A GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING RESEARCH WRITING IN A ROMANIAN EAP CONTEXT

Laura-Mihaela MURESAN
Bucharest University of Economic Studies
muresan.laura@gmail.com
Mirela BARDI
Bucharest University of Economic Studies
mirela.bardi@incontext.ro

Abstract:
Set against the backdrop of an English-medium interdisciplinary masters' in Romania, this paper describes the process of familiarising researchers with the *genre* specificity of research articles published in English language journals. Building on Swales' genre-based approach to research writing (Swales, 2004; Feak & Swales, 2009), the study includes both methodological aspects of genre-teaching / learning and an analysis of data collected through group discussion, reflecting the views of programme participants. Fully aware that it is too early to draw comprehensive conclusions, the authors hope that by integrating various perspectives, this small-scale research will further document the genre-based approach to research writing and will contribute to refining course design and methodology.

Key words:
Genre-based approach, research article, writing for publication.

1. Introduction

The academics' interest in publishing internationally, participating in international programmes, teaching via the medium of another language (L2, L3 or even L4) either at home or at a partner university abroad - are all multifaceted realities, accompanied by an ever growing need for comparable competencies, not just in one's own specialisation but also in the complex domain of communication. Much to non-linguists' surprise, sometimes, proficiency in a foreign language, in general, (e.g. English or German) is by far not enough for success, esp. when we refer to research writing for publication.

Building on the genre-based approach to research writing promoted by John Swales (2004) and the integration of corpus-informed analysis in EAP (Lee and Swales, 2006; Feak and Swales, 2009; Römer and Wulff, 2009/2010), this article illustrates the introduction of a process approach to genre teaching and learning in a Romanian academic setting.

Reflections on the current stage of developing and implementig a genre-based syllabus are complemented by an exploratory study of the target groups'

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views on the process. In agreement with Bhatia (2004) that there has been insufficient dialogue and '*collaboration between the two communities*', that of practising professionals and that of the discourse analysts/ESP and EAP-tutors (Bhatia, 2004: 160), the current study is intended as a springboard for informing future course design and refining the teaching methodology.

The next section starts with an outline of the EAP context of this case study and the target group's profile, followed by examples of operationalising the genre-based approach to research article writing in this interdisciplinary setting. The study aimed at eliciting and analysing the programme participants' views is rendered in Section 3. Overall conclusions are synthesised in the final section.

2. Framing the study: improving research article writing in a Romanian EAP context

2.1 Interdisciplinary Masters' - a case study

The case study is embedded in the framework of an interdisciplinary, English-medium masters at the Academy of Economic Studies in Bucharest: 'Research and Teacher Education for Business and Economics'. The programme was designed as a staff development initiative meant to enhance academic skills – teaching, research and educational management – as well as academic communication in English. The majority of the course participants are, therefore, academics of various specialisations within the wider field of economics or coming from related fields (e.g. business law, economic geography, etc.), with an interest in both research writing and innovative approaches to teaching, learning and evaluation. (Muresan, 2009).

As one of their main motivating factors is strengthening their presence on the international academic field, all students aim at becoming - in Swales' terms – '*broadly English proficient*' (Swales, 2004: 56). Age and length of experiene in this context do not act as differentiating factors, as there are also other combinations of variables.

As expected, when they enter the programme, the participants are at different starting points, due to varying levels of subject expertise and internationally relevant experience for advanced academic and professional communication. In addition, there is also a mix of other variables which come into play, such as English language proficiency in general, awareness of the target level of competencies to be achieved, motivation and availability to invest time and effort in order to reach the necessary level of expertise in all areas.

Even if individual priorities may differ from one stage to another, a common denominator is the participants' genuine interest in their professional development and the desire to deepen their understanding of international requirements and discourse practices, as well as to refine complex sets of skills. In the presence of such unusual students, classroom encounters can only be organized as discussion forums where all participants learn from each other. Naturally, we

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take a process approach to delivering content and to facilitating the improvement of relevant competencies, as described in the next section.

