

TOWARDS ESSAY WRITING

Introduction to writing

In the process of second language acquisition learners are confronted with acquiring different skills, to obtain a successful performance of this target language. Among these skills, relevant in language learning, writing plays a vital role. As in speaking, writing is an affirmation of the ability to use the language. This skill shows the learner's knowledge of grammatical rules and his/her ability to perform and use the language for communicative purposes.

Writing – putting our thoughts on paper! This saying is very common, familiar and at the first glance, extremely simple. However profundity and difficulty of this process lies in the very first phase. In fact, if we consider the primary particles that will eventually be transformed into a written composition of specific style, we will see that in that first phase we are faced with chaos. That existing chaos in our head consists of numerous rules and elements of the target language and certain strain and will are what is necessary to create order and produce a successful composition. It is in the power of the teachers, as guides, to create in students a positive learning attitude so that they can acquire this knowledge of skills. The role of a teacher or a lecturer is, if not the most, then at least second most significant aspect of language acquisition.

Provided that students have adequate teaching and guidance, another, maybe most decisive aspect of language learning is the program realized by the teaching curriculum. If that program enables sufficient and equal exposure of learners to all the skills this process consists of, we can be quite sure that proper, and successful acquisition will take place. Nevertheless there may be inequality in the exercises devoted to each skill of reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Unfortunately the teaching curriculum in secondary education programs seriously lacks the emphasis on writing essays, when the subject of English language is concerned. This insufficient presence of essay writing in the teaching program is not of such great significance at that stage. However, having decided to continue their education in the field of this foreign language, students face great challenges at university. They are confronted with extreme difficulty in producing written compositions at the academic level. The errors/mistakes common to their written work range from basic concepts of essay construction, through grammatical ones, and all the way to inadequate styles of writing. These errors as presented above have also been assembled in order of their importance.

Common errors

Allow us primarily to reflect on the essence of **essay development**. Not being able to practice the construction of essays, these students are unfamiliar with the division among the major parts of the essay. That simple division into an introduction, body and conclusion represents a great challenge to them. Setting aside the enormous number of rules that they must constantly keep on their mind as they write, this organization of ideas into different paragraphs is an additional strain placed upon them. Interestingly enough they are unaware of the parts of the essay even though these parts are unanimous to essay writing in any language, therefore in their mother tongue as well.

Following those errors, **grammatical errors** are the ones that create further problems for them. Even in the situation when they have great, productive ideas to present, if they lack grammatical knowledge of sentence constructions their effort is useless. Within these difficulties there are also problems in spelling, vocabulary choice, not to mention the irregularities in verbal forms and tenses.

Finally, students in secondary schools are slightly aware, if not completely unaware of the register of **formal and informal styles of writing** when producing a composition. As knowledge in this field is not of crucial importance at that point, few teachers stress the difference. Therefore freshmen at the university experience additional confusion in being able to grasp the aspects of these styles, let alone use them.

With the existing problem it is inevitable that a student of the first year at university will produce an essay similar to this following one.

Sample essay

Confronting the fallen idol

Someone said: Friendship is deeper than water. Doesn't it? Some people have rare luck, that they find a person who is a perfect second part of them. That

person, who fills you, who makes you feel complete, is your best friend. Rollo share that opinion, but he obviously doesn't find appropriate part.

Poor Rollo dealed with his strong emotions when the perfect picture he had about his friend was completely destroyed. Lime was his best friend, but in the same time he was his idol. Rollo has never really grown up and perhaps, because of that he worshipped Lime. So, Lime always abused Rollo's trust and sincere friendship.

Martins and Lime were friends over a twenty years and all that time he thought that he had known Harry. After Lime's death Rollo discovered the dark side of Harry's life. When Calloway told him a story, about a bare truth everything dashed. In the meantime Harry became a murderer and racketeer, or he was from the beginning. Rollo realized that he was a thing of a ridicule all his life.

