

Making Students Engaged in Improving Their English Writing Skills - A Case-Study from a Norwegian Upper Secondary School

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Abstract

Research has shown that Norwegian upper secondary school students struggle with various aspects of writing English texts as required in the curriculum. To support a group of vocational students to improve their English writing skills, a five-step method has been applied, that facilitates for self-regulation and emotional support in the learning process. The method is based on self-determination theory claiming that the basic needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness must be met to achieve intrinsic motivation. This is a pilot study investigating what students perceive stops them from succeeding with writing good texts in English, and what strategies they choose to apply to solve these challenges. The students reflected on the following questions individually and in class discussions: 1) What is important for you to learn to succeed with writing in English, and why? 2) What are you good at already that helps you write in English? 3) What is difficult and prevents you from writing in English? 4) What will you focus on improving the next few weeks? and 5) What specifically will you do to manage this? The results show that some of what stops the students is lack of motivation and insufficient vocabulary, and several students express a need to practice writing. Some students find good solutions to dealing with their obstacles, for example how to expand their vocabulary, but the majority struggle to find appropriate strategies. The study shows that to make students engaged in improving their English writing skills, extensive guidance is needed.

Keywords: English Writing, Motivation, Language Learning Strategies, Self-Regulation

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Introduction

Creating an engaging and motivational language learning context may be a challenge for teachers, particularly when it comes to writing, as students may not see the immediate need for being able to write proficiently in another language. When requirements are high, which is the case when it comes to the English subject in a Norwegian, educational context, this may be demotivating for students. An important aspect of language learning is how to facilitate for motivation through learning conditions. Some of the motivating aspects emphasized by the well-known professor of psycholinguistics, Zoltán Dörnyei (2001), are to develop a personal relationship with the students, create a positive and supportive atmosphere in the classroom, promote group cohesiveness and build confidence through regular encouragement. These are important aspects in the study presented here, reporting on an intervention where a five-step method for mastering language learning was applied, with a specific focus on improving English writing skills.

According to the English curriculum for Norwegian schools, students in upper secondary school are supposed to 'write different types of texts with structure and coherence suited to the purpose and situation' and 'understand and use an extensive general vocabulary and an academic vocabulary related to one's education programme' (The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020, p. 10). This is the curriculum for the obligatory English course for both vocational and general studies students. The expectations in the exam are the same for all students, whether they choose general studies or vocational studies after lower secondary school. They are expected to write an informative, a narrative or an argumentative well-structured and coherent text, and they are to prepare on a specific topic one day in advance and use sources in the exam, which lasts for five hours. Succeeding with this type of writing exercise requires different types of language competence; linguistic competence to get the grammar and language right, sociolinguistic competence, to meet conventions of the communicative situation given in the task, and pragmatic competence, to understand what is expected in terms of style and structure of different text-types (Council of Europe, 2003).

For many vocational students meeting the requirements when it comes to writing in English may be quite challenging, as they are perhaps more practically oriented than general studies students preparing for university. There may be exercises more suitable for vocational students, for example focused on presenting values or behaviour in a future profession, in contrast to exercises aimed at general students, where they typically are to discuss literary characters from English stories, or some social issues. Even though there may be different exercises to choose from, teachers and censors have an underlying expectation that the students write a text that complies with the requirements of a five-paragraph essay (Horverak, 2016), and this type of formal writing may be challenging for students. Some of the features Norwegian students struggle with when writing English texts are to get the structure right, to ensure that the argumentation is thorough, to use sources in a sensible way and to adjust the language to purpose and situation (Horverak, 2018).

The current study investigates: *What stops students from succeeding with English writing, and how can teachers facilitate for making them engaged in improving their writing skills?* To answer this question, an intervention was carried out to identify what students themselves perceive as obstacles, what strategies they apply under guidance from teachers, and whether this helps them improve their writing. The method applied is quite similar to approaches described in the literature of self-regulation, where students are to identify problems, examine and plan solutions and monitor their own learning (Boekaerts & Niemivirta, 2005). The

current study is a pilot study with participants from one group, and it is a further development of a previous study, applying the same five-step approach with a more general focus on language learning (Horverak, Aanensen, Langeland, Olsbu & Páplow, 2020). The method is based on Ryan & Deci's self-determination theory (2017, 2000).

