



Теорія і методика навчання

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**Developing Essay-writing Skills
for International Testing in English**

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***Abstract:** The objective of the article is to study the basic principles of preparation for the international English language testing, in particular its written aspect. Strategies for preparing for the testing emphasize the formation of written academic competence through systematic training in essay-writing according to the specificity of the requirements for the "writing" section. Mastering the process of gaining skills and improving abilities involves preparing for writing various types of essays, which includes analyzing the topic, forming a clear thesis, creating a structured plan, arguing, etc. **Research methods:** the communicative-activity and competence-based approach to teaching a foreign language have been provided. Effective teaching methods formulate critical thinking, teach arguing logically, editing the ready text, allow to optimize the educational process, accumulate experience in performing creatively while working on papers and set students up for successful completion of any task in the "writing" section. **Research findings:** the article systematizes typical difficulties, such as the lack of a guiding idea, violation of thematic unity, inability to argue sufficiently or formulate generalizations and come to conclusions, limited arsenal of cohesion tools, dominance of conversational style, etc. Recommendations are given for the successful completion of the tests in the "writing" section, as well as tips for editing the finished essay. **Conclusions:** systematic teaching of the English language essay-writing creates methodological conditions for the purposeful formation of basic cognitive and speech competencies, which allows students not only to get acquainted with typical tasks of international English testing, but also to gain practical skills in writing essays, enrich their creative potential and grow professionally. Successful completion of international tests requires creative-activity and problem-innovative approaches to ensure students' capability to pass an international test successfully, which contributes to their competitiveness in the international labor market.*



Keywords: *international English exams, Academic Writing section, essay, optimization, creative potential, practical skills.*

Розвиток навичок академічного письма при підготовці до міжнародного тестування з англійської мови

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Анотація: метою статті є вивчення основних принципів підготовки до міжнародного тестування з англійської мови, зокрема його письмового аспекту. Стратегії підготовки до міжнародних тестів з англійської мови наголошують на увазі до формування письмової академічної компетентності через системне навчання написанню есе. Оволодіння знаннями, вміннями та навичками передбачає підготовку до написання різних типів есе, що включає аналіз теми, формування чіткої тези, створення структурованого плану, аргументування тощо. **Методи:** методологічну основу становлять положення комунікативно-діяльнісного та компетентнісного підходу до навчання іноземній мові. Ефективні методи навчання – мозкового штурму, складання маршруту думки, формулювання критичного мислення, викладання аргументів, редагування готового тексту дозволяють оптимізувати освітній процес, накопичити досвід виконання творчих робіт, налаштувати студентів на успішне виконання письмового завдання. **Результати:** у статті систематизовано типові труднощі, такі, як відсутність керівної ідеї, порушення тематичної єдності, невміння аргументувати, формулювати та узагальнювати, обмежений арсенал засобів когезії, домінування розмовного стилю тощо. Наведено конкретні рекомендації щодо успішного виконання робіт тестового розділу «письмо», а також запропоновано поради з редагування готового есе. **Висновки:** доведено, що системне навчання написання англійськомовного есе створює методологічні умови для цілеспрямованого формування базових когнітивних й мовленнєвих компетенцій, що дозволяє студентам не лише ознайомлюватися з типовими завданнями міжнародного тестування з англійської мови, а ще й отримати практичні навички написання та корегування англійськомовного есе, збагачувати свій творчий потенціал та професійно зростати. Успішне складання міжнародних тестів потребує креативно-діяльнісного та проблемно-інноваційного підходів до організації навчання, що забезпечує



готовність студентів до цього важкого випробування, і, таким чином, сприяє кокурентоспроможності на міжнародному ринку праці.

Ключові слова: міжнародні іспити з англійської мови, секція «Академічне письмо», есе, оптимізація, творчий потенціал, практичні навички.

Introduction. The modernization of Ukrainian education today brings forward the need for a thorough rethinking of the unique reality which presupposes a shift in the educational process. Mastering Academic writing skills develops the ability to express and prove thoughts in the form of a short, but convincing text [1, p. 569]. It is one of the most important aspects of successful studies at the university and peoples' further activities within life-long learning paradigm, including their development at the international level [2, p. 230].

Literature review. Testing is traditionally used as a method of control – for selection and motivation. These problems are solved by a number of modern language testing programs. As defined, testing is a method of teaching by which teachers observe differences between students' approach to a personal development and use the principle of differentiation to meet various needs [3, p. 98].

