АКАДЕМИЧЕСКОЕ ПИСЬМО

Strategies for Overcoming University Researchers' Writer's Block

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Abstract. This paper reveals the importance of overcoming writer's block for university researchers as second language writers. The idea and materials for the paper come from the experience of the Center for Academic Writing "Impulse" at the University of Tyumen, Russia. The target audience of the Center is the university faculty and researchers who have a lack of time to immerse in the writing process, rather they mainly want to obtain an immediate tangible result. However, our research shows that they often get frustrated by their inability to complete their writing piece because they get stuck at different stages of the writing process. For example, some people find it difficult to finish their papers, or others fade away in the middle, but the main problem is to start writing. Thus, they face writer's block which can be referred to moderate blockage. To overcome the block, we offer the researchers a variety of activities during courses and special projects. This paper describes two strategies: classroom intervention including mainly pre-writing activities, such as freewriting, looping, word association, aimed to overcome the fear of a white page, and individualized intervention based on the project entitled "Drop in & Reboot your Writing". The project comprised 10-20 weekly individual meetings lasting for 30 minutes and aiming at dealing with a particular writing issue. The individual approach to each participant led to a better understanding of the causes of writer's block and finding the cures. These strategies aim to develop researchers' positive attitude to writing, to enable them to boost their awareness of the writing process in receiving the desired results, and build confidence as second language writers.

Keywords: academic writing, writer's block, university researchers, writing center, second language writing, pre-writing activities, freewriting

Introduction

Russian writing centers have been functioning in response to the increasing needs of the internationalization of higher education in Russia. To integrate into the competitive international academic landscape, the University of Tyumen (UTMN) became a participant of Russian Academic Excellence Project 5-100 in 2015. The following year, UTMN Center for Academic Writing was established to provide assistance and

support for researchers looking to get published in journals indexed in Web of Science and Scopus. The Center has been named "Impulse", as its mission is to give the faculty and researchers a new impetus for their continuing professional development, equipping them with skills that will prove useful in their careers.

Collaborating with our university researchers, we have observed some of the challenges they face like finding their research focus, choosing an appropriate journal for their publication, or struggling with language issues. In other words, they need someone to help them throughout the writing process rather someone to proofread or translate their texts before submitting. Thus, embracing S. North's philosophy of writing centers that they must aim "to produce better writers, not better writing" [1, p. 438], the Center has become a supportive environment to build confident and competent writers encouraged to perceive the importance of improving their writing skills through offered events. The important thing is to familiarize university scholars with the Center's approach so that they gain a better understanding of Center's perceptions and take advantage of the possibilities afforded by the Center [2].

One of the main challenges for the researchers in their writing process is writer's block. This term was coined in 1947 by Dr. E. Bergler, a famous Austrian psychiatrist, and since then, the issue has sparked researchers' interest. Writer's block can be defined as "the temporary or chronic inability to put words to paper" [3, p. 5]. This inability is mostly connected with experiencing negative feelings like fear [4], anxiety [5], and lack of confidence [6] or inspiration [7]. These feelings might occur when a writer thinks that his ideas are mundane or commonplace [6]. Writer's block can also stem from behavioral problems, such as lack of problem-solving skills [8]. Some works plunge into the problem more deeply, explaining writer's block in cognitive terms. The block might be a "block between the conscious self and its sources of material in the unconscious" [3, p. 7], or a "right brain – left brain conflict" [9]. On the contrary, some sources disregard the problematic nature of writer's block, considering it an excuse for missing deadlines[1].

Apart from the mentioned causes that can lead to blocks for any writer, language competences present difficulties for second language writers. According to F. Betancourt & M. Phinney [10], bilingual writers can face three types of composing problems. They are cognitive problems (like premature editing), affective problems (writer's attitudes about the language they use), and linguistic problems. The latter type can block even experienced writers in their native language and make them experience anxiety.

To understand the nature and the seriousness of the block, we used P. Huston's classification [9]. She differentiates between mild, moderate, and recalcitrant blockage. Such classification helps to apply different strategies to resolve each type of blockage. In our case, we discovered the causes of writer's block for the university researchers writing in English as their second language, analyzed the type of blockage the researchers have, and offered them some remedies to resolve the block.

