

Role of the teacher in shaping the student's writing skill

*Antoneta Ramaj**

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to show how "creative work" or teachers' "products" directly affect student's performance, in their written work. Through this study, it is aimed to draw the attention of all Albanian language and literature teachers to overlook important requirements and forms of teaching, which affect student's linguistic training. Aspects of the present research are related to the topic of written essays, their structure, the level of clarity and understanding ability, and the consistency of writing styles that students do, as compared to those required by the program. Other aspects of the study, closely related to the first one, are the evaluative comments and notes that the teacher makes on the students' written essays, as well as their suitability for each student. The general approach is to demonstrate through real examples, and convince teachers through analysis and comments, that various problems in the design (structure) of topic / essay avoid the syllabus/program requirements, produce different types of essays, and bring misunderstanding among students. On the other hand, general notes and comments do not help students improve. We believe that thoughts and the conclusions of the study will be helpful for teachers of Albanian language and literature in the development of their teaching process.

Key words: *Substantive program, essay, topic, criterion, questions, topic classification, types of essays, teachers' comments and notes, general words, assessment process, illustrative examples.*

* Doc. Antoneta Ramaj, State Education Inspectorate, Albania; arama@ikap.edu.al; netarama@yahoo.com.

Introduction

The teacher's work is inevitably associated with the students' teaching and learning process at school. Based on this, the teacher's role is crucial to students' achievements. Scientific knowledge and professionalism of teachers are essential in shaping the students, because it is he/she who gives to what is written in official documents. For this reason, this paper is intended to focus on teacher's work which directly affects the development of student's writing ability.

Methodology

The methodology used is diverse, including: research, analysis, comparison, observation, and evaluation. It has been carried out a) *a study of Albanian language and literature curriculum*, with special focus on writing, like the writing goals and writing types that students develop in different grades; b) *a study and analysis of the teachers' work* to judge the structure and their impact on student performance and to compare them with the curricular requirements on writing; c) *a careful reading the student essays*, to explain the structure and role of teachers' feedback on students improvement; d) *a class observation*, to see how writing is concretely done by the two actors: teachers and students.

Results and comments on them

The formulation of the theme (topic) is the most important part in the writing process, because the theme is the main concern on which the student's attention is focused. The more the topic is associated with literary knowledge, language skills and students' life experience, the deeper and more developed the essays would be. In order to maintain the students' focus and in order to make him not work in a constrained and mechanical way, it is recommended to deeply study the psychological effects awakened by the theme chosen; in addition, we should pay attention to the literature researches made in and out

of the classroom and to a vast number of social, psychological and literature processes¹.

Even when the topic is the same, the students' works (written essays) have distinctive features (their differences), because students' experiences are different, as is their observation ability and expression, which has been treated extensively in literature related to this topic. The following models, collected in Tirana's high schools, are real and factual data that show the teachers' work in structuring the writing topics.²

Examples are numerous and it is not difficult to collect them, but, for our purpose, we will highlight a few of them³, from the 10th and 11th grade.

Specifically, in the 11th grade, we note:

1. Argue your opinion in the form of an essay: "Life and books."
2. Skanderbeg's figure between the legend and the truth.
3. Albanians today, although in five countries.
4. "Rozafa's legend" enables me meeting with my ancestors.
5. Where the masks, where the face.
6. Don Quixote, both a comic and a tragic figure.
7. The good and the evil in Camaj's poetry.
8. Make an essay with a social theme and compare the changes and similarities of the honor codes of Albanian society of the ancient time.
9. Once you analyze and comment on the following passage, make a comparative essay, which compares the two spiritual moods of the General of the Army (from the book *General of the Dead Army*)
10. Write a philosophical essay focusing on Hamlet's famous monologue: "To be or not to be".

Considering the given topics, we explained in advance that the official curriculum of the Albanian language and literature of the 11th grade has defined types of writing, but no specific themes (teacher

¹ Karamitri, E., Petrit, K., Murthi, L., Pepa, V., *Literature in school*, Tirana, 2001, p. 100.

² See for example chapter 6, Lingual inequalities and social inequalities, in the book of R. A. Hudson titled "*Sociolinguistics*", Tirana, 2002, p. 226-25.

³ All essays are written in Albanian.

and students are free to choose for themselves). Thus, it is requested to make the paraphrasing and summarizing; the analytical summary; the descriptive, explanatory, persuasive/argumentative essay and the informative text.⁴ Thus, all the different formats and writing types of the essays can be realized.

