Developing the Pre-Writing Skills in Academic Writing with EFL Students in Macedonia

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Abstract

Students, professors, and researchers in every discipline use academic writing to convey ideas, make arguments, and engage in scholarly conversation. Academic writing is characterized by evidence-based arguments, precise word choice, logical organization, and an impersonal tone. Though sometimes thought of as long-winded or inaccessible, strong academic writing is quite the opposite: it informs, analyzes, and persuades in a straightforward manner and enables the reader to engage critically in a scholarly dialogue.

Academic writing is conducted in several sets of forms and genres, normally in an impersonal and dispassionate tone, targeted for a critical and informed audience, based on closely investigated knowledge, and intended to reinforce or challenge concepts or arguments. It usually circulates within the academic world (‘the academy’), but the “academic” writer may and should also find an audience outside this world such as writing for a friend, for a newspaper, writing a column, or simply writing and communicating on social media.

The aim of this paper is to give an account on the pre-writing techniques most used in the teaching process of academic writing. After a research that had been conducted in the course of four years of teaching the subject academic writing, the paper aims to show the best pre-writing practices that were proven to be most easy to turn to and most result-giving.

Key terms: writing, pre-writing, teaching academic writing, EFL

1. Introduction

In our native language we have all the skills and all the necessary knowledge in order to understand what we hear and see, therefore we are not aware of the complexity of that process. The ability to use one language in a way of communication doesn't represent just one unified skill. The knowledge of one language includes four separate skills:

- Listening
- Reading
- Speaking and
- Writing

The goal of learning one language is to have an equal development of these skills, based on vocabulary and grammar. We say equally, because if one person who speaks fluently and

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1 Original scientific paper
2 https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-academic-writing-1689052
correctly, but doesn’t know how to write, we can’t truly say that that person really knows that particular language.

Listening and reading are known as receptive skills, while speaking and writing are considered as productive skills.

While we can still find cases in high school particularly where lectures are based on the formal aspects of the language i.e. grammar, in high schools, teachers are guided to implement another approach, because learning the formal aspect (the grammar) is not suitable for the age of the students.

According to SIL International (1999), the four main skills are connected to one another with two parameters:

- the way of communication (verbal or written)
- the course of communication (receiving or producing the information)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Verbal</th>
<th>Written</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Receptive</td>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productive</td>
<td>Speaking</td>
<td>Writing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the first things that EFL students are being told is that they have to learn to communicate well with the target language: to understand one another, to talk to one another, read what they have written and to write to other students/peers. The basic language skills reading, listening and speaking are, therefore, the most exploited ones.

But what is as important as developing these three skills, is also learning how to communicate with the other person when he/she is not present. This is where the emphasis on writing is most evident. Needless to say, teaching writing with the sole purpose of communication is not what learning to write in the target language is all about. Learning how to write appropriately in the target language also helps students to strengthen their grammar, they can “play” with the language, “step out of their comfort zone” and the effort to express ideas and the constant use of the hand and brain is a unique way to reinforce learning.

When students are engaged in writing, they often discover something new to write about or a new way of expressing their ideas- they come “face-to-face” with the real need to find the right word and the right sentence. The relationship between thinking and writing is what makes writing a valuable part in any language course.

The methodology for teaching writing is not a clear-cut one and most of the approaches for teaching writing overlaps. All of the approaches for teaching writing have a different focus, the sentence, the paragraph, the grammar – syntax, communication and the process approach.3

In the traditional lecture the accent is put on the reading and writing skills, most likely because these two skills contribute in keeping the in-class discipline, so that the lecture is easily organized, and with that the students are more disciplined. Also, the reason for preferring these two skills is that the teacher is the one who speaks, while the students are the listeners. In a real situation it is not easy to separate all four skills, because they all precede or follow one another. This integration is constant and confusing, but still in class the skills are

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3Teaching Academic Writing to EFL students- The Process Approach, BiseraKostadinovska, MA, Irina Petrovska, PhD
vividly separated so that the in-class activities are organized sequentially and help teachers in their decision for the goal in class and the option of how it is going to be carried out.

