

## Fragmentariness and Written Competence in the Process of Teaching a Foreign Language

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**Abstract.** Competent writing as a communicative means plays a very important role in the modern world of technology. Although writing has always been an important form of communication, it was a rather neglected area in EFL classes for many years in the past. Therefore, students' writing competence has significantly decreased and has become inadequate to the requirements of standard writing. Other factors, such as the age of technology, and teaching means of foreign publication based mainly on the method of fragmentary activities, often result in students' incapability to write logically and coherently. Consequently, the rapidly changing situation and teaching policy in Lithuania requires filling in this gap and improving students writing competence. The article discusses the problems of teaching writing, based on the analysis of the empirical study.

### Introduction

The development of a language is a long-lasting process that comprises many stages and includes various aspects. Writing as the development of communicative skills is depreciated in the process of teaching a foreign language. Students, in their turn, also ignore writing, especially under the changing conditions of the age of technological communications. Therefore, the deficiency of writing skills is determined mainly by the age of technology and teaching means based on the method of fragmentary activities (Barzun, 1991:29). Without any doubt, the negative attitude of students towards writing as a time-consuming activity, demanding a lot of concentration and thinking, adds to the problem as well. As a result, students' writing competence has decreased significantly and has become inadequate to the present global needs. Consequently, foreign language teachers face the task of filling up this gap and paying more attention to the improvement of students' writing skills. The above-mentioned arguments are grounded on the research that has been carried out in order to evaluate students' writing skills under the influence of fragmented teaching/learning activities.

**The aim of the research:** to evaluate the competence of writing in English of the 1st year English major students at Vytautas Magnus University.

**The objectives of the research:** the comparison of the results of the two tasks performed, i. e. the results of **free writing** and the results of the **controlled writing** (a writing activity based on the method of fragmentary activities).

Presently prevalent trend of communicative teaching is aimed at training students to be capable of authentic communication in a foreign language at all the communicative levels, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing. The trend of communicative training is equally aimed at the development of communicative competence in relation to social-cultural and linguistic competencies.

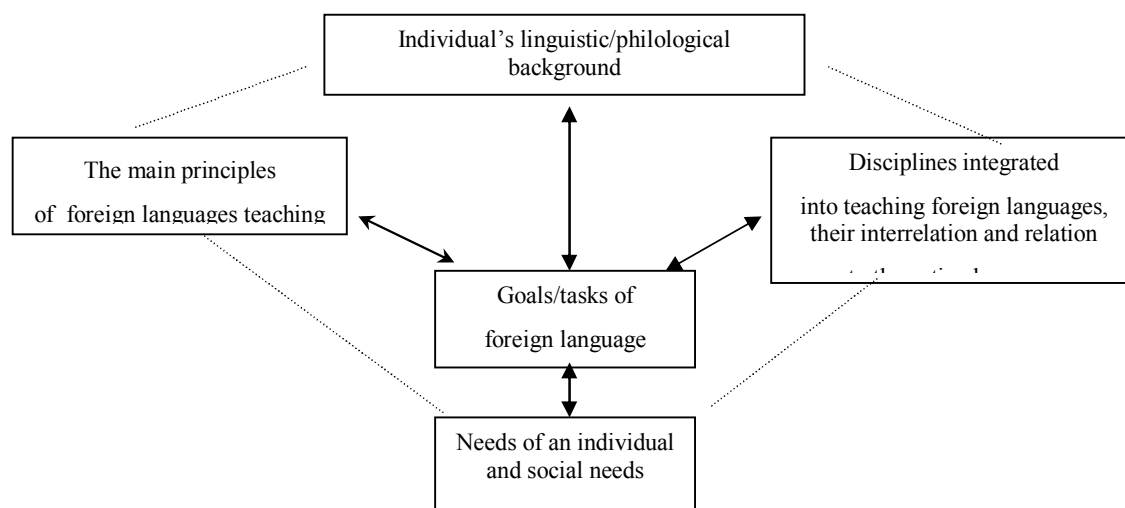
However, due to constantly changing situation and teaching policy in Lithuania, the emphasis on teaching all foreign language skills was not equal. For example, up to the end of the 1980s, special emphasis was put on improving reading skills; however, in the 1990s, speaking skills became more important. Present-day Lithuanian international policy, economic situation, problems of integration into Europe and intercommunication among people with the help of world communication means encourage Lithuanian educators to view teaching foreign languages on a much wider scale, evaluating the complexity of teaching all foreign language skills rather than putting emphasis on only one of them. The above-mentioned reasons have determined a critical evaluation of the attitude towards writing in English: having graduated from secondary schools or gymnasiums students are still not capable of expressing their thoughts in correct written English; they are not aware of style differences, essay structure, possible types of essays; students are not capable of applying their knowledge and experience in the native language, i.e. using their linguistic competence. The existing problems in this field as well as presently increasing communication in written form, determined by the world computerisation and the situation of Lithuania in the world context, urge to take the development of written communication in English into consideration and to evaluate the existing circumstances, students' needs and attitudes, world experience in this field and possibilities of application of this experience in Lithuania.