According to Ryan & Deci's self-determination theory, meeting the basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness supports the development of intrinsic motivation (2017, 2000), which is an important aspect of language learning (Dörnyei, 2001). Motivated learners seek new situations to explore and learn (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The basic need of competence is often related to Bandura's theory of self-efficacy, meaning belief in one's own abilities to plan and carry out actions to achieve goals (1997, 2006). Being active in one's own learning process may lead to increased self-efficacy, which again may lead to succeeding with self-regulated learning, or autonomy in the learning process.

Autonomy-supportive learning environments that emphasise choices have been documented to promote both motivation and good performance (De Naeghel et al., 2012; Jang et al., 2012). In the context of language learning, a quite recent meta-analysis also concludes that having a feeling of control over one's own learning process leads to motivation (Lamb, 2017). Research has also shown that the feeling of relatedness may lead to motivation in language learning contexts (Chang, 2010; Koga, 2010). The current study aims at exploring how teachers can make students engaged in overcoming their own obstacles and improving their English writing skills, by applying a method aimed at meeting the needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness.

Methodology

This study is part of an action research project, developing and adjusting a five-step method for mastery and motivation to various learning contexts. This approach includes identifying what is important, success factors, obstacles, choosing focus areas and making an action plan (see figure 1).

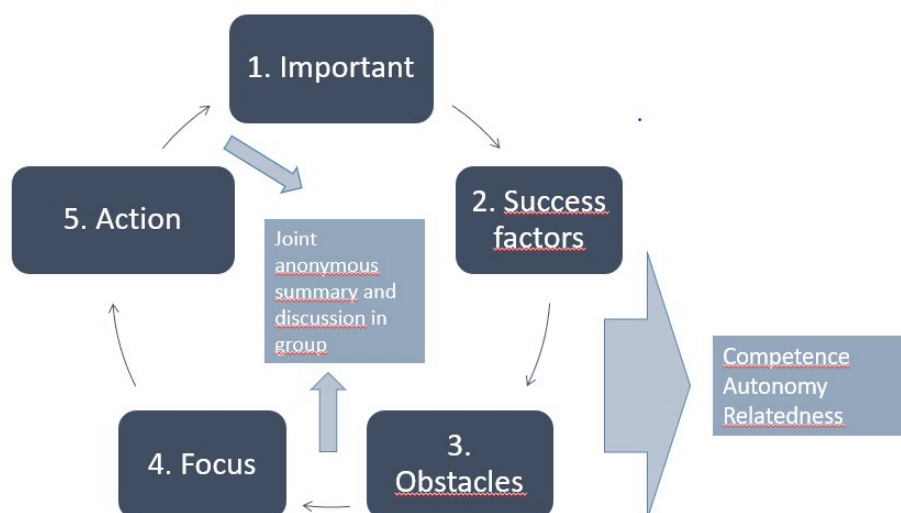


Figure 1. The Five-Step Method (Previously Published in Horverak & Aanensen, 2019; Horverak, 2020).

The study includes qualitative data, consisting of students' reflections in logbooks and pre and posttests from before and after the intervention including the five-step method. As pretest, the students were told to write an essay and discuss: What is important in your future job as a paramedic? What typical obstacles and challenges do you have to deal with at work? What personal qualities are important to succeed in this job? They were told that the essay should contain an introduction, a body and a conclusion, and a suitable heading. The posttest was a rewriting of chosen elements of the pretest. Examples of changes from pre to posttest will be given in the result chapter. The analysis of the student reflections focuses on what the students perceive to be their obstacles and what they choose as focus areas and strategies in their action plans. The sample consists of 13 paramedic students in their second year of a vocational study programme, meaning they were 17-18 years old.

Intervention

To introduce the five-step method, the teacher invited the students to discuss how they feel about learning English, using imagery of two different staircases, one with too large steps and one with more appropriate steps. The students evaluated whether learning English feels like climbing too large steps, or whether they manage to absorb knowledge step by step. Do they feel comfortable in the learning process? It is important that the students realize that an appropriate plan, or individually created strategies for how to work on the subject, in this case writing in English, usually is the best way to learn. After the discussion, the students answered and reflected on the first three questions of the five-step method; what is important to learn in English writing, and why, what are their success factors in English writing, and what are their obstacles? When discussing the first question, the teacher supplemented by giving examples of important aspects from the curriculum, so that the students could see the connection between what they think is important, and what the curriculum states.