When Rollo discovered that Harry was alive, he decided to act. So, Lime was killed because he wasn't realized that his friendship with Rollo was finished. It was dreadful end of a man and friendship. – You never know what stand at the end of the rainbow. So, you can't *totally* get to know somebody. Don't be afraid, schreach the surface of your friendship, don't be a worshipper like Rollo your best friend maybe isn't your friend at all. Remember.

The underlined segments are errors this student has difficulty with. As we can see these errors range from those of little importance such as spelling and punctuation, all the way to great problems of sentence construction. It is obvious that this student is inexperienced in the essay development and division into the major parts of essay, as his/her conclusion has not been separated from the rest of the body. The incorrect grammatical forms initiate the student's difficulties in comprehension thus production.

Once this composition has been evaluated and marked its author definitely feels discouraged and helpless having seen all the errors/mistakes he/she has made. Again let us confirm that this is a direct result of this child not being ready to grasp all the elements of essay writing as he/she has been exposed very little to them in the previous years of language learning.

At this stage it is in the hands of the teachers to analyze them and find the most suitable way to eliminate them. Of course, in the extreme cases complete elimination is not possible if the student not only has very little knowledge of this field, but at the same time lacks talent or interest in this skill.

In the process of error elimination the teacher faces a task that realizes several phases. First stage concerns recognition of the origin of this error/mistake and at the same time the question whether it is an error or a mistake. Stages in language teaching that follow are the stage of correct and productive teacher input and the stage of practice that should lead to an improvement in the students' output.

Up to now we have not made a distinction between error and mistake, but at this point it is quite inevitable to disregard it. In fact the simplicity of correction is based upon this distinction.

Error analysis

Errors are identified as incorrect forms produced by lack of knowledge about the target language, in this case English, or by incorrect hypothesis about it. Errors may occur due to lack of being informed about a specific grammatical field. Another reason may be that students were unable to fully grasp the rules, as the lecturer was not in the position to devote him/herself to each student and his/her difficulties.

Competence realizes knowing what is grammatically correct, so errors are connected to competence. These incorrect forms have occurred as a result of not knowing what is grammatically correct or as a result of having false hypothesis about it.

Mistakes on the other hand are less serious and are liable to correction by the student him/herself, even right after they have been made. They are caused by temporary memory lapses, confusion, distraction, hesitation, slips of tongue and such (Chomsky:1965). In this case we are confronted with performance which, as Chomsky (1965) has stated, may be a faulty representation of competence.

Mistakes are more common for students of final years of university. The incorrect forms found in their performance are rare and more often connected to style and choice of vocabulary.

Therefore in the sample essay most of the incorrect forms may well be regarded as errors. There is a greater possibility that they have been made by a student deliberately, as a result of misunderstanding. This student is unaware of most of them, believing to have written a suitable essay. Otherwise he/she would have been able to correct him/herself.

Causes of errors

Having clarified this distinction we may discuss the common errors and their causes at this first stage of learning essay writing. In order to bring about change and teach students the correct forms as well as teach them how to recognize their errors, we must pose the following question:

What causes the occurrence of these errors?

Only from such a standpoint can we make an attempt in eliminating them. These are the common causes of errors.

Interlingual Transfer is characterized as one of primary stages in learning a second language (Brown 1987:177). When learning a foreign language most learners experience identical difficulty. The problem lies in the existing knowledge of the mother tongue, which imposes itself on the learning process of the new language. Errors are conducted because of such equivalents in our mother

tongue. That leads to ›foreign pronunciation‹, faulty grammatical patterns and occasionally to the wrong choice of vocabulary.

As a well-known example we can observe the imposing of a rule about word order in our mother tongue on the existing rule of word order in English. It is quite possible in our mother tongue to be inventive and create many different word orders of a sentence, thus placing emphasis on various parts of the sentence. This ability indicates the author's experience and easiness in managing the sentence. However English realizes a fixed word order pattern where different parts of the sentence are not very easy to move about. Students are just too often misguided by the existing knowledge of word order flexibility in our mother tongue that they allow this mother tongue interference to take place.

