Teaching English Abstract Writing Effectively

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Abstract

The knowledge of formal writing is very important in present global world. However, it is the skill which usually receives little attention. Therefore the aim of this article is to demonstrate how to teach formal writing, particularly the writing of abstracts in English. The author of this article provides clear guidelines how to write an abstract in English while reflecting on the most common errors the Czech students and academics make when they write their abstracts in English. In addition, she presents a video which supports her statements about writing a good abstract in English.

Keywords: writing; abstracts; English; strategies; effectivity;

1. Introduction

The knowledge of formal writing is very important in present global world. However, it is the skill which usually receives little attention. Moreover, this fact has been confirmed by current research (cf. Djigunovic, 2006; Weshah, 2011) conducted in the field of the development of four language skills, i.e. listening, reading, speaking and writing. This is also true for the teaching of these skills in the Czech Republic (Sebestova, Najvar & Janik, 2011). The reasons for such a statement are as follows:

- teachers focus more on the development of receptive language skills (i.e. reading and listening) than on productive language skills (i.e. speaking and writing) – (cf. Sebestova, Najvar & Janik, 2011);
- teachers do not integrate all four language skills in their foreign language teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 2001);
- teachers do not develop pupils’ learning strategies which could help them in their foreign language learning (Hrozhkova, 2014; Vlckova, 2007);

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teachers pay the least attention to the development of writing skills (Frydrychova Klimova, 2012);
pupils have a negative attitude to the target language and/or low motivation to learn a foreign language (Frydrychova Klimova, 2013a); and
there are not enough qualified teachers of foreign languages at elementary schools in the Czech Republic (Sebestova, Najvar & Janik, 2011; Vojtkova, 2012/13).

The aim of this article is therefore to demonstrate how to teach formal writing, particularly the writing of abstracts in English, and to provide clear guidelines how to write them.

2. Teaching how to Write Abstracts in English Effectively

The writing of abstract is in fact one of the most important things for students since they have to summarize and highlight the most important thoughts/ideas of their text. Thus, writing has a unique position in language teaching since its acquisition involves the practice and knowledge of what are known as the other three language skills, i.e. listening, reading and speaking. It also requires the mastering of other skills, such as metacognitive skills since learners need to set an objective for their writing, plan it carefully, think over its layout and logical structure, revise it …..In the process of writing they have to use cognitive skills; they have to analyze their sources and then synthesize them in a compact piece of writing.

One of the best ways to attract students to writing is to let them write at the beginning of the learning process as freely as possible and evoke in them the feeling of creativity. Creative writing obviously can play a crucial role in the development of writing skills. Maley (2009, as cited in Frydrychová Klimova, 2012), for example, emphasizes the following benefits of creative writing:

- it aids language development at all levels: grammar, vocabulary, phonology and discourse; it requires learners to manipulate the language in interesting and demanding ways as they attempt to express uniquely personal meanings;
- it requires a willingness to play with the language; and
- it concentrates more on the right side of the brain, with a focus on feelings, physical sensations, intuition and musicality; it also affords scope for learners who in the usual processes of formal instruction are therefore often at a disadvantage.

In addition, Alexander (2009) calls attention to a different dimension of creativity in writing. She describes a specific role for creativity in EAP writing: Both students and teachers new to academic writing often complain that it is not creative. However, the creativity lies not in the unusual choice of vocabulary or sentence structure but in the ability to make writing transparent, like a pane of glass to allow new ideas to shine through.

The author of this paper suggests the following approach to the development of the writing of abstracts in abstracts (cf. Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998):

- to define an abstract;
- to look at the model abstracts in English and analyze their specific features such as vocabulary, text organization or academic formalities;
- to practise the writing of abstracts; and
- to evaluate the writing of abstracts (by a teacher and/or through peer review).

At the beginning of a lesson students are usually asked to provide a brief definition of an abstract. They can do it individually or in pairs in a written form and then they share it with another pair. Afterwards, the teacher can ask them to read their definition to the other classmates or they can compare their definition with the definition provided by their teacher from the APA Style (2010), which states that an abstract is a brief, comprehensive summary of the content of the article; it allows readers to survey the contents of an article quickly, and, like a title, it enables abstracting and information services to index and retrieve articles.
Consequently, students are exposed to a Youtube video on *Writing an abstract - common mistakes* (2012) in which Benjamin Noble comments on typical mistakes made by Russian students (see Fig. 1 below), which in fact are very similar to those the Czech students make (cf. Frydrychova Klimova, 2013b).

While watching the video, students make notes about the most common mistakes in abstract writing which are divided into three areas: vocabulary, academic formalities and text organization. After viewing the video, the teacher asks students about the structure of an abstract which is usually divided into the following parts:

- Aim/goal of an abstract
- Methods used for the research or survey
- Findings/results
- Recommendations/implications for further research or survey

Then s/he discusses with students the most common mistakes which occurred in the abstract. Thus, students should:

- prefer short words of Anglo-Saxon origin to long words of Latin origin (e.g. *use to utilize*);
- use the right collocations such *low speed, high speed* ...;
- avoid using colloquial words (*so, stuff* ...);
- not use the abbreviation *etc.* at all because it is not academic;
- always explain the acronyms first;
- always use informal style of writing;
write short sentences (20 words at maximum); and
avoid redundant phrases because the academic style is factual.

Before the writing itself, teacher can still provide students with some exercises on accuracy such as the use of passive voice or articles and also some exercises on the use of collocations which are typical of abstract writing.

For example:
*Find the right verb collocations to the following words.*

- __________ research
- __________ analysis
- __________ method
- the study __________

In the end the writing itself follows:
*Please write a short abstract (100 words) about the seminar paper you are working on at the moment (you can work in pairs).*

Students’ abstracts are usually evaluated by their teacher, either immediately in class or via the virtual learning environment Blackboard if students write their abstracts at home. However, a significant alternative to teacher’s evaluation is peer response/review (cf. Pathare, 2005) because it might yield several benefits for student’s learning:

- it might encourage a formative developmental process;
- it might support students’ co-operation and collaboration;
- it might decrease emotional undercurrents;
- it might develop thinking and reflective skills;
- it might teach students to be critical but in a constructive way; and
- it might develop other language skills.

For more information see Frydrychova Klimova (2012).

3. **Conclusion**

As it has been indicated above, the writing of abstracts in English is not easy because it requires not only a good level of proficiency of a foreign language but also being able to think in a foreign language and structure the main ideas clearly and logically. Therefore, foreign language teacher must take it in consideration and choose such strategies which would best chronologically and effectively lead a learner through the whole process of the writing an abstract in a foreign language, in this case English. Then such teaching and learning can be a challenge for both the teacher and student.

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