

PREWRITING IN EFL

LA PREESCRITURA EN INGLÉS COMO IDIOMA EXTRANJERO

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Abstract: Teachers of foreign language aim at developing in their students the four skills, however, this is not often achieved and one may wonder, which is the cinderella of the four: listening, reading, speaking or writing? Furthermore, there is a long-standing belief that there is a direct correlation between language proficiency and writing skills. Moreover, it is also doubtful that prewriting can exert much influence in the acquisition of writing skills. Has anybody ever wondered about the importance of a writing prompt, about the parts and characteristics of a writing prompt? Has a second thought been given to the purposes of assigning writing prompts? Scott's philosophy of the writing assignment and the criteria for preparing composition assignments as well as some examples of flawed and successful writing prompts can help foreign language teachers do a better job when teaching writing in a foreign language.

Key words: writing prompt, foreign language, English teaching, learning didactics, prewriting, assessment.

Resumen: Los profesores de Inglés como idioma extranjero aspiran a desarrollar en sus alumnos las cuatro habilidades básicas, sin embargo, esto no se consigue muy a menudo y uno se pregunta, ¿cuál de las cuatro es la cenicienta: escuchar, leer, hablar o escribir? Más aún, desde hace mucho se cree que existe una correlación directa entre dominio del idioma y destrezas de escritura. Se duda, además, de que la preescritura pueda ejercer mucha influencia en la adquisición de destrezas de escritura. Por otra parte, ¿alguien se ha preguntado acerca de la importancia de una tarea de escritura, sobre las partes y características de la tarea de composición? ¿Se ha meditado acerca de los propósitos que tiene asignar una tarea de escritura? La filosofía de Scott respecto de las tareas de escritura y de los criterios que deben tener los profesores para prepararlas, así como ejemplos de asignación de tareas de composición mal diseñadas y bien diseñadas, pueden ayudar a los profesores de idiomas extranjeros a desempeñarse en mejor forma al enseñar a escribir en un idioma extranjero.

Palabras clave: tareas de escritura, idioma extranjero, enseñanza del inglés, aprendizaje de la didáctica, preescritura, evaluación.

INTRODUCTION

There is ample evidence sustaining the fact that upon comparison of the time devoted to developing the four skills needed to learn a language, whether one's mother tongue or a foreign language, –listening, reading, speaking and writing– no equal opportunities are provided for these four skills. Writing is undoubtedly the least developed of all, *at least in Spain*. One may feel

that English as a Foreign Language writing is like the cinderella of the story. Blaya (1997) reports that Valdés et al. have noted that the majority of “foreign language professionals have adopted the position that writing is a *secondary* or less crucial skill than listening, speaking and reading...” (Valdés et al., 1992 cit. in Blaya 1997, p. 164). This author feels there are reasons which explain why this is so.

The first reason for neglecting the teaching of writing is the difficulty encountered due to the dichotomy between time put in and achieved results. Teachers do not have much time to devote to the process of writing, while students become impatient when the outcome of a writing exercise is not as good as expected compared to the time consumed. Another reason is the generalised belief that students’ language proficiency attests good writers and the other way round. Many teachers of English believe that English as a Foreign Language writing improves in as much as a student’s knowledge of English does. This author’s experience is otherwise. In fact, she shares Reid’s (1993) views when he manifests that:

“...second language proficiency and writing expertise are cognitively different. (...) Cumming (1989) investigated the correlations between composing strategies, second language proficiency, and writing expertise. He found that composing strategies were related to writing expertise, but that second language proficiency was not directly related.” (op. cit., p. 35)

Therefore, writing expertise has to be acquired as a separate skill from language proficiency since it is not a consequence of the latter. Prewriting facilitates such acquisition. Prewriting, however, has to be taught. This article has thus been written to provide some insights into prewriting pedagogical features. The pedagogical recommendations are mainly centred on the student writers themselves, and on the processes that they may follow to help in the final product. This author shares McCormick Calkins’s (1986) certainty that “...if the piece of writing gets better but the writer has learned nothing that will help him on another day on another piece, then the conference (or the exercise, or the corrections) –this writer’s comments in parenthesis– was a waste of everyone’s time.” (op. cit, p. 121) Calkin’s views are applicable to students of any age, as are the general principles described in this article.

