

**Difficulties and resistances to writing tasksⁱ:
experiences of brazilian students in international exchangeⁱⁱ**

*Dificuldades e resistências às tarefas de escrita:
experiências de estudantes brasileiros em intercâmbio internacional*

*Dificultades y resistencias a las tareas de escritura:
experiencias de estudiantes brasileños en intercambio internacional*

Messias Dieb² 

Abstract: I analyze semi-structured interviews conducted with nine students of Engineering and Computational Science who participated in the Brazil Scientific Mobility Program (BSMP), or Sciences without Borders (in Brazil), at University of California Santa Barbara (UCSB - USA) between 2015 and 2016, in order to understand difficulties and resistances related to writing. They supposedly show these difficulties and resistances because they come from study areas in which calculus is the predominant practice, and because they are usually dissociated from interactive writing practice. The results show that students' difficulties and resistances are basically originated in the lack of didactic situations, like those experienced at UCSB, giving them the opportunity of a legitimate intellectual (metacognitive and metalinguistic) activity that develops their social literacy, especially those which are typical of the academic milieu.

Keywords: Relationship with writing. Academic literacies. Sciences without Borders.

Resumo: Analiso entrevistas semiestruturadas com nove estudantes de Engenharia e Ciências da Computação do Programa Ciências sem Fronteiras, na Universidade da Califórnia em Santa Bárbara – Estados Unidos (UCSB), entre 2015 a 2016, para compreender dificuldades e resistências na relação com a escrita. Eles supostamente apresentam essas dificuldades e resistências por pertencerem à áreas disciplinares em que o cálculo é práxis predominante e por se encontrarem comumente dissociados da prática da escrita interativa. Os resultados mostram que as dificuldades e resistências dos estudantes residem basicamente na carência de situações didáticas, a exemplo das vivenciadas na UCSB, oportunizando uma legítima atividade intelectual (metacognitiva e metalinguística) e que desenvolvam seus letramentos sociais, em especial, os que são típicos do meio acadêmico.

Palavras-chave: Relação com a escrita. Letramentos acadêmicos. Ciências sem Fronteiras.

Resumen: Analizo aquí entrevistas semiestructuradas con nueve estudiantes de Ingeniería y de las Ciencias de la Computación, que participaron de lo Programa Ciencias sin Fronteras en la Universidad de California en Santa Bárbara (UCSB - USA) entre 2015 y 2016, con la finalidad de comprender sus fragilidades y dificultades en la relación con la escritura. Ellos supuestamente muestran estas dificultades y resistencias porque provienen de áreas de estudio en las que el cálculo es la práctica predominante, y porque generalmente están dissociados de la práctica de una escritura más interactiva. Los resultados muestran que tales fragilidades y dificultades residen básicamente en la carencia de situaciones didáticas, a ejemplo de las vivenciadas en la UCSB, que les proporcionen una legítima actividad intelectual (metacognitiva y metalinguística) y que desarrollen sus literacias sociales, en especial las que son típicas del medio académico.

Palabras clave: Relación con la escritura. Literacias académicas. Ciencias sin fronteras.

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² Federal University of Ceará (UFC) – Email: dieb@ufc.br

Introduction

Based on some personal experiences with academic writing teaching, I have noticed that a large number of students entering Higher Education show resistances and difficulties related to learning the ways we express ourselves in writing and approach university audiences. This happens especially in the first years of undergraduate programs, in which we, as professors, have the indispensable and irrecusable task during this adaptation period for students: that of “promoting [their] ‘academic literacy’ [...]. The tools, techniques and resources we use for that are diverse, with more or less perceptible and rewarding outcomes” (RIBEIRO, 2016, p. 60) In the course of this task, therefore, I have tried to understand what happened during these subjects’ writing learning trajectory, based on theoretical perspectives developed by Charlot (2000), Barré-De Miniac (2008) and Bazerman (2007; 2013), which focus on the subject’s intellectual activity and social construction of their learning experiences, their mobilizations and, especially, the meanings they assign to such learning experiences and objects.

