

Evaluation of Private Writing from the Student's Viewpoint

By

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Abstract

It is known that written communication activities in traditional instructional environments are carried out under the supervision and control of the teacher. It is observed in educational and instructional environments that it is the teacher who determines the subject of the writing and who evaluates the written product which is guided in terms of content and style; in other words, a teacher-centered approach is prevalent in such environments. On the other hand, private writing emerges as writing process suitable for the instructional approach that focuses on learner-centered principles. In private writing, the student decides on the subject, genre, and duration of writing, and he/she carries out the evaluation process. Private writing places the whole responsibility for writing on the student. Therefore, the teacher is no longer in charge of written communication activities but simply serves as a guide. The purpose of the present study is to identify what changes private writing lead to in the way students view writing. To that end, a total of 42 voluntary students were subject to a 12-week private writing process. The training was followed by interviews with the participants, and they were asked open-ended questions accordingly. Their responses to the questions, intended to monitor the effects of private writing in the context of freedom, self-confidence and duration of writing, were subject to content analysis. The students reported that they would prefer to write on whatever subjects they liked rather than write according to what an authority liked, to determine the duration of writing themselves, and to be completely free during the process. Following the private writing process, the students considered themselves freer in various aspects, more self-confident in writing, and more competent to assume responsibility for determining the duration of writing.

Keywords: *Private writing, writing skills, teaching writing, writing process.*

1. Introduction

Students are not always successful in writing, a skill that requires a number of skills to be used simultaneously, could cause students to feel anxious, to become hesitant, and to develop negative attitudes. Negative attitudes towards writing are more often a consequence of the way writing is taught than the nature of writing (Maltepe, 2011: 296). According to Maltepe (2006:64), students can write in a free manner only if they are provided with an environment where they are not judged during the writing process, where they can feel emotionally comfortable, and where they are free from anxiety, fear of criticism and pressure of the majority. According to Karatay (2011), negative writing experiences in written communication activities, as well as lack of feedback to improve and develop their writing skills, could cause students to develop negative attitudes towards writing over time. Studies have suggested that sources of such affective factors as anxiety, hesitation and other similarly negative attitudes include limitations associated with time and subject, supervision and evaluation, having to write in a way dependent on the authority, and so forth (Daly and Miller, 1975; Ozbay and Zorbaz, 2011; Iseri and Unal, 2012; Reio, Alexander, Reio, Newman 2014). Such negative feelings and experiences students have during the writing process indicate the significance of private writing, a term coined by Elbow (1973; 1981; 1999; 2000). An approach that can be used for improving not only attitudes towards but also achievement in writing, private writing is a process in which the subject and duration of writing are determined by the student/writer (Elbow, 2000). According to Whitney et al. (2012), private writing sets the writer free. In private writing, the writer does not share what he/she has written with others until he

has finished it or until he/she feels ready; he/she is not graded by his/her teacher for what he/she has written (Elbow, 2000).

The reader of private writing is usually the writer himself/herself. Unlike public writing, which is intended for publication, the purpose of private writing is to enable the writer to form a piece of writing to his/her delight (Hilligoss, 1989: 125). The starting point of private writing is individual; however, this does not necessarily mean that it cannot be published or read by others.