Being so concerned with the pedagogical aspects of teaching English to non-natives, and writing in particular, this author has focused upon the methodological side of English writing, zooming in on what comes before it, i.e. prewriting. The idea is to centre on this previous stage to later on fulfill the goal of writing accurately. To that effect, we have prepared a series of articles periodically released. This article defines:

1. What prewriting in this context means.
2. Purposes for assigning a writing task.

3. Parts of a writing task, its characteristics.
4. Scott's philosophy of the assignment.
5. A set of criteria for preparing composition questions.
6. Some successful and unsuccessful writing prompts.
7. A glossary as a frame of reference.

1. Prewriting or Process Writing Support. Definition

Prewriting is whatever comes before writing the final draft; it encompasses all the preceding steps, the *sine qua non* previous stages for a good piece of writing to see the light. From this perspective, prewriting can be nicknamed the cinderella of writing, because it takes away all the hard work with it, the tiring part; and, when finally the product is launched, prewriting is assigned no merit, and deserves no praise. Actually, it is sent into oblivion. Only the neat piece of writing remains. Thus defined, prewriting embraces all the drafts from the first to the last, and all the processes associated with draft preparation.

We understand that many voices might object to such a broad definition of prewriting. The justification for this viewpoint is that a written piece is unworthy of being shared, communicated to others, unless it achieves *good* quality. This state of *perfection*, so to speak, is only reached at the end of the road, wherever and whenever the end for each writer is.

The process of prewriting is initiated the moment the student writer is assigned a writing prompt. There may be varied and various reasons for being assigned a writing rubric. Those are worth taking into account because it is advisable that the student writer be aware of them in the prewriting stage. In fact, such purposes are meant to inspire a particular kind of writing performance, and the student writer is encouraged to observe them.

2. Reasons for Assigning a Writing Prompt

a.- Teacher's perspective. It is usually teacher prompted; it serves school purposes most of the time, such as language reinforcement as well as assessment. (e.g. Write about the video you watched in class yesterday. Use the new vocabulary in the glossary as much as possible in your composition). The purpose(s) may be evident to the students or not. Students usually use their *intuition* to follow the instructions given, hoping that their written response will come up to the teacher's expectations.

b.- The purpose of the writing assignment, that is, what the student writers, following the writing prompt instructions (or lack of them) have to describe, comment, criticise, agree, etc. about the topic or subject given (e.g. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the competitive exams).

c.- The purpose of the public, which means the person or people, real or imaginary, included in the prompt instructions and for whom the writing

event is described (e.g. Write a story for your little sister. Describe a photograph of the pet you have or would like to own).

d.- The reader's purpose, if different from that of the teacher, to read the written piece: a peer to make comments, to learn about a certain subject, etc. Incidentally, the reader and the public may coincide.

3. Parts of a Writing Task. Its characteristics

The purposes just described have indirectly unfolded the parts of a writing prompt: the subject or topic and the set of instructions accompanying it. Paraphrasing Ruth and Murphy (1988), the writing prompt generally consists of two main parts: (a) the subject or stimulus, that is, what the writer will write about; and (b) the instruction, the suggestions or restrictions on the subject or content, that is, how to address the subject.

Before delving into the constitutive parts of the writing prompt, one other aspect will be mentioned, namely, the student's reaction to it. Undoubtedly, the writing assignment produces an impact on the student: it acts as the stimulus that triggers off the thinking process. The influence exerted by this stimulus takes place in the student's mind, which in turn, elaborates the *constructed task* - the "task that the writer sets for himself on the basis of the given task. It reflects the writer's interpretation and understanding of the given task", as Ruth and Murphy (1988, p. 7) point out. This element is a mainstream aspect of the writing prompt. It attaches great importance to the student's interpretation, giving equal priority to both the stimulus and the response. Incidentally, there may be "a high degree of congruence between the given task and the *constructed* task, or there may be virtually none" (underlined by this author) (Ruth and Murphy, op. cit, p.7). It is this author's opinion that the *construed task* is quite frequently not taken into consideration by the teachers, so that the above authors' remarks can throw light upon this neglected aspect of writing. It should not be difficult to imagine the consequences of a writing assignment misinterpreted or misread by the student writers.