Second common cause of errors in **Intralingual Transfer** considers the transfer within the target language itself (Brown 1987:178). This is the case when the learners don't have an equivalent of a certain grammatical unit in their mother tongue.

»Once learners have begun to acquire parts of the new system, more and more intralingual transfer generalization within the target language is manifested.«(Brown 1987:178)

»As learners progress in the second language, their previous experience and their existing subsumers begin to include structures within the target language itself.« (Brown 1987:178)

As we have nothing quite like the grammatical unit of articles in our mother tongue, errors caused by intralingual transfer are often found in this field.

Typical English intralingual errors in the use of articles may be in the omission of ›the‹ before unique nouns, such as ›sun‹, before nouns of nationality like ›Arabs‹, or even omission of the definite article before the superlatives. The indefinite article is often misplaced and situated in front of superlatives or before these unique nouns like ›a sun‹.

Third frequent cause of errors is **Overgeneralization**. Meaningful learning is, in fact, generalization: »items are subsumed (generalized) under high-order categories for meaningful retention.« (Brown 1987:82)

Overgeneralization is »a process that occurs as the second language learner acts **within** the target language, generalizing a particular rule or item in the second language irrespective of the native language beyond legitimate bounds.«(Brown 1987:82)

A simple explanation of this extremely frequent concept is when students apply rules to all situations without taking exceptions into consideration. Thus from a derivation rule that a suffix –er added to a verb produces a noun, they try to apply this concept to every verb. That is why seeing ›drive – driver‹ leads them to believe in the legitimacy of ›fish – fisher‹ (instead of a correct form – fisherman).

Examples of these causes can be seen in the sample essay and the errors within it. Example of **Interlingual Transfer** is in the completely false sentence construction, as the student has literally translated statements from his/her mother

tongue. **Intralingual Transfer** errors are obviously in the use of articles. Finally **Overgeneralization** has been applied in the form of a verb ›deal‹ which has been regarded as a regular verb and therefore liable to rules that apply to regular ones.

Towards essay writing

Overcoming these misconceptions, misunderstandings, or faulty representations within the target language is not an easy task at all. The university teachers face up to a task of enormous challenge, when dealing with students' writing skills. The procedure involved in transferring knowledge of essay writing to students is a difficult and profound one.

The role of a teacher in this process is indispensable. Creating a positive classroom atmosphere as well as a positive attitude in students to accumulate the knowledge is the very first step.

Teacher input

Teacher input commences from this stage and the primary phase is teaching them to gather as much information as possible on the given essay issue. Students collect the necessary information by **prewriting**.

Students need to think about the content thoroughly before proceeding to write about it. Alongside, their thoughts should be devoted to the potential readers as well. The teachers should stress the significance of regarding their audience. Knowing who they are writing for will enable them to present the issue in the best possible way. After all, the aim of each composition written is to enable readers to comprehend and consider it.

One way of managing prewriting is by posing informative questions, such as: ›Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?‹

That way students will be able to elicit from themselves all the knowledge that they possess regarding the issue.

Another, also very effective way of prewriting is **brainstorming**. This is »the process of writing as many thoughts as you have as quickly as you can. In this process there is no formal organization. Only after you have finished brainstorming will you go back and select and organize the material.« (Reid 1988:46)

Besides these frequently used methods of prewriting we may also mention **clustering** where students visually arrange their ideas and each idea leads to another one. Essays may as well be written **based on a conversation, based on visual information** and so on.

As Hedge (1988:12) says: »Collaborative writing in the classroom generates discussions and activities which encourage an effective process of writing.«

