

TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING IN ENGLISH TO TERTIARY STUDENTS IN UKRAINE

Oleg Tarnopolsky and Svitlana Kozhushko

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses teaching writing in English to tertiary students with English as their major. The distinction is drawn between teaching writing for practical purposes and teaching academic writing. The focus of the paper is on teaching academic writing that is considered as an effective means of developing students' communicative abilities in English and their creative approach to learning and using the language. The methods of teaching academic writing are analyzed. Writing for fun and creative writing are discussed as two approaches complementary to teaching academic writing and aimed both at developing learners' creative writing skills and enhancing their motivation.

INTRODUCTION: ACADEMIC WRITING VS WRITING FOR PRACTICAL PURPOSES

When teaching writing in English to tertiary students with English as their major, it is rational to draw a distinction between two types of writing to be taught. The first type of writing may be called *writing for practical purposes (practical writing)*. The second type is *academic writing* (see Tarnopolsky, 2005: 194-195). *Practical writing* skills are those that students may and mostly will actively use in their future professional and personal life. They include writing business and personal letters, CVs and letters of application when job hunting, summaries and abstracts of professional literature read, business contracts and agreements, etc. The development of relevant writing skills is absolutely indispensable but they are relatively simple to teach due to the highly standardized nature of the majority of written documents belonging to the above-mentioned categories. For instance, some research data show that business letter writing can be taught with the aid of computers with little or no involvement from the teacher (Storozhuk, 2004).

The focus of this paper is *academic writing* that has lesser practical application after the course of English and is much harder to teach. *Academic writing* includes writing academic essays and compositions in the target language. This type of writing is hard to teach and learn because the level of standardization of texts to be written is much lower than in the written texts that were referred to above as belonging to practical writing category. Academic writing is of little practical significance as well because, after graduation, even students majoring in English will hardly ever have any need in writing essays in English for their professional careers or personal goals. If that is so, then why academic writing is paid so much attention to in courses of English as a second language taught at universities?

The reason is precisely the low degree of standardization in academic writing that makes it so hard to teach and learn. Academic writing is **the most creative** type of writing that can be taught to students of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL). It requires the most subtle and non-standard use of the language and deep understanding of its expressive possibilities. Writing business letters or CVs (*practical writing*), students cannot learn to write (or think) creatively because they have to write strictly following the existing standards and samples of similar documents that were used in teaching in order to demonstrate those standards. But when writing an essay in English, learners are supposed to express their own original ideas and find the most suitable language means for achieving this

goal. It develops not only the skill of productive writing but also develops general creative communicative abilities. Students obtain opportunities for creative and productive self-expression by means of the target language. This enhances their overall creative potential. And since writing is the most conscious and deliberate of all communication skills, academic writing becomes a unique means for learners' consciously mastering the creative, productive, and expressive approach towards communicative performance in the target language.

Another advantage is the role of **reinforcer** (Raimes, 1983) that writing plays in second/foreign language teaching. Of all communication skills, it is the one that best ensures the acquisition and best reinforces vocabulary and grammar. It contributes to fluency of their use by learners not only in writing itself but also in speaking and comprehension while reading and listening. Academic writing (to a much greater extent than practical writing) requires students to find and use varied vocabulary and grammar. Therefore, it ensures the acquisition, reinforcement, and transfer of that varied vocabulary and grammar into other communicative activities – speaking, reading, and listening. That makes academic writing an important vehicle of language acquisition.

The advantages of academic writing discussed above were the reasons for developing the coursebook *Writing Academically* (Tarnopolsky, Kozhushko, & Rudakova, 2006). This coursebook is based on a specific approach to teaching academic writing that is further described in this paper.

METHODS OF TEACHING ACADEMIC WRITING

There are three principal approaches to teaching academic writing underlying the teaching methods used.

The traditional **textual approach** is based on students' reading sample texts and writing essays trying to imitate in them the linguistic, stylistic, and other peculiarities of the texts read and apply them to their own compositions. This approach kills the creativity proper to academic writing, turns it into a process of imitating and/or reproducing what was read in sample texts, and therefore, eliminates those creative advantages of academic writing (see above) that are the principal reasons for encouraging students to practice it. But it would be irrational to totally repudiate this approach because students do need sample texts as some kind of orientation for their own performance.

The **process approach** (Tribble, 1996; White & Arndt, 1991) came to replace the textual one in the last quarter of the last century. This approach is the basis of current methods of teaching academic writing. Using the process approach presupposes introducing the sequence of stages for doing writing assignments – pre-writing, composing/drafting, revising, and editing (Tribble, 1996). In the process approach students first brainstorm in small groups the topic to be discussed in writing so as to generate ideas. This is followed by compiling an outline of the essay and individually writing its first draft. Students revise their first drafts and give them to other students for peer-reviewing and commenting on. On the basis of comments received, the second draft is written, then again revised and maybe peer-reviewed for the second time. The final stage is editing the essay by the writer himself/herself to eliminate all language faults. Thus the process approach focuses not on the *product* but on the *process* of writing aiming at organizing this process in such a way as to make students thorough, productive, and independent in it with the aim of developing their writing skills.

