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WRITING AN ESSAY AS AN EFFECTIVE MEANS OF TEACHING ENGLISH AT AN ENGINEERING UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. The article considers a set of strategies for teaching functional literacy in junior courses of the Railway University by the example of teaching essay writing in English classes. The article presents the types of direct and indirect strategies, their linguistic and pragmatic contents. The authors base the practice of teaching writing within the framework of the activity approach to learning and the theory of activity, which links internal activity with the process of thinking, memory, psychological processes and conditions, while external activity is always focused on a certain goal and is aimed at achieving results. External and internal activities are interrelated and depend on each other, so the learning process is most effective when it relies on both types of activities. Considerable attention is paid to the layout of an academic essay, its composition and stylistic features. The necessity of teaching argumentative writing is based on linguistic and metalinguistic analysis of the text. The authors summarize their own practical experience in teaching writing essays and describe in detail five areas to implement educational strategies. The article also discusses the key criteria for evaluating students' essays. Based on the study of empirical data, the authors conclude that there is a direct relationship between the choice of teaching methods and strategies and achieving good results.

Key words: learning strategies, essay, Railway University, argumentative writing, assessment system.

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НАПИСАНИЕ ЭССЕ КАК ЭФФЕКТИВНОЕ СРЕДСТВО ОБУЧЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ В ИНЖЕНЕРНОМ ВУЗЕ

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Аннотация. В статье рассматривается комплекс стратегий обучения функциональной грамотности на младших курсах железнодорожного вуза на примере обучения написанию эссе на занятиях по английскому языку. В статье приводятся виды прямых и косвенных стратегий, их лингвистическое и прагматическое содержание. Авторы обосновывают практику обучения письму в рамках деятельностного подхода к обучению и теории деятельности, согласно которой внутренняя деятельность связана с мышлением, памятью, психологическими процессами и состояниями, а внешняя деятельность всегда имеет определенную цель и направлена на достижение результата. Внешняя и внутренняя деятельность взаимосвязаны и зависят друг от друга, поэтому процесс обучения наиболее эффективен, когда опирается на оба вида деятельности. Значительное внимание уделяется структуре написания академического эссе, его композиционным и стилистическим особенностям. Подчеркивается необходимость обучения аргументативному письму с привлечением лингвистического и металингвистического анализа текста. Авторы обобщают собственный практический опыт преподавания письменной речи и детально описываются пять направлений реализации образовательных

стратегий. В статье также рассматриваются ключевые критерии оценки письменных работ студентов. На основе изучения эмпирических данных авторы делают вывод о непосредственной связи между выбором способов обучения и успешностью в достижении результата.

Ключевые слова: стратегии обучения, эссе, железнодорожный вуз, аргументативное письмо, система оценки.

Introduction

The steady trend towards expanding scientific and economic activity beyond national cultural and linguistic boundaries requires new approaches to teaching foreign languages, especially languages of international communication, English among them. A high level of proficiency in English “the language of modern science and technical literature” is a necessary prerequisite for a successful career of a specialist, his / her international mobility and professional integration.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of technical and engineering universities in Russia do not include a foreign language on the list of mandatory exam results. Therefore, the level of English proficiency, evaluated in USE (Unified State Exam, the equivalent of GCSE exams in the UK) points, makes no effect on the decision of the examining board when enrolling an applicant for the chosen technical specialty. As a result, with insufficient motivation to pass successfully the Unified State Exam in English in the pre-university period, first-year students, majoring in Mechanical Engineering, often have a low level of language knowledge, skills and competences. Therefore, a university teacher is often faced with the necessity to choose a proper strategy to develop communicative skills that correspond to the level of language proficiency in the student group. One of such strategies is teaching how to write professionally oriented essays preceded by a set of exercises to achieve the most positive didactic effect.

Materials and Methods

This paper describes the long-term comprehensive experience of teaching foreign languages, the authors gained at the Russian University of Transport (RUT MIIT), teaching creative writing in the form of an essay. Teaching to write essays in a foreign language at an engineering university pursues several goals, and

first of all: to develop skills of thinking on professionally oriented themes in a foreign language; to develop professional communication techniques within a certain system of codification of a written text; to form language skills for further argued presentation on the proposed subject. The focus of research in this paper is the combination of various teaching and learning strategies employed by the teacher for junior course students when teaching them to write essays at a railway university. The theoretical basis of the authors’ genuine research include the works by Russian and foreign scholars focused on psychological [19], philosophical [10–12] and pedagogical [3; 4; 20] fundamentals of conscious educational activity in the context of a foreign language learning [2; 16], strategies for teaching a foreign language [14; 15; 18] and descriptions of various types of essays [1; 6; 13; 22; 23], as well as essays by students of the Russian University of Transport, written in the 2020–2021 academic year. The purpose of the study covers several aspects: to determine the types of essays most suitable for the first and second-year students, to develop most appropriate professionally oriented themes, to determine the best strategy to prepare the students to write an essay under the teacher’s guidance and independently, to develop criteria to assess and grade essays. The study is based on structural and systematic approaches. The methodological basis involved comparative and statistical analysis, abstract-logical methods of induction and deduction, as well as observation, survey and expert assessment.