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Because of that, the questions that guide the reflection presented herein are: Why do students have difficulty and resist, in some cases, carrying out activities involving writing? Which aspects or facts of their school trajectory are hindering these subjects’ relation with writing practice? What is the professor’s role in tackling these difficulties? By discussing these questions, I set this paper’s goal as to understand the fragilities and difficulties some students have about writing, considering the dimensions of this relation that was built in the course of their personal and school trajectories. For that purpose, I analyze data from a research carried out with students who supposedly showed even greater difficulties and resistances related to writing, for the fact that they come from knowledge areas in which calculus is the predominant practice, and that this practice is usually dissociated from the idea of writing as interaction.

The research was carried out at a postdoctoral internship with engineering and computer science students who participated from an exchange experience within the ‘Science without Borders’ (*‘Ciência sem Fronteiras’*, in Portuguese, or CsF, for short) program at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), USA, in the years 2015 and 2016. At this institution, students attended classes in an extension program whose focus is the development of written communication skills, intended specially for the thousands of foreigners who choose that university when looking for a high-level professional, scientific and technological education center. Therefore, the experiences and trajectories narrated by students, built before and after the exchange, will be the basis to identify likely explanations about their difficulties and resistances related to writing, characterized by the dimensions making up that relationship (BARRÉ-DE MINIAC, 2008).

Methodological aspects of the study

When selected from several parts of Brazil to go to the United States, students participating in the research took English language proficiency tests for which the minimum passing score was 550. Those who did not achieve that score, as soon as they arrived in UCSB, were enrolled in courses offered by the university's extension program in order to broaden their knowledge of English, especially in writing, as a preparation for academic life in the following months, until the end of the exchange, followed by an internship at the program's partner companies (MONKS, 2013). As a result, most of them attended versions 1, 2 and 3 of the Academic Writing course, and the others attended, simultaneously or subsequently, the 'Introduction to Today's Research at UCSB' and 'Communication for International Students' courses.

By means of signs in public places and text messages in social networks, I hoped to contact all twenty-six (26) CsF students selected for that period. They came from several engineering and computer science branches, from several public and private institutions all over Brazil, and were being invited to voluntarily participate in a semi-structured interview. Only seven (7) male and two (2) female students, however, replied to my contacts and effectively participated in the research, since the others kept distant and did not show interest. For fear of violating the ethical principles required by the UCSB Institutional Review Board (IRB), that authorized the research procedures, I tried not to insist when I noticed that any student resisted participating in the interview. Despite the little available free time and the volume of activities at UCSB, I presume that the apparent resistance to accept the invitation could also be due to some kind of veiled fear, for the fact that they were CsF grantees and wanted to avoid making any statement that could be considered compromising; after all, as a researcher and university professor, I could symbolically represent some kind of inspecting, "governmental eye" over them. Thus, after a period of negotiations, the interviews were started and conducted individually in places freely chosen by the participants, proceeding to the presentation, the reading and signature of the Informed Consent Form.

In possession of that material, I started transcribing the recordings and converting them to Microsoft Word text files. After printing all transcriptions, I proceeded with a detailed ritual with increasingly attentive reading in search of possible explanations for the students' difficulties and resistances about writing throughout their school trajectories and their experiences in the courses offered by UCSB. During this journey, similarities in the kinds of investment, opinions and attitudes towards writing were identified, despite the typical nuances of singularity and situationality within each student's life story. In order to build a data selection which was consistent and coherent with the questions presented herein, I analyzed the students' discourse by focusing such aspects as dimensions of their relationship with writing (BARRÉ-DE MINAC, 2008), which will be presented later concurrently with the presentation of excerpts from the words corresponding to such dimensions, and referring to students by means of fictitious names.

