
ПРОФЕСІЙНА ІНШОМОВНА ПІДГОТОВКА В ПРОЦЕСІ МІЖКУЛЬТУРНОЇ ІНТЕГРАЦІЇ

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WRITING SKILLS: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Ability to communicate in writing in a foreign language is required for any educated professional in our modern globalized world. It allows people to get a prestigious job, to participate in international projects and exchange programmes, to get education, etc. For that foreign language proficiency level should be higher than the Intermediate one (B2+), including writing skills. It is this level that allows people to live, study or work independently in a country where and when this particular foreign language is used for communication. However, the results of examinations aimed at assessing the writing proficiency of Ukrainian school and university students demonstrate that their writing skills are not developed enough and leave much to be desired. Both teachers and learners consider writing to be the most difficult skill of the four main basic skills as it requires control over a number of variables simultaneously, over the content and the form, i.e., to know what to write about and how to write about it. The present article focuses on the specific features of writing which make it challenging, makes an attempt to analyze the writing challenges Ukrainian students face and to present some recommendations about what may be done by teachers of foreign languages to improve the situation.

Keywords: foreign language proficiency; reading; skills; writing.

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НАВИЧКИ ПИСЬМА: ПРОБЛЕМИ І РІШЕННЯ

Уміння спілкуватися письмово іноземною мовою є обов'язковим для будь-якого освіченого професіонала в сучасному глобалізованому світі. Це дозволяє отримати престижну роботу, брати участь у міжнародних проектах та програмах обміну, здобувати освіту тощо. Для цього рівень володіння іноземною мовою має бути вищим за середній (B2+), включаючи навички письма. Саме цей рівень дозволяє людям самостійно жити, навчатися чи працювати в країні, де і коли саме ця іноземна мова використовується для спілкування. Однак результати іспитів, спрямованих на оцінку володіння навичками письма українських школярів та студентів вищих навчальних закладів, свідчать про те, що ці навички розвинені недостатньо і залишають бажати кращого. І вчителі, і учні вважають, що писемна комунікація є найскладнішою з чотирьох основних базових базових навичок, оскільки вимагає одночасно контролювати декілька змінних, зміст і форму, тобто знати, про що писати і як. Стаття зосереджує увагу на особливостях письма, які роблять його складним; зроблено спробу проаналізувати проблеми, з якими стикаються українські студенти, та надати деякі рекомендації стосовно того, що можуть зробити вчителі іноземних мов для покращення ситуації.

Ключові слова: навички письма, навички читання, рівень володіння мовою.

Topicality of the research. Writing in a foreign language is required for any educated professional in our modern globalized world. It allows people to get education abroad, to participate in international programs and projects, to get a prestigious job, etc. It makes it possible to successfully interact in any professional area.

Writing is defined as the ability to tell or retell information in the form of a written text. Writing as a productive skill is not acquired by its users naturally; it should be taught. Douglas Brown notes that “just as there are non-swimmers, poor swimmers, and excellent swimmers, so it is for writers. Why isn't everyone an excellent writer? What is it about writing that blocks so many people, even in their own native language? Why don't people learn to write ‘naturally’ as they learn to talk?... We learn to write if we are members of a literate society, and usually only if someone teaches us” (Douglas Brown, 2000: 334).

Review of Literature. The task of teaching writing is especially complicated when writing is practiced in a foreign language. Both teachers and learners consider it to be the most difficult skill of the four main basic ones as it requires control over a number of variables simultaneously, over the content and the form, i.e., to know what to write about and how to write about it. As Graham and Perin present it, a well written text focuses on the topic and has an organizational pattern that enables a reader to follow the flow of ideas. It also contains supporting ideas that are developed through the use of examples, appropriate vocabulary and follows the

conventions of standard written English language such as correct spelling, capitalization and sentence structure (Graham & Perin, 2007: 3). Besides, “writing in a different language involves more than mastering its vocabulary and grammar. Language, including written language, is a reflection of the thought patterns of native speakers. In order to write well in a different language, it is important to understand the way native speakers of that language organize their thoughts” (Blanchet & Root, 2003: 1).

