

LEARNING TO TEACH WRITING THROUGH WRITING

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Abstract: This paper discusses some major issues concerning teaching writing to future teachers. There are a lot of EFL/ESL textbooks focused on teaching writing. However, those that are intended for trainee teachers are rare on the market. The goal of this paper is to share the result of several years of work on the writing syllabus and materials that is effective in the process of teaching future teachers. It contains sample of tasks based on certain principles that may promote teachers to become effective writers for themselves and, at the same time, to acquire initial professional skills necessary in their future career. A course book can not address any audience in general. It must focus on a particular learner, the objectives, and content of the process of learning. In the situation when no textbook meets these requirements, the problem of providing students with an appropriate textbook must be solved by creating new textbooks.

Keywords: *writing skills, strategies, professional needs, syllabus, teaching/learning materials.*

INTRODUCTION

Mastering writing skills is crucial not only to students' success at the university, but getting a good job after graduation, too. Acquiring this skill is of paramount importance, especially now, in the internet era. In all major fields of study, research, and business, it is absolutely necessary for a person to be able to communicate well in writing. No wonder, every EFL/ESL course book offers materials aimed at developing effective writing skills. Some universities also run online and blended courses focused on academic writing. With all the abundance of materials on the educational market, it looks like there is no need to create something new in the field of teaching writing. However, to be able to write well and to successfully teach how to write are two different

competences. Both, obviously, should be developed in teacher training institutions.

After many years of experience in training would-be teachers, methodology research, and struggle with students' papers, we decided to create a new university course on writing, different from what is usually offered on the curriculum in Russian pedagogical universities. It is different both in the underlying philosophy and approach.

The work on the syllabus and materials involved several stages: (1) a thorough analysis of major difficulties Russian university learners experience in writing in English – learners' needs; (2) identifying professional skills future teachers should acquire to be able to teach writing in English to high school students – professional needs; (3) a syllabus design; (4) a students' survey of

the topics they would like to write about; (5) collecting students' materials and creating activities based on them; (6) piloting the materials and revision; (7) getting students' feedback; (8) a course book publication.

It took us several years to collect and pilot materials, modify and improve tasks, write and rewrite them. The product of years of work and piloting the materials was the course book *Learn to Write with Us: a Process-based Writing Textbook* (Suchkova et al, 2013), which is now used in the course of writing in several Russian universities. The course book is intended for students, future teachers of English, whose level of language proficiency corresponds to B2+ according to the Common European Framework of Reference (Council of Europe, 2011). It is a process-based course book that invites students to master the skill of writing in English gradually, step by step, from a paragraph to longer pieces. Writing is seen as a skill of expressing ideas on paper clearly and effectively. The purpose of the course is to help students develop essential writing strategies and apply their knowledge to writing assignments they will receive in the university courses in the future, taking language exams, or teaching writing to their own students.

The unique feature of the textbook is that almost all the activities are based on students' written papers who gave their consent to use their papers as a basis for teaching/learning materials. The students of Samara State Pedagogical University, Samara State Aerospace University, and Povolzhskaya Academy of Social Sciences and Humanities can be called co-authors of this book.

The article contains the description of the writing course syllabus, the course

book principles. It considers the major difficulties Russian students have when writing in English. The article also provides information about the content and organization of the course book written for future teachers of English. Finally, the authors offer some writing strategies and tasks from this course book.

SYLLABUS OF THE WRITING COURSE

The syllabus below is offered here to illustrate the main elements of the writing course as part of the curriculum at the English language Department of Povolzhskaya State Academy of Social Sciences and Humanities, Samara, Russia. Target group: students majoring in English and teaching methodology
Duration: three semesters, 96 face-to-face academic hours in class/120 outside class

Aim:

- to enable students to write clear, detailed, well-structured texts on a wide range of subjects (from paragraph to more extended pieces of writing)

Objectives:

- to provide students with a variety of effective writing strategies, thus facilitating development of their writing skills
- to form initial teacher's professional skills in needs analysis, creating materials for teaching writing, and assessing written papers

Topics for consideration:

- Identifying strengths and weaknesses as a writer; setting goals
- Pre-writing strategies
- Paragraph writing: topic, main idea, paragraph structure and purpose, paragraph types
- Unity, cohesion, and coherence of the paragraph