If we take a look at the structural method of themes and writing types that they offer, we will classify⁵ them as one of the following:

Theme that orientates the student on the type of writing and content, e.g. as in theme 1;

The "dilemma" topic that is unclear on what will be achieved, e.g. as in themes 2 and 7;

Theme that classifies writing according to the scope on which the theme is based, e.g. as in theme 10;

Themes that classify writing according to the technique used to achieve it, e.g. as in theme 9.

The first theme: Argue your opinion in an essay form: "Life and books", tells us that the student should make an argumentative essay. This can also be formulated simply as: Write an argumentative essay on the topic: "Life and books."

In contrast, in themes 2-7, it is difficult to understand which type of writing to use.

Can a student clearly understand what type of writing he/she should use in the theme: "Skanderbeg between legend and truth.?"

There are a lot of cases where themes are structured in such a way that the students face the dilemma of what to do. For example, when we read the topic: "Don Quixote, a comic and tragic figure as well", we should:

- a) *Show* that Don Quixote is a comic and tragic figure;
- b) *Explain* why Don Quixote is a tragic figure;
- c) *Persuade* others through our argument that Don Quixote is the tragic-comic figure.

⁴ Institute of Curriculum and Training, "Albanian language and literature Programme, 11-th grade", Tirana 2010, p. 27.

⁵ The classification is done by the author.

The same can be said for "The good and the evil" in Camaj's poetry. What should we do with it?

- a) *Show* the moral pros and cons of Camaj's work.
- b) *Explain* how the good and evil are treated in Camaj's work.
- c) *Make* a summary of "good and evil" in Camaj's work.

Surely, students confronted with such a situation will feel unsure of what to do.

The other theme: "Write an essay focusing on Hamlet's famous philosophical monologue "To be or not to be" again has some problems. First, it is not clear the request of the teacher. Second, the teacher may be unwillingly defines the kind of writing from which the theme is taken - a designation that contradicts the curricular documents. It is well-known that students, first of all, improve and exercise different kinds of writings; the areas they are taken from are various and come later. Thus, for example, a topic in the field of history may require the student to explain or describe a phenomenon. It is also required of the student to argue or convince someone or to inform the reader about an event. If we stick to the teacher's request, the students will have to write essays on sports, music, physics, chemistry and mathematic topics. (Example: "Write a sports essay focusing on arbitration and players' behavior." Which type of writing will the student implement in this so-called sports essay?)

Of course the student will write about topics from different areas, but if he/she learns and exercises by writing a specific type of essay/text, e.g.: descriptive text / essay, he/she will know how to write essays/texts about different topics from various areas of science and life. Remarks can be made for themes 8 and 9, regarding the use of inappropriate words or groups of words, such as: *Write a comparative essay ...: Write an essay about a social topic where you compare the differences and similarities in the honor code of the society of the time.*

To have a more clear picture of what was said above it has been analyzed the 10th grade topics of written essays of two groups of teachers.

Comparative Table of Topics for 10th Grade

1 st Group	2 nd Group
1. Quasimodo and Esmeralda, two characters with spiritual similarities, but with physical contrasts.	1. Discuss the concept "The man who sleeps, feels that the dream is the best life".
2. Achilles Revenge	2. Analyze the historical veracity of the events described in the novel <i>Skanderbeg</i> .
3. Albania and Albanians with their characteristics.	3. Discuss Skanderbeg as a figure in the epicenter of the novel.
4. Beauty as a concept in Naim Frasherí's and Baudelaire's work.	4. Discuss the figure of Skanderbeg in relation to Alexander the Great of Macedonia.
5. Loneliness, turning into his/her self!	5. Analyze the meaning of the expression "When you are in Rome, do as the Romans do".
6. Prometheus, a lonely man...!!!	6. Are politics and history a mirror of human life?
7. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza as both tragic and comic figures.	7. Argumentative writing: "Strength of Shakespearean language".

The 10th grade curriculum plans that writing should focus on paraphrasing and summarizing an analytical summary, text map, a descriptive essay on a media product; revising of a descriptive essay, an explanatory essay, an informative text, a persuasive / argumentative essay and revising of a persuasive / argumentative essay.⁶ The comparative table shows that teachers do not carry out exactly what is required in the program, but develop different themes, depending on the passage or work which is studied. To discover their achievements and problems, let's analyze some of the given topics.

⁶Institute of Curriculum and Training, *the Albanian language and literature Programme*, 10-th grade, Tirana, 2010, p. 25.