In the literature, writing instruction is commonly divided into two, namely process-based writing and product-based writing (Murray, 1972; Kecik and Uzun, 2004; Diliduzgun 2013). As can be concluded from the descriptions above, private writing is process-based. In the process-based writing approach, the writing process is usually defined to be comprised of four stages: planning, outlining, editing, and final writing (Harmer, 2004:5; Kecik and Uzun, 2004). The literature lacks satisfactory discussion over how long these four stages would ideally take. In private writing, on the other hand, it is acknowledged that writing is a process, duration of which depends on the individual (Elbow, 2000). Duration is one of the considerable factors in the development of writing anxiety. In the scale developed by Karakaya and Ulper (2011) in order to identify students' writing anxiety, the statement "having to write an essay within a limited time period" got the highest mean score, significantly accounting for the score in the scale. The finding suggests that specifying a certain amount of time for writing results in anxiety on the part of students. According to Kean, Gylmn and Britton (1987), anxiety becomes inevitable when the writer has to write under time pressure. Similarly, Nelson, Range, and Ross (2012) assert students, when under heavy time pressure, finish off their writing without revising it. Scott (2001) draws attention to the importance of the duration of writing and points out that students allocate 40 to 50% of the total duration of writing to revision. According to Hall (1998), essays that have to be written in a limited time lead to writing hesitation. Barthes (1987; 1995) holds that writing is an unfinished process, that the writer can never finalize his/her writing, and that he/she finishes his/her writing simply because he/she has to do so. This means students' attitudes and willingness to writing could be negatively affected and they could develop writing anxiety when their teacher specifies a subject and asks them to write about it "in this class hour, by tomorrow, by next week or by next month"; therefore, this does not seem to be a proper approach. Until he/she has completed it, the writer has the chance and right to revise his/her writing (Gunay, 2004: 98; Elbow, 2000: 39-40). It could take days, months and even years for the person to complete the writing process and to feel ready to share it with others; furthermore, the writer may never wish to share it at all (Elbow, 1999). Since it enables the writer himself/herself to decide on the time needed to complete his/her writing, private writing may play a significant role in eliminating factors associated with time pressure.

Like the duration of writing, the content depends on the writer. According to Harris (1992), the content of writing cannot be determined beforehand; instead, it emerges gradually as one writes. Therefore, each writer gets prepared for the subject he/she has determined using different strategies and creates a style. According to Akyol (2011), when students choose the subject of writing themselves, they enjoy what they are doing and they get more willing to check and embrace what they have written. The writer can only develop creative strategies for a subject he/she has determined by himself/herself. Therefore, private writing assumes that the subject of writing can only be determined by the writer (Elbow, 2000).

Private writing is particularly able to eliminate factors in writing anxiety, for research suggests that there are basically three factors in writing anxiety (Daly and Miller, 1975; Ozbay and Zorbaz, 2011; Iseri and Unal, 2012; Reio, Alexander, Reio, Newman 2014):

- a- *Negative comments about the writing*
- b- *Fear of subjective evaluation*
- c- *Anxiety over failure in writing classes*

This means that evaluation and checking is likely to put obstacles in the way of a student improving their writing. This likelihood is eliminated by private writing. That is because private writing embraces the idea that it is not appropriate for teachers to evaluate what has been written by students who do not find themselves ready (Elbow, 1999). In traditional classroom environments, in contrast, teachers usually evaluate and correct student writing.

In addition, Reeves (1997: 39) reports that those who suffer from writing anxiety need self-confidence in writing. Self-confidence is crucial for one's competence in writing. Self-confidence is based on Bandura's (1977) concept of self-efficacy, and it is maintained that individuals need to feel confident in a given subject before they can efficiently use the skills they already have (Pajares, 2002). Pajares (1994) found that students' beliefs and confidence in writing are significant predictors of their writing performance. Also, the same study suggested a negative correlation between writing anxiety and self-confidence. According to Graham, Schwartz, and MacArthur (1993), students' information about, attitudes towards and beliefs in writing play a key role in how they can accomplish the process of forming an essay and how they can finalize their essays. In private writing, the writer writes about a subject he/she has chosen for as long as he/she wants and he/she does not suffer from anxiety over being evaluated; therefore, he/she has more self-confidence in writing (Elbow, 2000).

According to Hall (1998), writing hesitation is caused by anxiety, anger, rage, generated fears, discomfort, and perfectionism, which are all experienced during the writing process. According to Minninger (1997 as cited in Peterson, 1987: 37), many people suffer from writing hesitation caused by their fear of what others could say about their writing. Karatay (2011) maintains that negative writing experiences in written communication activities, as well as lack of feedback to improve and develop their writing skills, could cause students to develop negative attitudes toward writing over time. Although willingness to write and attitudes towards writing are expected to get better through education, research does not reinforce the expectation. According to a study by Kear, Coffman, McKenna, and Ambrosio (2000: 15), students' positive attitudes towards writing are worsened as they move to upper grades. In private writing, evaluation is completely carried out by the writer himself/herself; thus, the writer does not suffer from anxiety of being evaluated or corrected by someone else (Elbow, 1999).