The teacher made an overview over aspects from the students' anonymous reflections on what is important, success factors and obstacles, using a PowerPoint, and presented this the second session. The students continued the work with the method by answering questions four and five, what they wanted to focus on, and what specifically they were to do. The answers to these questions formed an action plan. The teacher supported this process, giving some examples of what they could choose to focus on, for example expanding their vocabulary or writing good introductions or paragraphs. The students were told that they were to choose strategies that could help them coping with their obstacles for improving their English writing skills.

In the third session, sometime after the second session, the students were to reflect on their obstacles again, as well as specifying their action plans, choosing focus area and learning strategies once more. During the third session, the students were also given time to follow up through writing practice guided by the teacher and the chosen focus and action in their plans. The writing practice from the third session is used as posttest.

Ethical Considerations

The data collected in this study was anonymous, as the students used codes in their writing, unknown to the researchers. The students consented that the data could be used for research purposes. This is a limited study, as only one group of paramedic studies students have been included, so it is not possible to generalise based on the findings here. Still, the study may

give some useful insight into the language learning processes of a small selection of upper secondary school students.

Results

This study investigates what stops students from succeeding with writing in English, and how teachers can make students engaged in improving their writing skills. In this section, an analysis of what the students perceive as their obstacles will be presented, as well as what they choose to focus on. The analysis is based on answers from two sessions, and the results are presented as number of occurrences of different topics. Examples of strategies planned are included. Finally, examples of pre and posttests are given to exemplify change in the students' writing.

Obstacles for Improving Writing Skills

When reflecting on obstacles, lack of motivation is most mentioned (9 occurrences), and in some cases this is related to grades, stress or feedback. One of the students write 'I lose motivation when I feel like I fail', another student writes 'I only feel that I (or the motivation within me) and my grades are going down together'. The problem with low grades is also related to struggling with dyslexia, as one of the students write 'one hears that one is doing well, but then get a really low grade, and this makes one feel that there will be more low grades'. Pressure is also mentioned as a cause of low motivation: 'I also feel a pressure, but the pressure demotivates me to write'. It is mentioned specifically two times that there are too high requirements in English. Another challenge mentioned is that as soon as something is corrected, another mistake is pointed out by the teacher, or the correction could be wrong. As we see, lack of motivation is related to different aspects of the learning process, and this seems to be the main obstacle for several of the students in this study.

Problems related to language competence are also mentioned as obstacles by several. Lack of vocabulary is mentioned six times, too low competence is mentioned two times and grammar is mentioned two times. Other aspects of writing mentioned are problems with using sources correctly and having fantasy or creativity to write good texts. Two of the students report 'everything' as being difficult, another student reports that 'nothing' is difficult. One student mentions having problems with nerves, or writer's block, and this is related to having dyslexia. Even though language issues are mentioned by some of the students as challenging, the main obstacles seem to be on a psychological level, related to lack of motivation.

Chosen Focus Areas and Learning Strategies

When choosing what to focus on improving, the students chose various elements of the language learning or writing process (see table 1 below).

Focus	Number of occurrences
Emotions (motivation, no stress)	6
Structure (building paragraphs, arguments, introduction)	8
Expanding vocabulary	8
Language mistakes (sentences, verbs, spelling, grammar)	6
Formal language	4

Table 1: Chosen Focus Areas

Some students focused on their emotions (6 occurrences), for example increasing their motivation or feeling less stressed. An example of a strategy applied was ‘think positively, think about why a good grade is important’. Otherwise, there were little specific strategies of how to deal with this focus area. One frequent focus area was structure (8 occurrences), such as building paragraphs, arguments or introductions. Examples of strategies written by one of the students were “write the beginning of a text twice a week, write paragraphs, read paragraphs, search in books and on the internet and write down what I find’. Other students had similar strategies. Expanding vocabulary was another frequent focus area (8 occurrences), and there were different strategies to work with this. One student wrote: ‘Write English, explain myself to others, write down plans, use a dictionary to find new words when I write, translate a book, watch movies/series, read, find synonyms (e.g. 3 words, 2 times a week)’. Another student made a plan for the week:

I will try to write more English and explain myself to others. Plan for my week:

Tuesday: before I go to bed I will write down what I did today in English.

