

SOME THOUGHTS ON WRITING SKILLS

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Writing is one of the central pillars of language learning and should be of major interest and concern to teachers, students and researchers. This paper is intended to be a plea for writing and explores issues regarding instruction and evaluation of writing skills of nonnative speaker students. It examines expectations of nonnative speakers writing quality and performance on writing proficiency exams, as well. Finally, it is trying to ring a bell about this skill that has been neglected in spite of its importance when it comes to foreign language acquisition.

Key word concepts: language, English, teacher, student, writing, skills

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General background. Of all the language skills, writing is the most difficult challenge for language teachers because students have less experience with written expression. Stimulated by audio-visual materials throughout their lives, students are novices in the discipline of writing. Making writing an ongoing part of foreign language acquisition from the first day in class will help ensure student success.

The purpose of learning a language is to improve the learner's four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, to achieve the ultimate goal of mastering the language. Every time skills are mentioned, they are ordered according to the moment they occur in the teaching-learning process. Writing is the skill that has to be well approached only after the other previous three have already been employed. Nevertheless, it seems that because it is the last one in the series, most of the times it remains neglected.

Why are writing skills important?

First of all, writing skills help the learner to become independent, comprehensible, fluent and creative in writing, important abilities which help learners put their thoughts in a meaningful form and to mentally tackle the message in a proper manner.

When it comes to writing in a foreign language, it is even more challenging. Writing English clearly is an important goal for all English learners. It is not only because writing well- be it your own language, or a foreign one - clarifies your mind and orders your thoughts, but also because the ability to represent yourself well on paper will help you secure a job in the future.¹¹⁵ Most multinational firms use English to communicate with clients. Professional staff regularly have to write documents in English, although they are not native speakers. Despite having a good level of spoken English, many of them have not considered the elements of good writing. Therefore, most of them tend to write as they speak, or to translate from their first language. The outcome is documents which are unclear to the reader or use an inappropriate style. There are also often grammatical mistakes caused by first language interference.

Moreover, how you write, the style, cohesion, tone, attitude say a lot about you as a person, and headhunters, employers know this. It is not just what is on the paper that distinguishes one resume from another in a competitive job market. Presentation, clarity, and professionalism in a foreign language can help distinguish you from the rest. Thus, good English writing can open doors in almost any field you might choose in the future (as not so many people can write it well). A survey conducted among 64 American companies revealed that half of them pay

¹¹⁵ Paige Johnson Tan, *The Importance of Writing Well: A Justification and How-to Guide*, <http://people.uncw.edu/tanp/writingwell.html>

attention to writing when considering a person for employment or promotion.¹¹⁶ That is why, nowadays, the growing trend worldwide is oriented toward establishing stricter standards of writing proficiency, an issue that directly affects students who are nonnative speakers of English. Whether you are a teacher of English, a student or a businessperson, (academic) writing skills are necessary in today's world. All kind of papers, like essays, reports, presentations, research papers, to pick up just some examples of documents, need to be written in the correct style, so to say the academic style, which would be the final target. When used appropriately, the academic style presents a polished and professional image.¹¹⁷

Traditionally, institutions have attempted to address nonnative speakers writing needs differently, and where it may once have been possible for nonnative students to graduate without being expected to write as well as students who are native English speakers today's trend mandate (theoretically, at least) that they be held to the same standards of writing proficiency as native speakers.

"While trying to improve math, science, and technology in our schools, we've neglected writing," said Commission member Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, which founded the Commission on writing in America¹¹⁸. "Writing is a fundamental professional skill. Most of the new jobs in the years ahead will emphasize writing. If students want professional work in service firms, in banking, finance, insurance, and real estate, they must know how to communicate on paper clearly and concisely."¹¹⁹ And this is said by Americans about English, their native language. Writing in a foreign language poses a lot more other problems, as speakers of different languages have different writing challenges that come from their own native language. Writing well in English can make the difference when finding a job. Speaking of jobs, nowadays applicants are asked for proofs, real document to support their declared knowledge of English. So learners have to sit for all kind of tests that assess their ability to use English, writing skills included.