The development of writing skills is challenging because of one more reason. Modern people, school and college students do not have to write a lot, at least, in Ukraine. Though, one of the tasks of the final high-staking independent school-leaving examination in a foreign language includes writing, traditionally it is writing a letter (extended email) which the majority of people stopped writing in their native language a long time ago. Because of that some students are puzzled and challenged by this writing task as they do not know what to write about and how. It is quite understandable: they prefer telephone calls, short messages, and blogs. For that, they use informal language and a lot of abbreviations. In addition, “because of the immediacy of these [the above mentioned] communication methods, there is little in the way of reflection of either what is received or what is being sent” (Defazio *et al.*, 2010: 34). Students have no time to reflect on what is written by them or by their peers. At the same time, reflection is of utmost importance for mastering writing: before starting writing, students have to think what they are going to write about and how (Kristy dwi pratiwi, 2012: 2) as writing is not ‘just expressing thought, it is also conveying the thoughts to the reader, therefore writings should be meaningful’ (Chowdhury, 2015: 6).

Thus, writing is a complex social act. It involves cognition: brainstorming, planning, outlining, organizing, drafting and revising, and it should be taught the same way. It demands a lot of time for thinking and reflecting on a topic. It requires the writer to analyze and classify any background knowledge. After this difficult process, writers need an appropriate language to express these ideas in a cohesive and coherent discourse (Chakraverty & Gautum, 2000:1).

Data Presentation and Analysis. In the grammar-translation past, which focused mainly on teaching and learning the rules, writing was completely ignored (in particular, in the former Soviet education system). Today the situation has somehow changed as school students have to take the independent school-leaving examination, with writing being one of its components alongside with listening, reading, and the use of the language.

It is required that Ukrainian school leavers’ foreign language proficiency be at B2 even B2+ level in terms of the CEFR (Programme of the School-leaving Independent Examination in the English Language 26.06.2018 #695, approved of by the Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine). This qualification allows students to live, study or work independently in a country where and when English is used for communication. Speaking about writing, in particular, they should be able to do the following:

Can write clear, detailed official and semi-official texts on a variety of subjects related to his / her field of interest, synthesizing and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources. Can make a distinction between formal and informal language with occasional less appropriate expressions (CEFR, 2017: 157).

Describing the process in detail, it means that they:

- *Can write clear, detailed descriptions of real or imaginary events and experiences marking the relationship between ideas in clear connected text, and following established conventions of the genre concerned.*
- *Can write clear, detailed descriptions on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest. Can write a review of a film, book or play.*
- *Can write an essay or report that develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting detail.*
- *Can write a detailed description of a complex process.*
- *Can evaluate different ideas or solutions to a problem.*
- *Can write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options.*
- *Can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources* (Ibid. : 76).

This means that, according to Heaton, a number of skills that should be developed in order to become successful writers are as follows:

- Ability to use the language: variability, correctness, appropriateness.
- Ability to use the written language conventions: spelling, punctuation.
- Ability to express and develop the content logically, without irrelevant details.
- Ability to structure and order the information properly.
- Ability to write according to conventions typical of the particular area, genre of communication and target audience (Kristy dwi pratiwi, 2012: 3).

Taking the above into consideration, the rubrics for assessing writing and task samples were developed and placed on the site of the National Center of Quality Assurance in Education (https://testportal.gov.ua/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Angl_mova-ZNO_2021-VV_SHEMA-otsinyuvannya-na-sajt.pdf). It includes the following variables: task achievement, structure and cohesion, register, usage of grammar and vocabulary. Thus, the criteria according to which the writing task is assessed are known to the test main stakeholders – test-takers, their parents, teachers, university administrations, etc. Unfortunately, due to a number of reasons (for instance, time constraints at the lesson, time-consuming checking process, not well-developed writing skills in a native language saying nothing of writing in a foreign language), writing is not paid much attention to at schools despite the well-known statement “change the examination and teaching will change too.” Changes in secondary level teaching are not as fast as it is desired. Several factors may explain why.