To make students and teacher's expectations coalesce, which is a way of reconciling the *construed* and the *given* tasks, writing assignments have to be framed following certain considerations. The first crucial issue to be taken into account is the topic. Sometimes, a topic is provided without any accompanying instructions. Topics like «My home town», «Childhood memories», «Last summer holidays», and so on, illustrate subjects where the student writers must provide their own focus and use their intuition to furbish the purpose of the assignment. Under such circumstances, this writer assumes teachers and students move within the realm of writing for self-expression so that almost anything is valid, if *well written*. There are no other apparent constraints. It is then, when the whole gamut of possibilities opens up without any teacher's guidance, that the tasks become more complicated, less effective and less efficient.

When the writing assignments include a set of instructions, the writers may be asked to describe, comment, criticise, agree or disagree, etc., which means develop a given subject in a certain way, based on a purpose. Thus, these instructions together with the topic become the full task. Furthermore, the rubric may demand from the student writers that they pay attention to several items, such as genre (a story, a biography, an autobiography, a journal, a description, etc.), public (bear in mind that the headmaster of a school, or one neighbour's son, or one classmate, or the like, is going to be the reader), register (formal or informal), tone (humorous, dramatic, etc.), and others. The rubric may also establish certain length limitations (150 to 200 words, one page long, one paragraph), time limitations (especially in tests, 30 to 45 minutes), special attention to grammar, verb agreement, spelling, etc. All these form part of the task.

The moment the students read the task, several reactions may be undergone from the very beginning of the thinking process. Nevertheless, variety and multiplicity should not deviate the students from the expected paths. Here lies the importance of designing a good writing task. A good writing prompt can be considered so if it "reduces the student writer's uncertainty about the nature of the desired response by providing adequate guidance, without introducing stifling constraints." (Ruth and Murphy, 1988, p.12). This leads the reader into the characteristics of a good writing prompt.

4. Scott's Philosophy of the Writing Task

Fred N. Scott (cit. in Ruth and Murphy, op. cit.), a professor of English, made a great contribution to the good writing prompt research when in 1903 he referred to the «philosophy of the assignment». It involved:

- 1.- the announcement of the subject,
- 2.- stimulation of interest in the subject,
- 3.- arousal of a desire to write upon it,
- 4.- suggestion of a method or procedure in writing,
- 5.- precautions against wasted effort. (op. cit., p. 21).

Scott added a witty observation to the announcement and stimulation of interest in the subject, and that is, the interest the subject should arouse in student writers and teachers alike, which means that both parties should enjoy working on the task in a similar manner. His comment anticipates the latest research on it, for nowadays teachers of this field emphasise the importance of teachers reading with enjoyment what their students write, with the implication that the written pieces should not be commonplace. Although some authors disagree with the idea that it is possible for students of a certain level to produce interesting products for the teacher because teachers know much more than students do, this author does not share their viewpoints. Every human being is a thinking creature, and as such, his/her intellect is powerful, almost unlimited. Student writers are always capable of

producing something worth reading, regardless of their age. There may be written communication problems, but this fact does not invalidate their ideas. Teachers should acquire the craftsmanship to help student writers express their thoughts. This writer is sure one can find a *tour de force* in any piece of writing, if the student writer has enjoyed writing it.

