

Akdeniz Language Studies Conference 2012

Learners' writing approaches in the context of first and second language use

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Abstract

The construct of writing approaches has been used to describe the relationship between the beliefs that writers have about writing and the patterns of strategies that they employ. The aim of the research is to investigate university students' conception of writing as deep and surface processes in L1 and L2 in Turkey. Students' writing approaches were measured through the *Inventory of Processes in College Composition* (IPIC) developed by Lavelle (1993). It can be concluded that deep approach is more frequent than the surface approach in both L1 and L2 but deep approach scores in L1 is higher than it is in L2.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of ALSC 2012

Keywords: writing approaches; surface approach; deep approach; academic writing

1. Introduction

Academic writing has been considered as a complex activity in higher education and it has been analyzed in term of processes involved in it and its demands from students. Attentional demands of writing include the dimensions such as theme, paragraph, sentence, grammar and lexis. Indeed, what really affects writing processes and outcomes are the intentions. The approaches-to-writing framework presents a different perspective based on the notion that students choose their writing strategies according

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to their intentions and the written outcomes are shaped by these strategies as a consequence (Biggs, 1988; Hounsell, 1997; Lavelle and Zuercher, 2001). In order to achieve the writing goals all writers need to use strategies such as outlining, drafting or free writing. Those strategies used by the writers are determined by the characteristics such as being an expert or novice writer and using the mother tongue or second/foreign language. There have been a number of studies conducted to show the link between strategies chosen and the beliefs about writing (Biggs, 1988; Hounsell, 1997; Lavelle 1997; Silva and Nicholls, 1993).

In the literature review, the term ‘approaches’ was first used by Marton (1976, cited in Pratzala and Redford, 2010) referring to the quality of processes applied as a result of students’ intentions (Marton, Hounsell and Entwistle, 1997). Writing approaches have been distinguished as deep and surface writing. In deep approach, the focus is at a higher conceptual level and the intention of writers is a full engagement in the task with a need to know and it requires seeing the task as a whole and proactive engagement in learning. On the other hand, in surface approach writers goal is just to comply with the task demands, the learning activity involves a low level cognitive engagement and it requires only reproduction of information and memorization (Lavelle and Zuercher, 2001). In writing literature, similar dichotomies have been used by researchers conducted studies with children such as reactive and reflective (Graves, 1973), symbolizers and socializers (Dyson, 1987), knowledge telling vs. knowledge transforming (Scardamalia and Breiter, 1982) and with young adults reflexive and extensive (Emig, 1971).

Learning approaches framework was extended with the inclusion of college writing by Biggs (1988) and the Inventory of Processes in College Writing (IPIC) was developed by Lavelle (1993, 1997) and its multidimensional structure was examined by Lavelle and Guarino in 2003. In line with the same writing approaches framework, a number of research studies were conducted to develop and validate different measures at different levels such as secondary (IPISC - Inventory of Processes in Secondary composition - Lavelle, Smith, and O’Ryan, 2002) and graduate (IPGW – Inventory of Processes in Graduate Writing - Lavelle and Bushrow, 2007).

Inventory of processes in college composition was designed to reveal writers’ processes along a deep and surface approach continuum. The items were intended to mirror writers’ intentions, conception of function of writing, levels of focus and common writing strategies such as outlining, grammar and revision. IPIC consists of 5 factors namely, elaborative, reflective-revision, low self-efficacy, spontaneous-impulsive and procedural. Of these five factors, deep approach is characterized by elaborative and reflective-revision strategies and low self-efficacy, spontaneous-impulsive and procedural strategies form the surface approach. The first factor of deep approach ‘elaborative’ strategy suggests a search for personal meaning and self investment. It requires viewing writing as symbolic, a deep personal investment and employing tools such as visualization. It indicates manipulation of audience and voice, extension or going beyond the bounds of assignment, self referencing, bringing oneself to the situation of writing (Lavelle, Zuercher, 2001). Sample items include statements such as “writing makes me feel good.”, “I put a lot of myself in my writing.”, and “At times, my writing has given me a deep personal satisfaction.”

The second factor of deep approach ‘reflective-revision’ suggest a sophisticated understanding of revision as a remaking or rebuilding of one’s thinking – logical reasoning. It requires willingness to take charge in writing to make meaning for oneself and for the audience. The level of focus is high and involves thematic and global concerns. These students adopt the ‘sculptor’ rather than ‘engineer’ strategy and writing and revision are intertwined in a dynamic process geared toward making meaning: “In my writing, I use some ideas to support other, larger ideas.” “I complete each sentence and revise it before going onto the next.” “I reexamine and restate my thoughts in revision.”