It is worth noting that, because of the limited space I have for this text, and in order to illustrate the data, I will use excerpts from the interviews that I consider most representative

of the students' relationship with writing. The aspects highlighted in the excerpts are related to all subjects, and not necessarily to each individual in their specific relationship to "knowing how to write". Although they vary in intensity and frequency, the dimensions of the relationship with writing will be present in all experiences narrated. Hence, the excerpts chosen will give an idea of how this relationship was being built among all of them, since, within the scope of their empirical realization, the dimensions can be more salient or more discreet in each one of the subjects' singular stories with writing and "knowing how to write".

Relationship with writing and its dimensions

The notion of relationship with writing refers to a set of investments, attitudes, representations and verbalizations constructed by subjects about writing and appropriation thereof, revealing a singular experience with this essentially social practice. It synthesizes a particularization of the relation with knowing (CHARLOT, 2013) which is developed by the subjects by establishing relationships with the world, with others, and with themselves, having "learning to write" and "knowing how to write" as bases. Since all knowledge constitutes a relationship, knowing how to write, in this perspective, represents a singular relationship with writing, its learning and different uses in social spaces (BARRÉ-DE MINIAC, 2008), which is marked not only by the desire to know of those involved in this practice, but also by the nuances of each context.

Since it is a historic and culturally situated action of language, writing is understood at the same time as an activity and a knowledge whereby events, ideas and feelings are represented, as well as meanings surrounding the world of writers which are expressed and shared with the expectation of being reconstructed by the reader (BAZERMAN, 2013). By naming these actions and uses of written language in school contexts, and, more specifically, within universities, Lea and Street (2006)ⁱⁱⁱ use the phrase 'academic literacies', which refers to cultural learnings typical of these institutional spaces from where the identities of the interacting individuals emerge. Complementing the idea of multiplicity in these institutional cultures, Hyland (2011, p. 195) defends that there are different ways how people organize themselves, relate to, and differentiate from each other from a given area of knowledge (or disciplines). The so-called "disciplinary cultures" are the ones, therefore, that manifest themselves from the limits of each discipline through rhetorical choice patterns used by subjects who insert themselves into these cultures in order to "gain support, express collegiality, solve difficulties and negotiate disagreements".

In this sense, I consider that the development of the relationship with writing can constitute the development of literacies itself, especially the academic one, and the guided insertion of students in a given disciplinary culture, for understanding that the three concepts are strongly related to formal learnings about the act of writing. Therefore, the relationship with writing involves not only the individuals' internal desires and motivations, but also their representations and other types of knowledge related to the act of writing. Based on these characteristics and the outcomes of recent studies, Barré-De Miniac (2008) lists four

dimensions of this relationship, which translate themselves into investments, attitudes, representations and verbalizations, which the subjects developed about the writing social practice. Despite being presented one by one, such dimensions do not exist in isolation – they penetrate and complement each other so that, in order to understand a given relationship with writing, it is necessary to contemplate all of them, as I will do later, together with the data analysis.

Investments, attitudes, representations and verbalizations related to writing

According to Barré-De Miniac (2008), one of the dimensions of the relationship with writing is the investment made in writing; it is characterized by the interest a subject shows when writing, and by the amount of investment (energy) that he/she devotes to its appropriation and production. Another of these dimensions refers to opinions and attitudes related to writing and comprises what the subject says about and does with and about writing, i.e., refers to their behavior, decision-making about the action of writing. In addition, the dimension of concepts about writing and its learning has the representations that individuals share socially about this practice, but that are manifest and reconstructed in their subject's singularity^{iv}. Finally, the last of these dimensions is related to the modes of verbalizations about writing and refers to the way how subjects report to procedures and actions performed by them when they write; in other words, these are the explanations on the choices they make when writing, constituting a metacognitive activity about the procedures adopted.

Based on the description of these dimensions, I consider that the reasons why students write and the way they are presented to writing, especially in institutional schooling spaces, considerably define the quality and the quantity of their investments in the construction of knowing how to write, as well as the attitudes, representations and verbalizations about this practice. In the case of the nine subjects in this research, I verified that some forms of pedagogical intervention, as narrated by them, can clearly explain their difficulties and resistances related to written production, because what has often happened is that such practices tend more to weaken than to broaden their competence as writers.