Procedure and participants

Ninety-three researchers took part in the Center's activities described in the paper from November 2018 to April 2019. These researchers mainly write about their research in Russian, have no or little experience communicating their research in English, and have different levels of English language proficiency varied from A2 to C1 (CEFR). The participants have often demonstrated their inability to get words onto paper for different reasons. They also shared their concerns about their fear of a white page when they do not know how to start writing.

Our approach consisted of two stages. The first one was cause analysis, during which we tried to single out the true causes of the researchers' writer's block. The causes were re-

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[1] Writer's block. (n.d.). Available at: https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=writer%27s%20block

vealed through observation, in-class discussions, and interviews with the participants. The interviews with the participants were unstructured and more or less individualized, aiming to get relevant information on the speaker's experiences and feelings about writing with a minimal set of pre-planned questions. The second stage was intervention, aimed to eliminate the revealed causes and overcome writer's block. The stages did not come strictly one after the other; they intertwined, came in cycles.

Both stages were introduced within the framework of the following courses: "English for Publishing," "Writing a Scientific Paper," "Strategies for Paragraph Development," "Strategies for Cohesion" and within a special project entitled "Drop in & Reboot your Writing." While conducting our courses, we offered a variety of activities, which enabled us to identify the causes of the block as well as to suggest some strategies for its elimination. The detailed description and the analysis of these activities come in the Sections "Classroom Intervention" and "Individualized Intervention."

Cause analysis

During the first stage, we tried to figure out what might cause the participants' writer's block. The participants were eager to share their opinions on the issue. From their point of view, the main cause of their writer's block seemed to be a linguistic one [10], such as insufficient English proficiency. They often struggled to use the right words and found it difficult to express their thoughts in another way. As a result, they were stuck while writing. Besides, they were unaware of English language writing conventions such as style, structure, and logic. The common cause for lack of this knowledge, even if the participants had a good command of English, was that writing in English had long been the most neglected skill during the process of learning English.

Another composing problem [10], which was identified from our observation, is premature editing, especially at the sentence level. While writing, the participants often concentrated more on correcting mistakes in spelling, grammar, or mechanics than on thinking about the content. Nevertheless, they did not recognize premature editing as one of the barriers that prevented them from writing.

As for the third type of composing problem – affective problems [10], the participants tended to demonstrate a controversial attitude toward writing in English mixed with curiosity and fear. On the one hand, they strived for learning to write in English because most of them have never had such an opportunity before. On the other hand, they expressed fear that may be related to their doubts about the language they use.

Using Huston's classification [9], we referred our researchers' problem to moderate blockage. It means that the participants struggled to find their voice and to "assert themselves as 'real' writers" [9, p. 95].

Classroom Intervention

To help the researchers to defeat writer's block, we marshaled a range of approaches to raising the participants' confidence as language users and showed how they can produce a decent piece of writing based on the language level they have.

The courses we ran provided sufficient scaffolding for the participants' writing development. The main advantage of these courses was that the participants came from different research fields and compared each other's papers in terms of style. This fact enabled them to find common features of English writing conventions in all research fields as opposed to Russian ones. Moreover, the researchers had to "talk through" their work [9]. Through this activity, they learned to explain difficult concepts clearly to non-specialists, who, in return, appeared to become a supportive audience. Sharing led to understanding their writing better and stimulated writing.

Each classroom session started with pre-writing activities to tune the participants into further writing. Such "tuning" made the participants more focused and optimized the participants' writing conditions [9], which, in turn, alleviated the fear of writing.

For example, the activity "*WOOP*," which stands for Wish, Outcome, Obstacle, and Plan [11] was introduced during the first meeting with course participants, so that they could set a goal they wished to achieve and share their possible results. This activity enabled the participants to identify the obstacles that were sometimes related not only to language issues but also to some other things, for example, lack of time or too many duties. Finally, they came up with a solution to this or that obstacle. Joint discussions about obstacles and possible solutions helped the participants realize that they all had similar problems, and through supporting each other, they were able to overcome barriers and become more successful in developing writing skills.

Another activity offered during the first meeting was to complete the sentence: "For me writing in English is …" The most common words were 'difficult,' 'challenge,' 'hard work', and, surprisingly, 'interesting.' Besides, some people mentioned writing in English as an important skill for any researcher who wants to be part of the scientific international community and as an impetus for personal and professional growth.

