Some Aspects of Designing a Course of Writing at Tertiary Level

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Abstract. As writing was a neglected language skill in Latvia ten years ago, it seemed necessary to investigate the present situation in teaching writing in EFL in order to develop a course of writing for students majoring in English. The research was carried out in two stages: (1) the analysis of the present situation and (2) the analysis of the recently popular approaches to teaching writing. It is evident, that future specialists in English should be able to deal with various texts in personal, public, educational and occupational domain. As students have insufficiently developed writing skills when they start their studies at University, it is impossible to meet all their needs in a couple of years at tertiary level. In conclusion the paper points out that it is necessary to pay greater attention to purposeful communication and expectations of different discourse communities in teaching writing already at school.

Since the beginning of 90s, writing as a separate skill has been assessed in EFL examinations at secondary schools in Latvia. Before this innovation, students at school mainly did lexical and grammatical exercises, wrote dictations, reproductions and compositions linked with the topics studied for the oral examination. In fact, writing as a separate skill was quite neglected in teaching EFL at all levels. Thus the aim of the research was to diagnose the present situation in this field in order to design a course of writing for students majoring in English: future teachers, translators, interpreters, linguists theoreticians, etc.

Only twenty years ago writing was considered as a secondary skill, which was linked with composing correct sentences and learning vocabulary. The Russian methodologist Galina Rogova, whose ideas were also popular in Latvia, indicated that writing helps pupils to assimilate letters and sounds of the English language, its vocabulary and grammar, and to develop habits and skills in pronunciation, speaking, and reading. The practical value of writing is great because it can fix patterns of all kinds (graphemes, words, phrases and sentences) in pupils' memory, thus producing a powerful effect on their mind. […] Writing includes penmanship, spelling, and composition. The latter is the aim of learning to write (Rogova, 1975: 197).

A similar approach was expressed by the Russian methodologist Evgenij Pasov, who linked writing with communication, but pointed out that teaching writing should be the task of specialised classes or universities specialised in English as the majority of people would not need it. According to Pasov, writing at school had to be considered only as a secondary skill and should not be connected with a definite purpose. Writing had to be only a means, not a goal. As writing had to be used to develop spoken language, the main task for the teacher was to help the students learn to put down what they were saying. Copying words, phrases and sentences, ordinary and creative dictations, letter writing, writing an article for a notice board, description of an event or a picture, games with writing and answers to the given questions were suggested as the basic tasks for teaching writing (Pasov, 1980: 189-195).

At the beginning of 90s, writing as a separate skill was included in the final examinations at secondary level in Latvia. But since 1995, writing tasks have been split into three levels (A, B and C). Content, organization, vocabulary, grammar and spelling have been distinguished as the main aspects, which should be assessed. Students have to be able to demonstrate their skills in writing a letter, postcard, diary entry, form, set of instructions, report, instructed composition and picture description (*Project,* 1995: 13). The same approach in assessing essays in Latvian was developed only in 2000. Before that teachers gave grades for *literature* and *language.* Understanding and originality in developing the theme, the importance, precision and sufficiency of the facts, logical structure and a well-argumented text, rich language, broad outlook and expressed personal attitude were meant by *literature.* The number of mistakes in spelling, punctuation and style were linked with *language.* (*Par skolēnu…* 1992: 1) Students in L1 had to demonstrate skills in writing essays about literature or essays on the so-called *free* themes, which were not directly linked with works of literature.

Thus, the analyses of the examination demands and the recent neglecting attitude to writing in Latvia aroused interest in more detailed research of the present situation in teaching writing at tertiary level. The first essay to the teacher of writing, reflective letters and a questionnaire were the main research tools used to investigate student's writing experience.

The content analysis of 70 essays "My writing experience at school" shows that more than one-third of the students purports to have little writing experience in the FL.

