

## Writing as the aim and means in teaching a foreign language: problems of assessment

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**Abstract.** The present article is the analysis of different methods and approaches to teaching foreign languages. One of the means of teaching a foreign language is writing. One of the main challenges the authors of the present article face is revising the existing criteria of language skills evaluation and working out a new criteria system for evaluating writing as it plays a key role in assessing language skills. While treating writing as the aim of teaching the authors take into account its communicative nature: a particular type of writing, writing genre that should answer the purpose of a particular communicative situation. A new system of writing tasks evaluation within the frame of the existing five-scale marking scheme is introduced.

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### Introduction

Till the 1990 the formation and development of methods of teaching foreign languages in Russia's linguistic education was nearly autonomous, as it practically existed without native speakers' assistance, without many authentic study materials, created by native speakers.

At the beginning of the 1990 the situation changed. A foreign language became an essential component of nonlinguistic education areas such as public relations, advertising, international relations, journalism, tourism etc. A foreign language started to be recognized as one of the most important tools of professional activity where writing plays an essential part. Thus, the methods of teaching a foreign language and writing in particular were adjusted to specific purposes in which the language needed to be used [1].

### Traditional approach to teaching foreign languages in Russia

The transition from teaching foreign languages only for linguistic purposes to teaching them for specific purposes was not that easy [2]. An analysis of existed English language teaching techniques and textbooks for the early stages of learning showed that their shortcomings were the following: the authors specified neither approach nor attainment targets; the principle of selecting and organizing teaching materials was not clearly explained; cultural differences between the native and the target languages were often neglected; the texts in the course books did not stimulate students' responses as they were often not directed at young people, their specific problems and concerns; topical

dialogues had little relevance to modern day life and the peculiarities of national culture; the imperative nature of many assignments resulted in a failure to provide a problem-solving stimulus. Our methods were primarily focused on advanced study of grammar and vocabulary expansion. Communicative differentiation of the language used in different spheres of everyday activities was not much paid attention to. And exactly communicative language competence appeared to be the priority in teaching a foreign language for specific purposes.

### Approaches to teaching writing

Together with speaking writing is referred to productive skills, but differs from speaking by a higher degree of accuracy, precision and normative form. As opposed to oral speech writing is restricted to verbal and graphical means of expression and devoid of prosodic elements [3]. Thus writing also requires teaching specific language units, which provide cohesion and coherence of written speech. In language teaching writing is used to perfect spelling, grammar, the choice of vocabulary and thus may be considered as means for teaching a proper and correct language in communication.

We realized that as opposed to speaking, reading and listening writing in our teaching methodology was considered exceptionally as the means of teaching a foreign language, but not as the aim, a separate skill.

When we treat writing as the aim of teaching we take into account its communicative nature: a particular type of writing, writing genre should answer the purpose of a particular communicative

situation. We had to think about a new approach to teaching and assessing writing.

### **Principles of the new-generation methods of teaching foreign languages**

We actively began to perfect our methods. In doing that we tried, on the one hand, to preserve the worked out integrated approach towards teaching foreign languages, on the other hand, to broaden and enrich it with the methods of our foreign colleagues (methods used in Cambridge University Press and Oxford University Press textbooks). The new approach took into account the following principles:

- **Task focus.** The materials emphasize encouraging students to do things with language, and learners to learn through practice.

- **Authenticity focus.** The materials emphasize three types of authenticity:

- The authenticity of text. Aural and written sources are natural and typical of the texts in question. Students are anxious to deal with ‘real’ material and feel a great deal of pride and accomplishment when they are finally able to do so.

- The authenticity of goal. The emphasis in the materials is on encouraging students to express their own ideas.

- The authenticity of task. Students are involved in purposeful activity in the classroom which recreates the realities of communicating in the world outside the classroom.

- **Meaning and form focus.** Learners are given a systematic introduction to and an opportunity to reflect upon different aspects of the language.

- **Strategy focus.** The material aim is developing the cognitive strategies of the learners, so that they know how to learn in a systematic way.

- **Educational focus.** The materials emphasize the gradual development of four worlds in the student: the world of language, the world of knowledge and content, the cognitive and learning world, the social and interpersonal world. The learner develops as an individual in terms of all four worlds as the curriculum proceeds.

- **Thematic focus.** The chosen themes and topics match the interests of students and are in harmony with the cultural norms of our society. As a general principle we suggest a gradual widening of thematic focus from the individual to the local, national and international environment.