Writers shape their writing depending on their target audience. Any change in the target audience results in a subsequent change in the content of writing (Perron, 1979: 146; Elbow, 1999: 144). Students always write for their teachers; consequently, they always produce the same type of essay. When teachers guide their students too much and try to alienate them from their writing, students begin to develop negative attitudes to writing. According to Moran (2004: 95), teachers ask their students not to use "I" in their writing; however, the omission of this pronoun makes students hate writing. Urbanski (2008) asserts that a writing teacher should teach his/her students to mind their inner voice and that writing instruction will yield more and more positive results as it is focused on students. Creative writing activities in the classroom not only enable students to express their ideas in a free manner but also contribute to their acquisition of the ability to respect and acknowledge others' feelings and ideas (Oral 2002: 18). "Since there is nobody that they can contact in person, they feel freer and, more importantly, they can let their ideas flow freely without having to change them. Therefore, while they are writing, children are always in a comforting and embracing environment. This psychological environment enables students (or even adults) to express themselves in a free manner, and it allows them to use imagination, something not so possible in face-to-face interaction." (Oral, 2002: 17). In private writing, the writer only writes for himself/herself; thus, he/she can freely disclose his/her creativity (Elbow, 2000).

The Stages of the Study

The 12-week private writing process was comprised of five stages as follows:

Stage 1: Conversations were held with the students as to "to whom, what, why, how and when they write".

Stage 2: The students were reminded that they had to determine the subject and duration and that they could share their writing with teachers and students whenever they would like to do so. They were told that they could talk to their classmates about their writing and that this could help them improve their writing.

Stage 3: At the beginning of each class, the students were told to write about anything they liked and in any genre they preferred for 10 to 15 minutes.

Stage 4: The teacher demonstrated on a projection how he/she edited her own drafts.

Stage 5: At the end of the term, students analyzed all they had written since the beginning of the term, and they verbally expressed the changes in their writings.

Purpose

The purpose of the present study was to identify what changes private writing could lead to in students' opinions of writing.

Significance

The traditional approach to writing assumes that writing usually occurs in a way that is intercepted and controlled by the teacher. This is despite the fact that writing as a means of communication is unique to the individual and enables him/her to satisfy his/her needs. This requires that the efficiency of private writing in writing instruction should be tested. According to Elbow (2000), students are in pursuit of expressing themselves through writing and thus they themselves should be able to decide on the style, content, process, and evaluation criteria. In the writing process, responsibility should be assumed by students. The present study was based on this perspective. The purpose was to identify what feelings and experiences students had during the private writing process.

2. Methodology

The present study was designed as phenomenological, a qualitative research design. Phenomenology is defined as generating common meaning out of previous experiences by several people about a phenomenon and concept (Creswell, 2013: 77). The basis of the phenomenological approach is individual experiences of one person or a group of people regarding a past situation. The approach attempts to reveal and interpret personal experiences, interactions, meanings ascribed to experiences, and perceptions concerning a previous experience. The researcher is concerned with meaning, establishes first-hand relationships with those who have lived the experience, and attempts to get to the essence of the experience (Akturan and Esen, 2008; Patton, 2002; Bogdan and Biklen, 1992). The approach places particular emphasis on the individual and what he/she has experienced.

Participants

The participants were 42 prospective teachers who studied Turkish Language Teaching at a Turkish university located in the central part of Turkey. These participants volunteered to participate in the study, and they were chosen out of 350 prospective Turkish language teachers. They were 18 to 20 years old. The reason for having prospective Turkish language teachers as participants is that Turkish language teachers are primarily responsible for improving students' writing skills. In Turkey, writing instruction is given by Turkish language teachers for those who have finished primary education.

Data Collection

The private writing process lasted for 12 weeks (once a week). The students were directed to private writing for 10 to 15 minutes at the beginning of each class. When the whole process was over, the participants were asked to comment on the process. In phenomenological design, data collection involves interviews with those who experience the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013: 79). To that end, the participants were addressed semi-structured open-ended questions so that they could reveal their experiences during the private writing process. Responses to open-ended questions allow one to understand the world as it is

viewed and experienced by participants (Patton, 2002: 21). The questions were composed in a way that would identify affective aspects of writing rather than academic performance. The researcher kept an account of the responses.