To be honest, I've never been a fan of writing! Especially when I was younger, since this has always been too much of an obligation to me... I did it because I had to. [...] programming is basically what I do all the time... and also because I use a lot of mathematics... but not a lot of writing. Sincerely, I don't know why I had to attend classes on academic writing. I think it was just bureaucracy. [...] A kind of pre-requisite from them here, so I didn't have a lot of choice (Klaus).

When reporting about its relationship with writing, the student allows us to infer that the obligatory way how this activity was presented to him contributed to the very low amount of investments in its appropriation and the conservation of one resistance whose frontiers had not been crossed until then. This explains why crossing such frontiers requires not only the conscious use of writing, but also, and especially, its desiring use. According to Charlot (2013) and Barré-De Miniac (2008), desire is what produces the meaning of something for

the subject, it is what allows us to attribute value (importance) to that something; and, for that meaning to be accompanied by favorable opinions and attitudes about this something the meaning refers to, it is also necessary that the goal of such activity coincides with the reason that motivates the subject to carry it out. Thus, Klaus' resisting attitude in relation to writing shows that it is guided by the representation thereof as a sheer obligation to be fulfilled during school years, re-signified, during the exchange, as a bureaucratic pre-requisite dissociated from his roles as a programmer.

What is curious in that situation is that the student speaks about programming but does not pay attention to the fact that this kind of language contains a specialized type of writing in which he seems to be proficient and to which he seems to dedicate himself very much as well. It is important to emphasize why a programming language is a writing whose syntax needs to be as careful as the linguistic syntax of academic writing, that it is through it that he will communicate what he studies to his peers. Thus, if he already has a good relationship with programming writing, it seems that what was missing to that student was learning from his teachers that his language is also a writing whose practice can be complemented with linguistic resources, such as those he was learning during his exchange.

To the causes of the initial negative significance about academic writing, other experiences were added which brought up feelings that contributed even more to the mismatch between the desire to learn about it and the communicative needs typical of the school and university space. A mismatch marked especially by the anxiety and pressure in the period when students prepare to university entrance exams, together with the low interactivity of the school composition genre and the disconnection between writing and curricular contents to which it could serve as a learning resource. One example of these experiences can be verified in the following statements by student Charles:

We had a separate class just to learn how to write. [...] I think I was a bit afraid of writing... For example, when I was in Brazil in the third year of High School, we had a lot of pressure to learn how to write..., because we were going to take university entrance exams and the composition was what mattered the most. So, it wasn't that pleasant because you were studying thousands of things at the same time and you had to learn how to write, and there was no other solution (**Charles**).

Charles' statements allows us to infer that, although the goal of passing entrance exams might have somehow been the motivation for him, writing the composition was a restrict and limiting act regarding learning and the use of language, since the kind of writing required in that situation tends neither to evoke nor to develop dialogical expectations, but to constitute only one more obligatory task to be carried out. By learning and carrying out the task of writing a composition for the entrance exams, the expectation of a more evident answer to be provided by him maybe would have been that of a grade that could grant him a seat in the university. Thus, the limitation I refer to is justified to the extent that the student perceives his participation as an agent is reduced, i.e., how someone positions him/herself in the world through writing, since the action of language in question neither evokes nor foresees, in this context, very dialogical answers from his interlocutor.

In addition, in the following interview excerpts, students Zenon and Arnold provide some clues that can help to better exemplify the dichotomy between writing and their education area.

I don't see any relationship with my engineering course, especially with the course I'm taking now, because I don't need to write (**Zenon**).

I think the way you write academically is different, and high school doesn't give you the necessary support. Students in Brazil, at least in my university, have to learn it during the program, by themselves. So, if there was, at least early in the program, a basic course on how to convey your ideas academically or whatever, I think it would be interesting. [...] Even because the way you write in engineering, in hard sciences, I think – no, I don't think, I'm sure – because my mother took History and I saw it like that, in the humanities, it's a little different. [...] We work with more objectivity in writing, shorter sentences, objectivity, clarity. I take a philosophy text, for example, I like philosophy, but it something much more like... metaphors, this kind of things we don't use (**Arnold**).

