



Dorđe Janković¹

University of Belgrade, Teacher Education Faculty

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The Functionality of Teaching Writing Skills in Secondary Education (based on the official functional style)

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Extended summary

The paper looks at a discrepancy between the standardised outcomes for learning writing skills in secondary education and the methods used to test these outcomes. The aim is to show that the practice of assessing the overall linguistic culture of students by means of written tests and by applying only one written form – the so-called written composition – is not adequate for measuring student achievement in other functional styles (scientific, publicistic, official); in this manner, the genres pertaining to these styles are ignored because they are not subject to evaluation and assessment. Other potential problems in teaching the culture of expression have also been identified: this topic is not dealt with systematically; there are no adequate textbooks and reference books for practising the elements of literacy; the predominance of only one form, written composition, as flexible as it may be, does not satisfy the needs of different stylistic genres and is not functional enough when it comes to communicative needs of students in their future lives and education; written compositions are generally assessed arbitrarily, according to teachers' subjective criteria; the majority of students do not find writing skills lessons stimulating or motivating. The paper provides an overview of the methodological literature which deals with this issue; the differences in defining the term written composition by the experts in the field of methodology are also presented (while some experts separate it from the “practicistic forms” such as requests, others pertain that it is always realised in a specific form). The ways of improving writing skills lessons are also proposed: 1) introduction of a greater number of styles, forms/genres in teaching writing skills, especially in the written assignments, 2) a more objective assessment of students' written compositions in the form of setting the criteria which they have to fulfill, or, even better, by establishing point scales, and

¹ djordje.jnkvc@gmail.com

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3) a systematic work on acquiring new skills at the introductory, practice and revision classes – writing written compositions, correction, and revision. As the result of the research, and by using the genres of the official style as an example, the paper proposes the ways in which written assignments can become (more) functional. At lessons of business/formal correspondence, students should become familiar with the structure of the genre, its content (the selection of the presented data), and its stylistic and orthographic characteristics. Practice lessons should include synthetic and analytical lexical, syntactic and pragmatic exercises, particularly in terms of acquiring the strategies for expressing politeness, greeting formulas, distinguishing between formal and informal vocabulary, especially in the area of hypotaxis, the nominalisation of predicative sentences and understanding its consequences, decomposition of predicates, forming impersonal and passive sentences, naming the phenomena at a higher level of categorisation; then there are exercises for practising the usage of various textual connectors (words used for beginning the sentences, further explanations, ordering, contrasting, concluding), exercises for practicing synonym variations, especially when learning the non-terminological vocabulary. The paper also proposes the ways for organising written assignment lessons, including the use of computers (text processors and email accounts), which could be beneficial for learning the elements placed somewhere in-between linguistic and computer literacy. The paper stresses the importance of familiarising the students with the assessment criteria before the actual written composition tasks, offers a list of potential criteria and the ways for assigning the points, emphasises the importance of the correction of written compositions and providing commentary for getting feedback on the acquisition of knowledge/skills. The conclusions of the research are as follows: (1) the stylistic and expressive potential of written compositions as traditional tools for evaluating writing skills is limited; (2) the sole implementation of these tools hampers the achievement of teaching and learning outcomes and (3) it overlooks different student predispositions and their varying interest in the literary, belles-lettres expression which is nurtured in the composition writing, and (4) the evaluation of compositions is quite arbitrary.

Key words: writing skills, functional literacy, written assignment, written composition, official style.

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