Three major topics – *logic or dialectic, rhetoric and grammar* – persisted yet in the Middle Ages and came to be called a trivium or 'three ways' of studying process included at any school syllabus, seem to be devalued later in English as some authors complain [4, p.170]. Nevertheless, the problem returns to become relevant again in connection with the modern European integration processes, which also have a positive impact on the further development of Ukrainian education.

Academic writing has been used for the past few decades to facilitate scientific and educational communication between different countries. Its principles are guided by the leading editors of the most competent scientific publications around the world [5, p. 78-84]. So it has been stated by many authors (Shpak O., Lisa I., Semenchuk O. and others) that everyone should master them, at least in order to



facilitate their path up the career ladder in any science [1, 2, 4]. English-speaking countries today play a key role in the development of the academic writing system and its scientific and methodological base. For Ukrainian education, this is a completely new discipline, although the problems it poses are not new for our scientific community. The process of developing written language was carried out by specialists from various fields, including linguists, philologists, semiologists, sociopsychologists, and also representatives of professions engaged in information technologies. Besides, universities work steadily to prepare students for passing international testing [5].

An individual today is required to have qualities that would allow her to approach any of global changes creatively and productively. As the authors (J. Waren) claim, developing creativity is becoming one of the mandatory attributes of a successful education. This task must be carried out through a system of purposeful training and the use of a personality-oriented approach [6].

Since the very beginning, testing was confined to helping students learn, as well as to determining the qualifications of individuals seeking employment. A model of foreign language achievement postulates three dimensions presented by James Carroll, one of the most prominent developers of the English language testing system [7]. That is:

- Mastery of linguistic behavior in aspects of auditory comprehension, oral production, smart reading, and skillful writing;
- Mastery of the language structure of phonology, grammar, syntax and lexicon/ sufficient vocabulary, and
- Level of mastering a language [7, с. 45-47].

Effective preparation begins with determining who needs to take international English exams for getting an international Certificate [8]. They are usually applicants entering universities abroad; employees looking for an interview for getting a prestigious positions in countries where English is a language of communication; those who have decided to leave their homeland and move to another country; teachers who



need to confirm their qualifications at the global level; who are building a career in a large company with an international staff, where communication is organized exclusively in English.

It is believed that a test may be used with the alternative or additional purpose of classifying or grading a student where a process of teaching and assessing students' written work is considered to be intensive. O. Fentsyk points out the content of competencies necessary for the formation of academic literacy in a student [2]. The issues of regulatory provision and legislative support for academic integrity have been highlighted in some articles (by Rega I., et al. [9]) arguing on the perspectives of higher education in Ukraine.

Academic writing, as it is judged by O. Maksymets, though being a traditional type of competence nowadays tends to become more relevant in the context of the development of international exchanges, information processes, and academic mobility, etc. [11]. The group of authors (T. Kostyrko, et al.) in their collectively created manual suggest that only a deep understanding of rhetorical skills allows a future specialist to enter the social community, to be competitive in the professional sphere and in international scientific communications [10, p 3]. L. Sazhko together with colleagues consider academic writing an important subject at any higher educational establishment [12] in Ukraine.

Identification of previously unresolved parts of the general problem. The English language testing confined to the written language for foreigners started in Britain in 1862, and then, only in the 1920s in the United States with the objective to apply the method of mental testing to reveal specific cognitive abilities and general intelligence. In the late 1990s written examinations were firmly fixed in Britain and the USA as essential instruments in the control of education and in certification of qualification for employment and further education [7, p.16-24]. Since then the work has been intensively conducted on developing testing system in terms of scoring and specific tasks developing. The common requirements for applicants involve not only



the demonstration of oral-aural abilities, such as phonetic accuracy, speed, fluency, smoothness, clearness, linking and phrasing, the ability to understand spoken English and a written text, to read intelligibly, but also to express thoughts as brilliantly as possible in the written form.

Formulation of the article's objective. The purpose of the present investigation is to characterize the specificity of preparation for international English testing. Therefore, the object of the study is the ways of preparing students for standardized international exams, such as IELTS, TOEFL, ESOL, etc. The subject of the work is focused on mastering competencies, which involves preparing for one of the four components of international tests: listening, reading, writing and speaking – essay writing.

