

# Helping University Students to Write Literary Essays

Alberto Lázaro  
Universidad de Alcalá

## I. Introduction

Writing is a mysterious, challenging, and sometimes painful human activity. That is perhaps the reason why the teaching of writing skills has often been neglected or postponed to later stages in Spanish schools and universities. It is not surprising, then, that students find writing in a foreign language extremely difficult. This paper arises out of research into the problems of writing literary essays that intermediate to advanced EFL university students have. The research was prompted by experience acquired during some years of teaching literature to Spanish students in the English Department at the University of Alcalá (Madrid, Spain). My experience, as that of many other teachers, was frustrating. Only a very small group of students wrote acceptable essays, whereas the great majority of essays were poor. This was a source of frustration not only to teachers, but to students as well.

At first, the error analysis was done very informally and I only gained general impressions rather than objective results. Therefore I decided to carry out a more systematic and formal analysis. This involved collecting data, studying the students' problems, classifying them and suggesting possible causes. After studying in detail the most common and persistent writing problems of my students, I planned some remedial work that could help them improve their literary essays. And this had to be done without interfering too much with the course programme, which includes a lot of literary topics and many works to read and discuss.

## II. Description of the Courses and Data Collection

The error analysis I present here was done with students from the second year of a four-year B.A. English Philology degree at the University of Alcalá during the academic years 1992-93, 1993-94 and 1994-95. The characteristics of the courses were the following:

- Subject: Twentieth-century English Literature, 1900-1945.
- Duration: the class met four hours a week during a semester of 15 weeks (two hours for lectures and two hours for seminars).
- Number of students: in 1992-93 there were 93 students; in 1993-94, 140 students; and in 1994-95, 173 students. They were divided into 2 groups for the seminars. Attendance was not compulsory and around 70%-80% of the students came regularly to class each year.
- Aims: one of the main aims of the course was to encourage critical commentary and develop descriptive and analytic skills through essay writing.
- Written assignments: 3 essays of about eight paragraphs and a term paper. Then, two exam questions in the final written exam.
- Level of English: intermediate to advanced.
- Previous courses of English literature: students had so far attended 'An Introduction to English Literature' and 'Nineteenth-century English Literature.'

In order to gather data for my research, at the beginning of each course the students were asked to write an essay of eight paragraphs about one of the first readings in the syllabus. They were given the topic, though not a specific question (no explicit title was given); they had to discuss the themes in H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, the elements of realism and fantasy in Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, and the role of nature in some love poems by Thomas Hardy. Without any further instruction or recommendation they wrote the essay and handed it in to the teacher for correction.

## III. Classification of Problem Areas

Marking an essay is always difficult, because it is, to some extent, a subjective activity and there are many factors that determine whether the essay is good, average or poor. After reading the same essay, two different markers may differ enormously in their marks (Heaton, 1975: 134). However, I had to choose some criteria in order to identify the main shortcomings my students had when writing. Figure 1 shows what I had in mind in assessing these essays:

Producing a Piece of Critical Writing

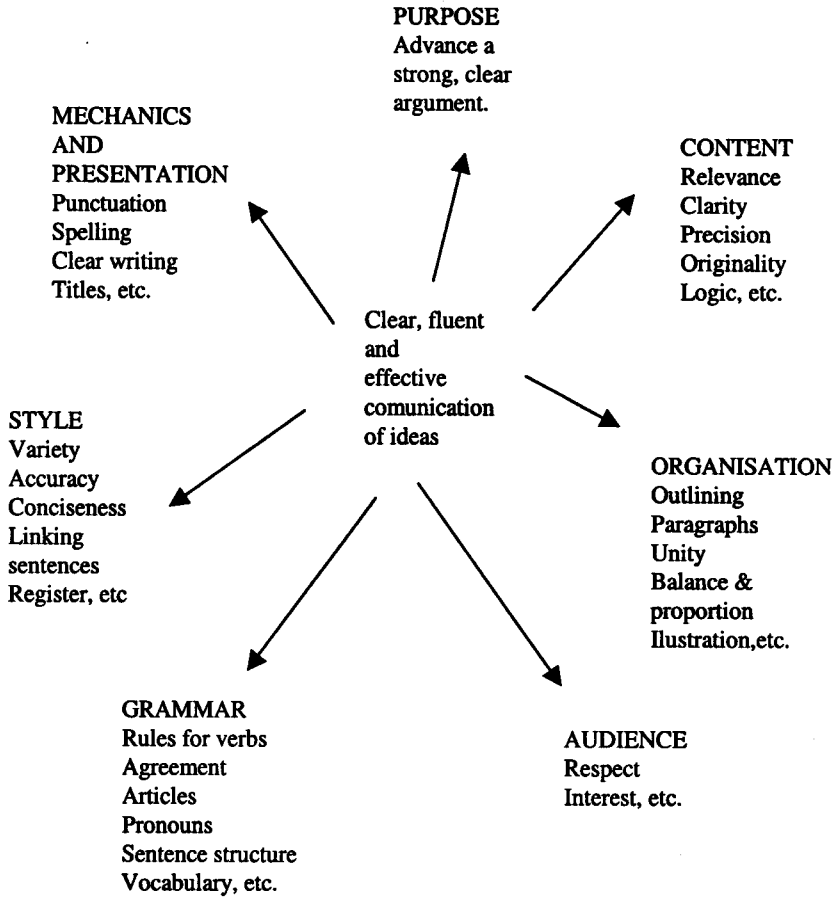


Figure 1

This diagram is adapted from a similar one designed by Ann Raimes in *Techniques in Teaching Writing* (1983: 6), though some changes and additions have been made. There are other types of classifications or categories given by other writers: Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater, for example, in *Literature in the Language Classroom*, include a different list of criteria used by the National Examinations Board to mark essays (1987: 254); and M. I. Josephson, in 'Marking' EFL Compositions. A New Method' also offers an extensive list of error types in

writing<sup>1</sup>. Anyway, I used these criteria in Figure 1 to classify my students' prevailing faults and analyse what might be called the Seven Deadly Sins of writing:

## Purpose

- Absence of a clear thesis.

## Content

- Unfamiliarity with the text.
- Irrelevance: the essay fails to answer the question.
  - Story telling: students tend to tell the story and forget all about the argument of their essay.
  - Wandering: some essays do not deal with the subject set, others include unnecessary material or lose track of its subject and the work they are discussing.
- Coverage: students do not deal with all main aspects of the topic set.
- Obscurity.
- Imprecision.
- Unoriginal essays: plagiarism or intellectual dishonesty.
- Illogical ideas.

## Organisation

Organisation of the essay:

- Deficient outlining and structure:
  - There is no introduction, body and conclusion.
  - Paragraphs do not lead on naturally to each other; the ideas are not organised in a logical and coherent order.
  - The division of paragraphs is wrong and the essay should have a different paragraph structure.
- Inadequate introduction: the introduction is full of platitudes and irrelevances; students write a flabby opening paragraph, in which they do not introduce the problem or issue that is going to be discussed, but in which they introduce irrelevant material about the age or the author's life.

---

<sup>1</sup> See also David Pirie's useful book *How to Write Critical Essays* (1985) and *The Student's Guide to Writing* (1999), by John Peck and Marti Coyle, a practical guide that shows how to improve essay-writing skills.

- Deficient concluding paragraph: students finish the essay with a paragraph that has nothing to do with what has been discussed or there is no conclusion at all.
- Disunity: students tend to repeat themselves or they write unrelated paragraphs.

#### Organisation of the paragraph

- Unbalance: paragraphs are either too short or too long.
- Inadequate topic sentences.
- Deficient illustration.
- Unrelated sentences.
- Wrong concluding sentence.

#### Audience

Students do not consider their audience – the reader.

- Boredom: students do not try to attract the reader's attention and interest.
- Insulting: students explain the obvious or they assume that the reader has noticed and considered every detail.
- Pretentiousness: students try to impress, rather than to inform and convince.
- Improper tone: the tone of the paper is not serious and respectful towards the reader.

#### Grammar

Student's use of language is not accurate:

- Rules for verbs:
  - English verbs confused (say/tell, wait/hope/expect, borrow/lend, ...).
  - No 'S' on 3rd person singular, especially when the subject is a noun or is separated from the verb.
  - Gerund instead of infinitive and vice versa.
  - Verb tense, voice, mood, auxiliary
- Agreement: number, clear reference, dangling modifier.
- Articles:
  - Using definite article where none is needed and vice versa.
  - Using 'A' instead of 'ONE' and vice versa.
  - Using 'A' with abstract or uncountable nouns.

