

## Writing skills of advanced level: Evidence from six case studies

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The paper focuses on the writing skills of advanced learners of English as a foreign language. The attitudes towards different aspects of compositions, the writing strategies that learners use in composition writing and the compositions written by three good and three poor writers are looked into. The analyses carried out in the study point to the easily discernible differences in the quality of good and poor compositions and the difficulties of determining the causes of these differences.

Although hardly anyone would question that writing merits a place in the foreign language (FL) syllabus, the layman's feeling that a command of the spoken language and of reading skills is more important has made the teaching of the writing skill peripheral. Writing is often perceived as a skill that is not as natural as speaking: all normal people learn to speak a language but we all have to be taught how to write. The essential differences between the spoken and written forms of language have also drawn attention away from the necessity to include the teaching of writing in language courses. Still, writing as a language learning skill could not be ignored.

Rivers and Temperley (1978) stress the different goals in teaching writing in the different stages of acquiring this skill. We start with learning the conventions of the code first by writing down; we then proceed to learning the potential of the code by writing in the language; in the third stage we practise the construction of fluent expressive sentences and paragraphs by producing in the language; finally, we turn to expressive writing by using the code for purposeful communication.

The more modern approaches make a point of stressing that writing is not just speaking in written form. Writing in itself is another form of communication. Such a view implies that it is essential that FL learners not only acquire the mechanics of writing but also learn how to organize the thoughts and ideas they wish to communicate through writing.

Perhaps the best writing activity that illustrates the communication aspect of the writing skill is composition writing. Until quite recently the investigations of composition focused on the final product of the composing process. Recently, however, the focus has shifted. Researchers have become interested in the process of writing itself. Numerous studies, especially in the 1980s, have tried to look into how, for example, skilled and unskilled writers behave during the process of writing, what factors affect the process of writing, etc. Different methods have been used in these studies, one of the most interesting one being the think aloud protocol (Ericsson and Simon 1984).

Thus, Raimes (1985) asked eight unskilled English as a second language (ESL) learners to think aloud while composing. She found that her subjects wrote a lot of text, were not concerned with errors, did not edit much and often went back to what they had already written. Raimes raises the question of the writers' recursiveness, which they were not using for corrections. Perhaps the real answer to this lies in the affective area: going over what one has written may have a positive motivational effect and can boost the writer's self-confidence. She also concludes that the think aloud procedure is not only a very effective research tool but a learning tool as well. This procedure has also shown the writing process itself to have a great learning potential. Writing seems to help ESL writers discover what they want to say – the same effect that writing has on L1 writers. In a second think aloud study with unskilled ESL writers (Raimes 1987) the same author confirmed some of her earlier findings. Her ESL subjects used strategies common to learners of different language proficiency and writing course placement and similar to L1 unskilled writers: short prewriting, little planning, a lot of rescanning with the purpose of rehearsal. In contrast to L1 writers, these subjects did little editing and showed more concern for meaning than for accuracy. Better ESL writers were found to interact more with their own texts (through more planning, rehearsing, rescanning, revising and editing). Raimes found that audience and purpose specification had only a limited effect on composing strategies. She reiterates the value of think aloud as a learning tool. She believes that composing aloud brings to the writers a sense of audience (as listeners).

Using a semi-structured interview with 71 underachieving ESL writers, Graeme (1997) found that these writers thought of revision as proofreading to be done at the word level, revised under the influence of their interpretation of teacher feedback on their writing and under the influence of teaching strategies.

Radecki and Swales (1988) have studied ESL writers' reactions to written feedback on their writing. The results of their questionnaire administered to 59 ESL college-level learners, and an interview carried out with eight of them point out that, based on these reactions, learners can be considered to be receptors, semi-resistors or resistors. The overall impression is that most ESL writers like both substantive (content-oriented) comments and all the formal errors corrected. In terms of revision, most learners see it as correcting surface-level errors. The more sophisticated they become in their major professional discipline, the more restricted they would like the language teacher's role to be.

Ely (1994) found that oral correctness, but not written correctness, was influenced by the classroom participation variable.

