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ON SOME ASPECTS OF TEACHING ESSAY STRUCTURE

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ЗА НЯКОИ АСПЕКТИ ПРИ ПРЕПОДАВАНЕ НА СТРУКТУРИРАНЕ НА ЕСЕ

The paper discusses various ways of teaching essay structure. The emphasis is on the development of a system of practical exercises aimed at developing students' abilities in writing a good introduction, body and conclusion of an essay. Key elements in teaching essay structure refer to the writing of thesis statement, topic sentences and inductive and deductive paragraphs.

Keywords: *introduction; thesis statement; topic sentence; paragraph; conclusion; logical development.*

Статията анализира различни начини за преподаване на структуриране на есе на английски език. Акцентира се върху представяне на система от практически упражнения, които са насочени към развитието на уменията на обучаемите да пишат увод, изложение и заключение. Основни моменти от процеса на обучение се отнасят към написването на теза, тематични изречения и оформянето на индуктивни и дедуктивни параграфи.

Ключови думи: *увод; теза; тематично изречение; параграф; заключение; логическа последователност.*

The way an essay is organized is one of the most important things that students should acquire in essay writing classes. A well-organized essay makes the text fluent and reader-friendly. It also helps for the cohesion and the logical development of the text.

The English essay most often is divided into five paragraphs: introduction (one paragraph), body of the essay (two or three paragraphs) and a conclusion.

The introduction has three parts. The first part should grab the reader's attention, the second part orients the reader to the subject of the paper and it ends with a thesis statement, which presents the main idea of the essay. "The thesis statement directs the reader's attention to the one idea that brings all the other ideas and details into perspective" (Axelrod & Cooper 1993: 210). It is the most important sentence in the essay. It is concise and written in the form of a declarative sentence. The thesis statement as well as the topic sentences should not be fragments, they express a complete thought.

The introduction is a difficult part to start and students may be encouraged to overcome *the writer's block* by following some useful steps. They may begin the introductory part with a proverb, personal anecdote, a question, a quotation, stating an unexpected detail, defining an important term, describing an unexpected point of view (Moore & Cassel 2011: 102).

Some introductions ask the reader to do something – to take some action, consider another alternative, or think more deeply about an issue or problem. Other introductions speculate on the future by predicting what will happen as a result of the situation described in the essay (Yarber & Yarber 2010: 9).

When teaching essay structure, it is important to have in mind the characteristics of the particular type of essay that is being taught, the cultural aspects of writing as well as the context of writing.

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“Texts always display traces of context” (Atanassova 2022: 72). Argumentative and discursive essays follow the standard form of essay and paragraph organization. Narrative essays usually start without an introduction. They begin with the story itself. The thesis statement of that kind of essay is rather flexible. There may be an implicit thesis statement or the thesis sentence can be implied. Since narrative essays are type of personal essays, the thesis statement may reveal the conclusion from the story that will be narrated and how that experience has changed the person who writes the essay.

Descriptive and reflective essays are also considered personal writing. Personal writing is experimental and the writers are free to create their flexible thesis statements, based on using descriptive and figurative language. Specific details and use of strong adjectives are preferable for the writing of the thesis statement. Descriptive and reflective writing should refer to the readers’ senses: sight, taste, touch, hearing and smell. The use of figurative language makes the work more vivid and impressive.

The thesis statement of an expository essay should not present an opinion or state an argument. It should be based on factual information that will be further developed in the body of the essay (Montane 2004: 37).

Exercises which are aimed at developing students’ skills in writing thesis statements can be divided into exercises, connected with the structuring of the sentence and exercises related to the logical development of the thesis statements. Students may be given the beginning of a sentence and then they should finish the sentence by adding specific information.

Teaching how to develop a body paragraph is connected with paragraph development exercises. Paragraphs serve the purpose of making reading easier by marking the logical stages in the writers’ thoughts and the subdivisions in the material (Pincas 1982: 53). Paragraphs vary in length but most often a paragraph is about 100 words long. Most paragraphs are usually four to fifteen sentences in length. The key to writing a good paragraph is to make it long enough to develop the topic (Checkett & Checkett 2010:133). According to Yarber & Yarber (2010: 6), a well-organized paragraph has three characteristics:

A good paragraph is unified: all of its sentences are related to one main idea.

A good paragraph is coherent: the thoughts proceed logically from sentence to sentence.

A good paragraph is developed: it contains enough information to convey the idea of the paragraph in a reasonably thorough way.

A paragraph is unified when each sentence relates directly to the main idea of the paragraph. Coherence can be strengthened in several ways: by repeating key words to carry concepts from one sentence to another and to echo important words; by using pronouns to refer to key nouns in previous sentences, and by using transitions. These three stages of connecting sentences and paragraphs indicate for the readers the exact relationships among the ideas (Kirsner & Mandell 2011: 56). The well-developed paragraph contains the support – examples, reasons, and so on – readers need to understand its main idea. If a paragraph is not well-developed, readers will feel they have been given only a partial picture of the subject. The concluding sentence of a paragraph is a restatement of the topic sentence. It gives the same information but presented in a different way (Boardman & Frydenberg 2008: 9).