How to improve writing skills? They are not just a set of basic skills people are taught at school. Writing and reading, listening and speaking are an integral part of each educated individual's life since they all mean communication. Written communication, in its turn, is another tool for people to express their ideas, and learn about those of others. Writing well is sure to earn respect.

Like all learning problems, difficulties in writing in a foreign language can be devastating to a student's education and self-esteem. If a learner fails to develop certain basic skills, he will be unable to write with the speed and fluency required to excel as these demands increase. Usually the normal steps in the progress of the learning process are tests and all sort of exams that are to prove their level of English. Writing is part of these tests. Paradoxically, this skill is not so much taught, rehearsed, improved even if everybody seems aware of the importance of writing, as shown above. Tests and language exams reveal this flaw of the instruction process. When preparing for them, students find themselves unequipped with the necessary knowledge to pass these exams. Not to mention what happens after graduation, when they actually need to get employed, so it is no longer about sitting for an optional exam like PET, CAE, BEC, TOEFL etc. Finding out the reasons for which learners consider writing a more difficult skill to approach and teachers, equally as a more challenging task to teach can be of a great help to overcome these shortcomings of the instruction process.

¹¹⁶ Alla Kondrat, *Importance of Good Writing*, 21 March 2009 http://www.suite101.com/reference/good_writing

¹¹⁷ Business Writing Seminars, www.linguarama.com/brochure/pdfbrochures

¹¹⁸ The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges is a blue-ribbon group of leaders from public schools, higher education, and the business and writing communities.

¹¹⁹ Writing Skills Necessary for Employment, Says Big Business, http://www.writingcommission.org/pr/writing_for_employ.html

Naturally, for many English students learning to write fluently in English is much more challenging than learning to speak fluently. Even for advanced level learners, written communications can come much more slowly in English than spoken communications. The reasons for this are as follows: written communication is more formal, spoken communication allows for more 'mistakes', expectations are much higher for formal written English. Another reason for which some individuals might find it difficult or impossible to write, is that written language takes on many different *registers* depending on the function of the written word. Often, these functions are totally foreign to spoken language and can thus be considered 'artificial' to the speaker. These functions are often only used in written speech and are therefore even more abstract to some individuals than the already difficult transcription of simple spoken language into an alphabet.

Learning some basic tips of effective writing can help the learners. Effective writing:

- is focused on the topic and does not contain unnecessary or loosely related information;
- has an organizational pattern that enables the reader to follow the flow of ideas because it contains a beginning, middle, and end and uses transitional devices;
- contains supporting ideas that are developed through the use of details, examples, vivid language, and mature word choice;
- follows the conventions of standard written English (i.e., punctuation, capitalization, and spelling) and has variation in sentence structure.

Consequently, the whole writing activity should be reconsidered and structured in ways that help students learn to produce cohesive and coherent discourse on their way to become self-sponsors of their own writings. Writing tasks should not remain mere 'compulsory' tasks that just have to be done by both students and teachers as well; writing activities can turn into challenging, interesting, creative moments of the teaching-learning process.

Of course, there are differences between a research paper, a memo, and an answer on an essay exam; students may like some of these activities and reject others. However, they all share certain common features: they go somewhere; they argue something; they have a direction and it is only the teacher's task to draw the student's attention and to raise the student's interest towards writing.

Students need to be able to write all type of tasks; they have to be aware of the limits between formal and informal style, they have to develop the ability to recognize the audience expectations and requirements. In order to achieve all these, there are issues to be approached, and clarified and here is the moment and the time of the teacher. The learner has to be conducted so as to raise his awareness on the audience, to develop his/her academic writing skills (outlining, summarising, reporting and arguing, paraphrasing and synthesizing), he needs to be given some theoretical knowledge about writing from which he will later on benefit, he has to become aware of the issues such as the differences between written and spoken language, coherence, etc. Unfortunately, at almost all levels of the educational process, our system lacks all the above mentioned aspects. There is a kind of inexplicable reluctance and sometimes even fear of approaching writing. And it is maybe just because teachers themselves did not go through such kind of a training themselves. Academic writing is the ultimate goal and challenge of both teachers and learners.