- ❖ 23% of the respondents admit to have little experience in writing at school, as they mainly wrote grammatical exercises, dictations, reproductions, personal letters and/or compositions on topics studied for the classes of conversation.
- ❖ 19% of the respondents consider to have average writing experience – besides the previous types of writing, the respondents also mentioned essays on different themes.

- 11% of the respondents claim that they have experience in writing only in the L1.
- 6% of the respondents have good experience as they wrote also short stories, poems, different types of letters (personal, social and business), reports, reviews, etc.

Although only about 60% of the students' essays deal with the types of texts they have studied at school, one can notice a tendency that the students' experience in writing is rather different.

The essays also reflect students' attitude to writing. Only 17% of respondents like writing while 10% -- dislike or even hate it. The analysis of the essays indicates that there exist different reasons for negative attitude to writing.

- A student does not like to spend a lot of time on problems; as a result, the student submits short essays (1 student).
- A student does not like to tackle problems while writing (1 student).
- A student does not like writing because she has no Shakespeare's talent (1 student).
- A student likes speaking better than writing (1 student).
- A student has problems with the FL that limits the ability to express one's thoughts freely (1 student).
- A student does not like to withdraw into herself and does not like to reread her own writing, but wants to create perfect works (1 student).
- A student hates writing in the FL, but wishes to change the attitude (1 student).
- A student hates writing because of difficulties while writing and she wishes to do the things she could be the best at (1 student).

Only one student admits that she likes to be responsible for a serious piece of writing, but another student expresses her unwillingness to reread her written work because she prefers to learn about her mistakes from others.

The essays show that quite a lot of students still do not understand the writing process of skilled writers. Some students want to learn to write without drafting and rewriting. They hope to become experts after a two-year course of academic writing. Of course, we cannot make generalisations from these results because only one student gives the same answer, but still we can predict the reasons for dissatisfaction with writing and try to prevent them during the classroom sessions.

The students' *reflective letters* about the first semester course of writing complement the information gained from the first essays to the teacher. They reveal that the students at school could write as they wanted – the most important was to be able to express their viewpoint in a FL, although the written product was inadequate to the conventions of a discourse community. The teachers analysed only their grammar and spelling, but paid little attention to the organisation and punctuation of their writing. So, it means that the students were taught the language with the help of writing or language as a means of self-expression, but not writing as a means of communication, i.e. basic conventions of composing a text, depending on the purpose of communication and the given situation.

In the course of research, *a questionnaire* was designed to specify the ideas expressed in the students' essays and reflective letters. Firstly, the respondents were asked to tick the types of writing, which had been really taught at school. The analysis of the data show that only half of 150 respondents consider that they have been taught how to write essays about literature and informal letters. Less than half of the respondents claim that they have been taught how to write summaries, CVs, formal letters, book reports, argumentative essays but only 11% of students have learnt how to write research papers. Secondly, the respondents chose the types of communicative tasks, which teachers really had taught students to perform. More than half of the respondents believe that they learnt how to describe a person, narrate, compare, describe a place and argue. Less than half of the respondents have been taught how to summarise, describe a process, describe causes, contrast, define, describe effects and classify. Besides only 35% of students has commented a peer's piece of writing at school.

The results of the questionnaire show that quite a lot of students have insufficient knowledge about rhetoric and how to respond to peer's piece of writing. But future specialists of English should be able to write and evaluate what is written. They should be able to deal with various types of texts written in personal, public, educational and occupational domain, for example, recommendations, CVs, abstracts, reports, research papers, etc. Most probably they will also need to evaluate imaginative writing, as pupils like to write stories and even poetry in the target language. There can exist a discrepancy between what will be necessary in real life and what can be really learnt during a two-year course of academic writing at tertiary level if the students have quite a low level of writing skills when they start the course. "Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning and Teaching" states that language learning should "contribute to the personal and professional development of individuals, interpersonal communication, and intercultural exchanges". (6) Christopher Tribble considers that teachers of writing should know WHY, HOW and WHAT to teach (Tribble, 1996: 5).