Some successful written tasks aimed at developing students’ abilities in writing coherent paragraphs may include: listing transitional devices in given paragraphs; rewriting paragraphs, staying as close as possible to the original text but changing what needs to be changed to give the paragraph coherence and flow; deleting repetitions; using the same organizational pattern for successive sentences by using parallel structures; inserting missing transitions; maintaining coherence by referring to material that was used earlier in the text as well as underlining details and ideas that have been restated.

Savage & Shafiei (2007: 2-3) identify the following types of paragraphs: descriptive paragraphs where the writer describes a person, a place or a thing; example paragraphs in which the writer explains a topic by giving examples; process paragraphs where the writer explains how to do something step by step; opinion paragraphs in which the writer expresses his or her feelings, ideas, and opinions about a topic and narrative paragraphs where the writer tells a story. The teaching of the different types of paragraphs can be successfully implemented in classes about rhetorical modes of writing.

Some useful exercises aimed at developing students' abilities to write successful paragraphs may include: identifying the paragraph patterns in different texts, writing titles of different paragraphs, correcting mistakes in paragraphs. Paragraphs may be written as deductive or inductive paragraphs depending on the position of the topic sentences. Activities aimed at developing paragraph-writing abilities may focus on turning an inductive paragraph into a deductive one and vice versa. A group of sentences may be given in a jumbled order and the students should make an inductive or deductive paragraph pattern.

“The alternation of general and particular in sentences within paragraphs and among paragraphs within an essay sets up a rhythmic pattern that becomes a basis for determining when we have completed the whole” (Irmscher 1979: 103). A common mistake in students' essay is the writing of very short or very long sentences. Another mistake is the writing of sentence fragments, which make difficult the understanding of the meaning of the sentence.

“For a paragraph to be effective, the topic sentence and controlling idea must be supported by details – facts, statistics, testimony, personal experiences, and observations. Without enough support, a topic sentence is unproven” (Connelly 2013: 51). Students may benefit from the following tasks, developed by the same author: writing topic sentences for a given subject, inventing details or opinions to express a controlling idea; crossing out sentences that do not support the controlling idea; revising weak topic sentences and adding details to create a more focused controlling idea (40–53). Exercises, relating to the above-mentioned characteristics develop students' critical thinking abilities.

Tasks about rewriting sentences, which do not contain an explicit topic sentence into paragraphs with topic sentences will add creativity in the classroom and will be a challenging and rewarding task for students.

When writing topic sentences, the following problems may occur: leaving out a key word from the main idea, changing a key word in the main idea and adding inappropriate new ideas to the main idea (Juzwiak 2009:139). Tasks, aimed at correcting the enumerated problems will help students develop a focused and coherent text.

The concluding paragraph “... eases the reader out of the main stream of a writer's ideas and into the final comments or observations that wrap up the essay” (Brannan 2010: 455). In the conclusion, the writer restates in his/her own words the thesis statement. “It can suggest a sense of ‘closure’ by referring to a quotation or fact used in the introduction. The conclusion should not present a new idea that will not be further developed. The conclusion may give advice to the reader or end with some thought-provoking questions. It may also make a personal growth statement or simply finish the story that was used in the introduction” (Juzwiak 2009: 255). The last way of finishing the essays is especially useful in narrative or reflective-descriptive essays. The concluding sentences may reveal an emotion, give an opinion, make a reflective statement or suggest behavior change (Brannan 2010: 285–286).

As an exercise in writing conclusions, students may be given a text and several optional conclusions from which they have to choose the one that is written in the best way. In some of the concluding paragraphs, there may be mistakes, which the students will have to find and correct. Students may dwell on how the conclusion makes reference to the introduction or they should find the sentence in the concluding paragraph which restates the thesis and the supporting points in the essay (Langan 2010).

It is important to note that some types of expository essay do not require conclusions. A process analysis essay may end with the result, an example essay and an analogy essay may also end without a formal conclusion.

The texts that will be given as written tasks should be in a specific academic register. By providing various texts from different genres, students develop their critical thinking abilities, feel confident in their abilities and acquire knowledge about the content, the structure and the linguistic characteristics of a particular text. Thus, the requirements for development of teaching materials are met:

- a. Materials should achieve impact (through novelty, variety, presentation, content, etc.).
- b. Materials should help learners feel at ease (through presentation, personal “voice”, etc.).
- c. Materials should help learners to develop confidence (pushing them beyond current ability).

- d. Materials should be seen as relevant and useful by learners.
- e. Materials should require and facilitate learner self-investment (through gaining interest, etc.).
- f. Materials should expose the learners to language in authentic use.
- g. The learners' attention should be drawn to linguistic features of the input.

Tomlinson (1998) in Hyland (2005: 111)

Teaching essay structure takes a central part in writing classes. The acquiring of the skills, which are needed for the correct organization of essays are important for students since the form of the essay is important for the realization of the content. The well-organized and structured essay provides a good framework for the coherent and logical development of the whole text.

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