Firstly, it is impediment to note that if writing skills are developed in the native language, they are transferred to the foreign one: “weaker writers’ failure to use writing strategies in English was based on their failure to use these strategies in their first language” (Anvar & Ahmed, 2016: 736). Though not all the researchers agree with this point of view. They note that different countries may have different writing conventions. According to Blanchard & Root, “not everyone is a naturally gifted writer. Writing is a skill that can be practiced and mastered. In many ways, it is like driving a car. If you have ever driven in another country, you know that some of the rules of the road may be different. Just as the rules for driving differ from country to country, the conventions for writing may

change from language to language” [Blanchet & Root, 2003: 1]. However, if students are not able to write in their native language, it is unlikely to expect them to be proficient writers in a foreign language. At the same time, foreign language writing skills may be developed and then even help with writing in the native language.

It is a wide-spread practice that a great part of school leavers masters the skill of writing in a foreign language at extra classes or with private teachers (according to the authors' statistics, almost three quarters of those who take the school-leaving examination in English). The analysis of 11th-formers' (those who were going to take the school-leaving independent examination) pieces of writing was made by the authors on the basis of the analysis of writing tasks presented by students who started attending extra classes of English at a language school or taking private tutorials from 1 year to 6 months before the final examination and have score 9 (out of 12) or lower at English lessons at school. Their knowledge and skills acquired at school lessons demonstrate the following:

Task achievement:

It is expected that thoughts and ideas presented in the submitted pieces of writing should be read easily, making the writer feel pleased to read that (Ur, 1996: 163, 170). Instead, school students are not able to imagine the situation which they are to describe in the letter (they say, “I don't know how to develop the ideas presented in the task”). Repetition of information and irrelevant details are common to the scripts. There are no thesis statements, that reflect what will be discussed in the rest of their piece of writing, no strong topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs, and no supporting ideas. Teachers give less importance on these issues; therefore students are also less concerned (Chowdhury, 2012: 43). The result is lack of creative writing, the writing task sample which is not interesting, imprecise, which is immature, and sometimes even senseless. That may be explained by the fact that school students do not read a lot. At the same time, “reading serves as input for writing; better writers tend to be better readers and vice versa” (Anwar & Ahmed, 2016: 736, Moreau, 2015: 4, Stotsky, 1993: 1, Kroll, 1007:10).

Coherence and cohesion

One more common problem is that students are not able to structure coherent arguments logically; they start writing about something, do not finish it, jump to another idea, then come back to the first one. The number of link words is limited to *but*, *and*, and *also*.

Vocabulary

Lexical resources are limited; words and word combinations are repeated.

Grammar range and accuracy

The most frequent errors are common ones: incorrect usage of verb tenses, problems with punctuation, improper use of articles or complete absence of them, erroneous word order (subject – verb – object). This is understandable as in Ukrainian the system of tenses and punctuation rules are different, articles are absent, and word order is not fixed.

Moreover, students are familiar with only one writing format – a formal / informal letter. They are not able to write stories, articles, and essays which are required by international exams like FCE, IELTS, TOEFL. Students have to take these examinations if they want to study abroad which is becoming more and more popular. In order to get ready for these exams, students have to take extra classes of English, private or at a language school. On average, 75% of university students who choose English as their major had extra classes of English for 2 or more years before going to university.

