

Vardyan A.

Yerevan State University, Armenia

TEACHING ESL THROUGH ESSAYS

ABSTRACT

The main goal of the present article is to teach university students how to write essays gaining special skills for writing. To get those skills the student should follow the steps in writing discussed in the article and mind the importance of critical thinking while writing.

Learning ESL and teaching through essay writing is a very effective means of learning a foreign language. It involves reading, writing, searching, editing with its all aspects, understanding and thinking critically.

Teaching any foreign language is not an easy task. This problem was thought over beginning from time immemorial. There were many different methods of teaching a foreign language. We don't need to analyze all the old methods that are known to us, but we can say that they have prompted modern method innovations and they have always been at the centre of discussions on how to teach foreign languages.

Changes in language teaching methods throughout history showed changes in the kind of proficiency learners need, such as a move towards oral experience rather than reading comprehension as the goal of language study.

Five hundred years ago most widely studied foreign language was Latin as it was the dominant language of education, commerce, religion and government in the Western World. In the 16th century, however, French, Italian and English gained an importance as a result of political changes in Europe. Other languages began to enter the curriculum of the European school in the 18th century, but they were taught using the same basic methods that were used for teaching Latin. By the 19th century this approach became

the standard way of studying foreign languages in schools. But during the World War II when US entered the war a significant effect on language teaching took place in America. The US government needed a personnel who were fluent in German, French, Italian, Chinese, Japanese and other languages who could work as interpreters, code room assistants and translators. As a result, it was necessary to set up a special language training program. Fifty five American universities were involved in the program by the beginning of 1943. The program was for students to attain conversational proficiency in a variety of foreign languages. As it was not the goal of conventional foreign language courses, new approaches were necessary for teaching foreign languages. The army training method lasted only about two years, but after the war it attracted considerable attention in the popular press and in the academic community. For the next ten years the “army method” and its suitability of use in regular language programs was discussed. But later there was a growing demand for foreign knowledge in teaching English as a foreign language. Thousands of foreign students came to the USA to study in universities. But many of them required training in English before they could begin their studies. This led to the emergence of the American approach to ESL, which by the midfifties had become Audiolingualism. Later other methods were introduced for language teaching. One of them was Situational Language Teaching which was a British approach to language teaching. But from the late 1960s the British approach changed to Communicative Language Teaching. Later there came many other methods of teaching languages as a second language, for example, Total Physical Response – which is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action. The Silent Way was another method devised by Caleb Gattegno who used coloured wooden sticks for different words. The Natural Approach method was based on the use of language in communicative situations without recourse to the native language and

without reference to grammar.

All these methods and later created ones were thought to make learning a foreign language easy for great masses.

Especially as English is an international language now, many of the latest methods are useful for students who learn it as a second or a foreign language. One of the latest methods is critical thinking. It isn't something extraordinary but a term which we will hear quite a lot in schools, colleges and universities, because it is a kind of thinking we shall be asked to do in our courses and later during our career and even life. Critical thinking in society and education is not a new concept. The evaluation of someone's own thinking process has been around since human history began. The Armenian proverb wisely says: "Every new thing is a well forgotten old one". Critical thinking was an essential part of ancient cultures, including the Egyptian, Sumerian and Babylonian cultures. Later it was an inseparable skill and focus for the ancient Greek philosophers. For instance, Socrates is known for teaching his students how to analyze their critical thinking processes. The word critical comes from the Greek word 'kriticos' which means to question and to analyze. We engage our critical thinking skills every day. Whenever we make a decision, solve a problem or prioritize tasks we use critical thinking. We do it not only in choosing our classes each term, finding out how many classes we can take in one term, which classes are most important for us to take first, but also - in every day life. For instance, when we shop for groceries, when we decide which bill we should pay first on a limited budget, when we work out problems and arguments between us and our friends or co-workers, we are being critical thinkers.

One of the aspects of modern language teaching methods now is to do it through writing essays. For doing this, students in development and entry level composition courses need detailed instruction on how to write essays, how to spot and correct their spelling, usage, sentence level errors, and how

correctly to include quotes from other writers. They also need instruction on how to interpret what they have read, how to go deeper into the topic they have chosen to write about, how to choose the best approach for communicating their ideas to their audience, and how to put all of these aspects together into a meaningful purpose for writing. The teacher encourages students to engage in an active critical thinking process during all stages of reading and writing and helps them to understand others' ideas as well as their own.

To start writing an essay needs a proper preparation for it. The preparation is the hardest step when the student begins to read and write a lot of material from different sources and chooses the important material thinking critically. The student may ask other students or tutors about the material he needs, but he shouldn't share homework or writing assignments with others, because essay assignment is an individual homework which must be done on his own. After all, students have shown that when they collaborate with other students, it increases their chance of being successful. We shall try to define critical thinking in the context of using critical thinking skills and fulfilment of the tasks. It will provide them with tools designed to help the students read and write analytically. It means to read – looking for answers to questions, and to draw some conclusions about the topic and to evaluate their own reading and writing processes. Good reading and writing go hand in hand. As the student learns those skills his own thinking and writing skills will improve. They will develop the habit of a step by step process of thinking about each part of an argument or idea. Once a student gets hooked on the power that comes from using his critical thinking skills, he may not be able to stop, - he will find himself using those skills everywhere – while reading a newspaper, listening to the radio, reading a novel, even watching a film. In his book "Thinking Through Essays" (7:23) Dr. Teri Maddox gives the critical thinking tools that will be used in the

essay writing:75

1. Purpose
2. Ideas
3. Support
4. Assumptions and Biases
5. Conclusions
6. Points of View
7. Analysis

The author defines each of these terms, describes how they are used in the reading and writing processes. The author explains all the points as follows:

The Purpose is the plan or blueprint of what the student wants to say in his essay. Ideas develop the student's purpose and form the structure of his sentences and develop the thesis. Supports are the examples given in details that illustrate the ideas they use to support the purpose. Assumptions – information the student takes and biases – personal beliefs the student has about particular topics. Conclusions – the results of the student's argument or purpose. Point of View – how the student sees the subject he is discussing. Analysis – breaking down an idea and working out the meaning of the individual parts and connections between the parts.