The third is the **genre approach** (Swales, 1990) that focuses on analyzing *communicative purposes* of the texts read by learners and *the means* used by the writers of these texts to achieve such purposes. On the basis of such an analysis, students learn to write their own texts trying to achieve similar communicative purposes by way of selecting the most appropriate and expressive language means for that.

The combination of process and genre approaches is considered to give rise to the best and most efficient methods of teaching academic writing (Tribble, 1996). Developing the coursebook *Writing Academically*, we believed that some admixture of the textual approach could also prove to be useful, so the coursebook is based on the combination of all the three approaches.

Working with this coursebook, students are supposed to acquire the skills required for writing essays that make use of the formats and styles appropriate for written descriptions (people and places) and narrations; for written classifications; for making comparisons and contrasting; for written definitions and interpreting cause and effect relationships; for written explanations of processes and argumentations (persuasion); A separate summarizing unit is devoted to teaching writing articles and reports.

Every unit is divided into two principal parts, *paragraph writing* and *essay writing*. The first is oriented at students' acquiring skills required for writing paragraphs appropriate for essays of a certain type (a description or definition essay, a cause and effect or persuasion essay, etc.). The second is aimed at helping learners to acquire skills of writing whole essays of this or that type – classification or process essays, comparison and contrasting or narration essays, etc.

In each part the *process approach* is followed. First, students brainstorm the topic of a paragraph or essay to be written to generate ideas. They have some pictures at their disposal as prompts and stimuli for their discussion. Having generated ideas, learners list, cluster, and group them, finally arriving at the outline of a paragraph or essay. All this part of the job is done in pairs or small groups, i.e., as *team writing*. That is followed by *individually* writing several drafts of the paragraphs or essays (each draft being peer-reviewed and commented on), revising them, and editing to arrive at the final draft.

At the brainstorming stage, students always read some paragraphs or whole texts on the topic of their writing. The texts are samples of paragraphs or essays (*the textual approach*). They also give an opportunity of analyzing those samples as to their genre peculiarities, communicative purposes, and means of achieving them to use the patterns found in sample texts in one's own writing (*the genre approach*). In such a way, *the process approach* is integrated with *the genre approach* with a certain admixture of *the textual approach* due to sample texts being used.

The two principal parts (paragraph writing and essay writing) of every unit in the coursebook described above are combined with two other parts included for specific purposes. These are *Writing for Fun* and *Creative Writing*.

WRITING FOR FUN

The methods of teaching academic writing described above and implemented in the coursebook *Writing Academically* mostly follow the methodology developed in the USA and the UK. This methodology is quite effective and has proved its high efficiency in teaching practice. But it has failed to achieve one goal. It does not enhance learners' motivation for writing in the target language. White and Arndt (1991: 11) point out that, "For many students writing is a chore to be got through for a grade, and to many others, not only is it a chore, but a boring one at that." This boring effect is enhanced by the fact that academic writing in English has to follow very strict regulations in what concerns the essay structure, the requirements to the thesis statement, topic sentences, supporting statements, final comments, etc.

To enhance learners' motivation and overcome the possible boring effect, every unit in the coursebook *Writing Academically* includes an original (not used in any other writing coursebooks) part called *Writing for Fun/Journal Writing about Yourself*. These are designed to achieve several purposes. The first (*Writing for Fun*) is done as class work in order to make

writing in English stimulating fun for students, to entertain them with writing, make them enjoy writing in the target language, thereby enhancing their motivation for writing and learning to write well in that language. It also gives an opportunity of writing *freely* with few limitations as to rhetorical patterns, genre, structure, and format, and “to play with the language” in the process. This is meant to achieve greater *freedom of expression* in written English, implicitly increasing learners’ command of vocabulary, grammar, and style. Writing for fun includes such tasks as transforming an ordinary text into an absurd and funny one or vice versa, writing funny fairy tales about life and adventures of objects in the classroom, writing short stories on personal experiences illustrating some well-known proverbs, and a number of others. Below is an example of the result of students’ teamed efforts when, writing for fun, they were doing a so-called *fantasy ball* task (every student in the group starts a story by writing one or two sentences, and then gives his/her sheet of paper to the student next to him or her who has to add one or two sentences more and pass the story on until the circle is closed and the last student finishes it):

One lovely couple on a dark night was very happy. They were sitting on a bench and talking quietly. The moon was shining brightly. Suddenly they heard a scream. It was a crow. It had fallen asleep on a branch and fell down on a dog by the bench. The dog was afraid and bit the couple on the bench. "Do you have a medical insurance?", the man asked the dog. "Yes", answered the dog and died. Then the man put the dead dog next to the girl on the bench and happy went home. He was happy because he was alone. The girl was happy because she was asleep, and the dog was happy because he died having a medical insurance.

The experimental data (Tarnopolsky, 2000) obtained by us show a great motivational effect of *writing for fun*, as well as its great influence on developing students’ writing abilities.