Cohen (1991) considers dealing with writing goals at different levels the most basic strategy. Learners have to decide on the general direction and organization of their writing (high-level goal), on how to realize these in terms of defining, explaining, illustrating etc. (middle-level goal) and, also, on choosing the appropriate language (vocabulary, grammar, spelling etc.). Cohen reports that good L2 writers also write multiple drafts, engage in retrospective structuring and take care of text cohesion (by means of conjunctions, repeating key phrases etc.). He also reports that successful writers process teacher feedback effectively (Cohen 1987).

One of the interesting aspects of a number of writing studies is the affective side of the writing process. Several studies have so far been devoted to the so-called writing anxiety. Thus, Daly and Miller (1975) developed an instrument (26-item Likert-type scale format) for measuring writing anxiety. Writing anxiety and writing apprehension are usually used interchangeably. The term writing apprehension was coined by Daly and Miller. Using this instrument Daly and Miller (1975a) studied the relations between writing anxiety and a number of other variables. Their findings show that ESL learners with high writing anxiety do not score significantly lower on proficiency measures, perceive their likelihood of success in writing to be low, show lower willingness to take writing courses, have lower achievement in writing and report less success in previous writing courses than learners with low writing anxiety. These researchers also found that females reported less writing anxiety than males. Although a lot can be predicted on the basis of writing anxiety scores, Daly and Miller stress that it is an attitudinal measure and should be used not as a sole measure but to provide an additional knowledge about ESL writers. Its major value is that it measures the ESL learners' predispositions towards writing more effectively than any aptitude test.

In a study with 433 Taiwanese university EFL majors Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert (1999) investigate the language-skill-specific type of anxiety – writing anxiety and its relation to the general language anxiety measured by FLCAS (Foreign Language Communication Apprehension Scale), which emphasizes the speaking element. The authors conclude that the two types of anxiety are related but at the same time independent variables. Both, however, share the element of low self-confidence. Cheng, Horwitz and Schallert conclude that language-skill-specific types of anxiety warrant further research in order for a comprehensive and refined model of this important language learning phenomenon to be designed.

### **A Study of Croatian advanced learners' writing skills**

In the study to be described we tried to look into the EFL learners' attitudes to composition writing, their writing strategies and success in writing compositions. Our study aimed at obtaining qualitative data. We were interested in the interaction of what

we considered of great importance for successful composition writing: attitudes and strategies. Therefore we decided to examine closely six EFL writers. These included three very successful and three very poor performers in composition writing. They were second year undergraduate English majors at the University of Zagreb.

### *Procedure*

The six subjects wrote a composition on the story “Moonwalk” by Susan Power, which they had first read and discussed in class. The assignment was done as part of their regular work in the second year English language course.

They were also asked to fill in a two-part questionnaire. The first part consisted of 13 Likert-type<sup>1</sup> items focusing on the strategies the subjects used when writing a composition in EFL. The second part included five Likert-type items aiming at finding out the subjects’ attitudes towards different aspects of a composition. With some of the subjects an informal interview was carried out after the completion of the questionnaire.

### *Results*

The attitudes to writing and the strategies the subjects reported as well as the evidence of their composition writing skills were looked into for each individual subject.

#### **Student 1**

This student reports planning the composition writing during the writing itself, not in the prewriting stage. She pays attention to connecting ideas and reports taking the time to connect shorter sentences into longer ones. As a rule, she does not reread her composition, but when she does she mostly corrects grammar, rarely vocabulary and never changes the content. This student never thinks in her L1 while writing a composition and prefers writing a free composition to writing on an already discussed topic. In her opinion, style is the most important aspect of the composition, followed by content, organization of content and the choice of vocabulary, while grammar is the least important.

The student’s linguistic resources are rather bad: her sentences are clumsy and there are syntactic inaccuracies. The lexical choices are not problematic. However, she often reaches out for expressions that she does not seem to have completely internalized yet. Her most conspicuous writing problem is that there is no real thematic development. The composition lacks organization. Her ideas are disconnected and she jumps

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<sup>1</sup> Likert-type items refer to statements aimed at eliciting opinions rather than facts on scales of agreement (from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*). The shades of a subject’s opinion are given numerical values.

from one idea to another throughout the composition without really developing any. Furthermore, she does not even make an attempt to stick to her topic. The result is the impression of a superficial treatment of the topic. The student gets lost in platitudes, generalities and vagueness. Inconsistencies can be observed in terms of the content that she includes. Ambiguities are frequent.