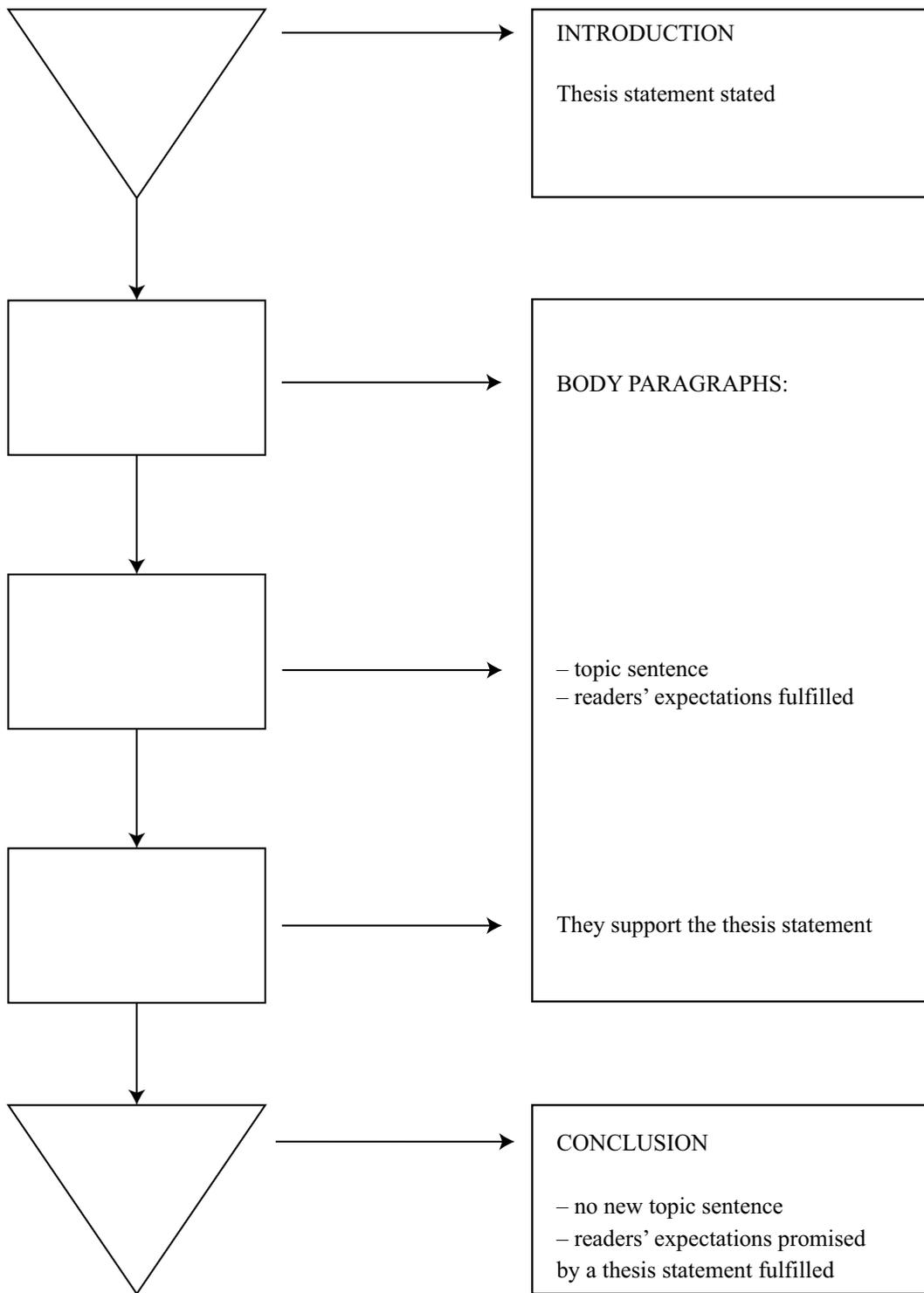
Once students have completed this task of prewriting and have put down all the information they were able to elicit, the next phase is at stake. This is maybe

the most demanding phase where all that chaos should be organized into an acceptable composition that has, as an aim, to transfer a specific information.

At this point there is a need of presenting the students with a pattern that will help them organize their ideas.

This is an outline common for any type of essay:

The promise pattern



This model is based upon an adapted pattern introduced by Reid (1988:43).

This pattern is of visual importance as students are able to recall it at the time of writing essays, especially during exams. At the moment they are presented with an issue, there is a sudden rush of numerous ideas on this topic, and that results in a complete chaos. As teachers, we help them overcome this problem and guide them in sorting these ideas out by helping them in understanding and applying this pattern in their writing process.

