

HOW DO OUR STUDENTS COPE WITH WRITING? SUGGESTIONS AND PROPOSALS FOR SOME DIDACTIC ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

Writing skills are firstly acquired through formal education in schools and universities and these institutions do play a key role in pupils' and students' education. In this modern world where we live in, by saying someone can read and write we are not simply referring to the ability for not being illiterate. Nowadays we judge people as literate, in other words, if they can read and write in certain situations and for certain purposes. This means the person is able to be creative by organizing his plan of writing in an aesthetic way. In this new approach, the experience of the recent years has shown that a lot of incoming undergraduates from the high schools “cannot write”. In spite of the school they are coming from, some of the new students show up a lot of problems. These are the difficulties that their university teachers have to face up with. The university which is aiming the highest level of knowledge, by building the “writing habit”, finds itself in a situation where it is necessary to deal with a poor and inappropriate linguistic level. So the university task somehow is transformed in a recuperative activity. However, most of the time the university teachers do not accept to get themselves back in these activities and keep complaining, by being critical to their students' poor performance in preparing different essays, projects and diploma thesis. In this paper we conclude that it is very important that every teacher should provide a friendly and a stress-free environment, where all the students feel equally involved in. By acting as the student's motivator and feedback provider, the teacher should offer a diversity of didactic activities which aim to improve the student's writing skills. Some suggestions with didactic character have been given not to advice the teachers, or to tell them what to do, which way to follow, what teaching methods to use or what kind of exercises to use. The main purpose is to draw attention to the main difficulties that students who learn the Italian language present in writing, as well as the problems of correction and the assessment of writing skills. Teachers can use forms and methods that they consider that best suit the class and the level of students they have, based on different needs and situations.

Keywords: *writing skills, students, teachers, approaches, didactic activities*

Introduction:

In everyday life written communication is replaced with the oral communication. As Balboni explains nowadays only professionals like journalists, writers, and poets write. Even

written correspondence is already replaced by telephone messages. The only type of written communication that is increasingly spreading among people is the electronic mail. So, written work is far away from our reality and for that reason we naturally arise the question: "What serves written work for"? We should not forget the fact that communication is a system and as such a thing, each network node is connected to the others and depend on them, drawing for each linguistic level the right choices. These choices include the type of written text, making to reflect over the rules with creative and cultural character.

Aim of study/research:

Emphasizing the importance of the problems of writing with the aim of structuring the course of learning to effectively create a written text.

Research topics:

To have an overview of the Albanian reality regarding the writing activity, different works performed by the third grade students of a middle school have been considered. The given tasks are referring to the writing activities that are normally being held during a class hour, such as completing an essay, writing a letter or completing a text. The selection of the third grade students is supported by two reasons:

1. By having a better lexical competence, the students of this grade can complete the given task in such a level that enables a further analyzing of the problematic features.
2. This is the main group of students who take the exam of certifying the language level, in which the above mentioned skills and abilities are tested.

Research questions:

How do our students cope with Writing?

Scientific methods:

To conduct the study there were used: literature review, observation, analysis of written works. It has been largely based on the studies and the researches of the most prominent Albanian methodists and linguists and mainly in those of Italian, French and English ones. More over, for further analyses, colleagues who teach in schools, have been asked to make writing activities with their students. It has been referred to writing activities that are commonly made in our schools dictated by the curriculum and the teacher's own data, those that are closer the writing, to master CELI certificate 3. It is recalled here that for the possession of this certificate in the written exam an important place occupies an argumentative or descriptive topic as well as a personal letter that might be formal or informal.

As claimed by the recent year's studies, writing is a complex and personal communicating process, which is strongly connected to a certain context and a special reader. Writing means to organize our thoughts and opinions in a text form, i.e. as an organic,

coherent and well structured unity. This is because we write for a certain reader and therefore we have to transmit or communicate our thoughts in a clear, logical and understandable way. By writing we express our opinions; by connecting different concepts along with a proper combination of the lexical elements, we modify and improve our mental structure.

According to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1995), “an essay is the most difficult task a person is being asked to complete”. However, as Como (2002) states, “tiredness and the energy spent in writing are counterbalanced by the joy that comes with it and this feeling consists in a well organized opinion and an understandable one”.

Krashen says that “by writing something, we express our opinions and our cognitive structures. The reinforcement of our cognitive structures leads to the learning process in general” (Kashen 1984).

Widdowson states that “the transition from oral communication to that in a written form, saying from an interacting and a mutual process to an independent and a more latent one, introduces the greatest difficulty to the one who is learning to write” (Widdowson 1996).

