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**CREATIVE WRITING AS A SKILL**

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**Abstract:** Creative writing is not only a means to help students unleash their creative side and feel more comfortable when writing, but has also been proven to improve language learning (Greaves & Schultze, 2012) The teaching of writing skills in a foreign language is a task of the school education, in particular, the education directed at the development of students' communicative competence in modern languages. This skill is developed throughout all stages of the learning process in order for students to become confident enough to practise the language in real environments independently. Undoubtedly, the focus in the classroom is more on the reproduction of other persons' texts (i.e. imitating models of good essays) than on the creation of one's own pieces of work that would develop the students' creative writing skills. However, in order to prepare students for the diversity of life and help them acquire the skills to communicate fully and adequately, this focus should be shifted towards the creation of own texts from the very beginning of the learning process, and the reproduction of written work examples should simply serve as a bridge towards this goal. Motivating students to write requires well-chosen topics that appeal to their growing sense of independence and individuality. For the essay (as a creative product) to the greatest extent outlines students' capacity to think independently and it presents their maturity in their cognitive and emotional interaction with the world. As a creative product the essay to the greatest extent outlines students' capacity to think independently and it presents their maturity in their cognitive and emotional interaction with the world. Therefore, we can say that working on an essay is part of the process of clarification and stimulation of the students' interests and their professional and personal development. The essence of the creative essay lies in the reasoning founded on the combination of the critical analysis and the emotional engagement with the discussed problem.

**Keywords:** producing an essay, reproduction of written work, language learning, well-chosen topics

The teaching of writing skills in a foreign language is a task of school education, in particular, the education directed at the development of students' communicative competence in modern languages. This skill is developed throughout all stages of the learning process in order for students to become confident enough to practise the language in real environments independently. Undoubtedly, the focus in the classroom is more on the reproduction of other persons' texts (i.e. imitating models of good essays) than on the creation of one's own pieces of work that would develop the students' creative writing skills. However, in order to prepare the students for the diversity of life and help them acquire the skills to communicate fully and adequately, this focus should be shifted towards the creation of own texts from the very beginning of the learning process, and the reproduction of written work examples should simply serve as a bridge towards this end goal.

In other words, the skill of creating one's own text in the foreign language (in general and, in particular, producing an essay as a specific text genre) is preceded by the ability to reproduce others' texts and imitate good practice. This learning sequence is natural but the sooner the transition is made, the better. For the essay (as a creative product) to the greatest extent outlines students' capacity to think independently and it presents their maturity in their cognitive and emotional interaction with the world. Therefore, we can say that working on an essay leads to the process of clarification and stimulation of the students' interests, as the genre itself can serve as a bridge between them and the student's professional and personal development. The essence of the creative essay lies in the reasoning founded on the combination of the critical analysis and the emotional engagement with the discussed problem. In its narrowest sense, the term "essay" means "first experience" or "practice". Today, this term has been established in educational contexts through its broader meaning, namely as "a short written text on a particular topic or a specific subject" (Savova, 2004; Mihova, 2006a).

Like any other skill, the ability to express oneself through writing could be developed in the classroom. When someone is required to write his/her own text on a topic, the extent to which their rhetorical and linguistic skills have been developed is being examined through evaluating their ability to interpret correctly the essay prompt, and to create a well thought-out and purposeful text within a designated time frame. The key competences that learners have to demonstrate and which form the basis for the standards of writing are as follows: a well-structured text with clear and logical transitions between the paragraphs; a clear and accurately formulated thesis; relevant and coherent content; a sufficient text volume; adequate and sufficient evidence to support the thesis; a wide range and precise use of grammatical and lexical language tools; good spelling and punctuation skills.

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It has been established that students find it much easier to autonomously create an essay if they write about a familiar subject rather than deal with a problem which is unknown to them. But even then, when approaching the writing task, they have to pay attention to whether or not the question prompt is followed by additional instructions. In some cases, questions include clarifications, specific requirements for the volume of the expected written response (e.g. number of words), the addition of illustrative material and/or supporting arguments (e.g. descriptions of personal experience), a certain way of organizing the text, specific quotes, etc. Typically, the question prompt itself contains some keywords which predict the approach to the topic. Students do not usually have time to rewrite their essay, so they have to choose the right approach to the topic before working on it. A few minutes should be devoted to clarifying and developing the main thesis of the written answer. If students try and consciously shape the main thesis in their introduction, the argumentation and the description will "emerge" effortlessly in the course of writing and the whole text will be more coherent and cohesive. Without considering their aim beforehand, students risk making one of the two biggest mistakes: going off at a tangent or creating a series of unrelated paragraphs, as a result of which it is possible that they create a text that is inconsistent with the topic, inadequate, with a vague or even contradictory content. Therefore, it is advisable students are best advised to prepare a plan which outlines the main thesis, as well as the supporting arguments and the way (e.g. the specific sequence) in which they will be presented. An appropriate style of writing that matches the purpose should be chosen and maintained throughout the written work. A well-structured essay should contain an introductory part which includes the main thesis, reflects the student's opinion and personal stance on the matter. The second part of the essay is the argumentation which supports the thesis through specific arguments, which are presented in separate paragraphs comprised of a few sentences, distinguished through clear logical connections. The final part the conclusion should be logically related with the argumentation but most importantly – with the introductory part of the text and re-emphasize the thesis.

