Looking into the Role of the Exploratory Action Research in Developing an Autonomous Learning Academic Writing Course (English) at a Technical University, Germany

Tetyana Müller-Lyaskovets, Ph.D. (TU Dortmund University)
Dr. Meni Syrou (TU Dortmund University)
Olena Horner, Ph.D. (University of Minnesota)
Autonomy-Supportive Teaching of FL (English) Writing: Mismatch between

theory of autonomous learning (AL)

what teachers experience in a classroom

exploratory action research addresses the difficulties of the implementation of AL
Platform für Autonomes Sprachenlernen und Lernberatung
Teaching Situation

Start of the PAULLA platform in 2015 as a combined platform for English, German, and Romance languages; partially funded by the Qualitätsverbesserungsmittel.

Over time, PAULLA sub-platforms for Romance languages, German, English General (A1 - C1), and English Writing (B2 - C1) were developed; showcases competence-oriented, task-based language instruction.

Regular B2 Writing and C1 Academic Writing have been taught since 2014.
Project Goal: To Develop and Implement the Autonomous Learning Academic Writing Course

✓ What are the demographic characteristics of the course participants in terms of their
  ➢ program of study
  ➢ degree level
  ➢ citizenship status (domestic or international)?

✓ What reasons do the course participants provide for taking the autonomous learning academic writing class?

✓ What are the teaching behaviors that support successful autonomous learning of writing?

✓ What are the course outcomes as compared to regular writing courses taught at the department in terms of
  ➢ course graduation rates
  ➢ student satisfaction
  ➢ student self-reported learning outcomes?
Theory of Autonomous Learning Stresses the Advantages of Learner Autonomy

We need to engage students in deeper level learning processes

Increase student motivation and personal interest in learning

Autonomous learning provides a mechanism to fulfill both requirements

(Futark and Kunter, 2012)
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Learner Autonomy Is Hindered by</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Learner constraints:</strong> lack of motivation and habits of independent learning</td>
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<td><strong>Institutional constraints:</strong> “limited space within the curriculum,” “prescribed curricula and materials,” and “lack of teacher autonomy” (19)</td>
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<td><strong>Pedagogical realities of AL</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Learning culture does not promote independent learning:</strong> “learners’ focus on passing tests” and “teachers’ limited expectations of what learners can achieve” (19)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Theoretical constraints</strong> (Futark and Kunter, 2012, p. 289). It is important to realize that not all autonomy-supportive behaviors have equal outcomes and that “choice is not the crucial factor.”</td>
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Reviewed in Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012
Educational Action Research Allows for Inquiry From Within Practice

Basic research

Research paradigms

Applied science

Action science

All three research traditions seek to contribute to general knowledge
Why Educational Action Research (EAR)?

✓ Traditional rationale for using EAR: EAR is a suitable means under the given work conditions at the universities across Europe because it allows for the professional development and supports university teachers in improving the quality of their teaching.

✓ Marsden and Kasprowicz’ (2017) study of the exposure of the FL educators to research in Anglophone contexts (UK and Australia):

“Over half our SB [school-based teachers] and approximately a quarter of NSB [non-school-based/university teachers] had never read an original research report” (p.618).
AR Is Theorized as a “Counter Narrative” (Brennan, 2014) to Traditional Research Because

✓ AR challenges the exclusion of language teachers from research and the institutional division of labor between the “doers” and the “knowers” (Smith and Sela, 2005).

✓ AR is a tool that empowers teachers to implement educational change (Brighton, 2009; Edwards and Burns, 2016; Smith and Sela, 2005).

✓ AR is distinct from other research designs and is a different type of scientific inquiry.

Levin and Rock (2003, p. 136. qtd. in Smith and Sela, 2005, p. 295) define educational action research as “systematic inquiry by teachers with the goal of improving their teaching practices.”
EAR Is Distinct From Other Research Designs Because

✓ it emerges from the “doers” and the stakeholders;
✓ unlike traditional mainstream research, EAR does not disengage itself from the human subjects in pursuit of objectivity (Eikeland, 2012);
✓ it is collaborative: both the participants and the researchers become the learners to learn to apply EAR methods to inquire into and change their reality;
✓ is concerned with the practice of intervention and allows for the change of context and of the existing teaching situation;
✓ allows for the control of the causal factor and the reformulation of the research questions and aims;
✓ is value driven by responsibility and justice. (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, 1985)
Affinities Between EAR and Writing Instruction

✓ both have a collaborative nature;

✓ both stress the participants’ commitment to learning;

✓ both require the participants to critically review and revise their previous steps and work;

✓ both stress the utility of continuous questioning of one’s own achievement and thinking;

✓ both drive positive change.
The Online Academic Writing Platform Offers the Following Content to the B2 and C1 Learners (1)

- **How to use the course**
  - Participants familiarize themselves with the goals of the course, the dynamics of teacher-participant dialogue, and course policies and timeline.
  - Writing outcome: *Research Project Schedule*

- **Identify your audience**
  - Participants learn about the importance of the audience we are writing for through print and video content.
  - Participants are introduced to a possible writing project pertinent to either B2 or C1 level.
  - Outcome: Participants define the audience for their writing project.

- **Write your topic proposal**
  - Participants learn about the reasons for writing topic proposals; they review print and video material and sample topic proposals.
  - Writing outcome: *One-page topic proposal*
The Online Academic Writing Platform Offers the Following Content to the B2 and C1 Learners (2)

- **Articulate your thesis/focus statement**
  - Participants are introduced to the structure of a thesis/focus statement; they review sample focus statements from papers coming from different fields.
  - Outcome: *A tentative focus statement.*

- **Do background research; pick your citation format**
  - Participants review the resources on writing annotated bibliographies, reference management software, and on international citation formats.
  - Writing outcome: *Annotated bibliography* of four sources used in the paper (C1 level task).