Let's analyze the topic of Group 1: "Quasimodo and Esmeralda, two characters with spiritual similarities, but with physical contrasts". Let's assume that the teacher asks the student to describe these characters. If we refer to the curriculum requirements, a descriptive essay should be implemented about a media. We can use the same logic for another topic "Albania and Albanians with their characteristics".

The topic of "Beauty as a concept to Naim Frasheri's and Baudelaire's work does not tell us what the student should do: Should he/she explain this concept, relying on the authors work, or should he/she show how beauty is described in the authors' works? The topic "Loneliness, turning at itself!!!", placing three exclamation marks at the end of the topic can express a very exclamatory character to what is said or could mean disapproval or an irony regarding the statement⁷. In the given formulation by the teacher, this is not clear; also is not shown what to do with this topic. Should a student write an expository or argumentative/persuasive essay? If you write an explanatory essay you should explain how loneliness is turning to his/herself, while in the second case you should convince the others through arguments that loneliness is turning to his/herself. So, the same topic, when not clearly formulated, produces two or more genres. The same can be said for the topic "Prometheus, a lonely man!!!"

Then the question arises: *Are the topics diversified in that respect to the content and types of forms allotted?*

For this, let's look once again the topics. In the second group, subjects, three out of seven themes require the student to: a) elaborate Skanderbeg's figure as the epicenter of the novel, b) elaborate Skanderbeg's figure in relation to Alexander the Great c) elaborate the concept that the man who sleeps feels that dream is the best life...?

Regarding the other two themes, one requires historical analysis of the authenticity of the events described in the novel *Skanderbeg*; another is an elaboration of the meaning of an expression. Referring to

⁷See the Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Linguistics and Literature, "The rules of punctuation in literary language", Tirana, 1981, p. 25.

the *Dictionary of the Current Albanian Language*⁸, 1984, we read that the meaning of the word *explicate* is synonymous with *analyze, elaborate*. This means that the student in the 10th grade elaborates on the same type of essay five times, without learning the other types. The two other themes are argumentative essay; one of them is named as such by the teacher. From the way theme 6 is formulated, "Are politics and history a mirror of human life history?", it gives more of an impression of an argumentative essay. The fact that the theme is an interrogative sentence shows it requires an affirmative or a negative response, which then should be argued. As seen from these examples, teachers formulate themes based on the fragment or literary work studied in class.

Naturally we raise the question: Is such a choice good or bad?

The answer would be that it is both good and bad. Why?

On the one hand, it is a good thing for those students who have read and know very well the parts of the book. This gives them the opportunity to have "abundant" thoughts to address the topic, but we are excluding the other requirements necessary for the implementation of an essay.

On the other hand, it is a bad thing because the theme is "conditional". This means that the student who, for various reasons, have little knowledge or no knowledge of the entire selected topic, will face difficulties, or even find it impossible to elaborate upon such an essay topic. As such, it is known that the main aim of the essay is that the student shows his/her writing skills. Given that this is the main priority, then why do we make the work harder for the student by choosing a "conditional" theme? There are plenty of cases when the student may have the necessary skills to write a response, but he/she lacks knowledge on the subject, therefore inhibiting him/her in demonstrating his/her writing skills well. It can be easily observed that knowledge of the students on the subject theme is to be controlled by the teacher during the coming hours, respectively, when they tackle the topic's analysis.)

⁸ Dictionary of the current Albanian Language, Academy of Sciences of Albania, Tirana, 1984, p. 1198.

Comments and teachers notes

Correction is complex, because through it we understand the elaboration of the topic, the students' compositional plan, the richness of their ideas, the ideological and artistic value of their arguments, and the vocabulary and spelling usage. Evaluation of writing from a literary and linguistic point of view does not invalidate its primary purpose creation. To the contrary, from a didactic point of view, it instructs the students to form a sustainable and creative individuality.⁹

Part of Albanian language teachers' work is evaluation of student essays. The evaluation is not complete if, in the end, the teacher's evaluation includes only the grade, without related comments regarding the writing process demonstrated by students. Teachers' comments and notes are important to the performance of the students' work. They help the students to understand their writing problems and help them to improve further. But their validity depends very much on the way they are drafted and submitted to the students. When we read teachers' notes /comments, normally there pops up in our mind the following bunch of questions:

Are the notes / comments related to the purpose, form and content of the article?

Are the comments individual and specific for each student?

Do they positively affect the students?

To answer the questions above, we took into consideration the notes of some teachers from different classes. Such notes¹⁰ include: *thoughts are extremely poor, without sentiment. The order of words is not right. The use of the stylistic words is not right. Work more carefully! Too bad! Punctuation is missing. You do not know where to use the point!*

In being so general, these comments do not leave any lasting impression on the students. In many cases, he/she does not

⁹ Theoretical treating of reading and studying "Study everything, but, reason in the first place", AEDP, Tirana, 1988, p. 161.