The first factor of surface approach ‘low self-efficacy’ is based on a fearful approach considering writing as a painful task. These writers have poor writing self-concept and have little or no awareness of the function of writing as a tool for making meaning and personal expression: “Studying grammar and

punctuation would greatly improve my writing.” “Having my writing evaluated scares me.” “If the assignment calls for 1000 words, I try to write just about it.”

The second factor of surface approach ‘spontaneous- impulsive’ suggests an unplanned defensive approach with minimal involvement in writing. These writers view writing as a one-step procedure: “My writing ‘just happens’ with little planning or preparation.” “Often my first draft is my finished product.” “I never think about how I go about writing.”

The third factor of surface approach ‘procedural’ suggests strict adherence to the rules and emphasis on ‘control’ in writing. Such writers try to please the teacher rather than to communicate or reflect. Lavelle and Zuercher (2001) comments that emphasis on procedure perhaps does not allow for emergent factors such as theme and voice and keeps writers busy with the task under time limitations. Sample items reflecting this approach in IPIC include statements such as “When writing an essay, I stick to the rules.” “The teacher is the most important audience.” “I worry about how much time my essay or paper will take.”

The purpose of the present study was twofold. The primary aim was to investigate the writing approaches of university students by the Inventory of Processes in College composition (IPIC) as deep and surface approaches. The study also aimed to use IPIC for further investigation and comparison of writing approaches in the context of both mother tongue (L1- which is Turkish in this study) and second/foreign language (L2- which is English in this study).

2. Methodology

The study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency of deep and surface writing approaches in L1 and L2?
2. Does the deep and surface writing approach differ in L1 and L2?
3. What is the effect of gender and year of study on deep and surface writing approaches in L1?
4. What is the effect of gender and year of study on deep and surface writing approaches in L2?

2.1. Participants

Participants of the study include 184 students enrolled in Faculty of Education – Department of English Language Teaching of Marmara University. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 21. Of the total, 106 were freshman and 78 were senior students and 142 were female while 42 were male. The reason behind the choice of these two specific groups of students is that the three years’ difference between the freshman and senior population yield a meaningful comparison between groups. At the same time the two groups could easily form a unified research population as a result of two common characteristics of the participants. First, they use English language in most of their courses and use Turkish (L1) in a few courses as the medium of instruction. Secondly, they were proficient enough to use both languages and they were provided with compulsory writing courses in both languages in the first semester of their freshman year to ensure high level of academic writing skills as they are trained to be prospective language teachers. It is worth noting that the Inventory was administered at the end of second semester to ensure all participants completed compulsory writing courses.

It is important to note that Turkish was the native language used by the majority of students in the department. The small number of students whose native language was not Turkish was eliminated from the study since their numbers were too small to allow separate analysis.

2.2. Instrument and procedure

The self report Inventory (IPIC) was administered to participants during their regular class period. After a brief instruction, students were responded to the original 75 items by using a 4 point Likert-type

scale (from 4= strongly agree to 1= strongly disagree) for both L1 and L2. Although their language proficiency was high enough to understand the items written in English, Turkish translations were provided for some items which were identified as difficult for them during the piloting of the Inventory. The inventory for both languages was applied in one sitting. Indeed, the items for both languages were identical, thus the scale was repeated at the right hand side of the items on the same page so that the respondents could read the items once and respond to them for both languages at a time. The Participation was on an anonymous and voluntary basis. Mean completion time was 25 minutes. Data were analyzed through SPSS 16.0 software program.

3. Results

In order to provide an estimate of the internal consistency of the Inventory, reliability coefficients for each subscale namely deep and surface approaches were calculated for both L1 and L2.

Table 1. Reliability estimates of the Inventory

	Cronbach's Alpha
Deep approach in L1	.89
Surface Approach in L1	.79
Total	.90
Deep approach in L2	.87
Surface Approach in L2	.76
Total	.88

As table 1 demonstrates, coefficient alpha reliability values were .89 for deep approach in L1 and .79 for surface approach in L1. The overall reliability of the Inventory for L1 was .90. The alpha values for deep and surface approaches in L2 were .87 and .76 respectively. The overall reliability of the Inventory for L2 was .88. Reliability analysis showed that coefficient values for both subscales (deep and surface) of L1 and L2 indicated relatively high level of internal consistency.

3.1. Frequency of deep and surface writing approaches in L1 and L2

In order to find out which approach, deep or surface, is more common among students in L1 and L2, first mean scores were calculated. Then, each student was assigned as having deep or surface approach by comparing mean scores of deep and surface approaches. Higher mean score determined which approach each individual had.