Written communication is perceived on a wide scale in this situation, i. e. logical and correct expression of thoughts, ability to express ideas in various types of essays and ability to think in written form. Therefore, this research was aimed at the comparative analysis of students' skills in the consistent and consequent development of ideas in written English (the comparative analysis of the controlled task based on fragmentary activities and the free writing task).

The Process of Teaching/Learning Languages: the Links between Teaching/Learning a Foreign Language and the Native Language

The communicative method of teaching foreign languages orientates the process of teaching towards students' present and long-term needs (Freedman, 1983:10), and emphasises practical goals of language teaching. Foreign language learning should help students develop their logical thinking based on the background of the native language and expand the intellectual potential of learners. Foreign language learning is clearly defined in various documents,

e.g. General Programs of Secondary Education in Lithuania state that language learning "creates conditions to communicate with the world, expand linguistic outlook and form general culture, get acquainted with other cultures, share information and social-cultural values with people of other nations, develop one's own personality. All necessary abilities of lingual and cultural communication necessary for a European person are developed in this way" (translated from *Programs/Project*, 1994:202). The necessity of foreign language teaching and conditions for the teaching process are represented in the following scheme (Fig.1):



**Fig. 1.** Foreign language teaching process (after Januškevičius, 1972:80-81)

The scheme reveals the relationship between teaching a foreign language and teaching the native one, other subjects and social needs. These spheres are closely interconnected: social needs co-ordinate the goals of foreign language teaching and raise new tasks, other subjects induce considering ways of applicability for special purposes according to existing social needs, etc. Some sources suggest that teaching of the native and foreign languages should be treated adequately (West; Wenzel and others); however, many authors emphasise the significance of the native language, which "is possible to be perceived deeper only in comparison with other languages" (Vabalas-Gudaitis, 1983:162). Moreover, the individual's nature and social environment determine different goals for teaching the native or a foreign language (Zanievskis, 1995:12). The relationship between the native language and a foreign one in the process of teaching a foreign language is of great importance. This relationship conditions linguistic competence: the native language has to influence the mastering of a foreign language: language interference is analysed, grammatical phenomena, idioms and sayings of two languages are compared (*Programs/Project*, 1994:202). In this way, both languages are enriched and students' linguistic competence is expanded. Proper understanding and employment of positive influence of the native language as well as a successful surmount of negative influence in the process of foreign language teaching is one of the most pressing problems nowadays. (Januškevičius, 1972:76). From the standpoint of the above-mentioned problem, the

inadequacy between the programs of foreign language teaching and real situation relationship has become noticeable: foreign language teaching means published abroad neither correspond to national interests nor appreciate the influence of the native language: they do not evaluate students' linguistic competence. Teachers who use those teaching means are free from obligation to relate the aspects of a foreign language to the native one and fail to take into account the questions of language interference and transposition. Therefore, fragmentary tasks and fragmentary answers have become the key method in the present-day process of teaching a foreign language. As a result, when writing in a foreign language, students either forget or simply ignore their linguistic competence in the native language, and, thus, their written pieces become collections of undeveloped and unrelated thoughts. This problem encourages educators to reconsider the problems of teaching writing and to discuss a more active creation of national foreign language teaching means as only the comparison of a foreign and the native language opens ways to conscious learning (Brown, 1980:148). For this reason an empirical research to distinguish between students' writing competencies as concerns their skills in writing based on fragmentary activities and in free writing is further analysed and discussed.