- Pronouns:
  - Using object pronouns after certain verbs (explain, suggest, ...).
  - Wrong concord of pronouns in sentences (They ... his ...).
- Wrong preposition, adjective or adverb degree, etc.
- Sentence structure: the sentences are awkward.
  - Sentences are too long or too short.
  - Sentences without subject.
  - Word order
- Vocabulary: there are distracting errors in word usage.
  - Due to apparent similarity to words in Spanish.
  - Because the student has no idea of the word and anglicises Spanish words.
  - Because a dictionary was wrongly or insufficiently consulted.

## Style

- Repetitive: students repeat words in close proximity one to another or do not vary the internal structure of the sentence.
- Wordy: students use a large number of words that are unnecessary.
- Inaccuracy: students do not make appropriate use of their literary vocabulary, of such terms as 'soliloquy,' 'character,' 'imagery,' 'irony,' 'alliteration,' 'plot,' 'metaphor,' etc.
- Linking sentences: students do not connect sentences in a fluent way or do not use 'discourse markers' properly (see Swan, 1980: 172).
- Wrong register: slang, colloquialisms, sexist locutions, etc.

## Mechanics and Presentation

- Wrong punctuation:
  - Use of comma instead of semi-colon or full stop.
  - Use of colon unnecessarily.
- Errors of spelling.
- Unclear writing: students present a rough copy with crossing-outs and corrections.
- Wrong margins and inconsistent indentation.
- Inadequate title.

- Lack of revision: haste is a common 'sin' among students, who do not write drafts, but hand their first and only version.

#### IV. Results

After reading and analysing my students' first essays, the results I obtained can be seen in the following tables.

##### Academic Year 1992-93

Group A: 31 essays analysed

Group B: 34 essays analysed

Problem area	Group A		Group B	
	No.	%	No.	%
1. PURPOSE	16	51.6	18	52.9
2. CONTENT	7	22.5	11	32.3
3. ORGANISATION	24	77.4	27	79.4
4. AUDIENCE	6	19.3	9	26.4
5. GRAMMAR	11	35.4	12	35.2
6. STYLE	8	25.8	10	29.4
7. MECHANICS /PRESENTATION	15	48.3	18	52.9

Table 1

##### Academic Year 1993-94

Group A: 45 essays analysed

Group B: 40 essays analysed

Problem area	Group A		Group B	
	No.	%	No.	%
1. PURPOSE	18	40	21	52.5
2. CONTENT	8	17.7	7	17.5
3. ORGANISATION	25	55.5	25	62.5
4. AUDIENCE	5	11.1	6	15
5. GRAMMAR	15	33.3	14	35
6. STYLE	10	22.2	11	27.5
7. MECHANICS /PRESENTATION	13	28.8	22	55

Table 2

## Academic Year 1994-95

Group A: 51 essays analysed

Group B: 55 essays analysed

Problem area	Group A		Group B	
	No.	%	No.	%
1. PURPOSE	26	50.9	18	32.7
2. CONTENT	14	27.4	9	16.3
3. ORGANISATION	30	58.8	25	45.5
4. AUDIENCE	11	21.5	10	18.1
5. GRAMMAR	20	39.2	17	30.9
6. STYLE	15	29.4	15	27.2
7. MECHANICS /PRESENTATION	27	52.9	18	32.7

Table 3

Looking at these results, we immediately realise that most of the students have read and analysed the literary texts carefully and that the problems are not really what to write, but how to write the essay. Moreover, their more serious difficulties are not grammatical or lexical, but rhetorical in nature. It seems that students are very unclear about how to focus their thesis, how to organise their ideas, and how to present them. The results clearly show that students do not realise that the presentation of ideas in a discussion is just as important as the ideas themselves.

The origin and causes of these shortcomings are difficult to identify. Perhaps, these particular students are used to writing short compositions for English language teachers, who tend to focus their attention on the control of language and the content, and when they are asked to cope with longer essays they are unable to organise their ideas in a coherent way. Students may also have failed to acquire these writing skills in high school, where they were supposed to learn how to plan and organise essays in Spanish. Another possible explanation is put forward by G. Krashen in *Writing Research Theory and Applications*, who claims that students have problems to organise their essays because they do not read enough, since the organisation of a text is unconsciously picked up while reading.

Whatever the reason, it is a fact that in four of the six groups analysed more than half of my students had problems with most of the basic steps in the writing process: finding a thesis, outlining, writing drafts, choosing a title and revising. A detailed analysis of their most important problem areas, that is to say, organisation, mechanics and presentation, can be seen in Table 4. Here I only offer the data from the essays marked in the academic year 1992-93, since the results obtained in the two following courses were very similar.