¹⁰ Notes are written on the teacher's version.

understand them and therefore does not work to improve them. Teachers do not give due importance to such notes written by the teacher. This is obvious if we have a look at their repeated, general comments and notes that do not comply with the scope of students' writing. Their notes are general and not in accordance to the purpose of the essay; they are not specific for each paper nor for each student; do they not evaluate the content of the article. Therefore, we face a lack of motivation and do not see any change in the students' work. Mostly, teachers focus on spelling and punctuation errors. There are cases when records are even incomprehensible by the student.

As for students, their only interest is the final assessment, the grade. They know it is written in the registry and show their achievements. The students pay little attention to teacher's comment. This is because the comment has no value for the students.

According to our conversations with students, it is understandable that they read the comments more to compare them with each other. "We – the students say - do not read the notes to understand where we went wrong, as the teacher continually writes the same comments. Why do I need them? I got the grade".

When student A. Z was asked about the effects that teacher's comments have on him, he said, "I know without even opening the notebook what the teacher has written. It just says, "Bad! Too bad! Poor! Still the same...? When will you start to write well?" –"And I get upset, but what can I do?"

If assessment is done properly and students are used to paying attention to teacher's remarks, we will have better essays and with fewer mistakes.

Grading and writing a few general words have little effect on changing students' performance. Therefore it is necessary to use new practices, which focus on contemporary strategies to assist students in positive changes in regards to their essay writing abilities. Assessment in process is, as such, because, "Writing is a continuous process of

writers, during the whole time when they are writing".¹¹ The way evaluation is provided by the teacher, step by step, makes the student change and continuously improve the product until the end. Assessment means the evaluation consultation and evaluation-suggestion- evaluation while the student works. But it would be nice if teachers, at the beginning of the written work (e.g. for an argumentative essay), help students with advice like:

1. Put the required elements according to the scheme: what to do, what to talk about, what course to follow?
2. Your Opinion.
3. Incentives to reach the arguments on which you will rely.
4. Arguments, evidence, illustrations of the used sources.
5. Closing process with the personal conclusion that defends the stance.

What are the advantages of this evaluation method?

First, the writing process for the student is an ongoing one, so the teacher can make suggestions from the beginning and further on about student's work. This way, the student will improve the work.

Second, the teacher can make comments and give advice step-by-step on various issues. He/she can suggest evaluating methods of topic treatment, the coherence, which is a very important writing criterion, the style used, the structure of the sentence, the use of words, etc.

This way, the student is able to work under the teacher's control. This makes teacher's instruction effective and helps the student's improvement.

¹¹ Gardner, A., & Johnson, D. (1997). Teaching personal experience - narrative in the elementary and beyond. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona Writing Project Press.

Conclusions

In conclusion we can say that:

a) The topic of the essay is the main problem, which attracts the students' attention. That's why the topic formulation is so important in the writing process.

Structuring the topics clearly helps the students and leaves no room for speculations and implementation of curriculum documents for genre diversity, avoids unnecessary duplication and helps the student to be able to learn and implement various types of writings.

b) The writing skill is developed and improved by conducting and evaluating the nature of the essay. Evaluation is not a purpose in itself. It is used to highlight the real situation of each student in order to further improvement.

c) Grading indicates the student's level, but does not explain it. The teacher's notes have an argumentative and persuasive role for the student. Despite their importance, teachers' notes have been and continue to be general, they do not specify any problem, and they often are not consistent with the purpose and the type of essay.

d) The assessment process is the best way to improve the students' writing skills, because he/she learns how to write, during the working process. It makes the student reflect, there by improving the writing. Teachers' suggestions about specific elements and parts of the paper help the students to realize his/her shortcomings. Dealing with notes and remarks after the product is written is useless. This is proved year by year of experience thus the students still make the same mistakes.

Appendix

The following is an example of the evaluation process, specifically to see what happens with the student. (This Essay is of a student from 10-th grade).

Topic: A proverb says: "Sherri do kokë"¹².

Do you think that the cause of death of two young lovers was the war atmosphere described in the tragedy "Romeo and Juliet"? Argue your opinion in the form of an essay.