### The Course and Results of the Research

Hardly any teachers would find arguments to contradict the statement that students' written pieces are often collections of fragmentary thoughts expressed in undeveloped and

incoherent sentences. A valid reason for this is teaching means of foreign edition based on fragmentary tasks, including writing tasks. Such activities are no doubt valuable, however they fail to develop students' writing skills based on logical and coherent development of thoughts. As a result, having entered the university or higher institution, students lack communicative writing in a foreign language skills, experience in employing the native language writing skills, individual and logical thinking, and apprehension of global significance and importance of written competence in the present-day world. The research is aimed at the analysis of the above-discussed problem and evaluation of students' written competence in English

75 respondents (1st year students majoring in English at Vytautas Magnus University) took part in the research. The research of students' written competence and influence of fragmentariness was divided into two parts:

Students performed a task of **free writing** on the topic given.

Students performed a **controlled writing** task based on the method of *fragmentary* teaching (task for writing was taken from *Teacher's Handbook of Advanced Writing*, 1999:96)

The performed tasks were evaluated according to the analytical scoring method and comparative analysis. Each student's written piece was analysed separately and his/her writing skills were also evaluated separately for each task. Both tasks were evaluated either positively or negatively, i.e. depending on whether it could be acceptable or not according to the standards of competent academic writing. The following results were obtained (Table 1):

**Table 1.** The results of the research

No.	Evaluation of the skill	Free writing task		Controlled task	
		+	-	+	-
1.	Narrowing of the topic	19%	81%	88%	12%
2.	Structure	21%	79%	82%	18%
3.	Logical development	29%	71%	85%	15%
4.	Coherence	23%	77%	89%	11%
5.	Grammar	35%	65%	87%	13%

Note: „+” – positive evaluation, „-” – negative evaluation

The results obtained allow drawing the following conclusions:

- When doing a free writing task, students are not capable of narrowing a topic; however, they quite easily keep to the requirements of written language rules when they perform a controlled writing task based on fragmentary method of teaching. Therefore, students lack skills to express their ideas freely and independently, i.e. they lack the skills that become of great importance in the later years of studying.
- Students lack logical development of ideas and do not seem to be aware of transitional means within a

paragraph: the results of a controlled task reveal better skills of expression in written form.

- When writing a free writing task students make more grammatical and punctuation mistakes, while writing a controlled task they reveal more accurateness as their grammar is concerned. Their writing in a free task fails to reveal good writing skills: the form or contents does not correspond to standard rules of academic writing.
- Students have fair skills in fulfilling fragmentary tasks; however, the skills of independent writing are poor: students do not employ their linguistic native language competence, do not reveal logical thinking and individual point of view.

## Conclusions

The above-discussed problems and the results of the empirical study of students' written competence allow drawing the following general conclusions:

- Competent writing as a communicative means plays a very important part in the present age of technology.
- The development of all four language skills, i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing, is important in the process of foreign language teaching; however, the teaching of writing does not correspond to global needs.
- The cause for the gaps that appear in teaching writing in a foreign language lies mainly in teaching means that do not involve linguistic competence in the native language and that comprise fragmentary tasks that are often inadequate to present needs.
- Teaching writing as logical and coherent development of ideas in written is mistakenly ignored in the first years of studies; students lack written skills in their later years: they have no experience in writing summaries, essays and this is extremely important for writing course papers or bachelor thesis later.
- Teaching writing in a foreign language has to be emphasised in the first years of studies at tertiary level and introduced as obligatory course into the general foreign language teaching programs.

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#### **Fragmentiškumas ir rašytinė kompetencija mokant užsienio kalbų**

##### **Santrauka**

Rašymas yra ypač svarbi komunikacijos priemonė šiuolaikiniame technologijos amžiuje. Tačiau rašymas, kaip bendravimo priemonė yra nuvertinamas mokant užsienio kalbų. Studentai ignoruoja rašymą pasikeitusiomis technologinės komunikacijos sąlygomis. Rašymo įgūdžių trūkumą lemia technikos amžius, užsienio kalbų mokymui skirti užsienyje leisti vadovėliai, kuriuose užduočių pagrindą sudaro „fragmentiška“ veikla. Taigi studentų rašymo kompetencija ir įgūdžiai žymiai sumažėjo ir neatitinka dabartinių poreikių. Užsienio kalbos dėstytojų uždavinys – užpildyti atsiradusią spragą ir kreipti dėmesį į studentų rašymo įgūdžių lavinimą.

Straipsnyje aptariamos studentų rašymo įgūdžių trūkumas ir jų panaikinimo būdai. Taip pat pateikiama empirinio studentų rašymo įgūdžių trūkumų tyrimo, atlikto VDU Anglų filologijos katedroje, analizė.

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