- Punctuation and mechanics
- Drafting, editing, and proofreading
- Essay writing
- Article writing
- Review writing
- Report writing
- Resume writing
- Letter writing
- Story Writing
- Avoiding plagiarism, paraphrasing strategies
- Assessment criteria, self-check, peer reviewing
- Written feedback

Functional Language:

- Concluding and summarizing
- Giving examples and focusing
- Expressing opinions
- Suggesting solutions
- Introducing main ideas
- Introducing listing
- Showing sequence and time
- Showing comparison/contrast
- Introducing cause-effect
- Phrases for reviews
- Phrases for report
- Phrases for letter writing
- Action verbs
- Narration verbs

Materials

- Suchkova, S., Dudnikova, G., Adayeva, O. (2013). *Learn to Write with Us: A Process-based Writing Textbook (Student's Book)*. Samara.

Controlling end-of-semester activities:

Semester 1 - paragraph writing, letter writing

Semester 2 - options: review / essay writing

Semester 3 - options: report / article writing

Assessment criteria: 1-5 scale

- Content
- Text organization
- Word range

- Sentence fluency (sentence length and structure variety, appropriate connectives)
- Accuracy (spelling, grammar and usage, use of capitals, and punctuation)

The syllabus requires an explanation of how one can learn to teach writing during the process of being taught. To do this, it is necessary to describe the materials used in the course and provide samples to illustrate the points. This will be done in other sections of the article.

The syllabus was designed to cater for the learning needs of Russian students. Observation and analysis of papers written by Russian learners of English (2003-2011) shows that students' major difficulties are (1) inability to structure a text properly: divide it into meaningful parts, formulate the main idea clearly and develop it, (2) lack of cohesion or coherence, (3) inconsistent register, (4) poor vocabulary and primitive grammar, (5) plagiarizing.

Partly, the difficulties result from the fact that students tend to think that writing in English is much like writing in their native language, which is far from it. A paragraph in English normally follows a straight line of development (the paragraph often begins with a statement of its central idea, followed by a series of subdivisions of the central idea with the purpose of developing the topic sentence). Conversely, the thought-pattern of Russian speakers is a zigzag line, sometimes interrupted by rather complex digressions: irrelevant, off-topic material is introduced in a paragraph (Kaplan, 1966, p. 15).

The analysis also shows that the writing problems also account for certain gaps in pre-university training, i.e. underestimating of teaching such things as paragraph structure: introduction, main body, and conclusion; basic

features: unity, coherence, and cohesion; writing purpose and paragraph types: description, process, opinion, comparison/contrast, narration, and problem-solution; text organization models: listing, sequence, comparison/contrast, and cause-effect. There is clear evidence that they all require special focus in instruction and practice. For this reason, all of these problems are highlighted in the course.

As can be seen from the syllabus, the biggest part of the course is devoted to writing on a paragraph level as a paragraph is a prerequisite for writing longer pieces. The problem of accuracy is dealt with in special units of the materials. The problem of plagiarism and how to avoid it is tackled separately, too.

PROFESSIONAL NEEDS

As the main intent was to target the materials on professional requirements for the teacher, certain skills have been identified as major ones. The authors of the article share the opinion of K. B. Yancey who states the fact that “in the 21st century, people write as never before – in print and online. We thus face three challenges that are also opportunities: developing new models of writing; designing a new curriculum supporting those models; and creating models for teaching that curriculum.” (Yancey, 2013, p. 1) Writing as “an object of study has been neglected until recently, but today it is an essential part of the pedagogical institutions curriculum”.

Unfortunately, however, we have to agree with Scane and Doerger (2010, p. 51) that “While pre-service teachers receive explicit instruction in methods for teaching writing to elementary and secondary students, they are less likely to receive explicit instruction about the writing skills necessary to be a successful, professional educator. The writing skills

of many teacher candidates often do not align with expectations for professionals and most introductory courses in writing offered at universities do not address the specific needs of those planning to become teachers.”