Group A: 31 essays analysed

Group B: 34 essays analysed

Problem area	Group A		Group B	
	No.	%	No.	%
<b>3. ORGANISATION</b>	24	77.4	27	79.4
<b>I/ Essay</b>				
a) Outlining	18	58	18	52.9
b) Introduction	17	54.8	18	52.9
c) Concluding paragraph	14	45.1	15	44.1
d) Unity	11	35.4	12	35.2
<b>II/ Paragraph</b>				
a) Balance and proportion	8	25.8	9	26.4
b) Topic sentence	12	38.7	14	41.1
c) Illustration	15	48.3	17	50
d) Unrelated sentences	7	22.5	9	26.4
e) Concluding sentence	12	38.7	13	38.2
<b>7. MECHANICS/PRESENTATION</b>	15	48.3	18	52.9
a) Punctuation	8	25.8	10	29.4
b) Spelling	7	22.5	9	26.4
c) Unclear writing	14	45.1	17	52.9
d) Margins	10	32.2	10	29.4
e) Title	12	38.7	12	35.2
f) Revision	13	41.9	15	44.1

Table 4

## V. Remedial Work

Before I did this type of error analysis, I used to dedicate one or two lessons to explain the basic skills of essay writing. These explanations were made before the first essay was due. The aim of this activity was to remind them of what I assumed they should have learnt in previous courses, either in English or Spanish, and I simply expected them to get on with their essays on their own. However, the theoretical explanation of a few rules was not enough. Students did not learn from a list of 'does' and 'don'ts,' and at the end of the course I still read many poor essays.

Therefore, I decided to include in my syllabus a writing programme to develop the necessary skills for writing literary essays. This programme contained practical exercises that drew the students' attention to those common problems detected in the error analysis (presenting a thesis, outlining, paragraphing, etc.). I had to ignore the rest of the problem areas or deal with them with a simple comment in class. I also did that with errors of format, revision or clear writing. Although some may think that a second year university course of twentieth-century English literature is not the right place to teach how to write, I do not believe it is a waste of time. I am firmly convinced that most of my students still need opportunities to develop various writing skills before they write full-length literary essays on their own. Even the most advanced students find essay writing challenging.

With these exercises I did not intend to provide my students with a guaranteed recipe for the good literary essay. The main objectives of these activities were to make the students reflect on the writing process and give them several recommendations that might help them to write better essays. These suggestions were likely to have the support of nearly all literature teachers, so they would also guide their future essays in other courses with other teachers, no matter the different approaches or requirements they might have.

The following exercises were designed on the assumption that writing techniques must be analysed and practiced. They are also based on a number of assumptions about writers and writing which have been put forward by the so-called process approach. Therefore, some of the activities focus on the different stages in the writing process: planning, drafting and revising.<sup>2</sup> I planned two types of activities: recognition exercises and guided writing.

### Recognition exercises

Before the students wrote on their own, I provided them with model literary essays on familiar topics and books that exemplified specific techniques and textual organisation. These models and the accompanying study questions enabled students to analyse and discuss how a good essay is written, which would help them to organise their own writing. The same type of exercises was also done with one of those flawed essays written by a student at the beginning of the course. In this case, the aim was not to identify the qualities of the essay, but to discuss how it could be improved. It goes without saying that this 'model essay' remained nameless, so that nobody could be ashamed or embarrassed when its shortcomings were identified and discussed in class. These activities were included in the belief that analysing somebody else's writing can encourage a more efficient critical reading of one's own essay. Therefore,

---

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive description of the main principles and techniques of both the product-focused approach and the process approach, see the sixth chapter of J. C. Richards's *The Language Teaching Matrix* (1990).

students were asked to read the model essay carefully and answer the following suggested questions:

**1. Purpose**

- a) What is the writer's aim in this essay?
- b) Can you find the writer's main idea? Write down the thesis statement that tells you what the writer's specific point or purpose is.