In the language classes this student has shown herself to be insightful and intellectually inquisitive but tends to react rashly, without thinking things through. This is reflected in her composition too. While in speaking activities this is not always a major problem since she can be directed by her interlocutor (e.g. the teacher), in composition writing she seems to almost totally lack an awareness of the effect of her randomly expressed ideas and thoughts on the topic.

One gets the impression that her writing problems are not necessarily connected with the language level: it is very likely that the same problems would be found in her compositions in the mother tongue.

## **Student 2**

This student also reports planning the composition as she goes along. In contrast to Student 1, she often thinks about what she will write in L1 and translates this into English. She claims that she pays attention to how her ideas are connected but does not connect shorter sentences into longer ones. She always rereads her composition and, while she does not change the grammar or vocabulary in her composition, she often changes the content. She reports a strong preference for writing on the topics dealt with in class to free composition. It is interesting to note that Student 2 believes that style, grammar and organization are much more important than content or choice of vocabulary.

This student's language is not too bad. Her sentences are mostly acceptable both in terms of syntactic correctness and complexity. Her choice of vocabulary is acceptable too. She shows an awareness of the need to organize her ideas but she does not manage to get her points across. She, for example, does refer to the story by giving descriptions but she fails to connect them to the theme. Attempts on the part of the student to organize her ideas and to follow a certain line of development are discernable in the composition but she never develops her ideas fully. The composition looks rather like a rough first draft.

## **Student 3**

Student 3 mostly plans ahead. She prefers writing free compositions. Most of the time she rereads her composition but reports making revisions only occasionally and on the grammatical and lexical levels. She believes that content and the organization of content are the most important things, followed by grammar and choice of vocabulary, while style is much less important.

This student exhibits serious language deficiencies on all levels. The major difficulties can be detected at the level of grammatical structures.

In contrast to Student 1, Student 3 makes an attempt to come to grips with her topic and to actually stick to it. She does take the various aspects of the story and tries to include them in her composition. However, there is no logical development. Like Student 2, she does not manage to get her points across. She switches abruptly from one idea to another without fully developing any. In terms of content, inaccuracies can be found, which could be the result of a superficial comprehension of the story or of a failure to assign adequate importance to relevant information in the story.

In the language classes she has difficulties following class discussions: when required to respond, she seems lost and unable to make all the necessary connections. One wonders whether this is due to the level of language proficiency, the cognitive abilities or affective states (e.g. a lack of self-confidence).

#### **Student 4**

The student more often plans as she goes along than in the prewriting stage. She claims to pay attention to the ways her ideas are connected. Most often, she rereads her composition and, in the process, only occasionally makes revision at the grammatical, lexical and content levels. She does not have strong feelings about writing free compositions or compositions on topics discussed in class. She reports never translating from L1 while writing a composition. This student considers content, organization and style much more important than grammar or vocabulary.

There are occasional grammatical inaccuracies or awkward lexical choices but her use of language is admirable, considering that she is not a native speaker of English.

She is successful in organizing her ideas in a logical way and in presenting them coherently. We can clearly discern the structure of the composition – from the introduction to the conclusion. She succeeds in selecting those ideas from the story that can be most effectively used to develop the topic. She shows an incisive analytical approach to the problems the topic deals with and displays a good insight into the topic. The student makes her point very effectively.

#### **Student 5**

This student mostly plans his composition ahead, in the prewriting stage. He makes a point of taking care that his ideas and sentences are connected. He often rereads his composition and revises the ways he connected his ideas rather than making revisions at the grammatical or lexical levels or in content. He prefers writing free compositions. In his opinion both content and accurate grammar are the most important aspects of composition, followed by the organization of the content. Style or the choice of vocabulary are much less important.

Like Student 4, he has a very good command of the written language, and his composition contains only intermittent awkward expressions and structures. Also, his sentences logically follow each other. The paragraphs are well structured. The ideas he includes seem bright and he shows a sensitivity to the problems discussed. His ability and willingness to get immersed in the topic is apparent in the composition.