Data Analysis

The data were interpreted through descriptive and content analysis. Initially, the data were analyzed descriptively, which was followed by the process of coding. Next, the coded data were grouped under concepts and themes. In addition, those concepts accounted for and interpreted under the themes were supported with statements obtained from the descriptive analysis. Descriptive analysis and content analysis are commonly used in qualitative studies (Yildirim & Simsek, 2005: 224-227). The data were interpreted under the themes "freedom", "self-confidence", "responsibility", "love for writing", and "duration of writing".

Ethical Considerations

In reference to what is called as "conscious consent" (Guler, Halicioglu and Tasgin, 2013), the participants were informed about the purpose of the study as well as its content and scope, privacy, and risks involved. Furthermore, only those who agreed to participate in the study were included in the sample. Finally, the participants were not called by their names in Results but by particular codes ranging from P1 to P42.

3. Results

The present study explored the participants' experiences during private writing and yielded five themes, namely "freedom", "self-confidence", "responsibility", "love for writing", and "duration of writing". The themes were concretized through sample quotations from the participants.

Freedom

Private writing gives freedom to participants. The underlying reasons why the participants felt free include "lack of guidance and intervention", "not sharing the writing with others", and "lack of anxiety over being evaluated".

In private writing, the teacher supports his/her students; however, he/she doesn't intervene in what they will write or how they will write. That aspect of private writing enabled the participants in the present study to feel free. P31 expressed her freedom in the process as follows: *"It is nice and enjoyable not to be subject to such warnings as 'Why did you write like that?', 'Express this in that way!' or 'That word sounds inappropriate!'*, and to know that what I am writing only interests me, my pen and my keyboard. That makes me feel freer than ever".

In private writing, the writer does not have to share his/her writing with others unless he/she is ready to do so. Since participants write for themselves and are not forced to share their writing with others, they feel free. One's freedom in writing is hindered by anxiety of being criticized by others or the likelihood that his/her writing may not be liked by others. P36 expressed her freedom as follows: *"I feel free while writing on my own but kind of restricted when sharing my writing with others"*.

Anxiety of being evaluated restricts students while they are writing. In private writing, on the other hand, the writer does not write to be graded or for a particular purpose. The writer should complete his/her writing on any subject he/she desires, in any scope he/she desires, and within any time period he/she desires. P2 expressed her desire to construct her writing in a free manner as follows: *"I do not feel free if I am trying to make others like my writing; I think that I am writing more easily and better in this writing process, for I know that I am not writing for someone else"*. Similarly, P10 considered evaluation as "being called to account": *"I am free when I am writing, for I don't have to be called to account"*. P29 expressed her worry over being evaluated as follows: *"I cannot be completely free while writing"*.

something that I want to share with others". Likewise, P21 reported how she felt special while writing as follows: *"My perspective showed that I was also special and I could write for myself. I understood that I was free and could write about anything or anybody without being influenced by others' decisions"*. The statements of the participants suggested that private writing could eliminate anxiety of being evaluated, of being guided and of sharing one's writing with others, thus setting the writer free.

Self-Confidence

Writing freely instills self-confidence into one. Self-confidence emerges when fear of being supervised and not being liked disappear. Private writing encourages participants to have self-confidence in writing. The participants in the present study attributed their increased self-confidence to *"the change to edit their writing"*, *"belief in the likelihood of writing better"*, and *"lack of anxiety over showing their writing to others or sharing it with others"*.

In private writing, the writer always checks himself/herself. P2 reported that she could edit and improve her writing by herself and added as follows: *"In such a writing process, I got the chance to check my writing and correct my mistakes on my own. This enabled me to have self-confidence in writing"*.

Private writing does not attempt to enable one to reach a certain level; a regular writer makes progress with each piece of writing, which makes him/her hopeful. In fact, P14 reported her belief that /her writing achievement would get improved in the following words: *"I may not be that competent now, but I believe I will be better in the future after this process"*.

The participants considered themselves more interested in writing than they were before they started the private writing process. P39 explained her level of interest in writing before and after the private writing process as follows: *"At first, I feared of writing; thanks to this class, my self-confidence has increased, and I feel more positive about writing"*.

The private writing process enabled the participants to have self-confidence in writing and helped them to hope that they would be able to write better as they improved their writing.