Most teachers are trying to incorporate all four skills in their teaching plans, even though some lectures are more focused on some skills than other ones. In learning new subject matter, the order of gaining skills is the following (this is for native languages as well as foreign):

*Listening:* The student listens to something new (a speech sound, a word, a grammar structure, etc.)

*Speaking:* The student tries to repeat the new learnt thing

*Reading:* The student looks at the new learnt thing at a written form

*Writing:* The student reproduces the written form

The order of gaining these skills is one of the primary elements on which the planning of the lecture is based on. It is best for the students to listen to the new subject matter first, then to pronounce it, and finally to see it in a written form i.e. to read it and write it down. In this way, the student is aware and ready to understand the new word before producing it and using it in communication independently. From a technical aspect, the difference between understanding and producing is called passive over active knowledge. Therefore, it is important for the students to be exposed to a lot of material in which the new word is used or a structure in which they can use it later in communication. Consequently, it is expected that the students will move through a period in which they will be exposed to the new language and will internalize it without producing it. They will understand, but they will not be able to speak. This period is called "the silent period".

1.1. Writing as one of the four main skills in learning a foreign language

In this paper the emphasis is put on writing as one the four main skills in learning the English language as a foreign language.

The fact that people often have to communicate in a written form is not the main reason when deciding whether to include the acquisition of the writing skill in the curriculum. There is an additional and very important reason: writing helps the students to study. How? Well, firstly with writing they practice the grammatical structures, idioms and vocabulary they are taught. Secondly, when students write, they have the opportunity to be creative in the use of language, to go further from what they have learned to speak, and most interestingly, to take risks in terms of the choice of words. Thirdly, when they write, they are more and more included in the language. The effort to express ideas and the constant usage of the eye, the hand and the brain is a unique way to improve studying.

Writing is a process of using symbols with whose help thoughts are expressed in a written form. It is also a productive skill and it is considered the hardest one to master, even in the native language because it does not only include the graphical representation of speech, but also the development and presentation of thoughts in a structured way. Writing to be correct, it is necessary to have the knowledge of the main system of the language. In English (for learners of English as a second as foreign), that means: knowing the grammar, the spelling and the structure of sentences and vocabulary. The main outcome of writing is generally called a text, while the receiver of the text is called the reader.
1.2. Aspects of writing

There are two aspects of writing: writing as a communication of ideas and practical writing, i.e. manipulating with grammatical forms. What is expected to be achieved with writing, as for the other three language skills, does not depend only from the teacher, but also from the creators of the language policies. Some teachers are focused almost entirely on the language, some on the communication, and some of them are focused on the forms and the message/information. On a linguistic plan, the goal is to learn letters and to develop the ability to manipulate with the grammatical forms precisely. The writers have to take into consideration the reader: the effect that they want to accomplish (informative, instructional, convincing), the connection that they want to have with the reader, the creation of meaning, the usage of the language and the proper grammar. Obviously, writing as a way communication is only possible when the students will gain control over the system of writing and grammar. However, both aspects - the communicative and practical, contain unique characteristics which result in different contributions in learning the language in general. The students, who can learn the elements of the language when they use them in their own communication, are studying the language more effectively and they can participate in very interesting and productive in-class activities.

Writing in class can be used as a tool for changing the pace of the lesson. If the students start talking and the quality of their presentations is decreasing, the teacher put them back on track with change in activities, from reading to writing. Teachers can also use exercises for writing in order to evaluate the progress of the student in sense of acquiring the language as well as the writing skill.

The micro-skills included in writing are:

- Spelling
- Respecting the punctuation rules
- The correct form of words (forms that express tense, number, gender etc.)
- Placing words in the correct order
- The correct usage of the vocabulary
- The use of a style of writing appropriate for the readers
- Coherency of the text.