5. A Set of Criteria for Preparing Composition Questions

Carr's ideas (1965, cit. in Ruth and Murphy, 1988) enlarge and complement Scott's on the importance of devoting time to the making of assignments, likening it to an art (op. cit., p. 25). The Commission on Writing, the Educational Council (cit. in Clark et al., 1968), devised a set of criteria for preparing composition questions that can help teachers become artists:

a.- A good question should be engaging. By *engaging* researchers mean that the task should involve the writers, and the final product should be effective for the teacher-reader as well. For instance, a prompt such as "my summer vacation" is not enough, whereas "what do you think was the point of failure of your summer vacation?" elicits a completely different reaction. The student writers' thoughts are being narrowed down in the second option. Another example might be: "write a letter to someone important about a problem in this country." A better assignment would be: "write a letter to your principal suggesting a way to solve a problem in your school." If the question is narrowed down, key elements such as "that happened last year" can also be incorporated.

b.- A good question should be designed to comply with the interests and abilities of the student writers. It is what Reid and Kroll (1995), summarizing Bereiter & Scardamalia, Carrell, Clayton, and Newell & MacAdam, have named as "accessible content: it should tap into the existing background knowledge of the student writers so that they can link old knowledge with new." (op. cit., p. 20). For example, subjects on pets, sports, and the like, such as: «How has your life changed since you got your pet at Christmas, or how has your pet X related himself to the rest of the family?»

c.- A good question should seek to elicit a specific response. The writing task should help the student limit himself to one area and focus on somebody to whom the piece of writing could be addressed, i.e. the public. This aspect should be carefully handled, otherwise, the students may end up writing for the teacher only. Anyhow, this aspect is quite difficult to manage, and there are opposing views on the same. Kirrie (1979, cit. in Ruth and Murphy, op cit.), for instance, believes that the best question should be as "nondirective as possible... any word, phrase, or brief statement which invites a variety of interpretations and responses." (op. cit., p. 29).

d.- It should be contextualised and authentic, in other words, within the realm of the students and in connection with classroom work, syllabus, and real world.

It can be inferred from the above comments that it is as difficult to prepare a writing task as it is to comply with it. Reid and Kroll (1995), summarising Ferris, Hamp-Lyons, McKay, Walvoord and White, justify the responsibility involved in designing good writing prompts owing to their twofold purpose: assessment of language skills and the write-to-learn function. The write-to-learn objective is no minor achievement; “a cognitive change and growth – education– should occur as a direct result of the writing task” (op. cit., p. 20). And, it is this learning situation that enhances the act of writing and makes it worthwhile. As was said before, writing is a critical thinking act.

The thinking process is not misled by the writing prompt, if the latter is correctly designed, to the best of the teacher’s ability. Once the assignment is released to the students, they focus upon the subject and rhetoric, the way of organising the information, while the learning process gets started. Nevertheless, to tackle what comes next successfully the students should have enough knowledge of the topic. This writer agrees with Tanner (cit. in Gray and Ruth, 1982) that the student writers must have something in mind to write about, a certain command of the subject matter, the treatment such content deserves (compare/contrast; thesis/support, etc.) and the writing skills to achieve the desired effect (organisation, compilation, etc.). A student may be versatile on a certain subject but may not know its rhetoric. Likewise, a writer may write correctly, and yet, the content may be superficially treated, so that the audience gets bored when reading it.

Attitudes towards different topics have some bearing on the writing pieces. If students lack motivation because the topics are dull, or so they feel, their performance may be affected. Topics should elicit an enthusiastic response on the part of the students. Enthusiasm is, certainly, one important aspect that teachers try to arouse in the students, but hardly ever achieve, firstly, on account of some topics found in the textbooks; secondly, due to misleading writing prompts; thirdly, owing to the instructors’ personal reactions to their students’ written pieces.

Dullness is against good writing. It may be sponsored by our behaviour as teacher-public. We are, undoubtedly, a very special public. In fact, we may even provoke some conflict. We allow no negotiations during the writing process, in case there is one, and only judge the final product. We are tough. Furthermore, we assess the tasks unilaterally, thus destroying the sense of real public that, on the other hand, we want to instil. This public duality together with the assessment function creates tension while making all writing enjoyment vanish. Going even further, and as it has already been pointed out, most writing tasks are to be given a grade. Applebee (1984, cit. in Ruth and Murphy, op. cit.) remarks that in the USA and in England,

“...opportunities in school-sponsored writing to write for oneself were limited (about 4%) as were opportunities to write for a wider audience (about 6%), teacher-as audience/examiner opportunities far

outnumbering the other two –social science papers (64%) and science writing (98%).” (op. cit., p. 77).