Responsibility

Private writing requires that the whole responsibility for writing should be assumed by the writer. In the present study, there was nobody other than the participants to evaluate their writing. It was the participants who had sole responsibility for evaluating, criticizing and editing their writing.

P3 summarized the feeling of responsibility she had acquired in the private writing process as follows: *"I found my writing inadequate and made some changes; at times I even completely erased what I had written and started over. I took brief notes from texts that I like reading and included them into my ideas"*.

In private writing, the writer is always involved in self-check and therefore starts to get more and more careful. P16 emphasized how she assumed responsibility for her writing as follows: *"During the course of the term, I started to get more meticulous in writing. Now I started to become more careful and choose more proper words. I got in the habit of checking my writing after finishing it"*.

Private writing enabled the participants to check their writing continuously and encouraged them to assume responsibility for their writing.

Love for Writing

Thanks to the freedom and responsibility it offers to the writer, private writing turns writing from a difficulty into an enjoyable process. The participants attributed the reasons why they loved writing in the private writing process to *"feeling free"*, *"lack of force"*, and *"elimination of prejudices"*.

P14 reported starting to consider writing as an enjoyable activity as follows: *"I felt the power accompanying free writing. I learnt how writing actually turned into something more enjoyable. Writing used to bore and repulse me. Now I have at least broken that taboo of mine."*

With freedom of expressing oneself in a comfortable way, writing turns into an easier and loveable activity. P18 summarized how she started to love writing thanks to the private writing process as follows: *"Above all, I loved writing. I freely put whatever I liked on paper and however I liked it, and I understood that I actually took pleasure in reading it"*.

The writer will internalize his/her writing whose subject he/she has decided by himself/herself. P24 expressed how she transformed writing from an obligation into an action she could perform "in her will" as follows: *"I used to write simply because I had to. Not because I wanted to but because I had to. For that reason, writing used to torture me. Your setting us free and not intervening in our writing during the term brought us closer to writing"*.

Since it changes traditional image of writers and readers, private writing alters prejudices against writing. P38 expressed such a change in her prejudices as follows: *"While I used to have prejudices against writing, I now feel more positive about it. I also believe writing develops a person. And I think our lives get richer as we write"*.

Thanks to the free space it grants to its writer, private writing changes the writer's attitudes to his/her writing. The following is how P25 compared her attitudes before and after the private writing process: *"I used to hesitate to write. After this practice (private writing), however, I started writing more comfortably, and now I have pieces of writing on the backside of my notebook that I can call mine"*.

Acting freely, as well as writing about anything they liked and as long as they liked, caused the participants to view writing as comforting and pleasant. That positive attitude of theirs suggested that they started to like writing more than they used to.

Duration of Writing

In private writing, it is the writer who determines the duration of writing. What he/she writes remains a draft until its content and style reaches the level the writer desires.

The participants thought that the duration of writing was determined by the writer. P7 expressed her ideas in the following words: *"I think writing has no specific time, for one would like to write whenever something occurs to me and I cannot confine my writing to a specific time period. I add something to it whenever something occurs to me"*. According to P19, it was up to the writer to finish his/her writing and expressed it was impossible to predict when the writing would be over until it was actually completed: *"I think there is no such time. I got it better during the process. The moment I think my writing is over, something occurs to me or I find one of the words irrelevant. Shortly, there is no specific time to finish the writing"*.

In private writing, there is a close link between the writer and the text; the writer guides the text, and vice versa. P18 expressed the power of the text to guide the writer in the following words: *"It is not up to me or someone else; it is determined by the writing itself"*. Similarly, P21 reported that the duration of writing sometimes went beyond the writer and was only controlled by the writing: *"I cannot say anything clear about this, for I don't think one can limit himself/herself while writing. Even if he/she determines a specific time for his/her writing, he/she cannot comply with the specified time period after that writing has surrounded him/her and has had him/her under its spell. I think no absolute judgment can be made in this respect."*

In the following words, P22 expressed how unclear it was when the writer's desire to edit his/her writing would fade away: *"I have no exact answer to this; sometimes I finish off a piece of writing in ten minutes whereas at other times I cannot put an end to it and rewrite it later"*.