On the one hand, modern educators are expected to write in the way that will enable them to communicate professionally with colleagues from the world, sharing ideas and discussing challenges and teaching experience, via professional blogs, forums, and conference papers. On the other hand, in addition to academic writing skills they acquire themselves, teachers should be able to develop materials in order to train students how to write effectively with the reader in mind. They should know how to develop such skills of their students as generating and arranging ideas, drafting and editing, overcoming drawbacks and difficulties, they should be in the know of a variety of methods and techniques, and, of course, teachers should be trained in carrying needs analysis and correction techniques.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills together with the National Council of Teachers of English worked out the skills necessary for a modern student and teacher. Some of them are creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, communication and collaboration, information and literacy. To enable future teachers to acquire the above mentioned skills, we implemented this course and are using the textbook. Later in the article we offer a number of activities that are aimed at developing the skills.

THE COURSE BOOK’S UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY

The underlying principles of the offered course are integration of language skills, reflective practice,

individual approach to students, and collaborative learning.

A certain system of activities is designed to make the process of acquiring this most challenging language skill gradually, from easy to more complicated tasks. The teaching /learning process is built on students' background learning experience; the prior knowledge is elicited, and the process is targeted on the learners' needs. Moreover, the activities are directed towards getting students to think for themselves; they are always provided options to choose from. Setting their own goals and monitoring their own progress (which is part of the teaching methodology used) is often referred to as learner-centeredness and learner autonomy (Harmer, 2008).

The skills of reading and writing are integrated with a focus on developing critical thinking skills, stimulating creativity, and fostering learner autonomy. Good reading samples, used with the purpose of their analysis and evaluation, further serve patterns for writing. Learners first make discoveries and perceive differences of ideas arrangement, consolidate their understanding of text structuring, and then create meaningful texts of their own.

The book also follows some principles which are very important for future teachers. First, students are recognized as individuals with their own learning style, background, pace, and interests. Their initiative is appreciated; they are encouraged to take on an active role in the process. Second, students are involved in different modes of classroom management: individual, pair, and group work, which are indicated in the instruction to the exercises. This teaches them how to organize an activity in a more efficient way. What is also professionally-oriented is the fact that

students are invited to evaluate their peers' works. Such peer review "encourages students to monitor each other and, as a result, helps them to become better at self monitoring" (Harmer, 2008, p. 150). The material itself has certain educational value, too: there is a great variety of tasks and topics; many activities are creative and focused on applying strategies.

WHAT THE BOOK INCLUDES

Learn to Write with Us starts with an introduction written for students that explains the ideas behind the textbook. The course book contains 18 units; each places an emphasis on a certain issue of the writing process. Each unit starts with a preliminary activity which provides a stimulus to thought and introduces the subject under discussion. The main points of each unit are emphasized in special tables, where explanatory comments are provided.

The book is also abundant in useful language presented in the boxes. A particular focus of the book is learning how to handle various tasks; that is why, it has a lot of helpful tips and effective strategies. The students are offered a variety of different activities to be done both in class and at home. Moreover, the book comprises several appendixes that are meant to assist students in evaluation their own work and the papers of their peers. They are aimed at encouraging students to use the guidelines until they get into the habit of editing their papers. There is a bibliography list which contains both methodology books and textbooks, printed and electronic resources that can be used for further reference in order to develop writing skills.

Each unit is structured in such a way as to first start students' thinking and elicit what they already know; then,

through a variety of exercises they acquire more knowledge about writing conventions, effective strategies, format characteristics, etc. At the beginning of the course, students write on the level of phrases and sentences, then continue with a complete paragraph, and next proceed to longer pieces of writing such as letters, stories, essays, articles, reports, etc. Each unit has a wrapping up exercise to emphasize the most important points of the unit.

TOPICS TO WRITE ABOUT

Discussion of topics selected according to students' interests and concerning different spheres of their life and professional activity makes for raising their cooperation, communicative competence, and motivation. It is known that teachers may expect better results if they invite students to write on the topics that are relevant and involving to them. We tried to consider our students' worlds of thought and experience in order to provoke their engagement with the material. That is why, before creating teaching materials, a survey was conducted in the Pedagogical University of Samara, which allowed having a list of topics students are likely to be interested in writing about. The questionnaire contained one open-ended question: What topics would you like to write about?