Results and Discussion

Effective methods of teaching a foreign language in school and universities have been researched and developed since long ago. And while the conceptual focus in teaching has been constantly changing, two eternal questions facing a school teacher or university professor remained the same: what to teach and how to teach. Modern

educators and researchers often quote the famous phrase of the English philosopher and anthropologist Herbert Spencer, who once said: "The great aim of education is not knowledge, but action." The concept of learning through activity was first proposed by the American philosopher and educator D. Dewey [3].

The activity-based approach underlies also the modern Russian education. It relies on the "theory of activity" developed by the Soviet psychologist and philosopher S.L. Rubinstein, who has shown most conclusively that human development occurs in the process of conscious activity, thus indicating the unity of human activity and consciousness [19]. The theory of S.L. Rubinstein is improved and developed by the famous Russian philosopher A.N. Leontiev, who confirms that human development takes place in the process of his meaningful activity. A.N. Leontiev defines activity as the basis and essence of life [12]. He emphasizes that conscious activity always has a specific goal and is aimed at achieving results [10; 12]. Psychologists distinguish between external and internal activities. The external includes a variety of physical movements of a person that are associated with actions, which are noticeable to others. Internal activity passes unnoticed by others, and it is associated with thinking, memory, psychological processes and states, and it manifests itself only by being involved in the regulation of external activity. External and internal activities are interrelated and depend on each other, so the learning process is most effective when it relies on both types of activities.

For objective reasons, researchers focus on the techniques of acquiring a command of a foreign language, which is associated with functional literacy, manifested in the practice of argumentative reading and argumentative writing. Teaching argumentative reading is anchored in the linguistic and pragmatic analysis of the text [7] and should precede the transition to teaching argumentative writing. To analyze the first connection between the compositional structure of the text and its conceptual basis provides for training students' cognitive processes and building their own argumentative texts [9].

The traditional approach to learning, which was used in the Soviet period and is widely spread in the modern educational space, is based on an active

approach to learning. It strives to combine a number of consecutive activities within the educational process: to research, to identify, to construct and to create. Compliance with the sequence of these stages of independent work gradually forms students' necessary personal qualities: cognitive, regulatory and communicative. The main goal of teaching a foreign language at the Russian University of Transport is to build up and develop students' foreign language communicative competencies of oral and written communication, which will be adequate to their professional orientation. Special attention is paid to interdisciplinary project-based training, including such objectives as:

- modelling and activating the right speech behavior in the surroundings of foreign language communication;
- developing practical skills to express thoughts fully and accurately;
- molding and developing communication skills for dialogue conversation and a narrative monologue planning;
- activating typical patterns of speech behavior in accordance with the communication level.

Educational strategies

In accordance with these components of teaching foreign language communication, one or another strategy of teaching a foreign language is chosen. Strategies for teaching a foreign language are usually divided into two main groups: direct strategies and indirect strategies. Each of them, in turn, is divided into three types.

Direct strategies combine:

- cognitive strategies that underlie the understanding and interpretation of the information received and contribute to the creation of new independent speech utterances;
- memory strategies that contribute to the systematization and storage of necessary information in memory;
- compensatory strategies, which help to quickly find a replacement for a speech pattern that is missing in memory in conditions of continuous communication.

Indirect strategies combine:

- metacognitive strategies, which involve the ability to plan and evaluate success in mastering a foreign language;

- affective strategies that determine the emotional side of communication;
- social strategies aimed at developing communication skills and overcoming cross-cultural differences.

Implementation of Educational Strategies

The educational strategies in the course of teaching essay writing in 1–2 courses of the railway university are implemented in five directions.

First, a communicatively significant context is chosen. By comparison, the general lexical topics selected for writing at school are prompted by the state codifiers, with a view to pass a Unified State Exam. At a railway university, with no obligatory written exam, it is logical to take topics for the subject matter of speech from professionally-oriented contexts, e. g. from Internet sites like The Railway Technical Website [21]. Though we preferred the Railway Technology website [17], the online version of the digital magazine Future Rail [5], because it is open access, has a convenient search system and a clear categorization. Out of nine thematic sections presented on the website, seven showed the best potential for organizing work with vocabulary and group discussions, namely: high-speed railways, passenger service, infrastructure, railway transport operation, rolling stock, urban railway transport, digital technologies on the railway. Techniques and methods that enhance topical awareness as well as strengthen metasubject ties, subject knowledge and personal involvement, include quick responses to video stimuli, watching topical video clips, topical role-playing games.