P13 thought that the content or genre could affect the duration of writing: *"Time required to finish the writing depends on the genre. For example, a letter could be written as quickly as in two hours while it could take 10 to 15 days to do a long writing"*. On the other hand, P39 maintained that subjects interesting to the writer could be written more easily: *"It depends on how interested I am in the subject. If it is something that I like and if it excites me, it takes short. However, it takes long if it is not that interesting"*. Another participant to argue that genre could affect the duration was P40: *"Time depends on the subject of the writing. I can handle a poem in one night, but it may take more than months to write a story"*.

The participants determined the duration of their writing on their own, and they found it quite natural that it was up to them to determine the duration. They also noted that the amount of time required for them to write could depend on the subject.

4. Discussion

The present study attempted to identify the participants' feelings and experiences during the private writing process. To that end, the views of the participants on the private writing process were grouped under five themes, namely "freedom", "self-confidence", "responsibility", "love for writing", and "duration of writing". At the end of the process, the participants felt free on the grounds that they had decided on the subjects of their writing and that they were alone in composing and finishing their writing. Being alone in composing their writing contributed to their assuming responsibility for their writing. Their self-confidence was escalated, for they knew that their writing would not be evaluated by others. In addition, they did not suffer from anxiety over being evaluated, which made them feel free while writing, caused them to assume responsibility for their writing, and enabled them to have self-confidence in writing. The findings are supported by those in the literature.

When no time limit is imposed on them, writers are enabled to feel free and not to suffer from such negative feelings as anxiety and hesitation (Karakaya and Ulper, 2011; Hall, 1998; Kean, Gylmn and Britton, 1987). This suggests that the duration of writing must be determined by the writer himself/herself. The reason for this is that the duration may change depending on the requirements of the writer during the process. Writers need more time mainly because of the need to reflect on and revise their writing (Barthes, 1995; Scott, 2001; Nelson, Range and Ross, 2012). Writing activities, unlike traditional ones, should be performed independently of classroom environments and limited time periods. Furthermore, being allowed to decide on the subject of their writing enables writers to feel free and gives them self-confidence, motivation, and responsibility. When the student can choose the subject of his/her writing, he/she gets more enthusiastic about writing and develops responsibility for his/her writing (Akyol, 2011). All these findings could indirectly mean that private writing contributes to writers' writing performance, for research (Pajares, 1944) indicates that those who have self-confidence and responsibility for writing are likely to become more successful in writing.

Another finding of the study is that private writing endows writers with love for writing. A look at the responses of those participants who had positive opinions in terms of freedom, self-confidence and responsibility showed that they had more love for writing than they used to. Increased love for writing could have been caused by the fact that private writing has the writer in the center of the process and no external intervention is allowed (Elbow, 2000). That is because this type of writing is undertaken at the time and in the shape that the writer desires. Moreover, lack of fear of negative criticism and evaluation during the process increases love for and interest in writing (Maltepe, 2006) and prevents them from having anxiety or hesitation (Daly and Miller, 1975; Ozbay and Zorbaz, 2011; Iseri and Unal, 2012; Reio,

Alexander, Reio, Newman 2014). This suggests that private writing helps one develop positive attitudes towards writing and eliminate negative ones.

5. Conclusion

The present study attempted to identify the participants' feelings and experiences during the private writing process. To that end, the views of the participants on the private writing process were grouped under five themes, namely "freedom", "self-confidence", "responsibility", "love for writing", and "duration of writing". At the end of the process, the participants felt free on the grounds that they had decided on the subjects of their writing and that they were alone in composing and finishing their writing. Being alone in composing their writing contributed to their assuming responsibility for their writing. Their self-confidence was escalated, for they knew that their writing would not be evaluated by others. In addition, they did not suffer from anxiety over being evaluated, which made them feel free while writing, caused them to assume responsibility for their writing, and enabled them to have self-confidence in writing.

6. Recommendations

The results could lead to several recommendations. Considering that private writing provides writers with, in particular, affective attainments, incorporation of private writing into classroom activities could help enhance students' writing quality. This type of writing could especially be used for helping students overcome writing anxiety and hesitation. Even so, it is still necessary to conduct studies of different designs on private writing in order that the results of the present study could be generalized. Especially experimental studies and those studies that explore causal links could help develop the literature on private writing.

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