**2. Essay organisation**

- a) Identify textual divisions: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion of the essay.
- b) Read this essay and the outline that describes its structure. Then, show the relationship between the plan and the finished essay.
- c) Decide which of the following statements best expresses the meaning of each paragraph in the essay.
- d) Read this essay and then make an outline. Use your own words to paraphrase the author's central idea and to state his/her supportive ideas. Do not simply quote sentences from the essay.
- e) (Students are given an essay in which the order of the paragraphs has been changed) Put scrambled paragraphs into essay order and then write an outline.
- f) (Students are given an essay in which the paragraphs are not identified) Break the essay into different paragraphs.
- g) What is the function of the first paragraph of the essay? Does it give a clear indication of the writer's point of view?
- h) How does the writer end the essay? Is the conclusion appropriate? Why? Is the initial premise re-stated? How is the first paragraph related to the last one?
- i) Show how the paragraphs lead on naturally to one another. How has this been done? Are the transitions from one paragraph to another smooth?
- j) Does each paragraph add something new to the argument? What? Could any paragraph be cut out without affecting the unity of the essay?

### 3. Paragraph organisation

- a) Do you consider the essay to be well balanced? Give reasons for your answer.
- b) Which sentence states the main idea of each paragraph? Identify the topic sentence of each paragraph.
- c) What details support the topic sentence of each paragraph? Pick out illustrations that have been used by the writer to make abstract ideas clear. Comment on the effectiveness of the illustrations you choose.
- d) Could any illustration or sentence be cut out without affecting the unity of the paragraph?
- e) How does the writer end each paragraph?

### 4. Title

- a) How suitable is the title of the essay?
- b) Can you think of a better one?

### Guided writing

Once the students had seen how a literary essay should be focused, planned, and organised, they were asked to do some 'controlled' writing.

1. Finish the essay. Students are given some but not all the content and the form of the essay. They analyse the material and write a complete essay. The material given can be:
  - A first paragraph.
  - A concluding paragraph.
  - A first and a last paragraph.
  - A thesis.
  - An outline.
  - A title, a first paragraph, and an outline for the other paragraphs (and they write either the whole essay or just the conclusion).
  - A first paragraph, an outline for the middle paragraphs, and a conclusion.
  - The topic sentence of each paragraph.

2. **Multiple choice.** Students choose one option out of two or three and write a complete essay or some part of it.
  - An outline and three different introductory paragraphs. They choose one and write the essay.
  - Two or three outlines and they choose the one they consider most likely to be convincing. Then they write the essay.
  - Two or three topic sentences. They choose the one that fits best in each paragraph.
  - A list of thesis sentences. They choose one and incorporate it into the opening paragraph of an essay.
  - Two or three quotations. They choose the one that they think is appropriate for each paragraph. They are given the introductory and the concluding paragraph, as well as the outline of the essay.
3. **Correcting.** Students re-write flawed essays or correct partners' essays.
  - They are given some thesis statements taken from students' essays. They must explain what is wrong with each thesis statement, and revise them as best they can.
  - Students eliminate sentences that are out-of-place in a paragraph because they do not develop the controlling idea expressed in the topic sentence.
4. **Reordering.** With the thesis of an essay and the points of an outline, students have to decide the best order for the ideas in the outline and write the essay.
5. **Open-ended questions.** Students respond to a series of questions in order to write the essay.
6. **Gap filling.** The topic sentences of an essay have been left out. Students have to write an appropriate topic sentence for each paragraph.
7. **Write and compare.** Students are asked to write on a specific topic following a particular outline, and when they have written their drafts they can see the model essay from where the outline was taken. Then, they compare and discuss the similarities and differences between the model essay and theirs,
8. **Parallel writing.** Students read and study a model essay. Then, they write their own on a similar theme, using as a guide the organisation of the model essay. They can also have an outline of the new essay.

## VI. Some Methodological Suggestions

Many of the exercises proposed here to guide students through the process of writing critical essays are specifically intended for classroom discussion. Therefore, they can be done orally with the students working together as a class, in groups, or in pairs. At the same time, we can encourage a critical approach among the students to each other's writing if they show their essays to a classmate and compare their outlines, organisation, illustrations, etc. We must take into account that sometimes there is no one correct answer and many alternatives are possible. The point is that students do not simply write, but also talk about writing. Stimulating discussion about alternative ways of organising a literary essay is an essential part of most of these activities.