2.2 Introducing a genre-based approach to research writing in response to identified student needs

In order to help this particular group of master students - who are, at the same time, academics and researchers - to develop '*a useful range of linguistic and rhetorical proficiencies within their disciplinary cultures*' (Swales, 2004: 56), we have introduced a genre-based approach to academic and research writing, considering that *genre* is much more than a language and text description category. We have highlighted features such as its operating at the interface between language and the real world, connecting language study with disciplinary cultures. Drawing on this particular relevance of *genre* as a concept and an instrument, we have tried to facilitate a deeper understanding of how language use can be adapted to serve specific communicative purposes in a given context, in accordance with the norms and preferences of a certain discourse community. Building on Bhatia's view of *genre* as a dynamic category (Bhatia, 2004: 144-147), students have been encouraged to go beyond the static understanding of 'the code' and the information content, in order to actively integrate disciplinary knowledge with discursive competencies. This has involved paying attention to the development of 'procedural knowledge' and active 'generic competencies', so as to encourage students to exploit the generic repertoire specific to research article writing in their professional culture.

The process approach to improving writing of research articles within our masters' programme highlights text structure and choice of language in relation to the communicative purpose of the text and invites students to regard texts as a set of choices to be made by the writer in order to deliver content more convincingly. Therefore, we have been looking at research articles not as finite objects but as a process of meaning construction which involves a certain sequence of communicative stages and the use of specific language to express textual functions.

Bhatia (2008) highlights the complex nature of discourse whose analysis requires

> '*a greater integration of text-internal and text-external factors that influence and contribute to the construction, interpretation and exploitation of genres on the part of professionals to achieve their objectives in a variety of specific contexts.*' (Bhatia 2008: 162)

In our academic setting, we can consider that the very presence of economics professionals ensures the text-external factors through the contribution their subject expertise can bring to the teaching/learning situation.

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In the teaching situation described here, the students are already familiar with academic genres – in particular research articles – therefore, the objective of teaching is not to familiarize them with new genres. As academics they constantly consume such genres and write their own samples of them. The challenge is to make them better writers of research articles in order to improve their publication record. They need to become more aware of international standards and comply with those standards in their own writing. This need can be better addressed, we believe, by proposing an analysis of texts not as finite products but as choices that writers make in the process of writing. A focus on genre enables learners to understand processes of text creation and, hopefully, contributes to making them better writers.

2.3 Genre-teaching and learning with a focus on research articles: examples of classroom practice - EAP/ERP-teachers' perspective

After setting the theoretical framework and conducting awareness-raising activities designed to highlight genre differences even within the same subject field, we selected strudture of research articles as the main focus. We set out to explore their overall structuring, followed by a more detailed analysis of article abstracts, introductions and conclusions in their inter-relatedness. Practice-oriented sessions included corpus-based analysis using the 'AntConc' software.

Students were further encouraged to discover the relationship between structural elements and their communicative function in the article. For a better understanding of language as a resource the writers choose from depending on their communicative purpose, *genre*-teaching and learning included a comparative analysis of the introduction and discussion sections in a small sample of research articles, whereby students were invited to identify the communicative purpose of the respective sections and to analyse their structure by identifying various 'functional moves' within each section.

To give an example of classroom activities, we will mention that before looking at a specific article (Poelmans, S. 2001. *A Qualitative Study of Work-Family Conflict in Managerial Couples*, Research paper 445, Research Division, IESE, University of Navarra), participants were invited to reflect on their experience of writing research articles and to define the communicative purpose of the discussion section. According to this particular group of students, the discussion section of research articles has the following functions:

- to explain the meaning of results;
- to show the link between results and the intended purpose of the study (internal relevance) and the link between results and existing literature (external relevance);
- to clearly show how the results found lead to the conclusions being drawn.

The article analysis conducted in class concluded that the discussion section contains the following structural elements:

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a. restatement of the overall purpose of the study reported in the article;
b. a summary of the most important findings;
c. comparison with results of other studies in the literature;
d. pointing out the specific contribution of the study and the general relevance of results;
e. limitations of the study.

