

RAISING STUDENTS' AWARENESS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE WRITING SKILLS

(Preliminary communication)

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to highlight the importance of writing abilities which should be incorporated into the syllabi of English courses at all levels for university students. Secondly, to increase both the interest and motivation of students for the class activities developing writing skills. Due to the complexity of writing itself it is rarely taught as a separate course at non-philological faculties in Serbia. However, graduate students of all fields of science are often faced with writing requirements in English language at the very beginning of their professional careers. As English is considered to be lingua franca of the modern technological age, our students should be equipped with those tools that would enable them both to profound their own knowledge and to present their own ideas and findings to other members of their discourse community worldwide. We suggest a discipline-sensitive and discourse-based approach in the development of materials to be used in English writing classes. In this way students would be encouraged to write as this was the activity mostly neglected and avoided by both students and teachers. In our opinion, an ESP (English for specific purposes) course at university level should inevitably include teaching general academic writing skills at the same time. Competence in writing would provide our students with necessary prerequisites that would facilitate their promotion in highly competitive scientific and professional world of their respective disciplines.

Keywords: *academic writing, motivation, Questionnaire, students of sport, language courses, teaching plans*

INTRODUCTION

Possession of effective writing skills is considered to be vital for university students who want to make successful careers in nowadays highly competitive contemporary world. Upon completion of their studies, our students should be equipped with those tools that would enable them both to profound their own knowledge and to present their own ideas and findings to other members of their discourse community worldwide. Moreover, the appropriate presentation of scientific achievements and knowledge can very often play an essential role in receiving of economic support for further research. Therefore, the ability to communicate ideas and information effectively through the relevant scientific community strongly depends on good writing skills.

Being aware that learning how to write in English as a second language is one of the most challenging aspects of ELT, we try to find some answers to a lengthy set of questions regarding the design of an effective writing course. Since we are primarily focused on students'

population, we want to gather as much information as it is possible about their specific needs. Here, our aid was the educational technology known as needs analysis, which is used widely in corporate training and aid development programs worldwide as a basis for securing funding and credibility by linking proposals to genuine needs (Pratt, 1980.). However, needs are not always easy to determine representing a mixture of students' actual skills, their interests, their future goals as well as the requirements imposed by the context of their educational environment.

According to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998.), we make a distinction between present situation analysis and target situation analysis. The former refers to students' present abilities, background knowledge and language proficiency, in general, and to their familiarity with writing processes and written genres, in particular. The latter concerns the target contexts of language use, requirements of writing skills in future professional

work and identification of target genres. The method we employ to collect the required information is a questionnaire, which comprises both types of analyses in order to collect data on the various needs. The questionnaire covers the following question areas: why students are taking the writing course, how students write, what aspects of writing students find most/least difficult, why students need to write, what genres and content areas will be used, where the students will use writing, etc.

METHODS

The research was conducted in summer term of the school year 2011/2012. The sample consisted of two groups of the second year students. The first group were students of the Faculty of sport and physical education of the University of Belgrade (N=26) while the second group were the students of the ICT college of vocational studies (N=26). Among wide range of different sources and techniques for collecting data, we chose a questionnaire as, according to Hyland (2002.), it is the most widely used means of eliciting information on students' personal goals, interests and backgrounds. The questionnaire included 10 questions related to students' attitudes towards writing. Seven questions were focused on the analysis of present situation i.e., students' current writing habits while the remaining three dealt with their readiness to employ these skills in the future. Such ratio was chosen because our students have never been taught writing skills separately from general English courses.

RESULTS

The result indicated that both FSFV and ICT students regularly write in their native language only short

written forms such as E-mails and SMSs while only a small number of them write longer written genres such as essays or even letters, as shown in Table 1. This confirms our belief that so far they have not been required to perform more complex writing tasks.

When it comes to their writing in English language it has been shown that the ICT students use English language to communicate daily on the Internet far more often (20 – 76.92 %) than the FSFV students (9 – 34.61 %). The reason for this may be found in the nature of their professions.

However, the majority of students in both groups (41 – 78.84 %) expect to use diverse forms of writing in English language in their future career. They identified the following written genres: business and application letters, CV and reports and only 8 ICT (30.76 %) and 5 FSFV (19.23 %) students relate their future job responsibilities to scientific forms of writing.

One question in the questionnaire referred to writing techniques and strategies they currently employ. The results in Table 2. showed that out of six given strategies only *computer-based writing* is used by all subjects. The worst results were obtained related to pre-writing stage. Only 7 FSFV (26.92 %) and 8 ICT students (30.76%) make any notes prior to writing. Similar to this, the editing stage is also neglected as only 13 and 8 students of the FSFV and the ICT (50 % and 30.76 %) respectively revise pieces of writing. Relatively small number of students use dictionary (22 – 84.61 %). However, a good strategy of writing directly in English is confirmed with majority of students with only 16 (61.53 %) of the entire sample writing their texts first in Serbian and then translating them into English, which ultimately helps them

Table 1. The current use of writing forms in native language

Groups	Respondents	Short writing forms		Long writing forms	
		Students	Percentage	Students	Percentage
FSFV	26	21	80.76%	9	34.61
ICT	26	24	92.30 %	7	26.92
Overall	52	45	86.53%	16	30.76%

Table 2. Presence of different writing strategies among the two groups of students

Strategies	FSFV		ICT		Overall	
	Students (26–total)	Percentage	Student (26–total)	Percentage	Students (52–total)	Percents
Pencil&paper use	25	96.15	16	61.53	41	78.84
Making notes	7	26.92	8	30.76	15	28.84
Computer based writing	26	100	26	100	52	100
Editing	13	50	8	30.76	22	42.30
Dictionary use	13	50	9	34.61	20	36.46
Translation from L1	7	26.92	8			

avoid negative transfer from their mother tongue.

Since the questionnaire was carried out at the very beginning of the term, the items focused more on the analysis of students writing habits. Only two items investigated how they expect to employ writing skills in the future.

By and large, students from both Faculty of Sport and Physical Education and ICT College of Vocational Studies proved to be highly motivated as all of them gave positive answers to the question about the importance of learning writing skills and conventions for their professional career since only two students expressed doubts about that.

CONCLUSION

Our study was conducted within a general English course with the ultimate aim of indicating the importance of being a skilled L2 writer. The results of this small scale research proved that our students need to be offered opportunities to approach writing in a more systematic way.

Since both the motivation and interest are present among the students-respondents, there is a strong urge to implement a separate course of English language writing skills in two higher education institutions. The creation of particular teaching methods and techniques as well as the preparation of the syllabus and teaching materials is another issue.

We hope that these research findings have shed a little more light on the importance of providing our

students with the opportunity to attend a writing course in English, which would definitely help them in their professional careers. To sum up, in the field of ELT, the teaching of writing holds considerable potential for both theoretical description and practical exploration within applied linguistics.

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