

DEVELOPING ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Shorena Dzamukashvili

Associate Professor, Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

Ana Gigaure

Assistant Professor, Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University

Abstract: The introduction of inclusive principles in university education allows students with different abilities and difficulties to receive a quality education. In the frame of DARE project coordinated by Israel we studied students learning needs at Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University. 519 students were interviewed. 8,2 % of the respondents said that they have some kinds of special educational needs. A fairly high percentage of students writes about difficulties associated with inattention, reading, writing instruction, and math skills. The highest percentage of students named writing problems. In the modern world, human communication through the Internet has become commonplace. Their language of communication is often English. Thus, the development of writing skills plays an important role in teaching English. The article discusses the different stages of writing and the strategies to be implemented at each stage.

Key words: learning disabilities, writing skills, university level

Introduction

It is important to incorporate inclusive principles in education at the university level. This will ensure quality education for students with learning disabilities.

Georgian students with learning disabilities often do not have any information about the problem/difficulty they have. These learners might be criticized by parents, teachers, friends or employees. Inattentiveness and spontaneous exclamation is characteristic for students with learning disabilities. Frequently they cannot control their emotions and have inflexible thinking. They find difficulty in:

- time management and planning;
- listening comprehension;
- writing;
- spelling;
- working in groups;
- memorization;
- coordination.

Learning disability cannot be described as mental backwardness, behavioral disorder or laziness. It is a neurological impairment that affects human brain to perceive, interpret, remember and deliver information (Laghidze, Bagrationi, Pachkoria, 2009).

Methodology of the study

In the frame of DARE Project (coordinated with Israel) we carried out research. Its aim was to find out students learning needs and disabilities. The subjects of the study were the students of Iakob Gogebashvili Telavi State University. They were 519 in all. The questionnaire comprised 14 closed-ended and open-ended questions. 8,2 % of the respondents said that they have some kinds of special educational needs. Quite a large number of students claim that they have attention, reading, writing, arithmetic calculation, etc. problems/difficulties. It turned out that the most frequent problem is connected with writing.

Based on the results of the study it is necessary to identify these language learners. Besides, universities should provide support system and services for these students.

In modern world people communicate with one another with the help of the internet. Their language of communication is often English. Hence, it is essential to develop writing skills while teaching English.

Review of the literature

It is claimed that students with learning disabilities are characterized by difficulties in organizing and writing their ideas and thoughts (Troia, 2007; Wong, 1997). They usually cannot successfully plan writing process and finally revise their papers. These language learners fail to express themselves in writing. The reason of their failure is usually disability of incorporating and using writing strategies in the process (Golley, 2015). Consequently, students with learning disabilities are in need of finding and teaching appropriate writing strategies to improve their writing performance.

The goal of the article was to find out the writing strategies that can be successfully incorporated in the teaching. The article deals with the different stages of the writing process and the strategies/techniques that might be utilized to improve writing skills of students with learning disabilities.

The importance of teaching writing strategies to students with learning disabilities is supported by different scientists. Golley (2015) states that “teaching students with learning disabilities to use strategies to help them plan and organize their writing will help them become more effective writers and will enable them to clearly express their thoughts and ideas” (p. 20). Hence, teachers should focus on teaching writing strategies to students with learning disabilities to maintain their learning.

Different authors present different types of classification of writing strategies. They present different stages of the writing process. For example, Chen (2011) distinguishes three basic components of the writing process: pre-writing, writing, and revising, whereas Graham et al. (2012) present five stages of the writing process: planning, drafting, sharing, evaluating, revising and editing. El-Koumy (2016) identifies four stages of the writing process planning, writing, revising, and editing (p. 155).

In our opinion, detailed and clarified writing strategies are presented by Graham et al. (2012). The authors offer step by step description and explanation of the writing process and therefore, it can be helpful and comprehensible for students with learning disabilities. Graham et al. (2012) distinguish two writing strategies for each stage of the writing process. At the planning stage learners may use POW strategy i.e.