During the session, the participants (tutor and students) emphasised the fact that such structural elements do not always occur in this particular order and the generation of such lists relates to the ease of explanation rather than to the reality of the text. Identifying the structural elements has nevertheless been considered a useful exercise in raising students' awareness of how structure is constituted in the practice of writing.

The use of specific language items was also analysed (eg. modality, complex noun-phrases) by highlighting their connection with the function of specific '*moves*'. Thus, we aimed to encourage students to regard grammar as a resource to choose from in order to communicate their ideas rather than as a set of rules to be complied with, in the firm belief that it is important for students to carry out their own analysis and to regard genre as a structural menu to choose from and use according to their own purposes rather than as a straightjacket that restricts their creativity.

After the classroom experience of discussing various sections of a research article in terms of communicative purpose, structure and linguistic items, we wanted to complement our perspective, as EAP/ERP teachers and course designers, with the students' views. In agreement with the students, we recorded their perceptions about the appropriacy of this approach - as described in the next section - in order to integrate their perspective in future decision making regarding the content and delivery of the academic and research writing modules.

3. Exploring the target group's views on the process

3.1 Research purpose and methodology

The group discussion was designed and conducted in order to record the students' perceptions about the usefulness of 'genre' as a working tool in helping them to become more proficient writers of research articles.

The main research questions focused on were: (1) What aspects of their usual academic practice helps develop genre awareness and knowledge? (2) Do master students / researchers regard genre as a useful tool in teaching academic and research writing?

The answers to these questions will inform the adaptation /redesign of the academic and research writing course in order to make it more relevant to the students' needs.

The group discussion was chosen as a research instrument because of its 'natural' character. The participants have known each other and worked together

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both in and outside class (reason why we did not have a focus group according to research methodology prescriptions) and their reflection of the teaching/learning experience could only gain from the whole group presence. Whole-class and group discussion have always been the preferred mode of classroom communication throughout the MA programme, so the students would regard the group discussion as a usual type of class interaction.

We selected group discussion over individual interviews because we needed to capture a variety of ideas and perceptions and the presence of the whole group was likely to generate interaction between the group members and thus yield richer data. We were equally aware of the risk of 'groupthink' but the moderator's role was to encourage individuals who did not voice their opinions to speak up. The moderator's role was also to pursue certain innovative, unexpected or original ideas. In retrospect, one could say that participants did not hesitate to voice both their agreement and disagreement with opinions expressed during the discussion and there was one instance when a group member took the initiative to ask a question to the group about the value of writing articles in cooperation with other colleagues.

A semi-structured interview guide was designed in order to help the moderator keep track of all the issues that needed to be addressed. Apart from answering certain questions, participants were invited to comment on statements about the various functions and features of genre. Combination of direct questions and comment on statements was intended to elicit a wider range of genuine reactions and encourage most respondents to participate. The instrument was designed in an attempt to capture perceptions about:

- writers' processes of learning genres as a step towards participation to the processes, goals and activities of academia;
- the ways in which awareness of generic conventions constrain or enable good academic writing;
- the usefulness of teaching genre structure explicitly.

It needs to be said, though, that during the discussion we did not refer to 'genre' explicitly and actually avoided using such terminology because we wanted unrestricted expression of ideas. Instead we used general terms such as 'text types', 'patterns of communication', and we tried to identify the key themes in the responses we obtained and, based on those, to identify responses to our initial research questions.

Analysis of the group discussion transcript was conducted by identifying key issues which were then grouped into themes. No attempt was made at quantifying the answers because we did not expect quantification to reveal any relevant patterns.

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3.2 Results and Discussion

The outcomes of this exploratory discussion are grouped below according to the main themes addressed by the respondents:

(a) texts and challenges
(b) learning text design
(c) process of writing
(d) broad schema for academic genres
(e) compliance with conventions versus creativity
(f) awareness of the communicative purpose of a text facilitates expression of meaning
(g) learning genre by analysing samples of writing

In what follows, we will present and briefly discuss the key aspects addressed in each of these thematic areas (see the 'Interview Guide' in the Appendix).