An efficient exercise that helped the participants overcome difficulty in writing was *freewriting*, which seems to be easily done: put your thoughts down on blank paper for 5−10 minutes without stopping. However, when freewriting exercises were first introduced, it was difficult for some participants to start writing; they could not get rid of the fear of making mistakes or of finding the right words. They even tried to stop and reread what they had already written so that they could follow the train of their thoughts. Thus, it was necessary to discuss the benefits of freewriting. Two types of freewriting exercises were offered: topic-based and unfocused. In unfocused writing, the participants wrote on any topic that came to their mind. It is worth noting that they usually described their feelings about the current events in their life or about their home assignment if they completed it or about the reasons why they did not do it. Topic-based freewriting included broad topics, for example, education, water, pencil, pol-

lution. Sometimes everybody could choose a topic among the suggested ones, or there was the only topic for everybody. The majority of the participants found the freewriting exercise useful because it affected their fluency to some extent and the coherence of their language; they had to concentrate on their ideas, not on their grammar or spelling mistakes. Focusing on the content rather than its expression, we followed P. Elbow's thought that "Freewriting produces syntactic and verbal energy which gradually transfer to your more careful writing" [12, p. 17]. He meant that freewriting practice may finally encourage a writer to avoid mistakes in style or language.

Looping was another writing exercise which helped scholars overcome anxiety about academic writing and build self-assurance [12]. The first loop included writing down everything that the participants already knew about their research issue for 5 minutes. In the second loop, the participants read over what they had written down and wrote one sentence capturing the most important or interesting idea. In the third loop, they kept developing the new sentence for another five minutes. Thus, the participants managed to produce a lot of writing that interested him/her and to establish a connection between the topic and themselves before integrating information from different sources.

Another great pre-writing exercise was *word association*. The participants were offered a word, and they wrote down words or phrases that related to it for 5−10 minutes. As they were writing more words or phrases, they could end up changing the route of the given word. The exercise aims to find so-called hidden words associated with a topic that people do not immediately think about. Association was a powerful brainstorming technique to demonstrate how their imagination could go in any direction, moving from one context to another.

The activity "*Story in four sentences*" was intended to develop the researcher's understanding of the importance of creating a structured and logically completed piece of writing. Researchers had to complete a story with the

given first line starting like a fairy-tale, "Once upon a time, there was a merchant so rich that he could have paved the streets of his town with silver ..." [13]. They had to add three more sentences bringing it to a successful conclusion. This activity took no more than five minutes. This activity aimed to demonstrate that a research paper has a similar structure to a fairy tale. The participants were amazed to discover an introduction, methods, results, and a conclusion in their stories. During the discussion, they shared the opinion that they usually wrote by instinct, intuitively using practical examples. By that moment, they started to realize how to do it consciously.

The course participants mentioned in their feedback that the described activities proved to be productive in dismissing their fear of writing and in overcoming writer's block. Fears of writing cannot be easily evaded, as they have built up over many years, but practicing writing for a short time may be an efficient starting point. Through discussions, interviews and after-course questionnaires, we learned that when our researchers were stuck in front of a white page, they recollected what they had done during the course and used one of the familiar strategies. These strategies not only eased their writing process but also encouraged the writer to produce a better piece. For example, one of the participants wrote, "The course "Strategies for Cohesion" allowed me to become more confident in constructing any connected text, particularly a scientific text." Another participant stated that "Inner barriers in front of the English language are going down, self-confidence is appearing." Positive feedback from the participants was the best evidence of the success of the described activities.

Individualized Intervention

While conducting the courses, we faced two other obstacles that prevented the participants from improving their writing skills on a permanent basis. The first obstacle was absenteeism: sometimes the participants had to miss the workshops due to their workload. Another ob-

stacle was that they explained that they could not work on their research paper because they did not have enough time every day. Many people think they can start writing daily only if they have plenty of time. "A lot of people think they can't write unless they have a big block of time carved out. They think they need at least 10 hours at a stretch to really get going" [14]. In her interview for *Nature*, W. Belcher also mentioned R. Boice, a professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, who was the first person back in the '90s to say, "No, this doesn't work. I've studied people, it doesn't work. You've got to have something more moderate, more daily, make it a habit" [14]. Thus, to develop the scholars' writing habits or change their writing habits, and overcome writer's block, we decided to launch a project entitled "*Drop in & Reboot your Writing.*"

The project lasted from November 2018 to April 2019. Fifteen participants joined the project. Each project participant was expected to attend the Center once a week to do different written assignments that could take up to 30 minutes. We selected 30-minute slots inspired by R. Murray's idea of 'snack' writing as "a productive strategy for making time for writing in a professional schedule, and still having a life" [15, p. 70]. Some project participants were surprised to find out that they could create something meaningful in such a short time.