A large number of students respond negatively when they are asked to write something. What the teacher has identified with boredom are in fact the hidden reasons which every teacher should have in consideration if s/he wants to have success in the development of the writing
skill regarding students. These reasons are: difficulties in finding the right words, fear of criticism, insecurity and no self-confidence, incapable of transferring the ideas fluently on a piece of paper etc.

1.3. Stages of writing

In writing, there are different stages. The first stage in which students have to go through is facing reality. It is very important for the students to be aware of their level of writing. Also, in this stage the teachers should give constructive feedback, and not share their expectations of the students’ achievements and stating if the students exceeded them or not. Commenting only on the positive aspects creates a false confidence with students. On the other hand, comments like how to improve and work on their difficult aspects helps the students to understand their lack in writing. After this stage is satisfactorily finished, the teacher should convince the students that their improvement of writing is possible. Convincing is a stage in which the teacher together with the students, are aware of the problem, but are also aware for the opportunity for that problem to be solved. In this stage the key role of the teacher is to be an exterior motivator. Keeping the motivation of the students on a higher level is probably the longest stage in the process of writing, but also the most important. The tasks which guide the students on a step closer to the goal will show them how it should be done, and how it should not. Every task should be at a higher level than the previous one so that with every task given to them, students will be motivated to take the next step. After the student feels that he/she is improving, his/her fear and the lack of self-confidence will be exchanged with courage and need to show what he/she knows. Keeping up the motivation and courage of the student on a certain level is very important and for its achievement, the greatest roles have the accomplished goals and the gradual increase of their level of knowledge.

1.4. Different forms for the development of the writing skill

Writing as an activity in class, or as homework, should first of all be connected with the necessities and interests of the students. Also, it should be even more connected with the reality and real situations. As it is already known, writing is considered as a complex task, as for the teachers, as well as for the students. The core of the English lectures is gaining communication competence, so modern courses of the English language as a foreign language have suggestions for practical ideas in class as:

- Stimulations
- Language games
- Relevant writing activities as: short notes, advertisements, stories, letter, greeting cards and other.

When choosing the right methodological approach, questions like these appear:

A) How and when are grammatical explanations needed?

B) Is the communication not successful if the grammar is not used correctly in writing?

C) How is the process of learning activated?

On the other hand, students should learn the grammatical rules, to listen and write in an authentic English language as much as they can, to exercise their notes with the new
vocabulary that they acquired and many other necessary activities which will improve the writing skill.

1.5. Practical ideas for developing the writing skill

- Punctuation (The knowledge and correct usage of punctuation marks and rules is important for writing any kind of a text)

- Writing full sentences, passages and full texts.

- Certain problem-solving tasks (Give an appropriate ending to the story, What would you do if you were in this situation, Determine what is the patient's condition according to his medical list etc.)

- Writing authentic texts connected with situations of the real world (notes, SMS, letters, advertisements, reports etc.)

- Linguistic games like: crossword, association of words, guessing words

- Checking the dictations by their classmates in comparison with an already correctly written dictation

- Different kind of exercises that have connectors

- Reading a given text two or three times so that the students can write down what they remembered (This exercise can be done in groups. Declare the winner!)

- Competitions in writing on the black-board: correctly writing the word, deriving sentences from words, connecting words etc.

- Making posters

- Free writing (students are free to choose the topic they will write about)

- Filling in cards, blank forms, application forms and sheet tables such as the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter</th>
<th>Name of a job</th>
<th>Action (verb)</th>
<th>Country</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>Angola</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Builder</td>
<td>build</td>
<td>Bolivia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Development of the writing skill with the help of the pre-writing activities

A good planned lesson starts with repetition of the previous learning material. Then follows the presentation of the new learning material, and consequently opportunities for the students to apply it and to be evaluated for what they learnt. Mainly, the lesson is composed of the following stages:

- Warm up/Reminding (The teacher encourages the students to use what they learnt in the previous lessons)

- Introduction (The teacher focuses the attention of the students on the goal of the new lesson and connects the same with their life)

- Presentation (New information is introduced, the understanding of the new learning material is checked and instructions are given for the exercises in the practical part)
- Application (The teacher provides an opportunity to exercise and imply the new information)

- Evaluation (This allows for the teacher and students to find out how much they have mastered the new learning material).