Among the most favorite topics were *films, food, outstanding people, favorite places and travelling, technology and the internet*, and others. All these topics can be found in the course book activities. Some of the topics, such as *societal problems, cultures around the world, creativity*, were added by the authors as they are considered to be thought provoking and developmental. As we see our role, the teachers' job is not only to teach a language, but also to educate

their students. The real education value of learning can be achieved by discussing culturally educational and social content.

THE PRINCIPLES AT WORK

This section aims to illustrate the principles underlying the course with samples taken from the course book.

The first and most important basis for professional progress is simply your own reflection on any issues that arise. Reflection is the necessary basis for further development: it is the "hallmark of the conscientious professional" (Ur, 1996, p. 319). The book has a lot of tasks which invite students to reflect. Here are some of them.

- *How is an essay genre different from a letter, report, diary, and other pieces of writing? What can you compare it with? What is the difference between an essay and a paragraph?*
- *Think back on the types of paragraphs you have already learned. What is the underlying principle for their classification?*
- *Work in small groups and discuss the following questions.*
 1. What is the purpose of a resume/CV?
 2. Have you ever written one in English/in Russian?
 3. Are the conventions of writing a resume/CV in English and in Russian similar? If yes, in what way?
 4. Can you write a resume/CV once and use it to apply for different jobs? Why /why not?
- *Think of all possible types of letters and create a mind-map. Mark those you have an experience of writing.*

As for the integrated skills approach, it seems the most natural as it reflects a real-life process of communication in which it is impossible to separate one skill from another.

Many activities begin with a series of discussion questions which aim at activating students' pre-existing knowledge of the world and engaging them in a topic that they are going to read or hear about. Speaking sessions allow students to investigate their personal experience, thoughts, and feelings about a topic.

- *Work with a partner and discuss the following questions.*
 1. What is the purpose of a review?
 2. How is it different from a letter, essay, or diary?
 3. Where will you find a review?
 4. What kind of information does a review usually include?

Much language production work grows out of texts that students read. At the next stage students are asked to read a review and answer questions. Together with focusing on certain points, the text serves as a model and can be the basis for a written task. Thus, texts are used to stimulate students into some other kind of work.

Paragraph 1	film title, director ...
Paragraph 2	
Paragraph 3	
Paragraph 4	
Paragraph 5	summary ...

After students have worked on the review structure, its language, students are invited to discuss with their partner the book/film of their choice. Thus, knowledge about what is a review is incorporated into the process of communication and, consequently, into a language skill, which makes its mastering conscious. This activity is also important as a preparation for writing itself.

- *Read the review and answer the questions below.*

1. What kind of film is being reviewed?
2. What is the film about?
3. Where does the action of the film take place?
4. Who are the characters of the film?
5. What names are used in the review? What for?
6. Is it a positive or a negative review? How do you know?
7. Would you like to see the film? Why/why not?

Tip:

For question 6, highlight words and expressions that helped you answer it.

The next stage involves the second reading of the same review and filling in the chart.

- *Read the review again and complete the chart below. Note down what kind of information is presented in each paragraph*

- *Think of the best and worst films/books/shows you have seen/read recently. List their good and bad points. Then tell your partner about each film/book.*

The final product of students' work is a creative writing task which can be treated as a wrap up of the exploration of the topic. It is writing a review. When students are asked to write creatively, they usually strive harder than usual to produce a greater variety of correct and appropriate language than they might

for more routine assignments. Students are offered some options and guidelines to assist them, which makes the task more learner-friendly.

- Choose one of the options and write a review (about 220-260 words).

Option 1

A review of a must read book for your university newsletter.

Option 2

A review of your favorite film to post it on a web page "Films that Are Always with Us."

Option 3

A review of the worst ever TV show for the rating "No-Show".

The following guidelines can help you follow the review format.

1. Don't fail to give background details of the product reviewed: the author, name, theme, main characters, etc. in the introductory paragraph. Also, indicate your purpose of writing and the addressee, and general impression.
2. In the **body** part of your review, present the main points that guided you in your evaluation, e.g. soundtrack, actors' performance, style of writing, etc. Remember to touch upon one topic in each paragraph (the plot, characters, language, etc.). Focus on good/bad features of the book/film/show and consider the following questions: *How did I feel reading/watching it? What makes it enjoyable/dull? Why and whom would I recommend / not recommend it?*
3. In the **conclusion**, express your positive or negative opinion and give recommendations to the reader. Summarize the reasons why the film/book/show is recommended or not recommended. |



Tip:

For more guidelines use Appendix II "Paper Self-Evaluation List."