- **Skills focus.** The emphasis throughout is on the integration of skills rather than the treatment of skills in isolation.

- **Teacher development focus.** The assignments are constructed with a range of teachers

in mind, some of whom need careful introduction to the teaching requirements of the new materials. The organization of the textbooks is flexible, allowing teachers to select sections of units for varying abilities typical in intermediate classes. Whenever possible, learning items, task-types and text-types are recycled. Students learn language ‘organically’, gradually making adjustments to what they already know.

### **Assessment problems in Russia’s linguistic education**

One of the main difficulties for us was to revise the existing criteria of language skills evaluation and practically to work out a new criteria system for evaluating writing.

Both at schools and universities a five scale-marking scheme exists. In practice only 4 scales are used because the lowest mark is represented by “2” indicating a non-pass level. This assessment system is very generalizing and actually does not perform the formative function of assessment.

### **Writing evaluation system**

We introduced a new system of evaluation within the frame of the existing five-scale marking scheme (see Figure 1).

In this scheme we connected each of the five levels of ability with a particular number of skills and abilities a student has to demonstrate to reach the level. Each level of evaluation covers four aspects (or profiles) of the evaluated language skill, writing in this case: content, organization, vocabulary and grammar/spelling. This scheme was created to push a formative assessment into the foreground. A formative assessment becomes really important in the light of possible necessity to make adjustments and alterations in the instruction according to the aim of education and individual abilities of the students. Carol Boston calls this approach “diagnostic use of assessment” [4].

In the analytic scale introduced by the British Council “Communicative Quality” and “Argumentation” are separated to form different profiles [5]. In our scheme we combined them in the profile “Content” since they are closely connected. In professional intercourse, where writing is used, content is formed by ideas argumentatively presented for concrete communicative purposes. This includes the student's audience awareness, an ability to incorporate research and reflection on the topic.

The profile “Organization” embraces the structure of the written text, which should be constructed with an introduction, a body and a conclusion. The body includes paragraphs, which are introduced by the main idea and accompanied by the

supporting ideas. Writing is to be consistently coherent, and cohesive devices should be visible both

inside and between paragraphs.

Mark	Content	Organization	Vocabulary	Grammar/Spelling
5	Ideas are completely relevant, appropriately detailed and effective. They show some originality and provide for complete realization of the task set. All content points are included.	Writing is consistently coherent. Main and supporting ideas are very well organized to convey the message. Excellent use of cohesive devices both inside and between paragraphs. Message is absolutely clear and effective.	Range and selection of words, phrases and structures are entirely appropriate and effective in term of style. Imaginative choice of words.	Very high level of grammatical accuracy. Sophisticated range of structures used. Practically no spelling and punctuation errors.
4	Ideas are completely relevant. Almost all major content points are included.	Writing is coherent most of the time. Main and supporting ideas are well arranged. Good use of cohesive devices both inside and between the paragraphs. Message is effectively followed.	Range and selection of words are appropriate or effective in terms of style.	High level of grammatical accuracy. Good range of structures used. Very few spelling and punctuation errors.
3	Ideas are relevant and appropriate to purpose. Sufficient number of content points included.	Writing is reasonably coherent with the main ideas adequately organized with supporting ideas and/or examples. Linking both inside and between the paragraphs achieves a reasonable degree of cohesion. Message is followed most of the time.	Range and selection of words are reasonably appropriate or effective in terms of style most of the time.	Acceptable level of grammatical accuracy. Reasonable range of grammatical structures used. Few spelling and punctuation errors.
2	Ideas are almost relevant and appropriate for adequate coverage. Some major content points are included.	Writing lacks coherence. Ideas are badly organized. Inadequate use of cohesive devices. Message is difficult to follow.	Range and selection of words and phrases are often inappropriate and ineffective.	Serious and frequent grammatical, spelling and punctuation problems. Poor range of grammatical structures.
1	Ideas are not relevant or appropriate for adequate coverage. Few major content points are included.	Writing is incoherent. Ideas are badly organized. Absence of cohesive devices. Message is impossible to follow.	Range and selection of words and phrases are inappropriate and ineffective.	Errors in grammar, spelling and punctuation show lack of basic knowledge of English.