The lead-in activities have a goal to prepare the student for studying, to "wake him/her up", to incite the curiosity and concentration.

2. Techniques for the development of writing with usage of pictures in the classroom

- One activity of writing can be a discussion of the whole class which is based on pictures which can be posters, pictures from a book, pictures from magazine attached on a hard surface and presented to the students, simple drawings on the black-board or copied drawings.

- The students are divided into two groups and the two groups are given different pictures. The students analyze the pictures and write down what they see and then exchange their analysis.

- The students are divided into pairs and small groups. All groups i.e. pairs work on a different picture. Then they talk to one another about their picture and task.

- Real communication tasks can be developed even with using pictures that the students have provided for themselves. With this activity we have a win-win situation. First, the preparation for the lesson of the teacher is relieved, and second the students have an opportunity to work and learn about what they are most interested in and have something to write about and also ask questions. Students can be asked to provide their favorite advert, their own drawing, a part of their own creation or a family photo.

- The work in the classroom should not be limited to only what the students see in the picture. We have to take in consideration that the students can make conclusions, predictions and assumptions for the world in the picture. We can ask the students to use their fantasy to visualize what happened in a particular moment in the picture and what will happen later or to conclude what brought to that situation shown in the numbers of the table and what will be the result.

  - Description

The picture that is worked out should be drawn/shown on the black-board so it can be visible to all students. The students should write down words which they would use to signify the objects. The discussion in class should provide a deal for how the diagram will be marked. Then, in small groups, the students will discuss and write down what other words and phrases they need in order to describe the room. For example: next to, on the left side etc.

Then, the sketch is removed from the black-board, so that the students can write a description of the room from their memory. The students exchange their descriptions and draw the room which their partner described.

  - Description, comparison and contrast

a) The students work in pairs. For the same sketch, one of the pair writes a description and gives it to the other one in the pair. From the written description the other student should drawn a sketch of the room.
b) While the first student writes about the picture, the second one gives him/her a description of a room which is very well known to him. He gives the description to the other student, who then tries to draw the room and furniture.

c) Both of the students look at both of the sketches and descriptions and make a list of similarities and differences between the two rooms. Till the end of the lesson they write together a composition for the similarities and differences. Before they begin writing, the talk about how they will organize the material that they have in their lists.

- Assembling a passage

Cards on which there is a sentence written down and which together form a passage for the sketch, is given to each pair i.e. group of students. The task for the whole class is to assemble a whole paragraph from the given sentences.

- Combining sentences

The previous-made cards with sentences can be used with new cards on which there are sentences that correspond and are an addition of the previous ones. Every student finds a partner whose sentence can be combined with the one that they have.

- Completing a passage

The task of the teacher is to prepare a passage for the picture and to write down on the black-board, but he omits the ending. The students discuss how to finish the passage. Then, they compare their versions with the one from the teacher.

- Controlled composition

The students are asked to be put in the role of the character from the passage. Then they rewrite the passage using a past tense.

- Directed composition

A task is given to the students to discuss in small group about what kind of passage they would write with opening sentences that the teacher has given them. For example: The room of Debby Johnson is colorful. They state all the details and colors, walls and furniture that they have imagined. Together in a group they write down a passage including the details that develop the idea of the first sentence.