A free composition has been historically regarded as the best test for knowledge of a language. Initially, during the examinations students were presented with an 'interesting picture' and were told to write a 250-300 word 'best composition about the picture' or on a selected topic in thirty minutes allowed, in such a way developing a 'single scale for measuring the general merit of students' writing skills'. The candidates were asked to give a title, write a summary of the main points of the story, and concentrate on the language. Alternatively, the applicants could be asked to write a letter of between 80-100 words on three alternative topics, e.g. 'A letter of thanks for a present you have been given on your birthday' [7, p. 56]. Thus, even the simplest of compositions involve a great deal beside language ability, such as *imagination, clarity, organization or paragraphing, structural elements, linking phrases, logics, the author's philosophy, etc. which is necessary to master while teaching students writing skills.*

Presentation of the main research material. The 'writing' section in the international tests (IELTS, TOEFL, Cambridge) assesses the ability to express thoughts in English competently, coherently and with abundance of arguments. Direct tests of "writing skills", the ability to 'put one's thoughts on paper' in a foreign



language is considered a problematic type of testing because it has a difficulty of getting a reliable rating, through very often subjective assessment of multi-dimensionality of the controlled items, such as *topic openness, originality, spelling, punctuation, structure, logics in dividing passages, selecting the proper style, 'grasp of English general style', examples, idiomatic expressions, organization of the material and so on*. Basically, teachers marked all errors in numerous essays and, in such a way, based the grade on the percentage of correctness. Scoring was a difficulty most frequently, due to the teachers' subjectivity. Thus much attention was paid to developing composition assessing scales was necessary to reduce the subjective element in scoring. Thus, among the developed assessment criteria are:

- 1/ a task achievement or response – how fully the task is completed;
- 2/ coherence and cohesion – the logical structure and coherence of the text;
- 3/ a lexical resource – the use of a variety of vocabulary;
- 4/ grammatical range and accuracy – demonstration of profound knowledge in English grammar accuracy and variety of used structures;
- 5/ the key skills – such as the ability to argue, describe trends, use of a formal style (for example, *Yours sincerely / Faithfully Yours*, for letters), avoiding repetitions.

For successful passing of B2 to C2, it is important to structure the essay, express a viewpoint clearly and demonstrate a high level of language proficiency [14]. For example, in the IELTS Academic, the writing section includes the analysis of graphs and essays, and in General, it is writing a letter and essay, in which candidates are required to produce an appropriate academic or formal style, grammatical accuracy and a variety of vocabulary. Applicants are supposed to know precisely *the features of oral and written scientific speech, its difference from other bookish types of language; the main types and techniques of argumentation; compositional and linguistic standards, etc.*

Basic knowledge of English is stated to directly influence the result. Obviously, stimulating the process of preparation in all aspects of mastering English guarantees



the best progress [1, с. 78-79]. For example, testing writing skills presupposes many dimensions and elements of the work, such as: *spelling, punctuation, structure, paragraph distribution, logic of thought development, degree of disclosure of the topic, originality, choice of style, giving relevant examples, use of idiomatic expressions, compliance with the requirements of a certain type of essay, etc.*

Practical training in writing, especially on the phase of highlighting and sharing with groupmates personal challenges, achievements and comments, can significantly raise the students' motivation to perform successfully. Overcoming difficulties contributes to personal development and must be praised by a sensible teacher. For instance, in IELTS testing, the section of "the bar chart explanation", titled Overview, first calls discomfourt due to its unexpected for a candidate format. While closer practicing the students are introduced with the samples of the previously approved papers that have already been assessed highly and can serve as good examples for mastering this format. Teachers particularise possible drawbacks and faults at explaining graphs, reveal the secrets, specify terminology and point out a specific vocabulary to characterize changes in diagrams. They offer practical advice of successful writing. Such help is especially valuable because of the restricted time of 20 minutes a participant has *to understand the scheme and the question, identify the key trends shown in the graph, plan the answer and finally write down an extended answer using 150-200 words.* In this case the students can be suggested to do the following:

- *first of all, read the task carefully;*
- *try to observe and note any changes, trends and tendencies in the diagram;*
- *write the introduction of the essays, organize it clearly avoiding superfluous language or excessive detail. In fact, introduction here is just effectively paraphrasing the given task;*
- *the main body should contain two or three paragraphs, presenting essential facts, illustrated with figures, giving a detailed breakdown of trends occurred throughout the period, showing your findings and conclusions. Remember to*



select significant information that is truly. Delving into insufficient details or excessive precision is considered unimportant or irrelevant, it is more elegant to cite "approximate" figures;

- *such essay should include comparison and contrast;*
- *solid vocabulary variability gains additional points on the test;*
- *the conclusion on the section "Overview," should summarize the main tendencies of the development and trends briefly but substantially [15].*

Thus, to optimize the preparation process, it is necessary to learn precisely the formats and features of every type of writing tests and to chose the right strategies and techniques for fulfilling practical tasks. It goes without saying that preparation for international the English language exam is a complicated and prolonged time-consuming process, requiring the proper spirit, time and energy. Among the recommendations are: *to study systematically – performing day-to-day writing tasks is engrossing; learn the specific formats and requirements of the writing sections of an international English testing you plan to take; chose and mix various resources for intensive preparation (for example, textbooks, video lessons and online resources, for example, Oxford Uni Essay Writing Workshop, and others); develop a personal preparation plan; specify individual strengths and weaknesses; listen to English daily and communicate in English as much as possible; practice essay writing regularly, adhering to the plan developed; buy or download trustworthy mock tests on an international testing; develop all the language skills simultaneously; receive feedback from teachers and groupmates.*

As for practical top tips of essay-writing which will bring the best possible mark, they are as follows: get ready to conduct a research on the subject of the essay – be endlessly curious like a toddler; analyzing the problem be open-minded, yet critical; don't over-read – find the courage to start writing. *The Introductory part* is strongly recommended to contain not only the information on the main subject of the essay and definitions, but also clearly show the author's message. Logically structurize



paragraphs, using linking elements (*moreover, obviously, simultaneously, typically, all things considered etc.*). Develop your idea arguing, appealing to counterarguments and producing strong points to prove your position (*What would my opponents say? Why are they wrong?*). While evaluating all sides of an issue, balance your essay with ‘pros and cons’, referring to the advantages and disadvantages of a decision, action or idea and make an informed choice. Remember about the originality which means being creative and persistent in details and contrariness. Be insistently repetitive but avoid repeating one word twice – you had better demonstrate your sophisticated elegant language with solid vocabulary – synonyms, metaphors, epithets, which will help your essay to sound posh and sufficient. Stick to the British English spelling in IELTS and Cambridge exams. Remember also to avoid casual words, contracted forms, etc. which can make your work sloppy. *In the Conclusion paragraph* give a clear and direct respond – conclusion becomes unavoidable if you have succeeded in defending your case arguing steadily and clearly, in your firm logical procession. In fact, you acknowledge what you have said in the Introduction but come out with an innovative solution. Try to be confident and proud having focused on the problem fruitfully.

We agree with the idea that essay-writing can be called *a craft* which can be taught [13, p. 3-19]. The British writer Ron Carlson is convinced that a writer’s confidence in the process is as important as any ‘accumulated craft dexterity or writing skill’. The author metaphorically describes the process of essay writing as, first, “the incubation period of thinking and gathering thoughts, then, the idea is to stew for a while, or grow whiskers, modify and change” in a preliminary stage of writing.

We can also speculate on a unwelcomed convenience of heaping help of internet, which, in a sense, is an enemy of a writer – a good essay needs an author’s genuine creativity rather than the ready ideas within a flooding stream of words from the screen. Anything that distracts the essay-writer must be refused for the time of inventory process.



Conclusions. All things considered, the taught writing skills must meet international standards. In modern foreign language programs of higher education institutions, mastering of academic writing occupies a significant place. The subject of Academic writing is an important component of language activity in most professions. International English testing provides candidates with the opportunity to obtain a certificate that will open up prospects, such as: admission to foreign universities, successfully passing an interview for prestigious positions, moving to an English-speaking country, confirming qualifications at the world level, etc. Thus, deep immersion in preparation for testing includes a detailed acquaintance with blocks and complexities of IELTS, TOEFL and ESOL testing, and taking mock tests critically summarizes and evaluates the level of language proficiency. The activities of the academic community can only be effective in connection with the requirements of the global development in the modern world, i.e. an educated critically-thinking creatively-active personality becomes a desired member for society at all stages of its development.

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