Fig.1: Marking scheme for writing assessment (LUNN)

The profile “Vocabulary” includes the range and selection of words, phrases and structures from the point of view of their stylistic value and effectiveness.

The profile “Grammar/Spelling” follows the writer’s ability to use appropriate and correct grammatical structures, which are relevant to the communicative purpose of writing.

Assessing writing as the aim of teaching a foreign language requires continuous readjustment of the marking scheme and the approach itself depending on the character of the specific communicative situation the writing is referred to. On the other hand, it is crucial for the evaluation reliability that the assessment would be conducted on a consultative basis, preferably by a group of teachers or testers belonging to the same educational institution [6]. Regardless of a teacher’s urge to produce impartial assessment, it is necessary for the whole teachers’ team to come to an arrangement of how to differentiate between subtle nuances of the quality of the written work, i.e. ‘all content points are included’ and ‘major content points are included’, ‘excellent use of cohesive devices’ and ‘good use of cohesive devices’ and so on. When multiple teachers are involved in discussion and negotiation of what criteria are to be applied to a particular score or mark, they not only give alternative perspectives but also make the standard criteria as unambiguous and objective as possible.

Following K.E. Bezukladnikov, B.A. Kruze and M.A. Mosina we believe that the most effective practice in assessment is interaction, when evaluation is done in classroom through discussion and feedback from the students [7]. Assessment is treated as an educational resource and allows to control how the student’s preparation work (research on the subject, discussion, reflection) correlates with the resulting written composition, as well as how the instruction has been understood.

### Collaboration in assessment

In teaching communicative writing collaborative assessment conducted by the teacher and the student allows improving the content of education, providing the necessary link between the process of teaching and learning to achieve better results in acquiring competences. This way of assessment is a realization of the theory of communicative competence which, according to Tim McNamara, represents “a profound shift from a psychological perspective on language, which sees language as an internal phenomenon, to a sociological one, focusing on the external, social functions of language” [8].

The considerable amount of writing activities is still done as homework and writing assignments are mainly completed on an individual basis. But the communicative nature of writing implies interacting between the participants of written communication. So, it is vital to introduce in-class writing assignments, which get students involved into a group or pair work. These assignments should not be reduced to reproducing certain linguistic pattern; they should emulate real-life social interaction and be problem-solving oriented. The major four types of written assignments are as follows:

- **Instruction.** Students work in pairs or small groups to produce written instructions for their co-students or other groups. These instructions may be done in the form of step-by-step directions, manuals, guides or briefing.
- **Competition.** Students work in pairs or small groups to compete by presenting opposite points of view or mutually exclusive ideas. This competition may be realized in the form of discussion, debate, positive or negative critiques.
- **Dialogue.** Students work in pairs or small groups to engage themselves in written conversations for specific purposes. This conversation may be produced in the form of exchanging letters, instant messaging, and questionnaires.
- **Cooperation.** Students work in pairs or small groups to complete a common task. This joint activity may be done in the form of teamwork composing a specific text or providing comments and analysis for a given text.

The competency-based approach in language teaching assumes not only gaining a certain amount of knowledge but achieving constant potential readiness to use it in a specific environment, i.e. knowledge-in-action through one’s experience [9]. It sets up a new relationship between the student, the teacher and the environment where the cultural component plays one of the key roles in a person’s developmental education. This approach represents the so-called “pedagogy of cooperation”, which treats the teacher and the student as equal participants of the process of learning [10].

### Conclusion

Focusing on communication in language teaching brought us to working out new approaches and techniques in teaching and assessing speech skills. These approaches were reflected in the graded English course developed in the Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod where the key goals of the basic curriculum are as follows:

- to contribute to the intellectual, personal, educational and vocational development of the individual student

- to develop communicative skills in order to acquire, record and use information from a variety of aural and written sources

- to assist students in developing an understanding of the nature of a foreign language

- to increase the possibility of understanding, friendship and cooperation with people who speak the foreign language

- to assist students in exploiting their knowledge of a particular foreign language to better inform the world of the people living in Russia and their concerns

- to assist students in acquiring communicative competence

- to enable university graduates to use foreign languages in employment.

The thorough work that we have done to improve our methods of teaching and assessing foreign language skills, especially writing for linguist and non-linguist students, is just a small part of a significant shift of the Russia's professional education towards the realization of the Bologna process. The assessment plays a key role in this process of increasing professional education quality standards and building a competitive education within the united European educational space.

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