One of the obstacles we have to overcome when we develop a writing programme like the one described above in a literature course is to link all these writing tasks and assignments to the compulsory literary analysis and discussion. The teaching hours are too short and the syllabus is too dense, so there is no much time left for extra writing activities. In order to mitigate this limitation, the following points should be considered:

1. There is no need to do all the activities suggested above, only those which focus on the more relevant writing problems the students have.
2. The model essays and the writing exercises could deal with books and topics included in the syllabus, so they improve their writing and learn English literature at the same time.
3. Only discussion activities will be done in class. That means that students prepare the exercises and do all the writing tasks individually at home the evening before. It is a valid maxim that 'One writes best alone, thinks best in company.'
4. Some of the discussion activities could even be done outside class if students are asked to prepare some of the recognition exercises for homework in groups of three or four. In this way, in class we only have to check the group's work and have a general discussion.
5. After writing the second essay, those students who still have problems in some particular areas do extra exercises on their own. We should take into account the diversity of our students' problems and prevent good students from getting bored with exercises they do not need. This obviously means more work for the teacher who has to correct plenty of exercises.

Since 1995 I have spent four or five lessons doing some of these suggested activities at the beginning of literary courses similar to the ones described above. When the students wrote their first full-length essay, the results were much better. I just had to dedicate a few minutes to comment on some errors that might still abound in the essays and distribute extra exercises to those students who needed some more practice. To illustrate the truth of this, below are some data obtained from marking the first essay students wrote for the subject 'Twentieth-century English Literature, 1945 to the Present Day' in 1995, 1997 and 1999.

Academic Year 1994-95

Group A: 56 essays analysed

Group B: 61 essays analysed

Problem area	Group A		Group B	
	No.	%	No.	%
1. PURPOSE	10	17.8	8	13.1
2. CONTENT	11	19.6	7	11.4
3. ORGANISATION	12	21.4	9	14.7
4. AUDIENCE	7	12.5	6	9.8
5. GRAMMAR	10	17.8	10	16.3
6. STYLE	9	16	11	18
7. MECHANICS /PRESENTATION	8	14.2	7	11.4

Table 5

Academic Year 1996-97

Group A: 39 essays analysed

Group B: 41 essays analysed

Problem area	Group A		Group B	
	No.	%	No.	%
1. PURPOSE	5	12.8	6	14.6
2. CONTENT	5	12.8	7	17
3. ORGANISATION	7	17.9	7	17
4. AUDIENCE	6	15.3	5	12.1
5. GRAMMAR	3	7.6	5	12.1
6. STYLE	6	15.3	6	14.6
7. MECHANICS /PRESENTATION	2	5.1	3	7.3

Table 6



## Academic Year 1998-99

Group A: 60 essays analysed

Group B: 55 essays analysed

Group C: 15 essays analysed

Problem area	Group A		Group B		Group C	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1. PURPOSE	7	11.6	10	18.8	2	13.3
2. CONTENT	6	10	12	21.8	3	20
3. ORGANISATION	7	11.6	11	20	4	26
4. AUDIENCE	5	8.3	7	12.7	4	26
5. GRAMMAR	9	15	12	21.8	3	20
6. STYLE	8	13.3	9	16.3	4	26
7. MECHANICS / PRESENTATION	6	10	8	14.5	2	13.3

Table 7

## VII. Conclusions

It is generally accepted that the student's ability to organise his or her critical comments on a literary text and put them down in a good essay is an essential skill for the study of literature. And, though we might think that it is easy to write, we must accept the fact that it is very difficult to write well. Then, the value of continuous practice in writing cannot be emphasised too greatly. The exercises suggested here intend to help English students write better literary essays.

Literature teachers should not assume that their students know or should know how to write a critical essay, but analyse very carefully their writing problems. It is basic to understand first what their necessities are, in order to plan some remedial work in an efficient way. This writing programme should be in harmony with our syllabus, so that it does not interfere too much with the other literary discussions and activities. We should not think that it is a waste of time to dedicate some lessons to essay writing, since they will improve our students' skills for organising their critical analysis of literary texts. And this will surely abate their fears or frustrations, getting willing students to write about literature.



## Works Cited

- Collie, J., and S. Slater. 1987. *Literature in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heaton, J. B. 1975. *Writing English Language Tests*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.
- Josephson, M. I. 1989. 'Marking' EFL Compositions: A New Method.' *Forum*. 27.3: 28-32.
- Krashen, G. 1984. *Writing Research Theory and Applications*. Oxford: Pergamon Institute of English.
- Peck, John and Marti Coyle. 1999. *The Student's Guide to Writing*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Pirie, D. B. 1985. *How to Write Critical Essays: A Guide for Students of Literature*. London: Methuen.
- Richards, J. C. 1990. 'From Meaning into Words: Writing in a Second or Foreign Language.' *The Language Teaching Matrix*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raimes, Ann. 1984. *Techniques in Teaching Writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Swan, M. 1980. *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.