Although there was somehow little identification of engineering students with writing – which explains the few investments on their part – there was also the acknowledgment that there are typical features of writing in this area that differ from other fields of knowledge. Whereas Zenon states that he did not see relations between writing and the engineering program or the job market in that area, Arnold acknowledges that written work, especially within the university, was not sufficiently done, and that only increased the difficulties and gaps left by High School. Thus, in the condition of future engineers, or engineers under training, their references of writing, comparing Brazil and the United States, seem to range between the perception of an activity hardly related to the contents of the area and the understanding that there are specificities related to it that would still need to be sufficiently worked on.

Based on the students' statements, it can be suggested that one of the most common ways how these subjects' writing competence became fragilized comports with the dichotomy between their development as writers and the questions involving their identity in this process, since, as engineering students, they acknowledge that knowing how to write is somehow important and involves specificities that they perceive and verbalize, but they resent not having had a more effective support to achieve the mastery of them. However, if, in the condition of subjects, as Charlot (2013, p. 143) said, all of us are able to transform the world around us at the same time we transform ourselves in this process, "however dominated they may be, human beings remain being subjects, [and, therefore] they act and their activity has effects". Therefore, considering this philosophical principle that the subject is a transforming agent, I verified significant and gradual changes in the interviewed students' relation to writing, from clear alterations of their dimensions, such as the opinions and attitudes contained in the following excerpt.

The course I'm taking now is... more general than Academic Writing, but, since it focuses on communication skills, we have to work a lot. So, I'm learning how to structure a text in English... Then, since I didn't learn that in my University in Brazil, I has been interesting to me (**Sasha**).

In general, all of them were aware that broadening their knowledge of English was imperative and, then, despite some of the aforementioned initial resistances, they noticed that materializing that learning through writing could not only be feasible, but advantageous. At the end of the academic year related to the exchange period, the possibility of an internship in an American company represented to them the pressing and concrete need of using written texts, which would require not only “good English” from them, in terms of grammar and spelling, but also the ability to communicate to specific, demanding and qualified audiences. Therefore, apart from the changes in the linguistic context, whose need to broaden their English context was evident, the pedagogy used by UCSB professors, giving the students opportunity to objectively raise their awareness about the uses of writing, as well as the intensive, interactive activity in the course of their classes were decisive elements in the impulse to transform the relationship being studied here. Charles’ comments on these aspects are extremely illustrative:

It was a bit different here... because the professor was good... You could send him an e-mail anytime... he kind of motivated us to write well; he showed several examples... and, if you were writing bad, he would explain why, [tell you] what you needed to do to improve... So, basically, he instructed us enough before we did, and then he gave us feedback about what we had done wrong or not... he would send you the text and make several comments. In all classes here, everybody needs to write a lot. For example, in one of them, some American businessmen participated; they are pretty important people and we had to send them questions through e-mail. So the professor taught us how to choose the right words, how to ask questions the right way, how to organize the ideas in the body of the e-mail, I mean, in correct English. So, he taught us how to make the appropriate structure of an email for that situation, and I didn’t know that before. The professor made us write a lot, especially about our experiences. So, my concern was to make him understand me. For example, one of the tasks was about writing what I most like doing, and then I had to explain that using only 600 words. But it wasn’t only to explain, I had to relate that to my childhood, say if it had something to do with it, etc. So the text had to be clear, correct and have a lot of content. But, without a good development in writing, 600 words is a lot to cope with. Then I looked at the paper and saw that there were still 500 words to go, and I thought that I didn’t have anything else to say, but I had to find a way of doing that, maybe changing the order of things. Anyway... I worked hard on that! But the professor helped me a lot because the texts came back with notes in red about the smallest details (**Charles**).