Tasks to be assessed invalidate, to a certain extent, the write-to-learn objective. This explains why it is important to attach the preparatory work leading up to the final product even though this should be excluded from assessment.

After having considered the general characteristics of writing tasks the next step will be to show some successful and unsuccessful assignments. The reader will find below some examples, which may help those teachers who do not know much about designing writing assignments become aware of this issue. Their framing has great influence upon eliciting either good or poor writing from the student writers.

6. Successful and Unsuccessful Writing Prompts

Well and poorly designed writing task examples have been obtained from assessment sources, for as it was mentioned before most of the purpose of the writing tasks is assessment, whether written or oral. Ruth and Murphy (1988) quote Clark’s definition of successful essay writing prompts in an examination situation. He remarks that such prompts should give students:

“...a choice of tones and styles to use through a pair of sentences given to them to begin the essay. These sentences differ in tone, diction, and approach to the problems (statistical vs. affective, for example) and are designed to establish a rather narrow set of constraints for the essay in order to limit the number of choices the writers have to make. In other words a role is created for the writers in which many of the variables they would encounter in a real situation are fixed, and the essay can be evaluated precisely according to their ability to determine the features of the given information salient to the communicative context and to match those features in their own writing.” (op. cit., p. 85).

One of his examples was as follows:

“Write a letter to the parents of a young child advocating a particular policy of television watching for their child. Explain to them why you advocate such a policy.

Begin your letter with the following sentence (which you should copy into your bluebook) (i.e. the examination booklet):

By the time the average person in North America graduates from high school, she or he will have seen 18,000 hours of television.

Now select *one* of the following as your second sentence and copy it into your bluebook.

The present generation of preschoolers watches an average of 42 hours of television a week.

Since real experience is the primary source of learning, children are growing up addicted to television and ignorant of life.

According to a well-known critic, television is giving the present generation 'an extraordinary exposure to standard adult English and an opportunity to see many things.'

Now complete your letter developing the argument that follows from the first two sentences. Do your best to make your argument convincing to the parents who are your readers." (op. cit., pp.61-62).

Reid and Kroll provide some prompts that have been used with ENS and ESL writers, with substantial success. Usually the assignment was given over half way through the composition class, to freshmen.

"Imagine that you have two weeks to live as a person of the opposite sex. That is, if you are female, imagine you have two weeks to be a male; if you are male, imagine that you have two weeks to be female. Think of the differences in social roles, everyday life, and feelings that you might have. **Use some of the questions below to begin pre-writing** (Bold and underlined by this author)

- A. What about your life would be better? Try to list at least 3 things.
- B. What about your life would be worse? Try to list at least 3 things.
- C. What about your life would not be changed? Try to list at least 3 things.
- D. What would you most enjoy being able to do in those two weeks that you can't do now? Describe one thing in detail.
- E. What would you least enjoy having to do in those two weeks?

Write a 2-3 pages (typewritten, double-spaced) essay in which you discuss the roles of women and men, **using your pre-writing** (bold letters by this author) and personal observations to support your opinions. Your audience will be a classmate of the opposite sex with whom you will discuss your idea and who will review your essay drafts with you. Your final draft (and all your preliminary work for this assignment) is due on...

Your essay will be graded on the following criteria:

Organization	30 %
Content	50 %
Mechanics	20 %

The analysis of this prompt points to the fact that the language and instructions were simple and direct. The purpose was to provide students with the opportunity to use their own experience, and to collect known data, and to organise them. There were clear rhetorical specifications. Peer review and teacher-conference were held as part of the prewriting process.” (Reid and Kroll, 1995, pp. 23-24).