Expressing an individual interaction in a text form, means to learn how to play a double role, to be prepared for the possible reactions of the readers, to give the information in such a way that enables you to deal with a cognitive lack of the argument given, to organize your thought in order for it to get thorough in a clear and easy way.

The professional writers follow up a nonlinear approach and keep adjusting themselves to the syntax rules, either in a conscious or a non conscious way; this is a continuous reaction associated with the different stages of the writing, including planning, re-writing, re-formulation, re-reading and the correction.

Many students who take on writing are not aware of the stages required by it and face up a lot of difficulties. This is because they do not follow up a proper process. As a result, sometimes they skip or miss out important stages of it. In order for their writing to be effective and to fulfill their expectations, it is very important for them to reflect and make themselves aware of the stages they should follow.

A lot of studies concerning the writing skills have enlightened the mental processes followed up by the expert writers; this is to help the beginners by giving them some properly structures teaching forms. Their findings have postponed the attention from the product to the process and from the word to the text.

In spite of the fact that the ability to write is very personal and changes from a subject to the other, it is possible to end up in a structured form of a teaching method, which makes it easy for the non expert students to effectively create a text. The majority of the studies concerning the ability to write originate from the ones concerning the writing process in one’s mother tongue. Systematic studies regarding the process of writing in a foreign language are of little extend and there is still no specific theory about it.

The didactic of writing in a foreign language should refer to that of writing in one’s mother tongue by adapting (and matching) the most accepted and wide spread theory – *the Process Approach Theory* –with the specific features of writing in a foreign language¹.

The first important studies with the reference to the special features emerging during the process of writing in a foreign language come from the 1980s and they exclusively belong to the Anglo-Saxon and American region. Different studies are carried out according to the inductive method – *Case Study Approach* – i.e. by firstly investigating certain cases, and then concluding in some general principles. Although not systematic and sometimes in contrary

¹ Benigni. L., *Il dibattito sulla valutazione tra passato e presente*. (atti di seminario).

with each other, these findings are very interesting regarding the differences and/or the analogies between the process of writing in one's mother tongue, and that of writing in a foreign language. Regarding the features and characteristics of the process of writing in a foreign language, these results can be classified into the following three groups:

- i. The difficulties of writing in a foreign language are too much connected with the lack of expertise and competence in writing in one's mother tongue, and not only with that of writing in a foreign language. Therefore it is evident that a well developed writing ability is needed prior to the attempt of writing in a foreign language. If so, the procedure of writing in one's mother tongue is then transferred into that of writing in a foreign language. Those who write in a foreign language are strongly supported by what they are able to perform in their own first language. According to Krashen, an effective ability to write in one's mother tongue not only simplifies the process of writing in a foreign language, but it offers an useful tool for the writers' intellectual progress, which then can be transferred in the process of learning other languages (Krashen 2004).
- ii. The procedures of writing in a foreign language differ from those used in one's mother tongue, regarding to the lexical and the syntactical system used. The major problems due to the writing process in a foreign language, moreover, are connected with the limited lexical competences, which can damage and sacrifice the process of writing.
- iii. The pressure exerted by the first language on the second language can have undesirable effects, because it negatively affects the lexical and morphological-syntactical system of the latter one. In spite of that, not all the resulting errors are always connected to the influence of the first language. The interference of the lexical system of the first language is often related to the fact that the one who is writing is forced to finish up his task without gaining the necessary lexical competence.

According to Zamel², the teaching methodology of the writing skills is still based on the limited and mechanical models: the grammar is taught because it is considered as a fundamental importance in the learning process of writing; the organization and the general characteristics of the best writing models are analyzed and the students are then required to complete some similar texts. The greatest concern regarding the teaching methods of writing is still related to the form of it.

Furthermore in the didactic methodology of writing in a foreign language, the teachers tend to be very demanding at the expense of the writing process. The main objectives for achieving a correct writing of the language are still those of assimilating grammar and syntax, which are both such aspects that are very well regulated by exact norms and rules. The student should master the sentence before going to the paragraph and then the latter one before completing a longer text.

During the evaluation process of the students' work in a written form, the teachers' main concern is related to the grammar problems and they do pay little attention to those related to the meaning of it.

Raimes goes further by saying that "the given exercises normally are aiming a correct use of the language, but they are of no help in developing the writing skills of the students". According to this author, "instead of this, the real needs for the students of foreign languages are to write in a realistic way; to develop the concept of the paragraph; to learn how to express themselves in a written form and to work out in shaping of their ideas". This is so,

² Zamel. V., *The composing processes of advanced ESL students: Six case studies* (1983).

because Raimés thinks that even in a foreign language: “Writing means to express someone’s thoughts and to deliver a meaning. Writing means to think” (Raimés 1983).