Many studies of written communication show that students should be aware of several factors that determine a successful result. Language learning is linked not only with composing and comprehending "correct sentences as isolated linguistic units", but with the development of communication skills to achieve the purpose (Widdowson, 1990: 2).

Writing involves other people. You respond to and build on other people's statements; you then write for other people to read. As a writer, you converse with others over the written page. To converse effectively you need to know what is on other people's minds, how you want to affect other people, and how you plan to achieve that effect. Thus, writing well requires that you understand the writing situation, grasp the particular writing problem, and carefully plan your writing strategy (Bazerman, 1989: 2).

As writers have no direct contact with the audience, they have to be explicit in their way of expressing ideas, i.e. communicating their message to the audience. But learning of a foreign language is also connected with understanding and accepting another culture. Language learning aims to "handle discourse" that is closely linked with cultural aspects (Widdowson, 1990: 53). Thus, a learner of a foreign language has to cope not only with linguistic, but also with cultural differences.

Current pedagogy has highlighted several approaches to teaching writing. Earl W.Stevick asserts that an effective method should "require serious and occasionally onerous effort from learners". He considers communicative approach to be appropriate for humanistic language teaching, as it gives reasons for students to communicate not just instructions how it could be done in the future (Stevick, 1990).

Besides communicative approach, Ann Raimes gives a detailed analysis of benefits and shortcomings of other approaches to teaching writing:

❖ *writing for reinforcement,* which focuses on accuracy and drill of grammatical structures;
❖ *writing for training,* which focuses on units of discourse longer than sentence, rhetorical patterns, their transformation and controlled composition exercises, but neglects the real meaning of the text;
❖ *writing for imitation,* which focuses on quite artificially created models, representatives of English rhetoric, writing of parallel texts by imitating content and form;
❖ *writing for communication,* which focuses on audience (although quite "fictional" as usually the teacher is the only judge) and purpose;
❖ *writing for fluency*, borrowed from L1 teaching techniques, which focuses on ideas and less on grammar and spelling.

Still, Raimes distinguishes one more approach to writing, *writing for learning*, which cumulates all the previous approaches and combines "writer, reader and text" and becomes "interactive and communicative". It begins with content, exploring of the topic through reading, and with learning the vocabulary. This approach includes writing and interacting with peers, studying of rhetorical structures, reorganising and editing of the written text while teachers act as coaches (Raimes, 1987).

The latest theories about teaching writing point out the importance of dealing with the writing process and different genres. Richard Badger and Goodith White have analysed product, process and genre approaches and come to the conclusion that they are complementary. They have created a model called a genre process approach to teaching writing. This model unites the teacher, learners and texts with situation, purpose, consideration of mode field tenor, planning, drafting, publishing and its product, text (Badger, White, 2000). The process of teaching writing is closely related to the studies of patterns of different genres. According to Tribble

"…a text is nothing more than a product of the categories of social interactions that are realised by genres".

Genre could be investigated at the beginning or in the process of writing. Tribble considers that social/genre approach should be linked with students' discovery of written conventions of a specific discourse community. Literate adults should concentrate on

"patterns of organisation, which are typical of different types of writing in the target language" and "how to make choices from the grammatical and lexical systems on offer" (Tribble, 1996).

John M.Swales holds the view that "exemplars of a genre" can be similar in structure, style, content and intended audience (Swales, 1991: 58).

In fact, non-native schoolteachers can find little support concerning socio-cultural aspect in writing – writing that is linked with a discourse community and its expectations in the given situation. This aspect is quite neglected in EFL coursebooks. Kiszely Zoltán's survey of students' books, which provide preparation for the Cambridge First Certificate examination show, that textbook writers should "lay more emphasis on encouraging a sense of audience and purpose in students" (Zoltán, 1998: 80). Teachers are left more to their intuition rather than knowledgeable reasoning or theory how to recognise an adequate text of a different culture and a different discourse community. Teachers face a multitude of various *recipes* found in course books on writing, e.g. how to write a good essay, a letter, a CV and many other types of texts. The books usually give one model and do not compare possible variants. Moreover, life experience can only add much more different examples to this multitude.

