

## How to enable students to become more independent essay writers

Ilene Ann Smalec Malloy  
UEM Lab - Universidad Europea de Madrid

### Abstract

This paper has resulted after examining the poor results of academic essay writing found in an increasing number of students in higher education. It also offers some advice and suggestions to remedy the situation.

**Key words:** ESL writing, academic essay, thesis statement.

### Resumen

Este artículo es la consecuencia del estudio de los malos resultados en la escritura de ensayos académicos que está en auge entre los alumnos de enseñanza superior. El artículo también ofrece consejos y sugerencias para remediar esta situación.

**Palabras Clave:** Escritura en segunda lengua, ensayo académico, el tema a defender.

### 1. Introduction

In 2000, I began to teach ESL to university students in Madrid, Spain. Since 2006, I have also been teaching a test preparation course called *Preparing for the TOEFL* at a private university. Over the years, many of the students have participated in study abroad programs in The United States, Great Britain, South Africa and China while others have gone on Erasmus programs throughout Europe. These students needed to learn how to write papers in English to pass their academic subjects. Many of the classes for Erasmus students in various European countries offered some of the lessons in English. Students that attended these programs had to work on projects and complete papers that required good writing skills. The elective subject, *Preparing for the TOEFL* (Test of English as a Foreign Language) focuses on the four skills. Reading, listening, speaking and writing proficiency are necessary for students to succeed in an academic environment. This class has been offered to students with an upper intermediate level of English. One of the noticeable weak areas of many of the pupils has been with ESL writing.

Writing an academic essay is very important for the students that plan to take the TOEFL iBT test. ETS (Educational Testing Service), the group that designs the test, promotes research studies to maintain valid language assessment. They claim that the “potential success of a person to understand and use standard American English at a college and university level is evaluated by the TOEFL”. Numerous colleges and universities worldwide require that non-native applicants take this standardized test for acceptance to their institutions. Internships, businesses, government agencies and scholarship programs may also require individuals to take this test. Writing is one of the four main sections on the TOEFL. The test takers need to understand the academic terms “essay” and “thesis statement”. Wikipedia defines an essay “as a short piece of writing” from a writer’s personal point of view. The thesis statement, found in the introduction of an

essay, describes the central argument of the paper. The students need to demonstrate their understanding of the correct format, organization and development of an academic essay in their writing. Learning how to write correctly and producing reasonably correct writing in a limited period of time is a valuable asset for all students because it will enable them to write their papers without hesitation for their subjects at the university. Writing provides opportunities for ESL students to improve their language skills.

## **2. Purpose of this study**

The aim of this study was to increase the probabilities of the students' success on the essay writing section of the TOEFL by making them more familiar with the organization and requirements as well as practicing the other sections of reading, listening and speaking needed for the test. Writing an independent academic essay and an integrated writing task are the two components of the writing section on the TOEFL. They make up 25% of the overall final mark of English on the test. Writing to the iBT test standards proved to be more difficult for most of the students in a second language than they expected. In order to enable the pupils to progress as quickly as possible in their writing competencies, it was necessary to determine and identify the specific areas of writing that the classes needed. The students would benefit from combined activities that focused on the skills they lacked. The activities had to help them to improve their writing acquisition within a once a week one-semester university course.

## **3. Identifying the problem**

In general, the quality of ESL writing with different groups of university students in various classes has deteriorated. Since writing a correct composition in English is important for students who plan to further their studies or work in another country, they need guided practice to acquire this expertise. They will need to write in their classes, for their research projects or at their places of work. They have to write in such a way that they can show their understanding of the correct structure required in academic writing. The overall quality of the students' writing is evaluated on the independent TOEFL iBT essay. The TOEFL website explains that the assessment is based on the "organization, development, and the correct use of grammar and vocabulary". These are the necessary areas that the teacher should have the students focus on during the course.

International students, applying for entrance into an American university degree program, must demonstrate proficiency in English. Most American institutions of higher learning require the students to take the worldwide TOEFL for admission to their programs. The iBT (internet based test) TOEFL test was introduced in Spain in 2006 and it changed from the previous computer and paper-based TOEFL tests. The students have to write an essay on the computer within a short time limit in order to do well on the writing section of the test. If the students are automatically familiar with the format, organization and features found in an academic essay, they will have more time to focus on accuracy while they complete the writing sections in the allowed time limit.

Writing is a complex task. Many students are not adequately prepared to cope with the writing section on the TOEFL. They are not familiar with the structure of the five paragraph academic essay. One of the main problems is that the students lack the skills to write an academic essay. They do not know how to summarize a listening comprehension nor how to paraphrase a reading correctly. Shabaya (2005, p.49) claims pupils need to develop metacognitive awareness strategies in order to develop their writing and that "meaningful

writing assignments help learners acquire the metacognitive skills that enhance good writing strategies” (p.50). They need considerable practice over time to improve their writing abilities and performance.