- **Write your paper outline**
  - Participants review print and video resources on the significance and techniques of writing paper outlines.
  - Writing outcome: *Paper outline.*
The Online Academic Writing Platform Offers the Following Content to the B2 and C1 Learners (3)

- **Refine your paper structure**
  - Participants review print materials on structuring a paper in their chosen genre and field.
  - Writing outcome: *Revised outline.*

- **Start creating your drafts**
  - Participants get feedback on their drafts and revise them at the level of the paragraph, sentence, and word.
  - Writing outcome: *Revised paper draft/drafts.*

- **Submit your portfolio**
  - Participants submit their paper as part of the *process portfolio.*
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Citizenship Status</th>
<th>Degree level</th>
<th>Program of Study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic – 33%</td>
<td>Baccalaureate - 17%</td>
<td>Humanities &amp; Social Sciences – 33%</td>
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<tr>
<td>International – 67%</td>
<td>Master’s – 33%</td>
<td>Science, Technology, Engineering, &amp; Mathematics – 67%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Doctoral – 50%</td>
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<td>There is no weight of sound argument in the provided reasons.</td>
<td>More participants want to improve on lower order concerns (LOCs) related issues.</td>
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<tr>
<td>“I hope to improve my academic writing skills.”</td>
<td>“I still do some grammar or spelling mistake, and sometimes my word choice is not appropriate. I would like to develop an awareness for these.”</td>
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<th>When provided with the prompts, the participants embrace all of them.</th>
<th>Fewer participants want to improve on higher order concerns (HOCs) related issues.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I prefer to work at my own pace. This course provides more opportunities to get feedback from the instructor about my writing. This course provides more opportunities to communicate with the instructor about my writing. This course will help me manage better my writing process. The time slot is convenient. I need a certificate of attendance for an English course.”</td>
<td>“Sometimes I can not express my idea clearly to the audience. I don't know the correct way to present a scientific paper.”</td>
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<td>“How to write a readable report/essay and how to guide your reader to understand your throughs is really important.”</td>
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What Reasons Do the Course Participants Provide for Taking the Autonomous Learning Academic Writing Class?
Two important arguments:

“...organizational and procedural choice may be not sufficient conditions for deep-level student engagement in learning” (p.100).

“...interest develops as a result of interactions with learning tasks that have been structured in such a way as to promote engagement rather than as the precursor to engagement” (p. 101).
What Are the Teaching Behaviors That Support Successful Autonomous Learning of Writing? (2)

- **Directive feedback on the LOCs related issues to teach how to diagnose and correct the problem**
- **Facilitative questioning to diagnose and correct the HOCs related issues; no comment marking of repeated mistakes**
- **Goal: foster cognitive autonomy. Students become independent problem-solvers.**
- **Organizational autonomy support is limited: schedule their projects and conferences within the timeframe**
- **Procedural autonomy support is limited: students implement all the steps of the writing process but have a choice of the writing project**
## Graduation Rates

<table>
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<th>Course</th>
<th>Graduation Rate</th>
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<tr>
<td>AWRC1 SoSe 2018</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRB2 SoSe 2018</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AWRC1 WiSe 2018/19</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WRB2 SoSe 2018/19</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAULLA-w SoSe 2018</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAULLA-w SoSe 2018/19</td>
<td>50%</td>
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### Academic Writing Courses Through Students’ Eyes.

<table>
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<th>Students in both regular and PAULLA courses</th>
<th>PAULLA students express enthusiasm to write more</th>
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<td>report increase in their confidence to write a paper</td>
<td>“Provide more chances to students who are interested in English writing.” “...just keep offering [the course]”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Students in both regular and PAULLA courses reported gain in skills</th>
<th>Some of the students in regular classes complained about the heavy workload and recommended shorter papers</th>
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<tr>
<td>✓ to frame the story by articulating the problem, answering the “So what?” question, providing the solution, and explaining the benefits to the reader; ✓ to write a paper from an outline; ✓ to revise their paragraphs for clarity and cohesion; ✓ to edit sentences for redundancies and structural defects.</td>
<td>“...nice atmosphere, but too much workload. the paper should be shorter.” “Maybe some small practice ... such as two page paper and just make a small topic for us to write.”</td>
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## Key Takeaways

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<th>Major outcomes of PAULLA-writing</th>
<th>Recommendations</th>
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<td>✓ increased student motivation to develop their writing skills; ✓ increased student confidence to write a paper; ✓ increased student reflectivity and awareness of the writing process; ✓ increased teacher reflectivity and empowerment as a result of action research approach to developing the course.</td>
<td>✓ PAULLA-writing can be offered as a logical extension of regular classes rather than their substitute. ✓ Students should be informed more rigorously about the learning opportunities that PAULLA-writing offers before they enroll in PAULLA.</td>
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A Set of New Research Questions

1. Is the delivery of online material effective in terms of
   a. the choice of material;
   b. the quality and accessibility of material;
   c. the range of topics it covers?

2. Is it comfortable to navigate to important material?

3. Do the online course users find the course navigation comfortable?

4. Which material do they use more often and why?

5. Is online teacher-student interface effective?
Thank You!
Tetyana Müller-Lyaskovets: tetyana.lyaskovets@tu-dortmund.de
Olena Horner: glus0005@umn.edu
Meni Syrou: meni.syrou@tu-dortmund.de
Bibliography