- Playing roles

Students, divided into pairs or groups imagine that the sketch describes a room of a summer sports camp. They work for the agency of marketing of the camp and need to prepare a brochure to attract young people in the summer sports camp. Their boss said to them to start with: "Every sportsman who comes to this camp will have an extremely attractive private room.". The students have a meeting in which they discuss the details that should be included. Then they write a passage. All students read their passages out loud and discuss which one is the best and why.

- Questions and answers

a) Students are divided into groups of four. Every student in the group get a card with a word, for example a bed, a table, a wardrobe. They are told that they are invited to go to the USA
and to live the Johnson family in their private house and that they want to know about the room that they will live in. The groups write questions about the objects on their cards. All of the questions are collected and are passed on to the other groups. Each group of students now writes a letter which gives answers to the questions given.

b) If the students have a great need of guidance in their writing, the questions and answers can be used in the following method:

The students are given a list with questions:

- Is the picture from the living room or the bedroom?
- Is the room big or small?
- Is the room organized in a good way or a bad way? etc.

They write answers in complete sentences and when they assemble the sentences, they will form a paragraph.

What else can come out of using the picture?

The students see the room-plan and discuss how the other rooms in the house look like would. Each group makes a plan and a description of a different room in the house. Together they make a full description of the house.

- Sets of pictures

From a pair of pictures, joined in one composition, there can be a huge number of controlled and free exercises of writing. Sets of pictures, such as a funny comic strip, provide to elaborate on writing the topic or storytelling, but also speculating the story behind the pictures of the comic strip. A set of parallel pictures - pictures that show similar scenes or tell similar stories, provide an opportunity for exercising the vocabulary such as sentence structure.

Example

1. The students work individually. They write down a list of sentences about the pictures which they are looking at, picture by picture. Then, in small groups they work on combining the sentences in order to make a full completed text.

2. The whole class works on the set of pictures, but the pictures are given in a wrong order. In small groups, the students discuss what is the correct order of the pictures and why. Then, they write the story about the pictures.

3. One group is given only two pictures, while another group gets the remaining two pictures. The groups discuss and write about what the pictures represent. They exchange their notebooks and their stories. Even then the groups see the pictures of the other one.

4. The students get cards with sentences for each picture. Then, they connect the sentences with parts of the pictures and right down the correct order of the sentences.

4.4 Diagrams, tables, flowcharts and graphs
A large number of effective communication exercises can be obtained during class with the usage of diagrams, tables, graphs and flowcharts. Through this method, the students, who see the information visually, transform it into a written form, in a form of a letter, a report or a text.

These exercises are limited in regards of coming up with sentences, because the information is precise and therefore does not allow improvisation. The content and vocabulary are strictly limited.

Examples:

- The students work in pairs. Two of them are given different diagrams. Each of them writes down instructions about how to draw the diagram. The students exchange the written instructions and by following them they try to draw the diagrams again. Then, they compare their drawn diagrams with the first ones and discuss about them with each other.
- The students of each pair are given tables i.e. table A and table B.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Land area</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>49 576</td>
<td>17 557 288</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>7836</td>
<td>7 364 158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>45 333</td>
<td>11 866 728</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Land area</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>158 693</td>
<td>23 668 562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada</td>
<td>110 540</td>
<td>799 184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>96 981</td>
<td>2 632 663</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table B

- They write about the three countries in their tables. For example, Nevada, with a land area of 110.540 m² is bigger than Oregon, with a land area of 96.981 m². Then, the students exchange their notebooks and try to draw the table from their classmates according to the sentences written down.
- The students have a task to draw a family tree. Then they write down all the information that is included in the diagram. The students exchange their written texts and try to draw the family tree of their classmates.

- Maps
Maps are a resource of great importance in learning a foreign language. Not only is the map used as a visual tool for exercising the skills, but also she contains real geographical information for the country whose language is being studied. With city maps and street maps of some cities, the students can exercise giving directions using words and syntax which describes spatial relations.