The report above summarizes the crux of the transformation process the students’ relation with writing underwent. As we could notice, the professors’ firm, present and challenging role helped even to minimize the terror of red correction marks, so traditional and so feared by students. Through these statements, it is possible to verify that what could sound to them as a simple error correction was perceived, effectively, as the answer by an attentive and interested reader to what the students had to say. Thus, the constancy and diversity of propositions with which they had to exercise writing also signaled to the students that this action was not restricted to a mere graded task but, on the contrary, meant exercising a communicative activity whose required practical effects called for answers and new and more sophisticated actions. The didactic situations designed by the professors, therefore, optimized the use of literacy tools, especially in some text genres already known by students, such as e-mail messages, in order to broaden and meet communicative needs and practices which were increasingly advanced to them.

The professor showed texts which were, until then, unknown to me. A memorandum, for example, I had never seen one, and didn't even know how to do it. The same thing with e-mails in English. I had to write an e-mail every day, almost every day, every week, and their structure for e-mails here is very interesting, very good. This was very useful to me (**Adonias**).

Here, I always had a feedback from the professor, you know? For example, I always had to do anything in writing, and sent it to him through e-mail, he replied showing what was wrong, and how to make it better. So, it was very cool to have the professor's feedback. Moreover: whenever there was something right, he would also say it was ok, do you understand? ... it was very cool (**Benjamin**).

Inserted into these literacy experiences and actions, by having to assume a writing project to talk about themselves or to establish temporal and interpersonal relationships in different styles and genres, such as e-mail and memorandum, students had to go their own, individualized paths towards overcoming the initial conflicts they were faced with. On this route, taking Adonias' and Benjamin's narratives as illustrations, the investments each one had to make in the required writing tasks were motivated and mobilized by a way of using language which, until then, seemed new and different to them.

The data also allows us to state that students, in the course of the writing experiences at UCSB, started to show new investments, attitudes, opinions, and verbalizations about writing, since the old representations that guided them were already undergoing modifications. As an example of that, let us see the following excerpts.

Academic writing has a style which is to go straight to the point; it is objective, organized and... accurate! It is... accurate, that's the point! [...]. Despite being boring in the beginning, there's a detail that pleases me: After having written, let's say, 7 or 8 compositions, I realize that today I can write a composition much more quickly and more naturally than before. That's what pleases me! It is not the fact of writing the composition itself, but to see my fluency in writing (**Klaus**).

Learning how to write is an important skill to the development of the profession. The most important to me, for example, as that I could clearly see how it improved my writing (**Adonias**).

I remember the first task the professor assigned to us... It took me a lot of time to try to find the correct words and begin the sentence... Then, after having done several activities, I realize that I can write faster, and better structure the idea. So, writing well is when you know how to structure the whole of your text, having a good introduction, and end, that everything fits alright inside it and... It doesn't have to be something like, with hard words, nor with a difficult vocabulary, you only have to give the information you want to, in a simple manner, so that anyone can understand it (**Gaia**).

Klaus' statements are the most evident example here of the transformation undergone by the students' relation with writing, in the course of this exchange experience at UCSB. Constant writing practice, even if named 'composition', and suggesting a school task without suggestion of any other genre, made him notice advances in his skills, and sparked, with that, a new attitude towards that task. The transformation took place not only in his attitude, but also in the representation of writing itself, which became even more evident in the statements following Klaus'. What was previously considered only a bureaucratic task without much usefulness is now seen as an important skill for the development of the profession. The

change was motivated and undoubtedly found support in the profoundly personal experience of these subjects with knowing how to write and in the relationship with other subjects (professors and businessmen) who turned these apparently didactic experiences into true socio-communicative situations.

Whereas Klaus seems to deny the relationships existing between what he learned in his school life and his academic and professional field, Adonias realizes that such relationships are not only possible but fundamental to the success in these fields. This clearly shows how the relationship with writing, despite being socially learned and shared, does not dispense with strong subjective elements. For that reason, it is also possible to infer that Gaia, in a very particular way, understands the act of writing as an action which is put into practice in order to fulfill the structure of genres. Despite sounding as a reducing idea of writing, such understanding already represents a positive gain, as it undeniably shows her understanding that discourse/text genres have their own structures and that they are somehow recognized through such functioning structures, i.e., they constitute typified language activities (BAZERMAN, 2007).