Secondly, general and professional vocabulary is expanding, and certain language skills are being trained. This direction is realized in mastering the vocabulary and terminology characteristic of the profession of a railway engineer, and it also involves the study of related phonetic phenomena, grammatical forms and rules of word formation. From the entire genre variety of materials of the Railway Technology portal [17] (feature articles, reports, news, advertising, educational videos), mainly feature articles fall into the focus of preparing for writing an essay, that is, those in which important industry problems are described as a set of facts and opinions with a

certain human aspect. The facts provide a rich language material for students to compile translation dictionaries of general and railway terminology for texts. The techniques and methods used in this direction include the compilation of word-forming spider diagrams, the analysis of words by composition, the selection of definitions for terms, the search for one-word synonyms for phraseological units, the compilation of English-English definitions of active words and expressions, dictations, filling in terminological gaps in everyday railway clichés, etc.

Thirdly, students are encouraged to interact under instructor's supervision and independently. The teacher organizes practical communication training sessions, including pair and group interaction with a view to master all types of speech skills: questions, comments, responses. The focus is on discussing professional topics from the human angle. This activity prepares students for individual essay writing prompted by the situation described in the feature article. The techniques and methods used in the strategy include interviews, public surveys, exchange of opinions, creating posters, group presentations, debates, etc. In the conditions of distance learning introduced at the Russian University of Transport in 2020–2021, preference was given either to collective work in the classroom or individual work on an essay at home, with regards to the situation with the pandemic.

Fourth, students are motivated to model offered texts and situations. They are nudged to use various audiovisual means, including images, videos, graphs, diagrams, etc. The techniques of this direction include story maps, diagrams, detail schematics, dubbing dialogues of situational video clips about railways with the original audio track turned off, visiting museums of railway equipment, railway stations and sorting yards with taking pictures and making consequent computer presentations, conducting virtual excursions, operating virtual sorting yards, etc.

Fifth, students' metacognitive skills are developed by management of thought processes, verbalization and written presentation. This strategy implies teaching and learning to think logically and correctly express opinions and arguments first orally, then in writing in an essay. The starting point is identifying conflicting views expressed in the chosen articles of Railway

Technology site [17], adapted by the teacher to the Intermediate – Pre-Intermediate level. To begin with, students carefully familiarize themselves with the article. The general understanding is controlled by True / False statements or Multiple choice questions. Then students make spider diagrams of opinions and arguments, paraphrasing them in their own words, trying not to miss important details, expressing their own comment where possible or necessary. Students learn to distinguish right arguments from wrong, strong from weak, and to arrange the right arguments in order from strong to weak. The correct argument is related to the statement contained in the opinion as a cause to an effect. If the causal relationship is indisputable without adding additional semantic links, then the argument is a necessary and sufficient condition for the truth of the opinion-statement, i.e. the argument is correct. If not, or the addition of circumstances is required so that the causal relationship is indisputable, then the argument is rather incorrect. In addition, the argument must be logical, verifiable and not contain an internal contradiction. It must exist independently of the opinion-statement, i.e. it must be independent. A strong argument is the one that is most likely to convince the reader. It is based on accurate facts, official statistics, opinions of authorities, laws, expert opinions, survey results, eyewitness accounts. An unsupported or poorly supported argument is considered weak, personal arguments in it prevail over objective realities. Spider diagrams of opinions and arguments serve as an aid for subsequent retelling, during which students are encouraged not only to express objectively the ideas of the article trying to use their own words, but also to express their personal comments. The issues raised in the chosen feature articles are usually controversial, which allows students to make predictions and express opinions based on their personal life experience, background knowledge, and personal evaluation of the situation discussed. The final phase of the development of metacognitive skills is the writing of an essay.

How to Motivate Students’ Independent Work

At the initial stage of teaching how to write essays, the teacher introduces students to

various forms of written opinion: an essay, an article in a newspaper, a letter of advice, a letter of response, a personal proposal for solving a problem, etc. The style of writing in them can vary from strict formal in an essay to semi-formal in an article or a letter, of approximately 200 words. Each of the forms of written speech has its own standards. However, for engineering students following standards is more advisory than mandatory, since first and second year students of non-linguistic specialties, do not normally have well-formed writing skills. The emphasis on developing these skills would rather be a super task for advanced groups. The main objective in teaching writing is to motivate language creativity and independent thinking.