Table 2. Deep and surface writing approaches in L1 and L2 use

Year	f	Total f	Total %
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Deep Approach in L1	Freshman	85	148	80
	Senior	63		
Surface Approach in L1	Freshman	21	36	20
	Senior	15		
Deep Approach in L2	Freshman	75	129	70
	Senior	54		
Surface Approach in L2	Freshman	31	55	30
	Senior	24		

As Table 2 illustrates, of the total 184 students, 148 (80 %) had deep approach while 36 (20 %) had surface approach in L1 use. Similarly, 129 students (70 %) had deep approach while 55 (30 %) had surface approach. In a more detailed analysis, the similar proportion was observed in freshman and senior student population. Therefore, it can be concluded that the frequency of students with deep approach is higher than the frequency of students with surface approach in both L1 and L2.

3.2. Comparison of writing approaches in L1 and L2

In order to find out whether there is a significant difference between L1 and L2 in terms of writing approaches two different paired samples t tests were conducted, one for deep approach and the other for surface approach.

Table 3. Deep writing approaches in L1 and L2 use

	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
Deep Approach in L1		107.9	13.05			
Deep Approach in L2	184	104.5	12.69	5.26	183	*.000

(*p<.05)

As Table 3 reveals, deep approach in L1 and L2 are different. The mean score of deep approach in L1 is significantly higher than that of the one in L2. On the other hand, there is no significant difference between L1 and L2 regarding the mean scores of surface approach.

3.3. Effect of gender and year of study on deep and surface writing approaches in L1

The data were further analyzed to find out the effect of gender and year of study on writing approaches in L1. Mean scores and standard deviations for deep and surface writing approach in L1 are provided in Table 3.

Table 3. Means and Standard deviations for deep and surface writing approaches in L1

Gender	Year	Deep Approach in L1			Surface Approach in L1	
		N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD

Female	Freshman	87	109.7011	12.94992	111.4023	10.41406
	Senior	55	110.4909	11.11867	107.4545	11.34284
	total	142	110.0070	12.23847	109.8732	10.91544
Male	Freshman	19	103.6316	12.26653	106.3158	8.90725
	Senior	23	98.0870	13.76396	102.3478	13.31304
	total	42	100.5952	13.24821	104.1429	11.57283
Total	Freshman	106	108.6132	12.98539	110.4906	10.30880
	senior	78	106.8333	13.16175	105.9487	12.09797
	Total	184	107.8587	13.05439	108.5652	11.29709

Table 4. ANOVA for deep writing approach in L1

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Gender	2713.110	1	2713.110	17.457	*.000
Year	179.740	1	179.740	1.157	.284
Gender x Year	318.990	1	318.990	2.053	.154

(*p<.05)

To measure the effects of gender and year of study on deep and surface approaches in L1, the data were submitted to two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). As Table 4 shows, the results of the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for gender ($F=17.457$, $p < .05$) on deep writing approach in L1. However there was no significant effect for year of study ($F=1.157$, $p=.284$). No significant interaction effect between gender and year of study was found ($F=2.053$, $p=.154$). Female students had higher level of deep writing approach than male students in L1. On the other hand, freshman and senior students were not significantly different from each other in terms of their deep approaches in L1.

Table 5. ANOVA for surface writing approach in L1

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Gender	826.022	1	826.022	6.883	*.009
Year	498.137	1	498.137	4.151	*.043
Gender x Year	.003	1	.003	.000	.996

(*p<.05)

As Table 5 shows, the results of ANOVA revealed significant main effects for gender ($F=6.883$, $p=.009$) and year of study ($F=4.151$, $p=.043$) on surface level writing approach. However, no significant interaction effect between gender and year of study was found ($F=.000$, $p=.996$). Female students had higher level of surface writing approach than male students in L1. In addition, freshman students had significantly higher level of surface approach than senior students in L1. On the other hand freshman female students were not different from freshman male or senior female students were not different from senior male students in their surface writing approaches in L1.

3.4. Effect of gender and year of study on deep and surface writing approaches in L2

The data obtained for L2 were further analyzed to find out the effect of gender and year of study on writing approaches. Mean scores and standard deviations for deep and surface writing approach in L2 are provided in Table 6.