From an old quarrel will arise a new love. Two families, hotbed of hostility, and a couple in a rare love are the problems of this tragedy. (You're in a literary argumentative essay. Rightfully you use the literary material taken from the prologue of the first scene, the first act, but, why not put it as a reference? When we wanted to put references don't we had this in mind?)¹³

It's strange that in the end of the drama hate, lack of communication and failure to discuss the problems triumph. "Who speaks, does not hurt," says a proverb. This shows that the achievement of a positive success is precisely the ability to communicate. Nothing is achieved by strife often degenerate into hassle. Although many people have realized this, strife still continues to dominate the solution of many life problems.

"Sherri do kokë". This proverb is related better than anywhere else exactly ¹⁴ in Shakespeare's famous tragedy "Romeo and Juliet". They were two young people in love with each other. (Review carefully the use of these two homogeneous parts; Can they fit together? If yes., does the escalation look like upside down?). Among them is born a genuine, clean and very warm love, I can even say incandescent love. This is an innocent form of love. (Congratulations¹⁵, you have just built a new Albanian word! Careful, only in the form is innocent! What about the content? However, it seems interesting.) It was closely connected to family roots and acceptance of hostility between Montague and Capulet. It were exactly (Find another word or remove it) these two

¹² In the majority of the conflicts, the disputes resolution between quarreling parties has been reached only after death and human loss. The Idiom "Sherri do kokë" means that, the quarreling parties will not understand the harmful consequences of their quarrel until someone will definitely be dead.

¹³ Teacher's comments are written in italics and into brackets.

¹⁴ Words in bold should be replaced with more appropriate words or in some cases should be removed.

¹⁵ Teachers should encourage students more often with such words.

young people who could break the ice of the frozen hate generating through years, although through the ceasing of their heart beats. (*So much bookish. Try to say it simply, more naturally!*) Love is a sensation, which makes someone gets re-born. Why should it bring the opposite of what the loving and cheering hearts experience, the misfortune? Why should their happiness, love and finally, their death, be the price to pay in order to end the proverbial hostility between their families? It is not fair. Such a price, in any case, for anyone and especially for these two innocent creatures from Verona, is not the one to happen. (*Switching from one argument to another is unmotivated. Why?*)

Shakespeare's work is directed at two main poles: (*Find the right word! Build a radius scheme with synonyms of this word and decide which of them would better fit in this sentence!*) The hate which is solved through violence, evil and the love of two young people born in the bosom of this hostility. Romeo and Juliet knew very well what their love would cause, but they madly loved each other and so they died ... with love. It was their youthful impetus that pushed them to do so. (*Find another word to express it literary*) Anyone acts for the sake of love; everyone is surrendered to it if he sincerely loves. It was their fate, however, even though such an end, their love was endless as long as it lived. (*Find the right words to express this special love. You should rewrite the whole paragraph, because:*

1. *It is not clear which way you mean: to surrender to the forbidden love or to the tragic end?*

2. *It comes out that the reason for this tragedy is the fate rather than the tense atmosphere of endless strife and that wind of hate that blows between families...*

3. *The sentence is not constructed properly.*)

It happened to emerge in this environment of hatred, which they challenged with their love, by making on its behalf, the greatest sacrifice, and by paying the highest life price for their love.

Well, it seems paradoxical that love did not win as often happens in books. It was a tragedy. It's bound to happen that way ... death. *No need to write this*) Through this tragedy I understand (*do not forget that you are writing a persuasive essay, which means that you not only have to understand, but also have to convince us with your attitude for the problem*

raised in this topic.) that in many times problems, hostilities are resolved through quarrel. Finally, I can surely say that – “sherri do kokë.

Should it always happen that way? I hope that human's civilization has changed. (Rewrite!!! You are right to hope that the level of civilization, over the years and centuries has changed. Rewrite it. Even with a thin coating of distrust on the civilization of human society, still I like the way of your!)

Bibliography and resources

AEDP, Theoretical treating of reading and studying “Study everything, but, reason in the first place”, AEDP, f. 161, Tirana 1988

Albanian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Linguistics and Literature, *rules of punctuation in literary language*, Tirana, 1981.

Academy of Sciences, *Albanian Language Dictionary*, Tirana, 1984.

Gardner, A., & Johnson, D., *Teaching personal experience narrative in the elementary and beyond*. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona Writing Project Press, 1997.

Hudson, AR, *Linguistic inequality and social inequality*, Tirana, 2002.

Institute of Curriculum and Training, *the Albanian language and literature Programme*, 10th grade, Tirana, 2008.

Institute of Curriculum and Training, *the Albanian language and literature Programme*, 11th grade, Tirana 2009.

Karamitri, E., Petrit, K. Murthi, L., Pepa, V., *Literature in school*, Tirana, 2001.