#### **4. Data Collection and Observation**

The students were initially administered a diagnostic exam in the *Preparing for the TOEFL* course to detect problem areas that would need special attention. They completed a questionnaire about their writing habits and answered a survey about writing in general. The initial written assignments and essay samples from two consecutive years of over fifty diagnostic samples demonstrated that many students not only had problems with basic writing skills, grammar and spelling, but also with writing paragraphs and putting their ideas into logical order. Most of their writing lacked transition words or a variety of sentence structures. The majority of them did not revise their work. Students frequently misinterpreted the writing prompts. Consequently, they wrote an incorrect essay because it was not related to the topic.

Above all, the students’ essay writing revealed problems with form and organization. Since many were not familiar with the pre-writing, drafting and revision stages in the writing process, they did not know how to begin to write a composition or an essay. They had to think a long time to come up with ideas. Noticing that the students had a problem writing an essay, I tried to understand what could be accomplished in a one-semester classroom setting to encourage better writing. I needed to identify the weak areas in order to focus on these topics immediately so that the pupils would progress quickly. From a teacher’s point of view, the students’ writing would benefit by some fun and inventive classroom activities that would suit all their learning styles.

#### **5. Action Plan**

By researching information about multiple intelligences, I was able to create activities to accommodate all the students in the class. Preparing handouts for the essay structure and a power point presentation about the writing process to present to the class, aided the visual learners. I needed an activity for kinesthetic learners. I began to research how the students store information in their brains. The idea of consolidating ideas into chunks as a useful strategy for memory retention appeared in different readings. The importance of making connections between ideas through discussion, mapping and thinking would convert the students’ knowledge from short term memory into long term memory. In *Mindscapes: Teaching for Multiple Intelligences*, the authors suggest using techniques to cater to individuals learning needs through the use of verbal, auditory and kinesthetic learning activities. This seemed like an appropriate approach for writing practice.

The writing process is a complex system of transforming thoughts into written communication. The ability to write requires structure and organization. It is acquired through a progression of stages that are necessary to build the required skills for writing tasks. The students go through some of the stages consciously and unconsciously through writing practice. I decided to investigate how students organize information in their brains. I read articles about how students convert knowledge in their short-term memory to long-term memory. I studied how the brain retrieves information and the importance of concept mapping. In order to make connections between ideas, the students needed to use methods which would facilitate the consolidation of information.

In the book, *Teaching with the Brain in Mind* by Eric Jensen, there is information about how every student in the classroom has the capacity for change. “Even the most discouraging and frustrating students can improve.” Jensen insists that,

“Students use both sides of the brain. Humans learn in many ways, including through sensitization, habituation, conditioned responses, semantic learning, imitation, and by actually doing them”.

Jensen claims that teachers should help their students make connections. The belief that writing should be a guided process to prevent frustration is very important. Writing a paragraph in a foreign language is difficult for many people. ESL students are unfamiliar with different aspects of writing. Students need to begin with prewriting activities to generate ideas to stimulate the schemata (their background knowledge and experiences) to recall personal facts and specific ideas.

Reading and writing are linked. The more students read the more developed their writing skills will be. Books, stories and fairy tales are textbooks for writing. Since the majority of ESL students are not used to writing regularly, more form and structure are required for them than in any other subject. I decided to use fairy tales. By having the students interview each other about fairy tales, they recalled the necessary concepts of beginning, middle and end of stories found in fairy tales. The students explore and review these structures while building their background knowledge to guide them through the writing process. In the book *Fairy Tales, Fables, Legends, and Myths: Using Folk Literature in Your Classroom*, Bette Bosma explains that using fairy tales can “foster creative writing activities”. By having students interview each other and recall the tales they read when they were younger, they were encouraged to remember certain elements used in fairy tales. They were able to draw information from their prior knowledge and experience.

Training the students about the structures found in a composition using outlines and templates and through the practice of pair/group work activities, has helped them to automatically recognize the format and method required to write correctly. They reviewed the basics of writing by doing activities that started with simple sentences and moved on to paragraphs and peer writing compositions. Collaborative learning has helped the students to improve their basic paragraph writing. The visual learners benefited from the preparation of handouts and a power point presentation informing them about writing and the structure found in academic essays. Through peer-editing group techniques the students became editors as well as better writers. They learn from other students’ mistakes and how to look for similar mistakes in their own writing.

Most primary school teachers include movement in their classes. Evidence suggests that older students need movement too. Learning can become easier when movement is introduced into the activity. As Jensen confirms that “movement influences learning”, I decided to do research about what could be done to encourage more secondary and university teachers to include movement in their writing activities to reinforce their learning. I looked for ideas similar to a class presentation for the students to read to their audience after the students felt confident with their writing. Instead of having them read their essays individually, I decided to have the pupils write a peer group essay and present their essays to the rest of the class. Close to the end of the semester the students’ role-played their essays, which they had developed in their groups by following the writing process. By having the students get up and act out the essay it was beneficial for all learning styles. Not only was this method appropriate for the kinesthetic learners, but it also aids analytical, auditory and tactile learners as well.