The project included not only the above-mentioned pre-writing activities but also some other exercises depending on the writing challenges the participants faced. The individual approach to each participant led to understanding the causes of writer's block and finding the cures.

The steps of each meeting were designed as follows:

• Warm-up questions aimed at activating the participant's prior knowledge on the topic, language pattern, or writing technique;

• Input: presentation of a writing technique/language pattern in context, making the participants familiar with some patterns so that they could implement them in their writing, helping develop the participant's noticing skills;

- Practice consisting of two parts:
1) doing a writing exercise to drill a particular writing technique/language pattern;
2) composing a piece of writing;
- Reflection.

A follow-up meeting activity included finding the studied language patterns in the participants' selected research papers of the target journal and analyzing their usage and function in the papers or integrating these patterns in their own piece of writing if possible.

These exercises could be divided into three clusters so that doing these separate exercises could help the participants to create a bigger picture of the language and to acquire the particular writing techniques for eliminating writer's block. The exercises were taken from the following sources: *English for Academic Research: Writing Exercises* by A. Wallwork [16] and *The ESL Writer's Handbook* by J. Carlock, M. Eberhardt, J. Horst, L. Menasche [17].

The first cluster of exercises was intended to help students understand writing a paragraph as the main blocking unit of a text. The participants practiced two approaches for paragraph development: a typical scheme including a topic sentence, supporting sentences, and a concluding one and the PEEL formula, which stands for Point, Evidence/Example, Explanation, Link. The examples of schema-building scaffolding were useful for helping the participants to recognize the patterns and rules of academic writing.

Another cluster of exercises demonstrated how to build different types of sentences: simple sentences, complex, and compound sentences. The focus on sentence level can be explained by a common mistake the scholars made while trying to transform a sentence in Russian word for word into its English equivalent. It occurs because the scholars have a lack of knowledge of the rhetorical principles that underlie English discourse. Besides, they were often unable to write long sentences that require various coordinating and subordinating tools, and they were unaware of the meaning and proper use of linking devices. Studying some examples of common linking devices helped the participants to understand logical relationships between ideas in the text and to use them to increase the effectiveness of the text. They got familiar with linking devices that indicate cause and effect, comparison and contrast, cause and effect and some others depending on the participants' prior language learning experience.

One important kind of sentences researchers have to write is definitions. Therefore, we decided to pay attention to this particular kind. Writing definitions was challenging for some participants. Equipping them with certain typical phrases for writing definitions enabled the participants to enrich their linguistic repertoire.

The third cluster presented the participants' reports on the progress they made between the sessions. One of the first activities the participants did was to create an action plan for their research paper. They also made an outline of their research paper to guide their writing work. *Outlining* as a brainstorming tool helped the researchers develop and clarify their thoughts to get over their initial writing block. An outline was useful in breaking down the text into some main ideas; thus, it gave the writers direction and focus. It was also changed as the researchers' understanding of their topic developed. Due to the outline, the researchers were engaged in regular writing, gradually making progress on their paper.

Another activity was *thinking about research rhetorically*, in other words, the participants described their intended readers, purpose, and genre [18]. According to Murray, considering a research paper as a design project, scholars can "think about audience, purpose, scope and structure before you worry about paragraphs and sentences" [15, p. 71]. Many participants mentioned that they never thought about their potential reader and never realized the importance of having readers in mind. One participant wrote in her feedback, "I believe it is important to recognize who is the reader of your article. How do you care about your reader? Is it simple to read? Is it an understandable text? Is it a coherent paragraph?" Thus, the participants were involved in regular writing, consisting of

small manageable tasks, which had an effect on removing the fear writing. They considered this process as fun and free from the stress of creating a final product. Some of the participants considered this step-by-step approach efficient, they highlighted that even reading a research paper in English became easier and more understandable in terms of various nuances of the language.