Some unsuccessful prompts will now be described below. Because they were poorly designed, they caused difficulties for the students in the classes. Some had flawed content, some others had classroom context problems and some had misleading language. This author starts by an example of a writing prompt with flawed content:

“The purpose of this paper is to examine the origins and results of Soviet control and influence in the Soviet satellites of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Romania, and Poland, as well as the current reforms and their implications. Your paper must be 6-10 double-spaced, typewritten pages. The written quality of your paper will be graded. This will include the use of proper grammar, correct punctuation, spelling, and word usage as well as the citation of references and the inclusion of a bibliography in the proper form.” (op. cit., p. 30).

Paraphrasing Reid and Kroll, the major problem of this assignment was in the content itself. It was broad enough for a book. This type of assignment created frustration for there was so much to be said that the student writers, trying to address all the issues mentioned in the task, did not accomplish any purpose, except state a series of sentences dealing with each one of the Subtopic. Consequently, the result was a list of subjects with no argument developed.

Another example of a flawed content prompt, given in a freshman music class, was the following:

“You will write a 3-5 page research paper on a musical topic. The purpose of the assignment is to familiarize you with music resources in the library. You must cite at least three different sources found in the library in your paper. This paper must be typed and double-spaced. The paper is worth a maximum of 60 points. It is due ...” (op. cit., p. 31).

The language of the prompt was clear but the content for the paper was vague. Students did not know what topic to choose: modern, rap, classical music, etc. They did not guess what the teacher wanted, nor could they assume that their choice would not show in their grades. When they put questions to the instructor about the topic, he answered that the topics had to be taken from “... the New Groves Encyclopaedia of Music, which would provide a good bibliography.” (op. cit., p. 32).

Some examples of flawed prompts because they are culturally bound, will be now presented for the reader's consideration. Quite often, cultural themes are taken for granted, and when foreign books flood the local market, for example English or American books crowding the Spanish culture, there may be writing assignments that do not fit the Spanish mentality or are irrelevant to Spanish customs. Teachers have to be careful when assigning writing prompts that may not belong to the cultural background of the students. For example, topics dealing with sports, which have a very heavy weight in the US, such as sports scholarships, would not be understood by Spanish students.

Performance appraisals to evaluate employees' suitability to the jobs they did was totally new in the Spanish business world twenty years ago, and if such topic had been assigned to Spanish business majors then, it would have been totally strange to their field of experience. It was also a flawed prompt in the US when given to ESL business management students:

"Create two performance appraisal forms based on your knowledge of the process. Each form should contain performance dimensions relevant to the position under consideration. The forms should utilize appropriate behavioral anchors for each dimension being measured. A generic form may not be used." (op. cit., p.32).

The analysis revealed an unsuccessful prompt, for the students reacted with lots of questions. The prompt was full of jargon and with no clear directions. Even the length of the prompt was unspecified.

There are prompts whose language is flawed because the student writers do not know what is expected from them. Let us see an example of this kind:

"The paper should be chosen in consultation with the instructor with a rough outline submitted by the 10th week of the course. The students misunderstood the prompt completely, thinking they should conference with the instructor only after they had written an outline and during the 10th week of class. Thus, they missed the whole early interactive phase meant to help them." (op. cit., p. 33).

With the hope of having given some insights into the difficulties involved in designing prompts, the pre testing of prompts is suggested. Pre testing is bound to succeed if students are asked for their comments before prompts are formally assigned to them, to see if the instructions are clear, if they understand the vocabulary, if the subjects interest them, if the assignments have been somewhat anticipated by the course objectives, and so on. Based upon the students' reactions, prompts would have to be written and rewritten and got ready for a second trial, depending on the number of revisions

needed. Prompts can also be evaluated by other colleagues, or even by the teacher preparing them, as long as he/she devotes enough time to reflect upon them.

As a way of conclusion on the writing prompt design, let it be said that Linda Flower (1989) highlighted this issue by pointing out that "if there were ill-defined tasks, constructive planning in writing might not happen." Barbara Kennedy (1994) stressed the influence of topic on the acquisition of ESL composition skills and the influence of topic on the cognitive task of demonstrating ESL writing proficiency. Reid and Kroll (1995, p. 37) concluded that although prewriting activities are indispensable to achieve a good piece of work, they will be useless, and the results disappointing, unless prompts are carefully done.