Essay construction

Teacher input concerning essay writing is based upon teaching students various parts of the essay. Regardless of the essay genre, length or issue they are dealing with, an acceptable essay for university level should have (an) introductory paragraph(s), body paragraphs and (a) concluding paragraph(s), as seen on the previous diagram.

Introduction is one of the most important aspects of the essay, as it sets the tone, identifies the essay type (style), identifies the position of the author and leads the reader into the content of the essay. It should be well-organized and it should contain the vital part of the essay and that is a thesis statement. This is the main idea of the essay, a promise that a writer should fulfill while writing the essay. The thesis statement is found at the beginning or more often at the end of the introduction.

Body paragraphs present the points that will support the thesis statement. There is no definite number of body paragraphs and this varies from one essay to another. What is significant is that each paragraph should be constructed as an essay in small. First, it should have a topic sentence, which is the main idea of the paragraph. Following that, examples are given to support the topic sentence and finally an explanation about them.

Therefore these paragraphs contribute to supporting the main idea, which is the thesis statement.

Conclusion is of no less importance in comparison to the other parts of the essay. It serves to sum up all the ideas presented and to provide a final perspective on the topic. Repetition is strongly forbidden in the conclusion, and a comment with a lasting impression is what makes the reader reconsider the issue of the essay.

Following this insight on essay development, as we have previously mentioned, the style of writing is also relevant. University teachers are required to include in this program the distinction between a formal and informal style as well as various types of written compositions, ranging from formal/informal letters, to articles, and even leaflets that all consider quite a different approach.

Techniques

All of this has led us to a question of methodology and applied linguistics. Simply throwing this information at the students does not necessarily realize successful output. In getting students to positively respond to these instructions teacher input must include various techniques, activities and approaches. They are:

- **prewriting drills**, both oral and written. Oral brainstorming activates their speaking skills and enriches their vocabulary of that issue. At the 3rd and 4th year students may also be given oral debates as a type of brainstorming, as they are prepared to engage in more serious communicative activities.
- **writing separately different parts of the essay** Once each of these steps has been fulfilled to a satisfactory level, these parts are connected in obtaining a complete composition.
- **recognition of thesis statements** in various essay types.
- **sample essay** Presenting them with a sample essay where they have to identify, observe and analyze different parts of the essay.
- **an incorrect essay exercise** Presenting them with an essay that has not been evaluated. Their task is to recognize errors and correct them.
- **two different essay styles** Students are given a formal and an informal essay to compare and list features characteristic to each pattern.
- **rereading personal essays** Students read their essays in class and at the same time practice reading and listening skills.
- **in-class essay** They are presented with a timed composition where they have to write an essay under the same circumstances as during the exam.
- **teaching them different types of essays** Besides learning their characteristics, students are instructed to analyse the vocabulary and grammatical construction of the sample essays. Also for homework they are assigned to write an essay of a specific genre.

Student intake

Based upon this informative and multifarious teacher input, students have at this stage obtained the skill and knowledge to grasp the basic concepts of essay writing. As this whole pattern of lectures provides a student with a lot of information, they will certainly be unable to memorize all the slightest details.

Therefore their demeanor towards this material is selective. Students choose to store in their memory those aspects of writing an essay that they view as most vital and necessary for them. Nevertheless we must not ignore the fact that they are sensible adults and that their choice while acquiring knowledge is a sensible one and their aim purposeful.

This choice is also very much dependent of their personalities, motivation even their inclination towards this aspect of language learning. Students are selective in acquiring information and their essays are direct results of this intake.

Student output

Following this strenuous task of attaining the expected level of written expression, students of the third year produce an essay output as is the following.

Sample essay

Dr. Strangelove or: How I learned to stop worrying and love the creature

Being the only child is one of the rare privileges with which destiny can bless you. Hub of the universe is definitely the most comfortable place to be in. Such was my life until one frosty February morning when the delightful state was interrupted by shrieks of the Creature, then unknown to me.