(a) Texts and challenges

Not surprisingly, the texts that participants need to write in their professional capacity include articles (both research articles and articles for the wider educated non-specialist community), textbooks and professional books, book reviews, lesson plans and student evaluations. Lectures and conference presentations were mentioned in connection with spoken genres. Scientific blogs were identified as an emerging genre.

Difficulties with writing such texts arise from *complexity of the content* (the case of professional books which are more difficult to write than textbooks), *expectations of a highly professional readership* and *evaluation criteria employed by various journals*. One noteworthy idea put forward by the respondents is *the need to make the written texts* – irrespective of the genre or the discipline – *attractive to the audience they are intended for*. There was general agreement on this issue based on respondents' experience both as consumers and writers of academic texts.

(b) Learning text design

Knowledge about the specificity of various text types comes from multiple sources. Among these are the models provided by more senior colleagues, whose style of conference presentations or teaching methods were sometimes adopted uncritically at first and refined or abandoned with increased experience and exposure.

Learning by trial and error from their own activity of teaching and writing was identified as another major source of learning. Such a response can be considered as evidence of participants acting as reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) who constantly define their practice and learn from it.

The discussion widened to relate to learning and refining general professional skills and abilities. Several other sources of learning were identified:

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- participation in professional training courses;
- teaching of letter writing in high-school;
- participation at conferences and networking events (well-delivered presentations adopted as models);
- working in international research teams and writing specific research project documents;
- exposure to more genres and explicit training within this particular Master's programme.

This range of responses, related to research question 1, indicate that a lot of genre-learning originates in social and professional interaction. The responses show that academics develop their awareness of conventions and acceptable communication patterns through interaction with peers in local and wider international contexts. Explicit teaching is also valuable, and this particular finding informs our search for an organizing pattern of the research writing module.

(c) Process of writing

The discussion about the writing process highlights the presence of certain '*guiding questions'* that writers keep in mind when planning their writing. Several participants said they are concerned about the novelty of their writing (What contribution does this piece of writing make to the field?) while others indicated more precise questions that guide their writing:

- ✓ *What novelty do I bring?*
- ✓ *Who is my writing useful for?*
- ✓ *Who else has written on the topic putting forward similar views?*
- ✓ *Who else has written on the topic expressing opposite views?*

Most people have a plan that outlines main content elements to be addressed. The difficulty of moving from the original plan to the final text arises from the criteria for getting published and from the need to write in a foreign language. Approaches differ in terms of writing straight in the foreign language or writing in Romanian and then rephrasing in English (depending on language proficiency).

Text structure is considered the most important element in writing. Elements that help writers ensure coherence are:

- keeping in mind the initial objectives of the article, study, etc.
- keeping in mind the intended outcome.

It is worthwhile pointing out that participants have noticed that writers published in international journals tend to remind the reader of the study objectives at various stages in their article and admit that this is a good technique which they often overlook. The fact that respondents acknowledge the role of classroom sessions dedicated to analysis of research articles in developing their awareness of such text features may indicate that explicit teaching of genre characteristics is

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valuable and necessary for highlighting certain less obvious text features. While learning of major genre features can and does happen through professional interaction and exposure/participation in the development of professional practice (Wenger, 1998), more subtle text elements need to be emphasised during the teaching/learning encounter.

Writers face considerable challenges when creating professional texts. *The risk of writing too much and getting lost in detail* is one such challenge.

> '*For me an academic article looks like a tree where the trunk and main branches are fairly easy to design while the small brunches and leaves are a lot more difficult to arrange. It is mainly because of the risk of putting too many branches and too many leaves.*' (Respondent 6)

Indeed, it is often too easy to lose tract of one's writing, particularly when writing in a language other than one's own and, surprising as it may seem, this is a risk for linguistically less proficient writers. Insufficient research planning may be another cause of loss of focus.

Respondents are aware of the readers' needs (keeping in mind the audience we are writing for was constantly emphasized during classroom sessions) and point out their concern for ensuring a logical sequence of steps (particularly in reports) which the reader expects to be covered.