The choice of the form and style of writing should be determined by the type of the theme and the students’ preferences. Most often, students choose the type of essay, familiar to them from school days. The present paper describes types of essay by the target audience, their structure, type, and criteria to evaluate a technical essay in order to increase brain power and boost motivation.

Before they start writing an essay, students should realize that any essay should be focused on the recipient (customer), or the target audience. Currently, many foreign universities and employers require applicants to submit an essay. The essay written for an international exam (IELTS, FCE, CAE, CPE) or a university exam should demonstrate the academic character of the applicant’s knowledge and writing skills and must accurately meet the criteria described in the guidelines for relevant exams required for admission to universities and colleges. An essay written for an employer should focus on the personality and business qualities of a potential employee and their ability to bring maximum benefit to the company. Essays written by students of technical universities on issues related to their future specialty (technical essays) should be practice oriented, i.e., they should focus on the students’ ability to think logically and present their views convincingly.

Technical Essay

For students to write an essay, it is important to verbalize the topic properly and

accurately. At the academic level for the FCE (the Cambridge First Certificate), the writing exam is built on the situationally based task designed so, that an essay topic and two ideas are provided for the applicant to develop them and put them in writing. Essay assignments for engineering students are not compiled randomly in terms of topic and contents, since they are based on opinions and facts set out in a specific journal article, report or review. In addition, they are variable in form, since they must take into account different levels of language skills among the students of the transport university. For a small number of advanced students, some tasks are given according to the academic models of tasks for international exams FCE, CAE, IELTS. However, for weak students, the essay tasks are outlined in a more simplified form, as questions of the type: “Why...”, “What...” or “How...”, with or without a hidden alternative. Unlike topics or ideas, questions do not require interpreting. The student gives a direct and detailed answer in his/her own words, i.e., gives an opinion statement and supports it with convincing arguments, trying to appropriately use general and professional vocabulary, using lexical and phraseological phrases and syntactic connectives between the elements of the statements that are suitable in meaning. Problem topics in the tasks are formulated in a more general form than they are described in articles or reports, so that students can use their life experience and statistical data and compare the phenomena described in the articles with the facts which they themselves have witnessed. Thus, the general humanitarian importance is assigned to purely technical issues.

A well-formulated task contributes to the students’ intellectual satisfaction from writing an essay and increases the level of their self-esteem. Most essay tasks were based on the material, available on the Railway technology portal [17].

Freshmen and sophomore students were offered professionally oriented essay topics from each of the seven sections of the Railway technology portal. These include, for example the questions: “What is your opinion about the prospects for the development of high-speed roads in Russia? Why may the attitude of urban and rural residents to the construction of high-

speed highways in their area of residence not coincide? What measures can prevent vandalism in electric trains and trains? Do we need dining cars in passenger trains now? What “pros” and “cons” can you name for the organization of premium tourist railway routes, such as the “Golden Eagle”? How do you think it is possible to reduce injuries and reduce the number of accidents on railway tracks, crossings and stations? What types of transport should be mainly developed in cities, and why? What digital technologies are appropriate to use to improve traffic safety? What digital technologies are now associated with comfortable travel on passenger trains? Can virtual training replace on-the-job training for drivers of modern trains? How to ensure the safety of passengers and conductors during a pandemic?” and others.

Technical Topic Essay Structure

Any essay should comprise: 1) opinion “ the author’s thoughts in the form of brief statements and 2) arguments “ evidence supporting the opinion. Arguments can be given in the form of events, facts, phenomena of social life, life circumstances, experience, statistics, etc., expressed as ideas and related to the statement by a causal connection. It is better to give two or three arguments in favor of each opinion - one argument does not seem to be convincing.

The structure of writing an academic essay includes:

Introduction.

Opinion 1 with arguments.

Opinion 2 with arguments.

Opinion 3 with arguments.

Conclusion.

The types of essays vary depending on the task. In our teaching practice, we used 4 types of essay (see Table):

1. Expressing opinions.

2. Reasoning about advantages and disadvantages (Advantages / Disadvantages).

3. Offering solutions to the problem (Providing Solutions).

4. Consideration of the proposed topic from different points of view (Discursive Essay).

The introduction and conclusion are essential components of the essay, but they differ in meaning.