The integrated skills approach gradually builds students' confidence in applying different strategies, stimulates them to obtain and present concepts and ideas, develops a feel for the use of the language in various tasks, and, consequently, leads students to meaningful communication in English.

An individual approach to students is reflected in tasks which offer a choice of options in terms of topics. Moreover, they are asked to produce a piece of writing on their own, at their own pace, thus working in a pattern of individualized learning. This is a very important step in the development of learner autonomy. As Harmer (2008: 394) suggests, "giving students agency (enabling them to be the doers rather than the recipients of learning action) is one way of helping to sustain their motivation".

- Write down 5-7 topics you would like to write about. Share them with your group mates.
- Choose one of the topics below and write the topic sentence around it. Think of how you would like to develop your topic sentence.
 - a favorite place to relax
 - night owls vs. early birds
 - the best part of the day
 - a societal problem
 - dreams and reality
 - an ideal partner

Tip:

Remember that the topic sentence is a general statement which is supposed to cover the content of the paragraph.

- Look at the topics below and decide how you would develop them: with details, examples, or explanation. Discuss the ideas with your partner. Are the answers the same? Why/why not?

- a learning style
- an unusual adventure
- Russian wedding traditions
- a genius
- a blog
- a card game

The textbook has a lot of tasks built around collaborative learning, where students work in pairs or groups, trying to achieve the best results they can. They have a chance to exchange ideas with their group mates, thus learning from each other. In many cases, students' work is read and commented on by their fellow students, as two or more minds are often more creative, effective, and efficient in solving problems than an individual mind. In collaboration, students contribute to each other's work, on the one hand, and are made more aware of their own, on the other.

Work in groups of 3-4. Discuss all the stages that come into writing. Create a mind-map together. Compare it with other groups' mind-maps.

a) In pairs, brainstorm ideas to compare and contrast

- people: _____ and _____;
- places: _____ and _____;
- things: _____ and _____.

b) Agree on the topic, add aspects to discuss, and write a paragraph together.

- Work in groups of 3 or 4 and discuss how to close an essay effectively. Consider the following questions.

1. What makes an essay complete?
2. How can you help the reader feel satisfied?
3. How can you signal that you have finished?

One of the many roles a teacher has to play is that of a materials designer. Although there are many resources available, many teachers continue to produce their own materials for classroom use. Teachers need to create effective teaching materials to ensure that students are learning to their maximum potential. Materials development is a major skill a future teacher must possess. The course book provides many opportunities for students to develop this skill.

1. Write a paragraph of five to six sentences on one of the following topics.

- how to cook pizza
- going on a package tour
- reasons for going abroad
- why to have/not to have plastic surgery

Begin with a topic sentence and develop it in the form of steps or examples.

2. Now add one sentence that is off target to the paragraph you have written and put your sentences in a less effective order. Number them.

3. Work with a partner. Read each other's paper. Find the sentence that is off target. Suggest a more effective order for the sentences.

In terms of professional competence, it is also very important for a future teacher to be able to see mistakes and to correct them, which is peer correction or review. The textbook has tasks aiming at practicing the skill of commenting, assessing, making amendments, proofreading and editing a piece of work. Trainee teachers need to be able to learn

to read critically for style, content, and language accuracy. They must be ready to give each other feedback. Below are several samples that illustrate this idea.

a) Write a comparison paragraph (pointing out likenesses) or a contrast paragraph (pointing out differences) on one of the following topics.

- A. two movies or two television shows
- B. two cafes/restaurants
- C. two jobs
- D. two dictionaries
- E. other

b) Write comments on your partner's paragraphs. Suggest ideas for improvement. Use Appendix I to guide you through the editing process.

- Together with your partner, evaluate the essays above using the questions below as guidelines.
1. Was it interesting to read the essay? Why/why not?
 2. What is the main message? Is it clear?
 3. Is the information relevant to the thesis?