Thursday: I will write down my plans for the weekend.

Sunday: I will try and translate a part of a book I have.

In the second session, this plan was made even more elaborate, adding the elements of using tools for translation and using more formal or varied vocabulary:

Tuesday: use a translation book and see if I can use other words when I write

Thursday: write down my plans for the weekend both in Norwegian and English and try to use more formal or other words.

Sunday: translate a part of a book I have

Other students chose to focus on reducing language mistakes (6 occurrences) related to spelling, sentences, verbs, or other grammatical issues. A strategy mentioned was to ‘Read about rules, speaking, practice vocabulary’. A final focus area chosen was to write formal language (4 occurrences). An example of a strategy was ‘Try to write in formal language, use a dictionary to find out what is formal’. The examples here show that the students had many specific strategies in terms of engaging in improving their writing skills, but not so many specific strategies to deal with their motivational problems.

Changes in Student Texts

To illustrate how the writing improved during the period of intervention, some examples here are included to demonstrate changes in the students’ writing. Two of the examples illustrate improved introductions, and the third example show an improved topic sentence.

Focused feature	Pretest	Posttest
Introduction	In this text there will be some facts about why I want to word as a paramedic and what the job contains of. There is also going to be some information about why the occupation paramedic are so important and what qualities you need to succeed in this job.	Paramedic is an occupation which carries a lot of responsibility. As a paramedic worker it demands both a good physically and mental health. In this text I will discuss more about why this occupation is important, what qualities one need to succeed as a paramedic and why this job is interesting.

Introduction	Paramedic is an important job. We need more people who want to be paramedic and work with people. Paramedic is a fun, good and important job. You can help and save who is in need.	Paramedics work hard to help people. Paramedic is a future job for me and to others who want to help people. Working as a paramedic is nice and important. The world needs more teenagers who want to be paramedic. Why does the world need more paramedics? How it is to be a paramedic? Who can be a paramedic? In this five-paragraph essay I will tell why I want to work as a paramedic. I will discuss the paramedic job and the requirements to be a paramedic.
Topic sentence	I think it is important to know how to exam a patient careful.	When you work as a paramedic, it is important to know how to exam a patient.

Table 2: Examples of Improvements in Student Texts

In the first two examples, we see how the introduction is more elaborate in the posttests compared with the pretests, and the first sentence gives more information in the improved versions. In the second example, we see how some general information is given first, followed up by some questions for discussion, and then the paragraph is closed by describing what the reader might expect from the rest of the text. The third example here shows a more informative and elaborate topic sentence in the improved version, with a fronted adverbial clause setting the context. All examples show how the students engaged in improving their English writing skills when given the chance to work with a chosen element of the writing process.

Discussion

This study describes a method that facilitates for making students engaged in identifying what stops them from succeeding with English writing and working with improving their writing skills. The results show that lack of motivation is a serious obstacle for many students. Even though the students seem to have few strategies to deal directly with their motivational problem, using strategies to improve specific aspects of their writing may have a positive impact on their motivation. Increased feeling of mastery and competence and taking control of one's own learning process may lead to increased self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017; Bandura, 1997, 2006).

When reflecting on success factors, some students may report that they have none, and when reflecting on obstacles, we see that some students may feel everything is difficult. Even if the students do not feel competent or proficient in English writing, they still have successes which are important in the process of learning English. In the reflections, we see that some of them realize that they in fact have some success factors, like being “motivated”, “hardworking” and “positive”, which are important when learning a new subject. Instead of just focusing on grades as success factors, students sometimes must be reminded that success is much more, especially since society mainly focuses on achievements, grades, and results.

