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Constraints and difficulties in the process of writing acquisition

Blanka Frydrychova Klimova*

University of Hradec Kralove, Faculty of Informatics and Management, Rokitanskeho 62, Hradec Kralove, 500 03, Czech Republic

Abstract

Writing is considered one of the most difficult language skills to be acquired but also taught. However, at present it is one of the most used forms of communication thanks to the development of information and communication technologies. Therefore, the aim of this article is to reflect on the cognitive, social and cultural aspects, which might hinder the development of writing skills. Moreover, the author of the article links the theoretical knowledge with the practical outcomes of the questionnaire distributed among the students of Management of Tourism from the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. Finally, she attempts to propose what teaching method should be exploited when teaching writing purposefully.

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1. Introduction

Thanks to the development of modern information and communication technologies, writing is one of the most commonly used forms of communication nowadays (Frydrychova Klimova 2012). However, this skill is also one of the most difficult to acquire in a foreign language (FL). The reason is that in addition to learning strategies, writing requires a high proficiency of the target language. The author agrees with Kern (2000) who claims that *knowing how to write a "summary" or "analysis" in Mandarin or Spanish does not necessarily mean that students will be able to do these things in English. As a result, any appropriate instruction must take into consideration the influence from various educational, social, and cultural experiences that students have in their native language.* Therefore, this article mainly focuses on the constraints and difficulties in the process of writing acquisition.

2. Constraints and difficulties in the process of writing acquisition

One of the reasons why writing is not easy to learn must certainly be **cultural differences** in the way academic register is perceived and understood in different countries. Clyne (1987) and Duszak (1994) characterize English as a *low context culture* while German, Czech or Polish belong to *high context academic cultures*. In a nutshell, this means that the English academic texts are perceived as being more clear and easy to understand than German texts which are more complex, full of nominalisations, compounds and modals. However, recent studies prove (cf. Biber, Gray & Poonpon 2011 or Biber & Gray 2010) that academic writing is generally structurally ‘compressed’, with phrasal (nonclausal) modifiers embedded in noun phrases.

* Corresponding author: Blanka Frydrychova Klimova Tel.: +420493332318

E-mail address: blanka.klimova@uhk.cz

In the Czech cultural environment knowledge and skills of writing are still neglected because writing is still perceived as a linguistic skill which is taught mainly at elementary schools and achieved through the mastering of grammatical and spelling rules. *Writing is seen as an individual gift* (Cmejrkova et al. 1999: 34). In the Anglo-Saxon world, however, writing is perceived as a skill which can be taught, practised and mastered. Czech students also tend to lack experience in writing and therefore the level of their writing is often very poor, even in the native language. This is unfortunately also true for higher education. Gillet (2004) sees writing as the most problematic use of English in Higher Education. Writing tasks vary from writing short answers in exams to writing dissertations and theses, and EAP courses often concentrate on the process of writing – planning, organising, presenting, re-writing, and proofreading. Typical writing skills include research and using sources; writing different text types as well as different genres; and using appropriate style (see also Cmejrkova 1999).

Undergraduates and even Ph.D. students have problems in writing their bachelor papers, diploma papers and thesis, or even if they are required to write just a short scientific article or review. Therefore, to help university students to improve this skill, one must bear in mind that:

- high cultural and social value is placed on the written version of the language;
- the term *literacy* is almost synonymous with proficiency in the written language;
- key definitions of what is standard language, what is correct and proper and even what is grammar are based on what has been described and codified in the written language (Carter 1995).

Difficulties in writing might be also caused by **social reasons**, such as negative attitudes toward the target language, continued lack of progress in the FL, a wide social and psychological distance between them and the target culture, and, a lack of integrative and instrumental motivation for learning. Probably the key element for students' writing from these is **motivation** (see also Frydrychova Klimova 2011). As Myles (12.6.2012) states, *however, if students show an overall interest in the target language (integrative motivation), perceive that there is parental and social support, and have a desire to achieve their professional goals (instrumental motivation), they can become more proficient in their ability to write in English, despite the initial lack of self-motivation*. Among the conditions for promoting motivation, Dornyei (2001: 138-144) cites:

5. *Create a pleasant and supportive atmosphere.*
6. *Promote the development of group cohesiveness.*
13. *Increase the students' expectation of success in particular tasks and in learning in general.*
17. *Make learning stimulating and enjoyable by breaking the monotony of classroom events.*
18. *Make learning stimulating and enjoyable by increasing the attractiveness of tasks.*
19. *Make learning stimulating and enjoyable for learners by enlisting them as active task participants.*
20. *Present and administer tasks in a motivating way.*
23. *Provide students with regular experiences of success.*
24. *Build your learners' confidence by providing regular encouragement.*
28. *Increase student motivation by promoting cooperation among the learners.*
29. *Increase student motivation by actively promoting learner autonomy.*
33. *Increase learner satisfaction.*
34. *Offer rewards in a motivational manner.*

Furthermore, Dornyei (2005) proposed a new approach to the understanding of L2 motivation, conceived within the 'L2 Motivational Self System', which attempts to integrate a number of influential L2 theories (e.g. by Gardner 2001; Ushioda 2001) with findings of self research in psychology (e.g. Higgins 1987; Markus and Nurius 1986). He suggests three main components of the L2 Motivational Self System:

- **Ideal L2 Self**, which is the L2-specific facet of one's 'ideal self': If the person we would like to become speaks an L2, the 'ideal L2 self' is a powerful motivator to learn the L2.
- **Ought-to L2 Self**, which concerns the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes.
- **L2 Learning Experience**, which concerns situated motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience (e.g. the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, the experience of success).

In addition, Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self System seems to make learners keener on doing things, but on the other hand, it makes them more responsible for their successes and failures. It also works with positive learning experiences.

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