So, the question is how to teach written communication of a particular culture. In order to answer this question, it seems that EFL teachers have to investigate this multitude, sometimes even contradicting, and have to try to draw their own conclusions. But the question is how to teach the students, especially future specialists of English, to assess the appropriacy of the particular *exemplar of a genre* to the expectancies of a discourse community of another culture when teachers themselves are not aware of all the possible *correct* variants. This situation is quite confusing, as there seems to be a gap between practice and theory.

There is one more opinion that writing is art and art cannot be taught because there cannot be ready-made recipes. (Kelly, 1975: 2-18) Writing can be learnt only through practice, real communication, and reflection on its results and effects. Students could become aware of the process of written communication, so that they are able to continue the investigation of the adequacy of the text for a particular discourse community on their own. Thus, the teacher of writing could focus on understanding of the writing process and give only an insight into expectations of a discourse community in the particular socio-cultural setting. For example, what is expected from personal, social and business letters, what is a report in comparison with other types of writing, what is a CV and that it differs in English speaking countries and in various situations. A course of writing can comprise only some aspects of writing, for example, some basic types of texts, communicative function of punctuation, the stages of the writing process and some other. But one cannot say that a course of writing at tertiary level can cope with many-sided life situations rather than *special* purposes, for

example, tests to complete the particular minimum in a domain.

As it was said before, teaching writing is a complex process and it cannot be completed in a couple of years. To share the load between the needs and wants of the students – future specialists of English in their educational, social and professional domain, it is necessary to pay more attention to developing writing skills already at school. The solution of the problem is to be started by stating the goals: why to teach, what to teach and how to teach writing. The focus should also be on developing materials for EFL classrooms that could meet the novelties discussed in the latest theory by linking teaching writing with communicative purpose and expectancies of discourse communities of another culture.

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Rašymo mokymas aukštosiose mokyklose

Santrauka

Prieš 10 metų Latvijos vidurinėse mokyklose rašymo įgūdžiai nebuvo ugdomi, išskyrus sustiprinto užsienio kalbos mokymo klases. Dažniausiai rašymas buvo taikomas kaip priemonė kalbėjimo ir skaitymo įgūdžiams ugdyti, kadangi rašydami besimokantieji geriau įsimindavo frazes ir sakinius. Mokydamiesi gimtosios kalbos besimokantieji buvo skatinami rašyti literatūrinius arba laisvų temų rašinius. Siekant parengti rašymo kursą būsimiesiems anglų kalbos specialistams, iškilo būtinybė ištirti esamą padėtį. Tyrimas bvo atliekamas dviem etapais: 1 - esamos padėties analizė ir 2 - labiausia paplitusių požiūrių į mokymą rašyti analizė. Savaime suprantama, kad būsimieji anglų kalbos specialistai turi mokėti rašyti įvairaus pobūdžio tekstus. Rašymo įgūdžių lygis buvo nustatomas rašinių, laiškų ir atsakymų į pateiktą klausimą analizės pagalba. Gauti rezultatai parodė, kad studentams trūksta retorikos žinių, sunkiai sekasi rašyti atsiliepimus apie pateiktus tekstus. Susisdariusi padėtis verčia ieškoti tokio pobūdžio į mokymą rašyti, kuris leistų patenkinti nūdienos rašymo poreikius.

Antrojoje straipsnio dalyje yra pateikiami įvairūs požiūriai į rašymą. Autorė mano, kad mokydami rašyti turime atsižvelgti į šiuos klausimus: ką, kodėl ir kaip mokyti rašyti. Rašymo įgūdžiai turi būti neatsiejamai ugdomi su kalbėjimo įgūdžiais, ypatingą dėmesį skiriant kultūriniam aspektui.

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