I liked out last activity in the course a lot. It was about how to... prepare a PowerPoint presentation [...] I thought it was really practical, both for a student and for someone who wants to enter the job market, because knowing how to make a presentation is very important. Knowing how to organize ideas in a clear way and convey confidence when you're speaking. So, knowing how to organize ideas is very important (**Zenon**).

The professor gave an example of presentation... Then he showed: the introduction, three paragraphs, and the conclusion. The first slide was the introduction of what he was going to say; the other three slides were talking about each topic, which was what he was going to say, describing the steps, and the last was the conclusion, resuming the thesis and making the closing. He gave this example of the slide he had done and of the text he had also produced, so this part was really easy for us. It was really interesting! (**Benjamin**).

Zenon's and Benjamin's statements equally show signs of the representation of writing, defended by Adonias, as an important skill to the development of the profession. According to them, "knowing how to write", when used appropriately, serves as a business card for those who are inserted in this activity. By using the presentation of a task in PowerPoint to talk about the successful use of writing, Zenon shows the understanding that those who write must not only know the structure of the genres they practice, but also, and especially, according to Bazerman (2007), perform an appropriate rhetorical anticipation of their audience so as not to compromise, among other aspects, their interlocutor's comprehension and response. Although a great deal of the students' investments in writing had been initially aimed at learning English, they started to notice that only mastery of the language is not enough to act within engineering academic and professional spaces. Learning how to communicate in writing, whether in Portuguese or English, can make a big difference in various spaces of social interaction and participation, such as that of writing e-mails which was previously reported by Charles when addressed to businessmen taking part in the writing course. I can state, therefore, that the experience and knowledge built by these students point to the need of writing professors constantly reviewing the aspects that conform their

formative role to students, who, more than “raw material” for classroom work, are interlocutors under development.

Furthermore, based on the narratives above, it is worth noting that writing and orality mix with one another to meet the demands of these subjects’ academic training and their preparation to a professional experience. In this context, although the nine students interviewed had not developed an extraordinary performance in writing, all of them achieved a significant advance by realizing that developing their writing skills is necessary for them to grow in participation both within their knowledge areas and in the job market. For this task, then, it is necessary that each professor, within the possible limits of action in the university, is able to decipher the means whereby writing is, on the one hand, presented to students as an extraordinary learning resource, as was shown here regarding English, and, on the other hand, can give the opportunity of gradually inserting these subjects into a disciplinary culture (HYLAND, 2011) of their knowledge area and/or professional work (KOHENEN, 2012). About that role, McLeod and Maimon (2000, p. 579) describe teachers as “the professional already involved in the conversation [of their] community, [who task is to help] the novice, the student, enter the conversation”. It is, therefore, an extremely important task, especially for those who are beginning, just like them, since “*knowing how to write for their peers is the main means [a researcher or professional has] to obtain recognition in their area*” (MATTE; ARAÚJO, 2012, p. 107, italics in the original).

Based on what I discussed up to this point, it is possible to state that, when students have difficulties and even resist, in some cases, carrying out tasks involving writing, it is because there are fragilities regarding that social practice. Such fragilities produce an even bigger than usual anxiety and end up hindering their development as writers, as traditional school cultures still require from them a behavior which is more typical of students than of writing subjects. In other words, this means that they required from students a continuous effort for hardly mobilizing tasks that mostly focus on issues of “transcribing letters, spelling and forming sentences that follow the prescriptive grammars”, according to Bazerman (2013, p. 195), than in more comprehensive literacy actions such as those discussed by Lea and Street (2006). Hence, the investments which should have been made in writing are minimized, whereas opinions and attitudes unfavorable to this practice are strengthened, especially because the representations that guide them are almost always elaborated within the school institution and diversified by a dull learning experience about “knowing how to write” (BARRÉ-DE MINIAC, 2008), which can always be reverted as long as experiences like the one analyzed herein are offered to students.