The classes were divided into five groups of five students with a different essay prompt from those that frequently appear on a TOEFL test. Each group was divided into the five sections of an academic essay; the introduction, body paragraphs and the conclusion. They decided among themselves who would take the

parts. The members of the group were assigned a part of the essay to write. They peer edited each others work. The teacher guided the groups through the activities and facilitated any help that was requested. They used big color-coded cards for the introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion. The words for *Introduction, Body Paragraph 1, Body Paragraph 2, Body Paragraph 3 and Conclusion* were written on the cards in bold letters in green, yellow and red to identify each section. On the other side of the card, the students wrote their section of the essay, which they read individually to the class. As they role-played the essay in front of the class, they held up their folio sized papers with their section and each student read their part of the essay in order to the class. This helped the visual learners remember the paragraph sequence in an essay.

## **6. Evaluating the Results**

My research focused on ways to enable students to become independent essay writers and improve their writing. Once the students' needs were established for the particular class, it was possible to implement different strategies to accommodate all the students' learning styles with different approaches to writing. They were encouraged to become autonomous learners and were made aware of the prewriting, writing and revising stages in writing and improved their writing skills. I encouraged the students to realize that writing is a valuable lifetime habit. Students learn more about grammar and writing conventions through corrections of the context of their writing. Through peer and student teacher conferencing, individual improvement can be achieved. In addition, mingle activities focusing on revision of basic grammar forms using general questions help students recall correct grammar structures that will be used in their writing.

Since writing is a complex task, classroom instruction, guidance and individual feedback are needed for best results. Improving students writing is attained through student/ teacher research. Students need to understand that writing is an acquired skill that requires practice and mastery. By encouraging cooperative learning, the students learn to value peer suggestions and they share in the editing process. Once they automatically learn to recognize the essay format, structure and organization, the test takers will have more time to dedicate to accuracy and creativity while writing an essay on this time based test.

The learners evaluate their own writing strengths and weaknesses and work on improving their own individual writing skills so that they are able to write an essay meeting the TOEFL iBT test criteria.

## **7. Conclusions and reflections for additional improvement and follow through**

Writing is not something that automatically happens. Students need practice and instruction. In order to improve their writing abilities and promote learner autonomy, it is necessary to have students focus on guided writing tasks, which should include activities directed at all learning styles. Teachers should include mini-lessons with activities about writing conventions and writing skills. As a result of this research project, there has been an improvement in the overall quality of the students' writing. The students are made more aware of pre-writing techniques to generate ideas and are encouraged to revise their written work. The more exposure and opportunities that the students have to practice their writing will increase their ability to generate, organize and make writing easier and faster for them also. Even the weakest student writer can improve with practice. It is necessary to increase adequate attention to classroom writing instruction and develop activities that cater to all learning styles.

## References

- Bosma, B. 1992. Fairy tales, fables, legends, and myths: using folk literature in your classroom. Columbia University, New York: Teachers College Press.
- ETS. 2006. The Official Guide to the New TOEFL iBT, U.S., McGraw Hill
- Jensen, E. 1998. Teaching with the Brain in Mind second edition. Supervision and Curriculum Development: United States.
- Lazare, G., Nicholls, S. and Shallhorn, J. 1997. Mindscales: Teaching for Multiple Intelligences. Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation: Toronto.
- Raimes, A. 1985. "What unskilled ESL writers do as they write: a classroom study of composing." TESOL Quarterly. Vol. 19/2: Pp.229- 258.

## Webliography

- Shabaya, J. 2005. "The Role of Preservice Teachers in Developing Metacognitive Awareness. Strategies in an Urban Language Arts Writing High School Classroom". College Teaching Methods & Styles Journal. Vol. 1/3 Pp.49-57 <http://www.cluteinstitute-onlinejournals.com>: last accessed July, 2008
- TOEFL iBT test. ETS : Educational Testing Service [on line] [www.ets.org/](http://www.ets.org/): last accessed June, 2008
- Traffic signal system for writing: <http://www.busyteacherscafe.com/units/paragraph.htm>: last accessed November, 2008.

---

**Ilene Ann Smalec Malloy** has been teaching English at *Universidad Europea de Madrid* in the *UEM Lab* since 2000. She has a BA in Humanities from *Saint Mary of the Woods College*, IN., U.S.A., and completed a *Curso de Estudios Hispánicos* from *Universidad Complutense de Madrid*. She holds a Masters degree in TEFL from *Universidad de Alcala*.