- Homework
One of the most often used lead-in activities is verifying homework. The biggest benefit from writing is actually connected with homework. Written homework contributes for the students to dedicate themselves to the subject and also to learning the grammar of the foreign language. Firstly, writing homework and exercises provides the students to make sure that they understand the forms and functions of grammar.
Secondly, the studying material given as homework prepares the students for communicational activities in which they will participate in the next lesson. Thirdly, verifying the homework in class provides the students another opportunity to clear up and solve their difficulties. Fourthly, corrected homework is a basic preparation for the exams with which the teacher checks their level of grammatical knowledge. The teachers do not have to correct the homework of the students, because if the students do that themselves at the beginning of class, the benefits of writing are much more significant.

- **Dictation**

Dictation is an activity with which writing is exercised and also contributes to listening and understanding. The dictation is usually considered as a boring in-class activity, but in fact it should be considered as an encouraging exercise. The point of the dictation can be changed if we put the answers to some questions in creative and practical ideas. These questions are:

A) Who gives the dictation and to whom?
B) Who controls the tempo of the dictation?
C) Who chooses and creates the text?
D) Who corrects it?

Of course, if the teacher has all the control, the approach is traditional, but surely there is another way. The dictation, as a potential in-class activity for writing has some advantages, among which are the following:

- Better spelling
- The students are active during and after the activity
- It incites unintentional thinking about listening to important information
- It is acceptable for groups of students with a different level of capability
- It gives access to interesting texts
- The teachers should be facilitators, but also responsible for creating the best conditions for studying and learning.

- **Tracing**

Tracing is an often used technique by the students in middle school. It provides exercising the new alphabet, exercising the movement of the hand from the left to the right side of the paper and also improves handwriting. Other than that it also contributes to better punctuation, spelling, and the use of a large letter as well as dividing the text into passages.

4.9 Writing as an outcome and a process

Many of the students do not get instructions about writing, neither in the native language nor in the foreign language which they are studying or learning. They often get useless feedback about the result that they passed on for correction and evaluation because the result is not understandable for them. This happens because students are not guided in the process of
generating and coming up with ideas, organizing those ideas into parts and writing the same onto a piece of paper. More recently, some specialists in writing suggest making a difference between the process of writing and the written result. Their conviction is that if the teacher wants to improve the outcome s/he should help the students in a way that he will improve the process which they go through in order to come up with that outcome. Evaluation cannot be used as an instruction for an upcoming writing activity, because the process of working with a language cannot be understood if the last step is where it is started.

The goal of mastering the writing skill is to write simple passages, making to-do lists, tables, filling in forms, applications, questionnaires etc., also for the students to reach that so called communicational level when they have the right knowledge and when they can play with the language with writing a creative text or an essay in which they will present their opinions, in an essay or text which is grammatically correct and build with a skillfully selected vocabulary.

In-class activity/ sample lesson

More recently, despite the traditional methods and working manners, technology is also an unavoidable part of the lectures.

The goal of the teaching lesson is repetition of the vocabulary - names of the rooms in the house and furniture.

1. In the first part of the in-class activity, the students work individually. On a piece of paper they write a description of the house they live in (the rooms, room arrangement and furniture).

2. Each student exchanges his/her description with a classmate who sits next to them.

3. The students have a task to turn on the computers and to draw the house of their classmates. Then, they make a PowerPoint presentation in which every slide contains a picture of a room.

4. Depending on the time, the students present their PowerPoint presentations by describing the rooms verbally.

Conclusion

The paper’s aim was to show the possible activities for development the writing skill in the lectures of the English language as a foreign language together with the pros and cons.

The writing skill is as important as the other three skills for ESL/EFL learners in order to be a proficient user of the English language at any level. The writing skill is the skill least taught in schools and that is why the new research is devoted to developing this skill. The emphasis is put not just on thesis writing but on general writing and the conventions surrounding it. Put like every other skill and process, it needs to be mastered step by step for the sake of better acquisition.
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