Final Remarks

In this text, I tried to understand the fragilities and difficulties some students show in their relationship with writing, considering the dimensions of this relation that was built in the course of their personal and school trajectories. However, in order to better understand the results found herein, it is necessary to remember that every and all activity involving language, whether in its oral or written modality, is always situated and, therefore, the

literacy practices experienced by students participating in this study show some specificities. Firstly, they were experiencing another linguistic culture, where this “new” relationship with writing started to be established. Secondly, the presence of writing as a social practice and the purpose of that relationship became continuously stronger, both in academic activities they had to carry out and in the professors’ daily lives themselves, with whom they started to have daily contact due to the exchange. Finally, more than learning English through writing, they realized that they were learning to write from English. Therefore, it is undeniable that his experience served for them to achieve writing in a very different way than what they have had the opportunity since they entered the school universe, i.e., writing was presented to them not only as a learning resource but also as an important learning object for the construction of their identity.

From these school trajectories and experiences that I analyzed, I consider, as a likely conclusion, the fact that the students’ difficulty to reach a satisfactory relationship with writing lies very much on the lack of didactic situations that give them the opportunity of a legitimate intellectual, both metacognitive and metalinguistic, activity. Such aspects were markedly suggested in the statements presented, considering that, from the moment the interviewees started understanding “how”, “why”, and “what for” they should write in their knowledge area, the dimensions of their relationship with writing underwent a significant transformation (BARRÉ-DE MINIAC, 2008). Consequently, we must conclude that the teacher’s role in tackling these difficulties is indispensable and leads to the attribution of favoring a relationship with writing in which students perceive that their identities and linguistic resources built until the present are being respected and organized with other aspects of the school and/or academic culture that they need to experience in order to further develop these identities.

Although students and teachers were successful, this does not mean that other experiences of this type will not fail. Maybe what I witnessed is not even a standard writing teaching model throughout the United States but it certainly represents an effort by those who make up the UCSB extension program towards that goal. Apart from this activity, the university also has an extensive writing program that offers general education courses in the undergraduate program, as well as postgraduate courses focused on writing and pedagogy of writing. Therefore, what I learned with this experience is that the challenges that intimidate students in their learning trajectories about writing can be perfectly known and faced up to, as long as we are engaged in unveil, through research, the mysteries of this social practice and the means to undertake its learning.

Thus, I think that further studies are still needed towards this goal, since knowing the students’ relationship with writing per se is not enough to perform a “good job” as a writing teacher and/or academic research advisor (CARDOSO, 2009). It is urgent and necessary that the knowledge about this relationship can be turned into a greater care with the commitments assumed in the classroom and in other spaces where teachers work. Thus, we need to further deepen the debate by taking into account some questions: How can a teacher afford writing learning opportunities despite his/her adverse working conditions and the several contradictions that ravage the education systems in Brazil? Under such conditions, how can

one be a partner to students in this adventure called learning to write? It is therefore important that such questions are investigated, since, for writing learning to take place as efficiently as we wish, students must count on our advice and especially with the certainty that we recognize them as language subjects, even though this may have been absent from our own education process.

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Notes

ⁱ Translated by Gregório Magno Viana Oliveira. Lattes: <http://lattes.cnpq.br/3278544077664814>. Email: gregorioliveira@gmail.com

ⁱⁱ This article is the result of a postdoctoral internship and was written with support from CAPES (the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, Brazil), process BEX n. 0602/15-9. All translations are my responsibility.

ⁱⁱⁱ For these authors, although the term focuses on the study of Higher Education literacies, the concept can also apply to all educational levels, from pre-school upwards.

^{iv} Under the perspective of Social Psychology (ABRIC, 2003), representations are organized into two systems of elements: a central, and a peripheral one. The former, of a more social and cultural nature, and the latter, more related to the individual's action in groups, making it susceptible to the appearance of new elements, to the adaptation and integration of the subjects' daily experiences. Thus, socially constructed and shared experiences are assigned a particular meaning by the subjects: the meaning characterized by their desires and mobilizations.

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