Table 6. Means and Standard deviations for deep and surface writing approaches in L2

Gender	Year	N	Deep Approach in L2		Surface Approach in L2	
			Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Female	Freshman	87	104.1609	13.02223	109.6437	10.47919
	senior	55	108.0182	11.18446	107.7636	9.67617
	Total	142	105.6549	12.44565	108.9155	10.18237
Male	Freshman	19	103.4737	8.53990	107.1053	8.60810
	senior	23	97.9130	15.22233	104.2174	13.34152
	Total	42	100.4286	12.81414	105.5238	11.40868
Total	Freshman	106	104.0377	12.30712	109.1887	10.17851
	senior	78	105.0385	13.24538	106.7179	10.91633
	Total	184	104.4620	12.68744	108.1413	10.53963

Table 7. ANOVA for deep writing approach in L2

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Gender	925.981	1	925.981	6.007	*.015
Year	23.067	1	23.067	.150	.699
Gender x Year	705.142	1	705.142	4.574	*.034

(*p<.05)

In order to measure the effects of gender and year of study on deep and surface approaches in L2, the data were submitted to two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). As Table 7 shows, the results of the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for gender ($F=6.007$, $p=.015$) on deep writing approach in L2. However there was no significant effect for year of study ($F=.150$, $p=.699$). In other words, freshman and senior students were not significantly different from each other in terms of their deep approaches in L2. There was a significant interaction effect between gender and year of study ($F=4.574$, $p=.034$). Female senior students had higher level of deep writing approach than male senior students in L2.

Table 8. ANOVA for surface writing approach in L2

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Gender	294.334	1	294.334	2.683	.103
Year	180.728	1	180.728	1.647	.201
Gender x Year	8.075	1	8.075	.074	.786

(*p<.05)

As Table 8 shows, the results of the ANOVA applied to surface writing approach in L2 revealed no significant differences between neither female and male students nor freshman and senior students.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Writing approaches represent students' reactions to the instructional situation. Prescriptive writing tasks require learners engage in surface features of writing rather than more sophisticated strategies such as autonomy and reflection. The results of the study show that deep strategies were more commonly used by university students in this particular context regardless of being freshman or senior year students. At

least two distinct explanations may account for this finding. The first is that the students in the current study were already proficient enough to use both languages in writing. The second explanation concerns their high level of motivation. High level of language proficiency and motivation might have helped them become more reflective and elaborative in their first and second language writing.

Deep approach was more frequent than surface approach in both L1 and L2. However, deep approach scores in L1 were significantly higher than those in L2. It might be the result of a fact that writing in native language is easier than in a second /foreign language; therefore, it might be more probable to use more sophisticated processes while writing in the mother tongue in which the writer is more competent. The results of the study suggest that gender is a factor affecting writing approaches. Female students had higher level of deep approach in both L1 and L2 than male students. This finding suggest that female students seem to show a high degree of self reference and feeling in writing as deep approach involves more critical, personal and affective dimensions (Lavelle and Zuercher, 2001).

Finally, the study revealed that year of study has no profound effect on writing approaches in both L1 and L2 except surface approach in L1. Contrary to expectations, three more years of educational practices of senior students did not seem to have contributed much to their deep writing approaches in L1 and L2. Freshmen students appeared to have significantly higher surface approach than senior students in L1. One possible explanation could be that freshmen students might have focused more on L2 rather than L1 since they were at the outset of their academic education while majoring in English language.

Instruction should involve fostering a deep conception of writing as a tool of learning as well as meaningful activities, integrated tasks and assessments. (Lavelle, Smith and O’Ryan, 2001). To foster deep strategies a number of suggestions can be listed as follows:

- It is important to show learners that writing relates to different types of learning, various contents and audiences.
- Authentic writing tasks such as internet, e-mail writing, and web based activities with collaborative opportunities would help students find relevance and use deep approach strategies such as high level of focus, getting involved in meaning and autonomy.
- Designing a high quality writing climate requires tasks which emphasizes on revision and meaning, scaffolding, modeling and integrating writing across content areas (Lavelle and Zuercher, 2001).
- As Lavelle and Zuercher (2001) suggested, writing across the curriculum may be redefined to foster reflective and elaborative writing strategies in various courses that are offered to students during university education. In addition to academic writing courses, some other courses might require reflective tasks such as journal writing. With regard to writing instruction, gaining a positive identity in writing should be more important than acquiring discrete skills in writing.
- Deep processes such as analysis, evaluating differing perspectives and self-expression need to be well integrated in instructional plans.
- As Smith and Campbell (1999) addressed, instead of prescriptive writing guides feedback from lecturers or other critical readers with a more sophisticated conception of the essays is more likely to promote ability in students to have extensive revisions of their own writing and to evaluate critically.
- In related research literature, self regulation has been associated with managing writing processes, managing constraints, and audience (Graham and Harris, 1997; Graham and Harris 2000; Zimmerman and Bandura 1994; Zimmerman and Kitsantas, 1999). Thus self regulatory activities such as self scheduling and creative effort over extended periods of time can be given special attention in instructional plans.

In summary, familiarity with writing approaches may provide insights into understanding what students do, how they engage in writing tasks and building more effective writing environments. On the other side, it helps students to have their own self assessment in terms of motives and strategies they adopt in writing.

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