All these points or, as the author says, tools, are very important in writing an essay, as the students do in my different courses. When we finish one unit of our textbook ("Success at First Certificate" Robert O'Neill, Michael Duckworth, Kathy Gute, Oxford University Press) i.e. reading, analysing, telling, discussing, expressing ideas about the text and answering all the problematic questions, the students have an interesting task – to write an essay on a particular subject. But very often students write their essays by only making a plan, giving details, telling their points of view and giving their conclusion. I mean, they do not like going deeper into the subject and

purpose of the topic, or analysing the facts and taking many other ideas of different authors into consideration. This is a problem that we must show them the ways how to work, read and write thinking critically and other important aspects while writing an essay.

In my opinion, for writing an essay the student must be taught to think over and analyse each paragraph that is included in the essay. As usual, any kind of essay (Professional Definition Essay, Description Essay, Comparison and Contrast Essays, Process Essays etc.) consists of introductory paragraph, a body paragraph and a concluding paragraph. It is easy to tell the student about these paragraphs, but the main point is to teach him/her how to form each of them, how to work out any idea or bias, how to construct a sentence to make it grammatically or syntactically correct, how to express his or others' ideas and thoughts and how to prove the righteousness of his ideas and conclusions.

The technics of essay writing is more or less not very complicated but the process of writing needs hard work. In my opinion, the first step of essay writing is to read critically. What does it mean? – It means that while reading the necessary material the student should read actively, i.e. he/she should understand the material which needs concentration. We can compare active reading with listening, because when you listen you concentrate and understand the meaning of the words. Passive reading can be compared with 'hearing' because you can hear something without actively engaging in understanding what they mean. Developing active reading habits help the student read critically and engage in thoughtful analysis as he/she reads. Active reading gives the student a habit of using specific reading systems, i.e. he/she uses highlighting or underlining, codes and other annotating methods. Highlighting and underlining are ways to separate the main ideas from the rest. Highlighting is also used to mark words the student does not know and then fill in their definitions in the margin. The margin can be used

to write different ideas, a number of examples given in support of the main idea of the paragraph, to write questions as he reads, to make comments, to make comments when he notices author's biases. To annotate texts as he reads, the student can use his own list of symbols and codes while reading. Having gathered (annotated) a lot of material, the student should begin writing a paragraph which involves putting the parts in order so that he can effectively communicate his point to his intended audience. In this case the student will use critical thinking to determine his purpose, for writing a paragraph, the argument he wants to make, the support he will provide, and the conclusion he will read. It is important for the student to show his/her point of view about the topic, if his/her point of view is based on correct information, and what is his analysis of the topic. He/she should give proper examples and details to affirm his support to the topic. He needs to provide evidence and support for his arguments in order to develop his paragraphs. The evidence he uses can come in the form of personal experience, the experience of others, research, facts, statistics from assigned readings. It is compulsory to engage his critical thinking skills to evaluate the strength of his arguments and ideas. Eventually the student comes to a point where he makes his summary to show his conclusion on the topic, to prove his thoughts and ideas.

Conclusion is the final point in the student's argument, the place he reaches after discussing the ideas that support his purposes and arguments. The concluding paragraph sums up the purposes and main ideas of the body77 paragraph. It pulls all the ideas and purposes together in a finished product, providing an overall sense of conclusion. The concluding paragraph sums up and re-emphasizes the thesis statement and the conclusions the student has reached. It is the result of a long and hard work the student has done during essay writing.

In the process of essay writing very often the student should use

reworking style, i.e. going back and checking what he has written. During revision he must check the order of paragraphs and the details within them: move things that need to be moved and delete things that do not belong. He must ensure his essay flows smoothly by adding, connecting words or phrases where needed. He must be sure whether his paragraphs have enough support from examples and details to develop his topic. After revising the style and content the student needs to read his essay for grammar and spelling errors. He should turn on his inner editor at this stage of writing. He should check the word usage, the word choice, the spelling of the chosen words and the style he had been using while writing. He should even check the use of different punctuation marks, pronoun agreement, subject verb agreement, pronoun reference fault errors, colon uses, apostrophe use, unnecessary passive voice constructions, i.e. correction of any error he finds. It is important to have another eye, I mean another student to go through his essay and revise it. It is very helpful if the student can put his final essay draft aside for a day before he completes it. In that way he can spot simple errors and misprints that are invisible to his brain for the first few days after he finishes his paper.

In the article the students are introduced to the essay writing process, are shown how to organize and provide details and support for their essay's purpose, and learn about the importance of order, unity and coherence. Teaching and learning ESL through essay writing is a very effective means of learning a foreign language. It involves reading, writing, searching, editing with its all aspects, understanding and critical thinking. During all the process of writing an essay, the student works hard to gather materials for it reading all necessary books, magazines, articles, other essays, etc. All this process is very useful for the student to gain more ideas, learn many new words and expressions, which later he/she incorporates in his essay. Lastly he uses critical thinking while reading different sources and gathering the material

he needs, analysing it, asking questions, summing up, checking and at last thinking critically.