Grammatical considerations along with rhetoric forms should be used to clearly and effectively express the writer’s ideas and intentions. Writing as a learning activity means to have as a starting point neither the grammar, nor the form, but the content of it. It also means to be aware of the three components of the communicative triangle, i.e. the writer, the reader and the text.

According to Zamel (1987), to develop the writing skills of the students, either in their own first language, or in a second language, it is necessary to change the context of the traditional form of writing. It is also very important for the students to have a positive attitude and not a stressful one, regarding the writing activity. The teacher should facilitate the students’ task by offering them numerous possibilities in writing for different purposes and by aiming different readers. This can be done by organizing helpful and motivating activities, which can help the students to consider the writing activity as a moment to create some certain content.

To have an overview of the Albanian reality regarding the writing activity, different works performed by the third grade students of a middle school have been considered. The given tasks are referring to the writing activities that are normally being held during a class hour, such as completing an essay, writing a letter or completing a text. The selection of the third grade students is supported by two reasons:

1. By having a better lexical competence, the students of this grade can complete the given task in such a level that enables a further analyzing of the problematic features.
2. This is the main group of students who take the exam of certifying the language level, in which the above mentioned skills and abilities are tested.

In the majority of the analyzed works, it can be seen that writing in Italian language is connected with different problems regarding the form and the content of it. Those problems are of different types: orthographical, morphological, lexical and syntactical errors. The written works are characterized by the lack of a clear opening and/or closing part of the text. Sometimes the paragraphs are not properly connected to each other. Very often you can find numerous sentences with no importance, which can be easily removed from the text. Some of the supporting examples and arguments given are not complete. Different problems are seen regarding the coherence and cohesion of the text as a whole, and in special cases a logical structure is missing. One can frequently find repeated words and very long sentences. Sometimes the writing is unclear and it deviates from the main issue.

Regarding the teacher’s attitude towards the process of writing, there are some issues which can be improved too. Instead of asking the students to finish a piece of writing straight way (as it randomly happens), the teacher can give them enough time to brainstorm different ideas in a continuous process of planning, drafting, re-planning and re-drafting. By acting as a motivator, the teacher should also encourage the students to carry on writing even after they have completed their studies.

Conclusions:

- As with the other skills, the most important factor in the writing activity is an active participation of the students during the teaching process. A pragmatic method is needed to motivate the students for such an activity.

- The teacher must have clear ideas regarding the objectives he intends to realize; this can be done by choosing the proper instruments and strategies and the necessary sources to facilitate the learning process. An active participation of the students along with an effective learning can be achieved by a pragmatic coordination of the objectives for the learning process with the students' needs, the teaching materials, the proper strategies and the selected evaluation criteria.
- Aiming a qualitative writing does not end up in having a theoretical understanding of different types of the text or that of the grammatical rules. It is also necessary to apply different procedures and strategies and to develop a sense of lexical reflection.

Recommendations:

The initial phase of writing can cause difficulties, so the students can work in groups to formulate concepts and ideas for the argument. They should make a plan before they start working. Individual plans can be compared to the group before they start writing. By working in groups, students make a variety of questions about the topic. This helps to focus the attention on specific aspects of the special argument that interests the reader. The answers of the questions form the basis of writing.

The teacher helps students develop ideas and concepts by encouraging them efficiently. Students write as fast as possible on the argument for 10 minutes, without worrying about linguistic form and the punctuation. If they do not remember a word can leave a vacancy or they can write in their own language. Then they go on with the revision of the text. The students work in groups and together they give ideas and concepts. Writing by collaborating is effective for the learning as it is integrated with other skills. Then the students, after having read or heard a story or dialogue can write based on different perspectives.

The students retrieve the notes that they have taken or written in the pre-writing phase and organize them. "Which should be written firstly?" "Why?" Here is the opportunity to remind them that they should always start with what the reader knows before moving in what he doesn't recognize.

It's good that students often share written works and evaluate each other's work. This is because in reality we often ask friends and colleagues to read texts for correcting any errors. At this stage it may also be required to correct, reduce, or modify the text for a more efficient display/presentation.

In fact, writing in a foreign language is not a skill that is taught separately from the other skills. What a student should learn to build a dialogue, a letter, a text teller, etc., despite the difficulties associated with spelling, is what he must learn to understand the spoken language, to speak and to read.

Starting from the analysis of the correction of errors in students' written works, it is believed that it is important for the teachers to involve students in selfcorrection.

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