Academic writing is formal writing. Most of the written pieces students are asked to produce refer to this particular style of expression. Many novice writers find it difficult to distinguish informal writing from formal writing. Informal writing is just at hand because it is more familiar. Informal writing is fine for diaries, blogs, personal letters or emails to friends. However, students working on papers for school, exams, scientific papers, presentations, business writing generally are required a more formal style.

Academic writing skills, can, anyway, be learnt, improved if students focus on several key areas; it differs from writing in high school.

1. Essay writing. It is interesting to notice that in most of the cases when teachers actually teach writing, we have to deal with the so-called ‘five-paragraph theme’ which is really a good thing. Students know that such a writing assignment begins with something general, narrows down in the middle to discuss specifics, and then branches out to more general comments at the end. In the classic five-paragraph theme, the first paragraph starts with a general statement and ends with a thesis statement containing three issues; each body paragraph discusses one of the issues in turn, whereas the final paragraph sums up what the student has written. It is a great way of learning how to write an academic essay; it is the easier or simpler version of the academic writing that requires stating an idea and supporting and arguing it with evidence. “Writing five-paragraph theme is like riding a bicycle with training wheels”¹²⁰ and the difference between high school writing and further academic writing probably relies on that in high school the stress is on the who, what, when, where, whereas further academic writing asks the student to think the how and why.

Students have to know certain technical aspects of writing an essay, for example. They need a little bit of theory as input, somehow like a prefabricated recipe that they can adapt, improve, and feel free to employ whenever they are asked to write.

The title of the paper should suggest not just the topic of the paper but also the thrust of the argument, if possible. An essay of longer than three pages should probably have a title, or covering, page. This should include, at a minimum, the title of the paper, student’s name, the course name and number, teacher’s name and date of submission.

The Opening A good paper should have an opening that is interesting to the reader. It has to be something intriguing that you can grab the reader’s attention.

The Main Statement of the Essay A thesis statement should also be included in the opening as well; it briefly presents the main argument of the essay (this may be a how or why answer, a policy recommendation, or an opinion). Importantly, after the thesis statement, the paper should then tell the reader how the writer intends to demonstrate his argument or justify the opinion or recommendation asserted (an important aspect that many authors forget).

The Body In the body of the paper, the student should support his thesis. It is important after each point to link back to the thesis and refresh the reader with what you have told him so far. *The Conclusion* should not bring any new information. Rather, the conclusion should re-state the main thesis and show the reader how it has been demonstrated.

There are some common problems students should be let known of. For instance, writing a *paragraph* is not a natural skill, but a learned skill. Students should simply follow a structure: paragraph usually containing a general idea in one sentence, and 4 - 5 supporting sentences which expand this idea by giving explanation, details, and examples to support the main idea. Paragraphs are used to separate main ideas. A new paragraph signals to the reader that a new idea is about to be discussed.

Spelling becomes a widely spread reason why people dislike writing. However, it does not mean that we take it for granted and do nothing with language learners to improve the situation. Spelling, as any other language skill has to be given our thorough attention. Some people are naturally good spellers. Others worry about spelling but they have to realize that correct spelling is really only vital when we are writing final copies of assignments or other documents. The most important thing to remember about spelling is that it's a skill you learn by writing and seeing the words on the page. Proofreading is the key to a correct spelling.

Summarising and *paraphrasing* are difficult skills to acquire for our students at the beginning of the writing activity, since our education does not emphasise them properly.

On the other hand, the after-writing steps are also extremely important for; consequently, students should be introduced to *strategies* such as revision, peer feedback, critical evaluation

¹²⁰ *College Writing*, <http://www.unc.edu/dept>, last visited 10 April 2010

and group work gradually and the teachers should show the students the beneficial sides of these procedures, since our students seem neither familiar, nor inclined towards group work and critical evaluation.

2. *Formal letters.* A totally different story is that of writing technical, formal documents, like letters, memos, reports, that students tend to consider as easier assignments. Nevertheless, students seem to come to such conclusions only after having been presented a basic, simple, and clear summary of writing rules. In English there are a number of conventions that should be used when writing a formal letter, starting with its layout, the right place and content of the address, date, references. Furthermore, the letter should be as simple and as clear as possible; its length should be correct, not longer than necessary, whereas contractions proper to informal writing should be avoided.

