013): It inquires into learning, is contextualized, methodologically rigorous, safeguards the integrity of the students, and seeks to be made public in the academic community.

The participants are a teacher and ten students who, in 2023, are in the second and final year of an academic program leading to an initial academic degree - A bachelor's degree - at a public university in Chile. They participated in a course implemented to accompany the students in elaborating bibliographic research, which is part of the degree requirements. The course was designed and implemented by a teaching team that included the principal investigator of this study.

The data for this study are student semi-structured interviews, students' writing pieces, and teacher's written comments.

The interviews were processed through qualitative content analysis and constant comparison (Glasser & Strauss, 2008), identifying tensions regarding research and writing. Using a guideline based on Rogers (2023), the written comments were classified into three categories according to their focus: content, structure, and conventions. The comments were inductively analyzed in each category by relating them to the tensions identified in the interviews.

Results

The tensions students report in writing a research paper are Difficulty delimiting the topic, Structuring the text, Searching for valid sources, Exercising intertextuality, and Positioning their authorship.

The teacher's comments are characterized by being situated in specific aspects and addressing the students personally as learners and authors. The comments that respond more clearly to the tensions focus on the structure and conventions of the writing. Within the latter, those related to the intertextual exercise serve to promote students' authorial positioning.

Discussion

In our region, the development of research competencies requires systematic curricular activities and student-centered methodologies (Romaní-Romaní & Gutiérrez, 2022; Rojas & Méndez, 2017).

The tensions identified confirm that students have different dispositions toward research (Sáez et al., 2024). This study proposes feedback as a pedagogical tool to accompany the development of these tasks and contribute to managing tensions. For that purpose, feedback must have the features of scaffolding (Rogoff, 1990; Van de Pol et al., 2010). In feedback, these features are expressed in its contextualization and personalization, which coincide with the qualities of effective feedback proposed by Rogers (2023).

Conclusions

Writing research papers is a highly complex task that stresses the students; identifying the specific areas of tension allows adjusting the pertinent pedagogical tools. Written feedback provides adequate accompaniment as it scaffolds the research and writing process through contextualized and personalized interventions. In the era of Agenda 2023 and AI, these attributes of pedagogical interaction remain at the core of learners' needs.

Limitations and Future Research

Considering the irruption of AI, future studies could incorporate its use as a tool to support the search and systematization of information and the student's perceptions of these tools.

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