### **Student 6**

This student reports always planning ahead. She devotes special attention to the ways her ideas are connected. In contrast to all the other subjects except Student 2, she often thinks ideas through in L1 and translates this into English but she does not believe that her composition would be better if she wrote it in L1 first. She always rereads her composition and her most important revisions concern the content and the ways she connected her ideas. She likes writing both free compositions and compositions on topics discussed in class. This student offered a comment on the latter saying that it is useful to discuss composition topics in class because it helps one to think through the ideas and, also, because one hears about the attitudes of others in class, which is helpful. In her opinion all the offered aspects of the composition were equally important.

From the language point of view this student shows a linguistic competence higher than that of the other two good students.

This student shows an extra characteristic that is not so evident in Student 4 and Student 5: drawing on the information from the story she creatively interprets the story's meaning and goes outside the story to explore its implications in other spheres of human existence. It is this creative sensibility that distinguishes her from the first two good students.

### *Discussion*

If we now compare the analyses of the six students' compositions, the use of writing strategies they reported and their attitudes to composition writing, we can arrive at a number of interesting conclusions.

The three poor students displayed certain common characteristics, just like the three good students had other characteristics in common that distinguished them from the three poor subjects.

In terms of the approach to composition writing the poor students tended not to think out their ideas. They did not get as immersed in the problem as the good writers. Their treatment of the topic was much more superficial. One has a feeling that they wrote without taking into account the reader and without attempting to make their writing reader-friendly, that is logical and coherent. The good writers seemed to invest a genuine effort into their writing. They also seemed more motivated to communicate their ideas to the reader.

It is interesting that, at the strategic level, it is not possible to distinguish the good from the poor writers. Thus, planning ahead was not an exclusive characteristic of the good writers, just like making revisions mostly at the grammatical level or thinking first in L1 and then translating thoughts into English were not typical of the poor writers. In terms of the attitudes towards which aspects of the composition were the most relevant, no pattern that could distinguish the good writers from the poor writers could be discerned either.

There are two possible approaches to explaining the different writing performances by the subjects of this study. If we keep in mind that the poor writers also have a poorer command of the foreign language, we may assume that, perhaps, their lower proficiency is a barrier that prevents them from developing effective writing skills. On the other hand, our overall impression is that the good students would also write well in the mother tongue and that the poor students would probably write poorly in the mother tongue too. Obviously not all of the problems that poor students encounter in writing stem from their poor language proficiency. It seems that good writers possess not only a higher language proficiency but also some writing-specific skills and abilities that poor writers do not possess. It would be interesting to find out whether these skills and abilities have been acquired as part of their L1 competence or to what extent they reflect the writer's cognitive and affective characteristics.

### *Conclusion*

Writing in a foreign language is a highly complex phenomenon. While it is not all that difficult to characterize an effective composition, it is extremely difficult to explain what characterizes an effective writer. Attitudes to composition writing alone, as evidenced in this study, do not seem to guarantee effective writing. The writer may be aware that, for example, the organization of content may be very important but may not be competent enough to make it effective in their own composition. On the other hand, the writing strategies that writers report using may not really be used by them in practice, or may not be used in an effective way. The best questionnaire on attitudes or strategies is, after all, a self-report measure. While self-report is considered a legitimate research method, we have to take into consideration its limitations too. It would take some other types of measures, for example a think aloud protocol, to get a better insight into what writing behaviours really contribute to successful writing.

As stressed in the introductory part of this paper, affective factors may hold some of the answers. It is reasonable to assume that a FL learner may be aware of what is important to produce an effective composition but may be unwilling to attempt effective strategies because of a lack of confidence in their language proficiency. One's expectations of success and aspirations may influence one's writing behaviour in an important way. If FL learners attribute the success in composition writing primarily to language proficiency, they may not even attempt to employ the writing strategies they possess in their L1 to writing a FL composition. Skills transfer from the mother tongue to the foreign language need not happen automatically.



Perhaps it would be fair to say that good writing is as much a result of linguistic as it is of non-linguistic abilities and competences of the writer.

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## RAZVIJANJE VJEŠTINE PISANJA NA NAPREDNOM STUPNJU: ŠEST STUDIJA SLUČAJA

U radu je riječ o vještini pisanja naprednih učenika stranoga jezika. Analiziraju se stavovi prema različitim aspektima sastavaka, strategije kojima se učenici služe pri pisanju te sastavci triju dobrih i triju loših učenika. Provedene analize pokazuju lako uočljive razlike u kvaliteti dobrih i loših sastavaka i teškoće u određivanju uzroka tih razlika.