7. A Glossary as a Frame of Reference

L1, L2, ENS, NES, NNS, ESL, EFL, EFL STUDENT WRITER, EFL WRITING TEACHER, WRITER, WRITING, ACADEMIC WRITING, HOCS and LOCS, WRITING PROMPTS, CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC.

L1: mother tongue (Spanish).

L2: English.

ENS, NES: English native speakers.

ESL: English as a second language. Either English is spoken at home, and/or the students attend a bilingual school, where most of the subjects are in English. (King's College, the American School, and the like). Matsuda (1998) specifies that in ESL:

"...writing became separated from composition studies at a 1965 workshop. The participants recommended that speakers of English as a second language should be taught in special classes by teachers with training in the field. It all started at the end of World War II when a large number of international ESL students came to America for higher education." (op. cit., quoted from abstract).

Incidentally, most of the literature this writer has come across is on ESL; most researchers base their studies on students who go to an English speaking country to pursue further studies.

EFL: English as a foreign language: not spoken at home, taught/learned in Spain, learned at school or in an academy. Schedule: 1 to 5 hours weekly, usually 3. Some linguists use EFL/ESL rather obscurely, indistinctly and differentiating them as well, as is the case of Raimés (1998) in her article Teaching Writing, or Reichelt (1999) in her article Toward a More Comprehensive View of L2 Writing: Foreign Language Writing in the U.S.

EFL STUDENT WRITER: any student of English as a Foreign Language who has to produce a coherent piece of writing in English to share with others.

EFL WRITING TEACHER: teachers of EFL who may or may not have received EFL writing teacher training, but who are supposed to teach EFL writing as one of their multiple tasks.

NNS: non-native speakers of English.

WRITING: in this article means using and producing language on paper to communicate something to the world, to a reader, to a public, or for self-expression. Writing is in this article only considered as the last step of a process whose outcome is the finished product. It is the action when its author has decided the product is final, where no further alterations are foreseen. Whatever stage comes before the final product will be included as pre-writing.

ACADEMIC WRITING: the term academic writing is something that strikes this author as being too formal, and that only at a very advanced level would apparently EFL students be capable of handling its principles. This writer believes, from her own experience, that academic writing is the equivalent to saying: think, plan, investigate, ask, share, organise, find purpose and main idea(s) to communicate, review, discuss, reorganise, draft again, until the final draft is written. It is school writing. Whether 100 words or 10.000 the basic skills have to be there. Creative writing is not included under academic writing.

PROCESS APPROACH: "...involves many facets of being: cognition, emotion, sense of self, sense of others, situation, background, experience, and development." (Simmons, 1995, p. 8).

HOCS: or Higher Order Concerns: According to Purdue University On Line Writing Lab, these are writing tips, namely, the aspects of the writing most responsible for the quality of the paper. They include the thesis or focus, and audience and purpose, the organisation, the development, while **LOCS** – or Lower Order Concerns– include sentence structure, punctuation, word choice, spelling.

WRITING PROMPT OR WRITING TASK: any formal teacher-prompted indication to write. It can also be referred to as the topic, the task, the prompt, the writing stimulus, the writing instructions, the assignment; usually number of words, topic and/or genre, and hand-in deadline is provided. (e.g. Write a letter to a pen friend telling him about your latest holidays, between 150 – 200 words).

RHETORIC: "...covers a multiplicity of concepts in the field of modern composition studies, ranging from the skill with which one uses language to

the textual properties of a given piece of prose. The rhetorical variables in a prompt derive from the way in which the student writer is instructed (a) to approach the content area of the topic (e.g. injunctions to assume a particular persona/voice in which to write the essay, or to write to a specified particular audience and/or purpose, and/or (b) to concentrate on producing a product that exhibits specific rhetorical properties that are identified or implied in the prompt (e.g. compare and contrast X and Y; illustrate with specific details).” (Reid and Kroll, 1994, p. 239).

CONTRASTIVE RHETORIC: the comparison and transfer of mother tongue knowledge to EFL.

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