4. Are there enough facts and examples to support ideas in the paragraphs?
5. Does the author know who s/he is writing for? Why/why not?
6. Does the essay have a good opening?
7. Does the writer finish the essay in style/strongly?
8. Is the purpose achieved?
9. Is the organization appropriate to the topic and purpose?
10. What can be improved?

- Exchange the essays with your partner and assess each other's paper using "Assessment Criteria" given in Appendix IV. Give feedback: state good and weak points and recommend ways to improve the essay.

- Study the texts with the teacher's comments. Editing your friend's paper can help you improve your writing skills, too. In pairs, think of how you can improve the paragraphs taking the teacher's notes into consideration.

1. Is it the topic sentence or one of the reasons? Add a link.

I travel a lot and for me going somewhere on my own is quite boring. Why? In addition Punctuate. I always joke: in a new and unknown place it's always better to have someone who starts panic Correct collocation? earlier than you do - it usually makes me feel more confident. Can you specify the idea? Link? Traveling with friends is always fun: I would've never had so much excitement in Vegas if I were grammar there alone or with my family. Why? Some details could be added. But even close friends' interests may differ. So it may turn out to be a real pain in the neck to figure how to reach a compromise and make everybody happy. Check. Are you sure it's relevant? Touching upon Not clear. traveling alone again, I would say it's not for everyone: you would never think of visiting China on your own without knowing the language for example, Check punctuation. though some real thrill-seekers might find it to be a good idea to get new impressions. Vocabulary and structures are varied, but it's not clear whether you are for or against traveling with friends. The paragraph also needs a conclusion.

2. My former classmate is my best friend. Make the topic sentence more specific. For one thing, we have almost the same interests. Some details could be added: what interests? and go everywhere Where? together. Another thing I value about her is that I can tell her everything not being worried that she will betray me. We've been together long enough How long? to confide our secrets to each other. Great Make it a sentence. to have a person whose opinion you can trust. Moreover, I'm not sure the link is good here. she is a very loyal and reliable person. There is no conclusion. How about making it strong to show that you can't imagine your life without your friend? Why don't you give him/her a name?

The book also has lots of tasks which encourage students to search and research – another necessary skill for teachers. By making a “systematic, self-critical enquiry” (Rudduck & Hopkins 1985: 8), students open something new in terms of language as well as advance their educational level perceiving it in the course of learning.

- *Google the net for samples of recommendation letters and collect phrases you think useful. Exchange the lists of phrases with your partners.*
- *Google for samples of invitation and apology letters. Collect useful phrases, bring them into the classroom, and share with your group mates.*
- *Make up a collection of the Internet resources with anagrams, riddles, rhymes, poems, etc. Include those that provide an opportunity to post your own. Have a try!*

The use of such tasks reflects an up-to-date tendency in education – focusing on discovery learning (Joolingen 1999: 385). These tasks are definitely conducive to developing critical thinking and, besides, they are professionally relevant to future teachers.

STUDENTS' FEEDBACK

Although many Russian learners find writing the most difficult skill to acquire, by the end of the course, students feel far more confident about their ability to cope with the writing demands. The process of becoming a good writer requires time, hard work, and perseverance. And yet the reward is well worth the wait. Being “essential” and “valuable”, is a general opinion of the students who have been taught this course. Some more quotes from students' feedback are as follows: “The course is very comprehensible and involving,” it is “thoroughly drawn up,” “simultaneously challenging and entertaining,” “it undoubtedly meets the

needs of future teachers,” “written in a straightforward manner, and it feels a bit like being taught by a knowledgeable friend.” We value the opinion of our students and feel grateful for such appreciation of our work.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, a course book cannot address any audience in general. It must focus on a particular learner, the objectives, and content of the process of learning. In the situation when no textbook meets these requirements, the problem of providing students with an appropriate textbook must be solved by creating new textbooks. In our understanding, the textbook *Learn to Write with Us*, oriented towards the audience of future teachers of English is optimal and effective because it combines language learning and professional training.

While learning to write at the level required at tertiary level, would-be teachers also acquire basic professional skills of how to teach writing. A systematic approach to training these skills helps to achieve this two-fold goal; a variety of tasks and topics, well thought over introduction of materials make the way to this goal enjoyable and efficient.

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