The creative essay does not require a strictly academic and/or analytic approach. It is to be distinguished from the scientific analysis and dry academism employed in research reports (Savova, 2004). The creative essay leaves room for the thought to play. Its argumentation is based on an associative principle – a thought (e.g. an emotion, an image) spontaneously calls out another, as they both create a connection based on a common characteristic. The approach to the problem discussed displays an individual perspective towards the matter, and it may include a wide variety of arguments and elements of unpredictability and idiosyncrasy. Typical of the creative essay are strong imagery, emotionality and expressiveness, polysemy, usage of metaphors, subjectivity and individuality. The essay may also be an experiment of thought triggered by a push from a starting point (the question prompt) and assuming an unfamiliar argumentative direction. Part of the essay is also the joy of expression, achieved through the unique selection and combination of means of expression that make up one's own personal style of writing. Common beliefs, trivial or trite comments and stereotypes are not and should not be a part of this genre. The essay should reveal an individual flight of thought following intense mental probing of oneself and the world around. A typical feature of the creative essay is also its free argumentative structure, abiding by no mandatory patterns and ready examples, one which only follows the intuition and imagination of the author.

All this poses the question as to how exactly an essay is created (see Mihova, 2006b). Firstly, the / the author should be in position to emotionally related to the problem, it should provoke in them–disturbing or joyful thoughts, it should bother or elate, astonish, persuade or urge them; in their work they must try to get across their understanding of the matter at hand. That is why before starting to write, a student should take time to think about the essay for a bit and formulate a rough plan of action, as well as adopt a personal attitude and approach to the matter. Secondly, the essay must contain and present a personal stance, which should be coherent - opposed or parallel to the other existing opinions on the issue. In other words, the writer should display awareness of other points of view on the matter, and explain where exactly he/she stands. Thirdly, the presence of supporting arguments or rebuttal, examples and evidence, makes the essay somewhat similar to a scientific report: whose element could not and should not be excluded from the creative essay. Fourthly, the essay also comes close to a work of art through the requirement for use of bright imagery (e.g. analogies, metaphors, hyperboles), its emotionality, and originality. The author tries to see the problem even in its unexpected aspects and approach it from unusual angles. Fifthly, the essay may contain elements of a storyline, a fairy-tale, a fantasy, sentiments, aphorisms. It can also strike close to folklore and the narrative wisdom of life. Sixthly, the essay contains its own emotional elements – personal feelings and senses, unique expressions, favourite techniques. In order for a student to be original, they must delve into the topic and make themselves aware of everything it triggers inside them including associations, fears, trembling, emotions, pictures, aromas, speeds and twists. Figuratively speaking, both their body and spirit should be at the place where the reality of the subject exists, only then will they reach authenticity. Seventhly, the essay must have the necessary

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genre and specific text structure – an introduction, a main body and a conclusion, in which the conceptual turns and their answers are well-defined. Eighthly, the essay needs to display accurate use of language which at the same time is also fluent, idiosyncratic, allowing for the coinage of new words and diversions if necessary to achieve a specific effect. Ninthly, the essay differs from all other types of argumentative work because it does not aim for comprehensiveness and systematicity, but rather a specific and unexpected point of view, which, however, captures the whole complexity of the subject matter in the essay. In this case, this can be achieved through a strong argument, depth, specificity and expressiveness (ibid.).

An interesting point is the psychological process of creating an essay. Even long ago Michel de Montaigne (2017) called the essay "a compressed reason" / quintessence of thought / (see Mihova, 2006a). This psychological process of creating an essay includes the following cognitive actions: purposeful observation, analysis of the essence of what is outside and inside; memories; linking past and present experiences (e.g. knowledge, information, examples); defining the different points of view on the phenomenon until a precise formulation of a title and a good sense of the problem itself are achieved; internal structuring of information; various ways of creating and structuring the text surprising the reader, obtained through an internal drive for creation and development of the feeling of the essay; a prognostic stage, which includes the prediction of the effect, impact and quality of the product - here the author has to become confident that this is their own personal way of expressing a position which would affect the reader. In other words, the essay combines the expressive and the impressive functions of the language (Jacobson 2000, p.89). The position is specific and personal, but that does not mean that it is not universal. On the contrary, the essay allows for everyone to find an individual answer to the question asked, as well as defend and justify it. However, something more important is happening in this process –the author rediscovers their way towards finding the answer. For this reason, the process of writing a creative essay requires the feeling of communicative equality between teacher and student, mutual desire for the recognition of the other's opinion. Working on an essay of this type, the students can be involved as co-creators in the educational process, making them responsible and active (Mihova, 2005). Therefore, whenever possible, the students should be given a chance to write essays not only for the purposes of assessment, but rather for the type of communication triggered by real-life information exchange.