The initial confusion soon turned into an open hostility. This intruder started invading my territories. My sovereignty and integrity were threatened so I had to take some immediate action. At first, everything went well. My dirty little schemes, like hiding its baby–nipple or ruining its reputation by calling it bad names, were quite efficient.

But all of a sudden, my war luck changed. Old allies, parents, unexpectedly took his side! My once earned respect was shattered into pieces. I was treated as a spoilt brat, which came as a shock to me. Was it possible that I had to look after the Creature in order to become regarded as a grown–up? Obviously, my strategy had to be changed. The role of a loving elder sister was more than appropriate, so I took up the part with utter diligence and enthusiasm.

Little by little, I learned that taking care of yourself and someone helpless, like the Creature, is a point of being an adult. Finally, I memorized his real name and began to see him as an actual person. Foolish childhood years were behind me and my parents realized it also. But did I truly earn their respect and trust still remains questionable.

This essay shows that the student has understood the concept of writing different parts in the structure of an essay and also essay genres. This student easily

confronts the task of writing compositions and includes a note of personalization in it, making this piece of writing even more creative. Grammatically correct, acceptable accomplishment indicates that the student considers the issue, thinking, elaborating and organizing his/her ideas completely and with great ease. This level of essay writing realizes improvement not only in the field of vocabulary enrichment and variety of sentence construction, but also in the ability to convey clearly the meaning of it.

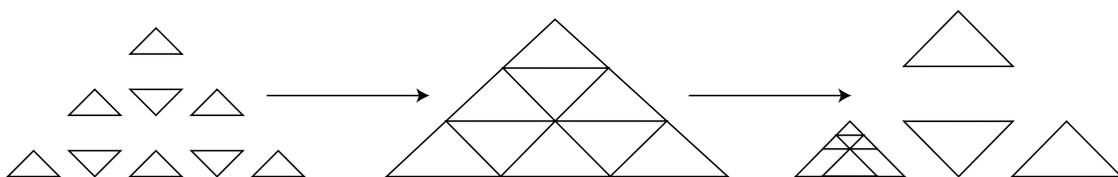
At this level slight corrections are more likely to be mistakes, rather than errors.

Meaningful learning

Unfortunately not all students at the final years of university reach this level of producing written compositions. Many of them are still fighting a never-ending battle of memorizing so many rules and methods applied in producing a written composition. They need to devote themselves to practicing the basic concepts of composing an essay. Even writing essays in their mother tongue is of importance, as the rules applied are rather similar and the notion of constructing a piece of writing leads to an identical purpose.

Within these lectures on writing we must emphasize the importance of pre-writing activities on how to organize ideas inside their heads and sort out the existing chaos. They should be informed of the significance of relating new concepts to the old ones. This ability, once acquired, not only helps them in writing, but also in any life decision, any project they undertake, or any life situation they find themselves in. This ability is recognized as meaningful learning and retention (Brown 1987:66), a process we all subconsciously apply when we're exposed to something new.

Illustration of this is in the following diagram:



This diagram presented by Brown (1987: 66 fig.4-2) illustrates that in our mental storage we already possess certain knowledge. New items that we acquire, we connect to the existing ones and therefore conduct meaningful learning. Those new items become a part of our mental storage, and remain there until the next new item is acquired and added to the content of our mental storage. In that manner second language acquisition is successfully conducted.

Eventhough we are unaware of this process taking place, if the teacher input is carefully planned out and conducted, the knowledge can be successfully

accumulated. The students can learn to apply this process, not only in second language acquisition but in any learning experience. There lies the greatness of this theory – in the universal application interwoven with any learning that takes place in the human organism.

References:

1. Brown, D.H., *Principles of language learning and teaching*, Prentice–Hall, Inc. ,1987, Englewood Cliffs
2. Chomsky, N.,1965, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press
3. Hedge, T. 1988, *Writing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
4. Reid, J. M., *The Process of Composition*, Prentice Hall Regents, 1988, Englewood Cliffs
5. Tribble, C., *Writing*, Oxford University Press, 1996,Oxford New York