There is a risk of focusing on performance goals, such as evaluations from the teacher, rather than on personal mastery goals (Ames, 1992) when working with self-regulation approaches,

as making goals is quite central, and even part of the definition of what self-regulation is (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002). When applying the five-step method, the first question used is 'What is important when learning English', instead of 'What is the goal when learning English', to emphasize personal mastery rather than external goals (Langeland & Horverak, 2021). This is a change that was made in the five-step method based on results from previous studies applying the same method, showing that asking questions about goals led to a focus on improving grades rather than improving specific skills (Horverak, Aanensen & Langeland, 2019; Horverak, Aanensen, Langeland, Olsbu, & P aplow, 2020). The results of the current study show that this change in the method has made students focus on other aspects of improving their writing skills than improving their grades. They rather focus on mastering specific skills or features of writing, showing that they have chosen mastery goals rather than performance goals.

When reflecting on obstacles, we see that many students struggle with both motivation and different parts of the writing process. When working with an approach such as the five-step method, and identifying obstacles, it is important that the students do not get stuck in their problems, but instead start the process of making an action plan, which means creating feasible learning strategies that help them dealing with their obstacles and improving their skills one step at a time. Along the way, they hopefully see their own victories, and what they have achieved. Sometimes, they perhaps need to be reminded of their success factors, as this may help them feel competent, which again may lead to increased self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2006), making them feel in control of their own learning process.

When dealing with the two final questions in the method, making an action plan, the students may need some scaffolding to choose sensible and specific learning strategies. As we see from one of the examples above, plans may be revisited and improved. Receiving advice both from the teacher and from peers may lead to a feeling of group cohesiveness, as described by D ornyei (2001), or relatedness, as described by Ryan & Deci (2000, 2017), and may facilitate for increased motivation and engagement in the learning process. Students may need several attempts to learn how to create a good and useful plan. Showing samples and discussing what could be improved, is an important part of acquiring learning strategy skills. The plans are supposed to include strategies for coping with obstacles together with improving English writing skills.

The students' chosen focus areas mirror some of the challenges Norwegian students have when writing English documented in previous research (Horverak, 2016, 2018). They struggle with writing proper paragraphs or structuring texts, and to write in a formal language. Some students mention losing motivation due to low grades, high requirements and pressure. As mentioned, English exams in Norway are challenging and require much from students - from both vocational and general studies students. Perhaps should there be less focus on evaluation criteria and grades in the learning process, and more on specific features of writing? Focusing on grades and criteria, or external evaluations, runs the risk of developing a school focused more on performance than mastery (Ames, 1992). To ensure motivation and engagement feeling competent is central (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). There is perhaps a need to focus more on mastery and competence in education in general, and less on external evaluations, to make students engaged in their own learning processes.

When making endless matrices of evaluation criteria and goals for students, which is the situation in Norwegian schools presently, we risk increasing pressure and creating demotivating learning environments. With a renewed curriculum on the steps (The Ministry

of Education and Research, 2017), integrating life mastery skills and student participation in all subjects, perhaps this trend of making endless criteria-lists may change, and hopefully, there will be a shift from performance goals to mastery goals. The current study supports this type of change, by making the students engaged in identifying what is important for them to improve, and choosing appropriate strategies to do so, regardless of external evaluations or grades. There is perhaps a need for a more extensive change of mentality in the educational system, to succeed with implementing the type of approach that is described here fully. Still, within the frames of the current educational system, applying the five-step method presented here may give the students some feeling of autonomy, as they may experience that they have choices, and can influence their own learning process.

Conclusion

The current study illustrates one way of creating an autonomy-supportive learning environment, with the students' experiences and agency in focus. By applying the five-step method described here, the teacher facilitates for autonomy and competence by letting the students themselves define what is important to learn and they choose learning strategies they believe will help them improve their English writing skills. Through classroom discussions about how to overcome various obstacles and what strategies could be applied, a sense of relatedness may also develop. These are all important aspects to achieve intrinsic motivation and engagement in the learning process (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2017). Choosing appropriate focus areas and learning strategies may be challenging for students, so there is a need for teachers to scaffold this process by giving examples, or choices, and supporting the students to practice applying different strategies.

This study has a limited scope, and there is a need to investigate the potential of an approach such as the five-step method presented here in more extensive studies. There is a need for more longitudinal interventions, as well as interventions in different contexts. The current study focuses on writing skills in English in general, but it would also be possible to apply the same approach in relation to writing different types of genres, for example. This may make it easier to become even more specific in the action plans. Despite of its shortcomings, the current study illustrates the potential of the five-step method to facilitate for motivation and student engagement in the language learning process.

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