The issue of asking for *peer-feedback* generated interesting comments. Several respondents said they ask for feedback in order to make sure that the ideas expressed in a foreign language are clear to the reader. One respondent expressed her preference for writing academic texts in a team (at least with one other writer) because it gives her a better sense of control over the final product. Another reason is the presence of complementary skills –one writer may be more skillful with the content while the other with text formatting or presentation design. As most respondents agree, cooperation is particularly valuable in interdisciplinary activities when various perspectives are needed.

(d) Broad schema for academic genres

Exposure to certain genres (through professional activities and interactions) seems to generate a schema (expectations) for those specific genres. Therefore, *broad schema* are developed through experience and exposure. However, respondents pointed out the need for more explicit tackling of subtle, fine-drawn genre elements that are not readily accessible and which may require explicit training. This result offers a response to the second research questions and shows the need for teaching/learning of genre features through dedicated activities.

Such results may seem inconclusive in the sense that they suggest both spontaneous acquisition of genres through practice and the need for explicit teaching/learning of genre features. There is obviously a need for more empirical

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research carried out in a variety of academic contexts to support theoretical and pedagogical assumptions about the development of genre competence. The work of Freedman (1993) indicates the presence of a '*felt sense*' of certain genres and concludes that explicit teaching may not be necessary. However, the same author notices the scarcity and inconclusiveness of research into how genres are acquired and admits that different socio-cultural contexts may require different teaching/learning strategies.

The discussion introduced the idea of a *'mental template'* which people develop depending on their own understanding. This mental model is then translated into a style of writing or presenting which emphasizes the presence of a 'personal touch':

> '*We tend to organize our presentations or writing in a way which makes sense to us and which we find easy to follow.*' (Respondent 2)

These opinions create a view of genre as a set of widely-accepted conventions established though extended practice, but also a personal set of norms which may arise from the way individuals internalize and respond to those established conventions. It is a very sketchy and preliminary interpretation but it is an idea worth pursuing through further research.

(e) Compliance with conventions versus creativity

The idea of the inevitable *personal touch* brings forward the issue of compliance with mandatory elements of structure becoming a straightjacket and possibly hampering creativity. The discussion pointed out the need for a balance between observing the common core of features that define specific academic genres and maintaining enough room for creativity. One of the ideas put forward deserves particular emphasis: compliance with established conventions has a developmental role because one can only be creative once conventions are understood very well. Creativity does not mean ignoring conventions but rather mastering conventions and using them to enable richer expression (written or spoken). Writing a research article means at the same time complying with conventions and also contributing to defining those conventions.

These are very generous ideas that indicate a profound understanding of the construction and role of texts within their academic community. Ideas expressed by this particular academic group about the process and implications of text construction can be justifiably extended to most professional communities and is in line with descriptions of knowledge creation within 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1998).

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(f) Awareness of the communicative purpose of a text facilitates expression of meaning

Respondents agreed that defining the overall communicative purpose of a text at the start of the writing process offers guidance throughout the process and for this reason items (vocabulary, tense, modality, etc) that 'communicate' the function of specific language elements.

The issue of providing models (What to do and What to avoid) came up in the discussion but eventually the extent to which we can provide models was questioned on the basis of that 'personal touch' that was mentioned earlier in the discussion. Articles published in refereed journals were considered acceptable by editors, so highlighting the good features of such articles together with analysis of a larger sample of articles were suggested as ways forward.

Finally, the idea that established conventions change is particularly noteworthy. Participants pointed out the fact that no longer than 10 years ago articles in economics were more descriptive and narrative while now they tend to focus more on developing models of analysis and have a stronger mathematical element. Standards are expected to evolve and a parallel with figure skating, which is becoming increasingly more complex, was made by one participant in the discussion:

> *'There is a constant search for novelty, for being original, and so standards change…it's mainly researchers who generate these changes through their attempts to be innovative. It's the same with figure skating, where the dancers come up with more and more complex and difficult figures, not necessarily because they have to but they want to bring novelty all the time.'* (Respondent 10)

4. By way of conclusion

We were encouraged in adopting such an approach by the students' considerable professional expertise in their own fields (economics and business-related disciplines). In our attempt to analyse academic genres we have been drawing on the students' professional knowledge and knowledge of their academic culture in order to help them increase their awareness of discourse construction in their own field. Additionally, a process approach to developing writing expertise makes all participants in the learning process contribute to the pool of knowledge and perceptions that are shared in the classroom and enables us all to learn from each other.