- ✓ “Pick ideas (i.e., decide what to write about).
- ✓ Organize their notes (i.e., brainstorm and organize possible writing ideas into a writing plan).
- ✓ Write and say more (i.e., continue to modify the plan while writing)” (p. 16).

Another strategy that should be taught at this stage is “ordering ideas/outlining”. Students should:

- ✓ “Brainstorm/generate ideas for their paper.
- ✓ Decide which are main ideas and which are supporting ideas.
- ✓ Create an outline that shows the order of the main ideas and the supporting details for each main idea” (p. 16).

It implies that students should brainstorm their ideas for the paper, then review and number these ideas. In other words they should decide which are main or supporting ideas and arrange the right order of them.

At the “drafting” stage learners should utilize “Imitation” strategy and

- ✓ “Select a sentence, paragraph, or text excerpt and imitate the author’s form” (p. 16).

At this stage “Sentence generation” strategy is also used. Students should:

- ✓ Try out sentences orally before writing them on paper;
- ✓ Try multiple sentences and choose the best one;
- ✓ Use transition words to develop different sentence structures;
- ✓ Practice writing good topic sentences.

The third component of the writing process is “Sharing” and the strategy that is used at this stage is “Peer sharing”. Students should:

- ✓ “In pairs, listen and read along as the author reads aloud;
- ✓ Share feedback with their writing partner, starting with what they liked” (p. 16).

Another strategy is “Author’s Chair”. At this time, students should “sit in a special chair in front of peers and read their writing” (p. 16).

“Evaluating” writing implies the use of so called “Self-evaluating” strategy when learners reread their paper and ask questions:

- “Are the ideas clear?
- Is there a clear beginning, middle, and end?

- Does the writing connect with the reader?
- Are sentence types varied?" (p. 16)

At this stage students also use "Self-monitoring" strategy i.e. they answer the questions

- ✓ Did I meet the goals I developed for my writing? If not, what changes should I make to meet my goals?
- ✓ Did I correctly use strategies that were appropriate for this task? If not, what should I change?
- ✓ record their answers to self-assessment questions
- ✓ inform their teacher, when they meet their goals (p. 16).

The last component of the writing process is "Revising and editing". At this stage "Peer revising" and "COPS (editing)" strategies are applied.

"Peer revising" strategy asks students to:

- ✓ "place a question mark (?) by anything they do not understand in their writing partner's paper.
- ✓ Place a carat (^) anywhere it would be useful to have the author include more information" (p. 16).

The final strategy of the writing process is "COPS" or editing. This time learners answer the following questions:

- ✓ "Did I Capitalize the first word in sentences and proper names?
- ✓ How is the Overall appearance of my paper?
- ✓ Did I use commas and end-of-sentence Punctuation?
- ✓ Did I Spell each word correctly?" (p. 16)

Scientists (El-Koumy, 2016; Graham, et al., 2012) support the idea of using demonstration while teaching writing skills. Graham, et al. (2012) consider that "teachers may need to model an entire strategy or parts of a strategy again before students can work independently" (p. 17). El-Koumy, (2016) also claims that "modeling" is crucially important while teaching writing to students with learning disabilities. Teacher modeling writing strategies "makes the invisible visible and the implicit explicit to the students" (El-Koumy, 2016, p. 154). The author claims that students with learning disabilities should be taught writing strategies together with genre specific strategies. The author also highlight the importance of "thinking aloud" by the teacher. In this way learners with learning disabilities have chance to see what they are expected to do on different stages of the writing process.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Based on the results of the study it is necessary to identify language learners with learning disabilities or difficulties;
- Universities should provide support system and services for these students;
- In modern world it is essential to develop writing skills while teaching English;
- Students with learning disabilities are in need of finding and teaching appropriate writing strategies to improve their writing performance;
- Students with learning disabilities need "modeling" to improve their writing performance.

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