The analysis of the results of the IELTS examination, which is one of the main language filters to studies abroad, also proves that writing is not paid enough attention to at the Ukrainian school. However, it should be remarked that the scores for writing are lower than for other skills in other countries too (<https://collegedunia.com/exams/ielts/ielts-average-score>). In 2021, the average IELTS scores for Ukraine were as follows (out of 9 – the highest of the IELTS band):

Reading 6.6; Listening 6.7; Writing 5.8; Speaking 6.5; Overall 6.5

The results may be compared with other countries, for example, the RF:

Reading 6.9; Listening 7.0; Writing 6.0; Speaking 6.7; Overall 6.7

Speaking about the tertiary level, it should also be noticed that there have appeared Ukrainian universities with instruction in English which require to do lots of tasks, projects, research papers, and exams in writing. Furthermore, the increasingly popular education abroad is available only to those whose foreign language command, mostly English, including writing skills, is above the intermediate level of language proficiency. Thus, writing should be paid more attention to.

Recommendations and Conclusion. It is undeniable that the process of writing results in the final product. This product approach to writing with the focus on the structure of the language, treats writing as “imitating the input that students get from their teacher in the form of text” (Badger & White, 2000: 153-154). However, students master writing in the process of writing. The process approach to writing, without ignoring the proper grammar of the final product, focuses on and embraces four stages: prewriting as discussing the topic to write on, composing as organizing the writer's thoughts and making the plan of how to describe the topic, drafting, revising the drafts, and editing what has been written (Ibid.), with only the last, second or third variant being assessed. Thus, in order to develop and improve students' writing skills, it is quite logical to apply the process approach to writing besides scrupulous attention to correct grammar and rich vocabulary.

Development of students' creative capabilities, *i.e.*, the development of “mastery over content and organization of ideas” (Akram *et al.*, 2020: 354) requires analytical and cognitive skills which are best developed applying interactive learning / teaching techniques: role play, peer teaching, group discussions, oral presentations, essay writing competitions, etc.

Students experience limited vocabulary, misuse words and make spelling mistakes. It happens mostly because of the lack of reading practice. There are students who do not read at all. If they do not read being at school, they will not have ideas, no content to write about, being university students. Thus, they will write poor essays and papers (Ibid.: 354). Extensive reading of well-written publications (fiction, non-fiction, magazine and newspaper articles, etc.) is of utmost importance: to be a good writer, one should be a good reader. More than that, reading builds up students' vocabulary.

Unfortunately, it happens quite often that teachers do not provide constructive, desirably positive motivating oral or written individual feedback to students' papers. It is important to present the feedback in the form of a “sandwich” (negative feedback and constructive criticism is presented in between two pieces / statements of positive feedback). So far, in the majority of cases, the feedback given to students on their written pieces is just the grade. Students have no information what to pay attention to, what to do

to overcome their writing challenges, what direction to develop, etc. It is important for teachers to provide a comprehensive feedback to their students so that they can identify areas they have made writing errors or the sections they need to improve on. In order not to overload teachers, it is possible to analyze in detail not the whole writing piece (if it is a long one), but an excerpt, or to practice peer checking with assessment rubrics what to assess which are developed by teacher and given to students.

A very important role in mastering the language is played by modern, communicative resources with tasks to develop all language skills including writing, writing skills manuals, and communicative texts which contain interesting information and presenting content to discuss and to write about.

University administration attention to the development of foreign language skills including writing ones is also very important. As a result, in Ukraine, there have appeared "Writing Essay" project within the framework of "Smart Osvida (Education)" public project and Academic Writing courses in university curricula.

One more challenge is plagiarism. Teachers should pay attention to it, and, if it happens, the penalty should be stiff.

Finally, problems with writing are caused by the lack of practicing writing. Students have to practice writing more often. After all, practice makes perfect.

It is impossible not to agree with Defazio *et al* that lack of the necessary writing skills prevents students from becoming successful communicators both during their studies and after graduation (Defazio *et al.*, 2000: 1). Moreover, developed writing skills are also important for the development of the ability to critically assess the information obtained as it is one of the main requirements for being media literate members of modern society.

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