This special project really became very "special" for the participants. Compared to single activities scattered throughout previous courses, this course became more centered on the problem of writer's block. The time span of half a year was perfect as the participants got gradually engrossed in writing, while putting away their anxiety and fear of a white page. The time limit and structure of each meeting made the participants understand that they can become really productive within a short time. The activities changed their attitude to writing as they began to realize the importance of investing time in developing their confidence through new types of writing, and they impacted some researchers' conceptions of the writing process and of themselves as writers.

Conclusion

The paper revealed the importance of dealing with writer's block. While working with the university researchers, we identified the causes of their writer's block and suggested some activities to address it. The block was mostly connected with lack of confidence and not believing in themselves as real writers, which was moderate blockage according to Huston's classification [9]. We offered special activities during classroom intervention and a special project "Drop in & Reboot your Writing" during individualized intervention. The participants had to accomplish a continually expanding range of tasks which enabled them to build their confidence as writers. The conclusions that we came to are as follows:

• Writer's block can present a serious issue. It should not be neglected. For our researchers it is not just an excuse for missing a deadline.

• Due to the demand for quick publications, researchers focus on product rather than process writing. It leads to negative feelings during writing, as it becomes an unavoidable burden. Gradually, negative attitudes cause blocking. The activities described in the paper alleviated stress and fear of writing (For example, "WOOP" or thinking about research rhetorically within the project "Drop in & Reboot your Writing"). Discussing problems and attitudes appeared to be efficient, as the participants learned to see a problem from the outside and develop the behaviors they needed to tackle the problem and end up with a positive vision.

• Most writers we worked with, especially inexperienced ones, got stuck at the beginning. That is why most of the suggested activities were aimed to find a starting point (For example, freewriting, looping, and word association). In this case, the participants benefited a lot from writing sentences and paragraphs within the project "Drop in & Reboot your Writing" as it was easier for them to start writing small pieces. Creating action plans also contributed to solving the starting point problem since the researchers were able to see the road to follow.

• Second language writers, especially those who have lower levels of English language proficiency, suffer from additional blocking due to language issues. Our goal was to show them how they can manage using the language they have (For example, within the activity "Story in four sentences" or editing activities within the project "Drop in & Reboot your Writing" showing that they can feel the language even at their level).

It is evident from the conclusions that the suggested activities and the project served multiple purposes each, but their ultimate goal was to help our researchers change their conceptions of the writing process and of themselves as writers.

The words of V. Nelson: "A long distance runner is someone who runs. It is not a person who desires to run" are the final point to mention here [3, p. 16]. It means that the more you write, the more successful you are. Never stop trying.

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Стратегии преодоления писательского барьера при написании англоязычных научных текстов

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Аннотация. В статье представлен опыт организации работы Центра академического письма «Импульс» Тюменского государственного университета с исследователями, которым необходимо подготовить научную статью на английском языке за короткий промежуток времени. В процессе работы над статьёй часто возникает писательский барьер – неудовлетворённость уже написанным, проявляющаяся в том, что автор останавливается на каком-то этапе. Например, некоторым трудно закончить статью, другие теряют запал к середине работы, главной же проблемой оказывается непонимание или незнание, с чего и как

начать писать. Чтобы помочь учёным погрузиться в писательский процесс, Центр использует две стратегии. Первая стратегия – метод вмешательства – эффективно применяется в рамках курсов по академическому письму и включает различные подготовительные письменные упражнения и задания. Примерами таких упражнений служат свободное письмо (freewriting), петлевание (looping) и ассоциации слов (word association), при выполнении которых участники концентрируются на генерировании идей, что помогает уменьшить стресс, связанный с письмом на английском языке, и побороть страх белого листа. Вторая стратегия – индивидуальное вмешательство – применяется в рамках проекта «Drop in & Reboot your Writing». Участникам проекта предлагаются еженедельные индивидуальные консультации продолжительностью 30 минут, во время которых они работают над формированием или развитием определённого навыка академического письма в зависимости от своих потребностей. Количество встреч варьируется от 10 до 20 с учётом занятости участников. Индивидуальный подход к каждому участнику способствует лучшему пониманию причин писательского барьера и поиску эффективного решения. Применение данных стратегий помогает выработке позитивного отношения исследователей к процессу академического письма, способствует осознанию принципов написания научного текста и преодолению писательского барьера.