The first paragraph should be short and state the purpose of the letter (be it an enquiry, request, memo or complaint etc).

The body of the letter should contain the relevant information that initiated the writing of the letter. Most of letters in English are not very long, so retain only the essential information; ideas should occur logically, clearly and cohesively.

The Last paragraph of the formal letter should state what action you expect the recipient to take. In addition, students have to be aware of the difference between formal and informal styles of writing. Even within academic writing, there are different levels. Good writers think about their purpose in writing and their readers when deciding how formal their text should be. It might help students a lot to imagine a sliding scale which measures the level of formality.

Extremely informal -----Extremely formal

Eg. diary, reminder

Eg. legal document

The facts tackled above represent only a very concise way of presenting a formal letter; this, together with samples and then the actual work on the composition are the stages towards exquisite pieces of writing. They are necessary; otherwise, set in front of a task (like the one below¹²¹) learners find it almost impossible to achieve it at the required level. The task does not seem extremely complicated. Still, taking a look at the right column we can see what is being actually assessed. If students are not familiar with this type of approach, they can easily fail. Sometimes the trouble is that teachers themselves are not prepared enough to train students, to support them and finally to assess their work.

<p>Question</p> <p>A restaurant in your region is to open shortly and the owner has placed the following advertisement in your local newspaper:</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px 0;"> <p>RESTAURANT STAFF NEEDED...</p> <p>...For a busy restaurant located in the main tourist area</p> <p>number of vacancies available, including:</p> <p>Junior Chef</p> <p>Waiter/Waitress</p> </div>	<p>Content</p> <p>Should mention the post applied for, relevant skills and previous exp and personal qualities. Could also mention when available to attend interview.</p> <p>Range</p> <p>Language suited to a letter of application, e.g. correct use of present past simple tenses for describing past experience(s). Standard expres as 'I am writing with reference to...'; 'I look forward to hearing from 'Should you need further information....'</p>
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¹²¹ The complete text of the assignment is taken as proof from Certificate in Advanced English Paper 2 Writing, www.flo-joe.co.uk/cae/students/writing, last visited 12 April 2010.

<p>Restaurant Manager</p> <p>Hours of work: 6 - 12pm, Mondays to Saturdays.</p> <p>Please send us a letter explaining which post you are interested in. We should consider you for the job. Interviews will be held a week from the date.</p>	<p>Organisation</p> <p>Should have the layout of a formal letter, with appropriate beginning and ending (e.g. 'Dear Sir or Madam', 'Yours faithfully'). Should be written in the first paragraph. (e.g. 'I am writing to apply for the post of restaurant manager, which was advertised in The Daily Gazette'). The second, third (and possibly fourth) paragraphs should describe your relevant experience and personal qualities as well as your general suitability for the job.</p> <p>N.B. In the exam there is no need to write addresses.</p>
<p>Write the letter of application. (Around 220-260 words).</p>	<p>Register</p> <p>Fairly formal. Should be consistently polite throughout.</p> <p>Target reader</p> <p>The reader would be persuaded that the applicant had the right experience, and would consider inviting the applicant for an interview.</p> <p>Language accuracy</p> <p>Should not contain major errors that lead to misunderstanding by the reader.</p>

The teacher's attitude toward correction, the way in which he offers it to students, and students' own feelings about the teacher in general are significant factors in the effectiveness of the writing process. Teachers should focus more on process and give multi-draft assignments; they should teach students how to use feedback to improve their writing skills. Moreover, teachers should provide feedback that addresses the specific needs and expectations of students. Some students need feedback on the content, style, and rhetoric; others may use corrective feedback of their lexical and grammatical expression.

Conclusion The paper has stated some thoughts about the teaching of writing in the nowadays context oriented toward establishing stricter standards of writing proficiency; it suggested some ways for teachers to help students become better in their writing, be creative and competent. It is a necessity for writing activities to be structured in ways that help students learn to produce cohesive and coherent discourse on their way to become better writers and critics of their own writings. Finally, the primary focus of writing practice should not be only on the correct word or phrase, but on the whole communication process that help improve the quality and image of the student himself.

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