Last but not least, it is also necessary to develop skills for self-control and self-assessment during the writing process because they guarantee the increase of effectiveness of education and enhance the students' interest in their own development.

Learners need some preparation in order to be able to produce autonomously a quality creative essay. The method of 'KWL' (know / want to learn / learned) is a great educational tool that can be used for this purpose before students start writing. What does this technique involve? The topic on which the essay prompt is based is introduced and discussed at some length before presenting the writing task. The aim is to activate students' schemata and preliminary knowledge on it. For example, we can ask them to write three things they know about the topic at hand. Then they are encouraged to think about what they would like to learn about the subject and, as a result, what questions they would like to ask in order to get this knowledge. They have to write those questions down. The clear formulation of these questions is a handy tool through which their understanding of the subject can be checked. The "W" part (what I want to learn) can be left blank - especially if the topic is unfamiliar for the learners and we plan to provide them with some resources which would scaffold their knowledge, but at the end of the lesson every student should have something written in the "L" section (what I learned).

When students face 'THE WHITE PAPER', they have to leave their consciousness function and bring out all the associations arising from the essay's title (Mihova, 2006b). The ideas they will later use (including those recommended by the teacher) are derived from those associations. Then the students should decide what resources they have available in this creative process - verbal and mental - and what else they need to procure. This process represents the complex internal dialogue that they lead with themselves and the world to make sense of their personal and others' experiences related to the subject at hand. Following this is the organization of ideas for their essay (and later its content) by the principle of association. In and around them, they must seek the most indisputable evidence to support their insights about the subject matter. Then they discover or hypothesize the different points of view on the subject of their essay, and they finally form their point of view on the problem, their own opinion on the subject matter (i.e. their thesis). Thus, they achieve independent thinking and gain a sense of the problem by orienting themselves towards their own feelings and senses, as they identify with the problem at hand. Thus, the emotional intensity and mental reasoning, which are so inherent for the essay, are achieved. Similarly, students should also choose appropriate sentences, aphorisms or even create their own expressions so that they present their stance on the topic in an original way. In this process, they should not strive to disguise their own subjectivity, often

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expressed through personal bias, because they distribute their attention between the responses that the relevant text and other sources of information give to the problem and their own responses they have developed through self-reflection.

In a research study testing Bulgarian students' skills to assess and edit their own written work in the foreign language, an experimental group of twenty-three 9th grade students /aged 15-16-years/ studying English as a second foreign language (after German) was invited to write a short essay on the following topic: "Computers are an essential part of our daily lives" (the topic of the essay is familiar to the students, corresponding to their age, education and foreign language competence level<sup>76</sup>). The students were previously familiarised with the genre-defining features of the essay, the writing process improvement strategies (outlined above), and the criteria for the evaluation of the essay. Students had to write their essays in class (in order to avoid reproduction of ready examples) within 40 minutes, under the constant supervision of the teacher. In order to avoid negative psychological states (albeit temporary) that could affect the outcome of the study (e.g. stress, lack of motivation), the students were not informed that they are participants in an experiment. They did not have the time to produce a draft, but this is in tune with the need of the teacher to prepare them for exam situations when they would have to concentrate and understand the essay requirements to such an extent as perform the task without writing a draft; this also involves the learners' ability to self-control and self-assess their work in the process of its creation. The students' essays were not marked, but the overall impression was that they generally did very well: they were quite capable of writing their own text on a given familiar topic, displaying understanding of the problem, ability to formulate a clear thesis and support it with convincing arguments. Rhetorical skills for logical organisation and coherent construction of the text were shown. Deviations from the essay-writing requirements were not observed. This was not the case, however, with respect to the linguistic norms of the foreign language – grammar, spelling and punctuation. In some students' essays displaying original and provocative thought quite a lot of language mistakes were observed - predominantly punctuation mistakes and, sometimes, spelling. Seemingly, students focusing on the content of the text did not pay enough attention to the language norms they had to follow whilst writing. In other words, the students from the experimental group had not yet developed the habit of implementing the language norms of their second foreign language simultaneously with the development of the text.

As a conclusion from the critical review of the methodological literature on the subject and the research conducted, it can be said that stimulating students' self-reflection practice is a key element in the process of their education on how to produce creative and quality written work (incl. essays), which should go hand in hand with the development of their foreign language culture and communicative competence.

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<sup>76</sup> The level of English language proficiency of the students from the experimental group is B1, which is higher than the expected proficiency level for the grade.