Journal Writing about Yourself tasks complement *writing for fun* tasks and are meant to be done as a home assignment. *Journal writing about yourself* tasks make a kind of portfolio where students write about their personal problems, past emotional and other psychological experiences, personal relationships, formulate their attitudes to different situations in life, etc. It develops learners’ abilities of self-expression in written English, again with few limitations as to rhetorical patterns, genre, structure, and format. Therefore, the aim of enhancing learners’ motivation for writing in English is set just as in *writing for fun*, but this time it is achieved by giving them a chance of *writing about themselves*, disclosing the worth and value of their personalities to a potential reader. This cannot but have a great motivational value taking into account the natural human interest in and keenness on self-expression. Besides, just as in *writing for fun* and due to the same reasons, *journal writing about yourself* gives students additional possibilities for acquiring *freedom of expression* in written English and for implicitly increasing their command of English vocabulary, grammar, and style.

CREATIVE WRITING

Creative writing "suggests imaginative tasks such as writing, poetry, stories, and plays" (Harmer, 2001: 259). In the coursebook *Writing Academically* *creative writing* tasks are a separate (final) but integral part of every unit, which is not characteristic of other writing coursebooks. These tasks were introduced because our experiments (Tarnopolsky, 2004; 2005) had demonstrated their extraordinary potential in developing students’ abilities for writing in English as the target language, accelerating the development of relevant skills, developing fluency and sophistication both in written and oral communication, and enhancing learning motivation. The main purpose of such tasks is to teach students *to write creatively and freely in English using their own choice and discretion in selecting the subject matter, the*

form, and format of writing. That is why short stories and psychological sketches, giving the greatest possible freedom in selecting the language forms, format, structure, and style of a written piece, were suggested as genres in which students could write. The aims pursued were practically the same as when doing *writing for fun/journal writing about yourself*: achieving greater 'freedom of expression' in written English, implicit increasing of students' command of English vocabulary, grammar, and style, and giving them broader opportunities for self-expression. But these aims were achieved at a higher level than that of *writing for fun/journal writing about yourself* tasks, i.e., the level of writing literary, artistic works. The very level on which writing was done encouraged students' creativity and their attempts to find and use the most expressive language means in their work. Such creativity was further encouraged by *the spirit of emulation* that creative writing naturally generates among students. It is so since learners write for other students, their peers, only, and those other students are going to evaluate what was written.

A sample is given below to demonstrate the results achieved half a year after starting to do creative writing tasks. The writer, *Mary* (the name is a pseudonym used to meet the conditions of the granted permission to publish the learner's work), was a second year student majoring in English at Dnipropetrovsk University of Economics and Law (Ukraine). Her writing skills in English had hardly been developed at all at the start of her writing course. But after one semester of doing creative writing tasks, she was able to write short stories like the following one:

I had to fly again. I hate flying. I'm airsick, I don' like stewardesses and the way they talk to passengers (We are not ill kids!!!). The meal is always not to my liking and, be sure, it will be as cold as a stone. And I always (ALWAYS!) have strange people in the neighborhood. Last time it was a corpulent man who snored deafeningly all flight long. And the flight before the last was awful! One of my neighbors talked in his sleep. So I know now all his little empty secrets Even now I remember his stupid round face, turned-up nose and deep wrinkles around the mouth. It is so easy to distinguish a dull, malevolent, worthless person. By the way, it's so exciting to define the main point of any person just having a glance at him. For instance, that guy on the left. I hate men who are weak ... narrow shoulders, too thin fingers, too big nose. He's so skinny that it seems the wind would take him easily if he left his keys at home. What kind of woman can it be to find him interesting? Even his eyes don't dare to look at me straight. Of course, he likes me ... It makes me so tired ... Why only the mongrels like him try to please me? Where are the Men? The Real Man? And this one ... a gray narrow-minded person, whose interests can be just in service to his boss and his grand mom still asks him what he had for lunch. By the way ... why that daubed doll, the head stewardess, fusses over him? ... He doesn't look like a president, that's for sure! She offers him tea for a hundredth time! I'm thirsty too, by the way! No, there IS something in her behavior beyond doubt! I have to know what's the story! Or I'm not myself!

- Excuse me! May I have a cup of tea? Thank you. I see our plane is in skillful hands! I love flying. I always feel almost like a bird when I'm on board. And one can meet so many interesting people! Oh ... I'm eager to know who's this young man on my left?

- Oh. Of course ... But ... Didn't you know? It's John Black!

- Who??? ... J ... John Black ... Oh my goodness! I've never seen him before ... John Black ... ("OK, don't worry, my dear! We'll make it! Where is my most charming smile? ... ").

- I beg your pardon, sir. Do you have any extra plaid? It's quite cold here ... don't you think so? I'm almost frozen.

From everything said above, it may be concluded that *creative writing*, just as *writing for fun*, makes an important addition to teaching academic writing for improving and accelerating learners' writing skills development.

CONCLUSION

The approach to teaching academic writing in English embodied in the coursebook *Writing Academically* is based on combining the process, genre, and textual approaches with supplementary activities (*creative writing*, *writing for fun* together with *journal-writing about yourself*) that are used for accelerating and improving the writing skills development and enhancing learners' motivation. The try-outs of the coursebook in teaching practice have proved that such a combination really achieves its ends and greatly contributes to quite a considerable students' progress.

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