Therefore, the suggestions resulting from the small-scale study presented above are extremely valuable for two reasons. On the one hand, they provide insights into perceptions about the process of learning and using academic genres of members of established academic communities. On the other hand, the data is useful for the design of an academic writing course as very insightful and clear guidelines were brought forward. Expectations were clearly articulated and the

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profound understanding of text production indicates the huge developmental potential of this group of students.seems to be the most important element of genre. However, there was agreement that other elements (such as awareness of the audience expectations, elements of structure, specific language tems) are equally important because they all have a role in the expression of meaning. Discourse needs to be adapted to specific audiences (eg talking to high school students about current economic phenomena required adaptation of vocabulary and definition of concepts) and the ability to do so increases with experience.

(g) Learning genre by analyzing samples of writing

Looking at the ways in which other writers organize their writing and deal with established conventions was considered a very useful exercise and a suitable type of activity for developing writing competence. Respondents acknowledged the need to write more structured articles and agreed that analysis of 'real-life examples' (ie articles published in refereed journals) represents a step forward in their attempt to improve writing of academic genres in a foreign language. They suggested that classroom work should concentrate on analyzing every section of a research article in turn by looking at structure elements and specific language

Limitations

The study captures the opinions of one particular group of academics involved in a process of professional development and for this reason is very limited in scope. At the time when the interview was conducted we had barely adopted a genre approach to teaching academic writing and the students' experience of working with this category was limited. We could not, therefore, measure students' progress after introducing this approach nor can we draw, based on our findings, any conclusions about the usefulness of genre as a teaching tool in our context.

However, the complexity and insightfulness of results could make the study relevant for a wider audience and for research in the teaching of academic genre. Many generous ideas were expressed in this small corpus of data which are worth pursuing by investigation of other academic communities and contexts.

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Appendix
Interview Guide

1. What sort of texts do you need to produce, in speaking or writing, in your academic capacity? You can choose from the list and add anything which is not there.
   Research articles
   Textbooks
   Book review
   Professional books
   Research proposals
   Recommendations
   Staff appraisal interviews/reports
   Conference presentations
   Correspondence
   Blogs
   Lecture
   Feedback to students
   Financial reports

[*In bold – text types suggested by respondents in addition to the list provided*]

2. How difficult/easy do you find it to produce any of these types of texts? Are some more difficult than others? Which are the main difficulties/unproblematic aspects?

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3. How did you acquire/develop knowledge about the specificity of these text types? (learning writing in school, from colleagues, from reading similar texts, explicit teaching)
4. How do you approach the process of writing a research article? (Which aspects do you establish first? How do you proceed? Are you aware of the purpose of each section? What do you look for when you revise the text?
5. To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
   Structure is the most difficult part of writing, no matter whether you are writing a novel, a play, a poem, a government report, or a scientific paper. If the structure is right then the rest can follow fairly easily, but no amount of clever language can compensate for a weak structure. Structure is important so that readers don't become lost.
   What elements do you take into account in relation to the structure of your text?
6. To what extent do you agree with the following statement:
   People have a '*felt sense'* of prevailing genres. We have an initial *broad schema for academic discourse, a sense of shape, structure, rhetorical stance.*
7. Which of the following elements of genre help you with your writing?
   - awareness of the audience
   - the communicative purpose of the text as a whole
   - functional elements of structure
   - specific language depending on the overall communicative purpose
8. Is genre a useful tool that helps your creativity or is it rather a straightjacket? Do you think there is too much emphasis on conventions of writing which do not encourage creativity?
9. To what extent was it a useful exercise to analyse an article and see how elements of structure and language are expressed in specific articles? (Think of what we did in class)
10. What further support do you need in familiarising yourself with genre characteristics with a view to enabling you to become more proficient writers?

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