Types of essays and their features

Argumentative Essays				
Structure	Expressing opinions	Reasoning about the advantages/ disadvantages	Offering solutions to the problem	Considering the topic from different points of view
Introduction	express an opinion	define the topic	identify the problem	define the topic
The main part	argument 1 and supporting statements	strong points and arguments	solution 1 and supporting evidence	the first point of view (political/economic)
Paragraph 2 Paragraph 3 * (optional)	argument 2 and supporting statements	weak points and arguments	solution 2 and supporting evidence	another point of view (political/economic)
Conclusion	paraphrase the opinion	a balanced unemotional point of view	a brief conclusion or a sentence with the best evidence	a personal opinion based on the points of view mentioned above

Note. * Paragraph 3 is not a compulsory fragment of an essay, it is added if there is a necessity to give one more point of view.

Assessment System

The assessment of the essay varies depending on the foreign language level of the student. Students of the Intermediate – Upper Intermediate level write an essay that meets the standard requirements from the point of view of the contents, structure, mode of the narration, vocabulary and grammar.

When assessing the contents of the essay, it is taken into account how the theme is identified and revealed, whether the student has met the standard of 250-300 words. Essays which are either shorter or more verbose than it is specified are treated as faulty and graded lower than model ones. Text-building logic, personal point of view on the proposed problem, linguistic and stylistic literacy are also evaluated.

The students of the Russian Transport University often treat such a detailed assessment of the essay as excessive and unnecessary, and at the initial stage of teaching writing skills the teacher should take time to explain extensively the necessity to observe and follow the format. A common mistake also comes from the students' attempt to add a totally new argument when writing a conclusion. This also leads to a decrease in the overall grade for the work.

Vocabulary and Grammar (Vocabulary and Syntax)

The complexity of grammar structures, used in the essay, should correspond to the level of knowledge of the student. Intermediate and Upper Intermediate level students should use correctly various grammar structures (subordinate clauses of reason and result, relative and conditional clauses, introductory words and sentences) and avoid repetition and redundancy in neighboring sentences. Students should combine simple sentences into complex and compound syntax structures, using proper pronouns (which, that, who); use linking words or linkers (besides, to begin with, first, secondly, then, therefore, eventually, admittedly, otherwise, wherever, obviously, owing to, finally, etc.); use sentences with both active and passive voice predicates, infinitive and participial constructions, complex prepositions; use proper articles; abstain from excessive use of common everyday expressions (lots of, kind of, sort of); adhere to a neutral politically correct style.

Students' essays at a level below Intermediate were assessed according to lower criteria. Pre-Intermediate level students could get a high score if they showed their ability to express argumentative opinions; did not pull phrases from a technical journal article and use them in their essays, provide

real, not imaginary or incorrect data; gave original arguments to prove their opinions; referred to scientific facts and did not deviate from the topic, describing a specific topic. Too ornate language with an abundance of language clichés as well as plagiarism indicate lack of independent thinking and ends up in a lower grade. The essay was graded as unsatisfactory if originality level was below 70%. Many creative essays were given quite high grades, despite somewhat awkward style, grammar errors or other imperfections, as grades for students of the first and second year of studies have a great motivating force and mobilize them to the proactive study of the language.

The self-determining work in preparation for writing essays helps students to express themselves in writing essays, know the ropes in the matters of English railway literature, transfer translation skills to the description of new railway technologies and phenomena, look for optimal solutions to railway materials in English technical literature, carry out professionally oriented communication.

The teaching approaches described in the present paper were applied in 2020–2021 in the groups of first and second year students of the full-time department of “Operation of railway transport” specialty at the Russian University of Transport and was elaborated for the corresponding textbook [8].

Conclusions

A comparative analysis of theoretical and empirical studies with the results of our own pedagogical practice allows us to draw a number of conclusions.

1. First and second year students do not have sufficient pre-university language training and do not have the necessary skills of metalinguistic and linguistic text analysis, which is absolutely necessary for independent creative work to write essays on professional topics.

2. When writing an essay, students often underestimate the importance of cohesion - intra-textual connections that provide a continuum, i.e., the interdependence of separate statements, facts and the logical sequence of narration.

3. To improve foreign language communicative competencies of engineering students, it is necessary to develop a separate set of educational strategies

for each academic group involving of relevant professionally oriented tasks.

4. At the preparatory stage for writing an essay, it is advisable to give time to develop metacognitive skills, combined with the skills of metalinguistic and linguistic analysis for all students.

5. When planning independent work for the students and work in the classroom under the guidance of the teacher, it is necessary to create an optimal educational environment in order to increase students’ motivation in learning despite possible external interference.

6. It is also necessary to exclude plagiarism and thoughtless borrowing of ideas and texts from available Internet resources.

Summing up the above, we consider it necessary to carry out a methodically competent selection of educational material, as well as methods and techniques of working with it on the basis of a balanced combination of educational strategies.

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