

DEVELOPING ESL STUDENTS' WRITING SKILLS

Nunu Belkaniya (Kyiv, Ukraine)

Written communication is the area of language which requires the use of correct grammar, spelling, relevant lexis and appropriate style, punctuation and good structuring. This paper details on common difficulties ESL students encounter on their way of producing different pieces of writing. Students lacking experience in writing essays, reports, summaries and other assignments often misuse vocabulary and mix formal and informal styles. These irrelevances affect the output results and minimize student's chances to succeed in academic performance or to apply for a desirable job.

The evidence suggests that when writing activities are mostly based on grammar exercises and less on concise text composing tasks students find it difficult to approach essay, review or report writing. But merely challenging students with more writing assignments teachers would little contribute to improving their students' writing skills. As might be expected, a guided practice with clear explanation would enable students to become more efficient in writing.

The scope of guidelines on written communication may vary depending on the type of writing. Before making students compare informal and formal writing styles teachers may need to highlight the purpose of writing and the audience addressed. While informal and neutral writing styles are widely used by university students in blogging and social media, formal style seems to them much more complicated and so it is. One of the possible ways of abridging the instructions on formal style writing could include individual assignments focused on preparing the recommendations and templates for it. Students may feel more confident after presenting their findings on *do's* and *don'ts* for writing tasks. For example, the concept of cautious language, often called "hedging" or "vague language"[1] could be presented as it is found on the following website :

<http://www.uefap.com/writing/feature/hedge.htm>

Language used in hedging:

1. Introductory verbs: e.g. seem, tend, look like, appear to be, think, believe, doubt, be sure, indicate
2. Certain lexical verbs e.g. believe, assume, suggest
3. Certain modal verbs: e.g. will, must, would, may, might, could
4. Adverbs of frequency e.g. often, sometimes, usually,
- 4 Modal adverbs e.g. certainly, definitely, clearly, probably, possibly, perhaps, conceivably,
5. Modal adjectives e.g. certain, definite, clear, probable, possible
6. Modal nouns e.g. assumption, possibility, probability
7. That clauses e.g. It could be the case that .
e.g. It might be suggested that .
e.g. There is every hope that .
8. To-clause+ adjective e.g. It may be possible to obtain .
e.g. It is important to develop .
e.g. It is useful to study

Being familiar with "hedging" in writing students might avoid making too absolute statements, as the one in the following unhedged sentence:

It is *undeniable* that formal writing style is too complicated.

The suggested "hedged" version of this sentence could be:

It appears that formal writing style *seems* too complicated to some people.

A vast number of educational resources offering advice and tips on writing among common mistakes made by ESL students point out the overuse of linking words like *furthermore, moreover, in addition, firstly, therefore, however* and many others. The experts admit that “native English speakers do not use linking words extensively. Just at selected points in their writing. An advanced ESL writer generally uses linking words much more frequently than a native speaker would “ [2].

Other errors in formal writing, which are often overlooked by students, are presented to rather full extent in the List of Common Errors on Centre for Independent Language Learning website [3] . These are some examples from the list:

- the use of too informal words and phrases like *a lot of, a bit, 'cause, in a nutshell, by the way* instead of their formal equivalents;
- the use of contractions *I'm, can't, that's, let's, don't, won't* ;
- uncountable nouns used as plurals
- the use of personal pronoun *you* instead of *one*.

To summarize, the key points of improving ESL students' writing skills imply constant writing practice under competent guidance and reference to relevant educational resources.

References

1. UEFAP Using English for Academic Purposes .A Guide for Students in Higher Education retrieved May 7, 2016 <http://www.uefap.com/writing/feature/hedge.htm>
2. <http://www.really-learn-english.com/esl-writing.html>
3. Centre for Independent Language Learning' retrieved May 8, 2016 from <http://www2.elc.polyu.edu.hk/CILL/errordetector.htm>