A REPRESENTATION OF THE FRENCH GCSE WRITING PROCESS IN THE UK

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Abstract: The paper is focused on the importance and complexity that writing involves when students have to prepare for their GCSE exam (General Certificate of Secondary Education) in the UK. The main idea is to create another perspective and demonstrate that it is more important to focus on the pre-writing phases, such as planning, editing and redrafting an essay. For the topic to be properly approached, Jeremy Harmer's theoretical model focused on the writing process will be turned to good account in the sense of following his pieces of advice regarding the way students concentrate their attention on planning, drafting, editing and creating the final draft before actually writing an exam.Similarly, the importance of proofreading will be discussed and in terms of that, Adriana Vizental's theoretical model focused on the proofreading of the final product will be tackled upon.

Keywords: GCSE-General Certificate of Secondary Education, KS-Key Stage, MFL- Modern Foreign Languages, SATS-Standard Assessment Tests, SPaG-Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar

One of the main questions a teacher may come across to is: '*Why do we teach writing*?' We must remember that writing belongs to productive skills and, therefore it represents a fundamental part in engaging in social, professional, community but also civic activities. Writing is considered practical, as we need to write every day to complete some tasks, such as to complete a CV, to write a very important letter or email, or even to fill in a form. Without writing, there is no student education because almost all of the assessments require shorter or longer written answers. Similarly, nowadays, writing is one of the most important forms of communication, especially if we consider teenagers and young adults. Writing an email, texting or even using social media represents a way of keeping in touch with our colleagues or family. Writing is chosen when some feelings cannot be expressed by speaking. At the same time, some students struggle writing essays or any other types of writing, because they lack a sense of organisation, coherence and clarity. These students will be able to communicate their ideas by speaking and it makes them feel very frustrated, as they are aware they cannot write as well.

Together with the speaking skill, it helps the students to communicate their thoughts and feelings to others. Some of the most important roles of teaching writing is the fact that it draws connections to prior learning experiences (for example, the starter of a lesson) and encourages students to engage with the text in order to deepen the understanding of a new material.

First of all, when teaching languages, it is mandatory to take into consideration our students' age, which, of course, represents a major fact in our decision about what to teach and how to teach, especially because people of different ages have different competences and, obviously, needs. In the UK, education is compulsory from the ages of 5-16. At the end of KS (Key stage) 1 and 2 all students have to take Standard Assessment Tests (SATS) in English, Mathematics and Science. At the end of KS4, pupils have to take GCSE

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examinations in a variety of subjects. There are also some vocational qualifications which can be gained at this stage.

At the end of Year 12, the students take AS (Advanced Subsidiary) level examinations and then A (Advanced) level examinations at the end of Year 13. This is the most common form of entry into university and other further education courses.

You can see underneath the structure of key-stages.

Age (years)	Year	Stage	Method of assessment at end of Key Stage
3–4	Nursery	Foundation stage	Teacher observation
4–5	Reception class		
5–6	1	Key Stage 1	Primarily teacher assessment. Tests in English and maths in Year 2, marked by teacher.
6–7	2		
7–8	3	Key Stage 2	An element of teacher assessment. Tests in English, maths and science, usually in Year 6, marked by an external marker.
8–9	4		
9–10	5		
10–11	6		
11–12	7	Key Stage 3	An element of teacher assessment. Tests in English, maths and science, usually in Year 9, marked by an external marker.
12–13	8		
13–14	9		
14–15	10	Key Stage 4	GCSEs; other public examinations/qualifications.
15–16	11		

In this research, I am going to strictly refer to Key Stage 4 and will focus on the crucial importance the GCSE exam has on students. At the end of year 11, the students are being tested on all the four skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. The reason I am concentrating more on the writing skill is that it represents a fascinating area and it is important to see how different it is from what students in Romania have to do in year 11. The marking process is very complex and it helps deliver the specification to students. Compared to the reading and listening skills, writing requires extended time; that might imply learning or memorising some specific grammatical structures that can be used across any topic. While spoken texts are not organized and complete and the vocabulary belongs strictly to the basic word stock, written texts are very well structured and the vocabulary is sophisticated and ambitious; they avoid ellipsis, repetitions, fillers and pauses.

The following topics are studied from year 9 until year 11 (for French, Spanish and German). This suggests that the students must have strong knowledge about all themes, in terms of the listening, reading and speaking skills, as well as the writing skill. This also helps to highlight how structured the themes are, so that students know what to prepare, what to revise and what to expect.

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AQA GCSE Themes

Theme 1	Topic	Sub-topic
Identity and culture	Me, my family and friends	Relationships with family and friends
		Marriage / partnership
	Technology in everyday life	Social media
		Mobile technology
	Free-time activities	Music
		Cinema and TV
		Food and eating out
		Sport
	Customs and festivals in TL countries / communities	

Theme 2	Topic	Sub-topic
Local, national, international and global areas of interest	Home, town, neighbourhood and region	
	Social issues	Charity / voluntary work
		Healthy / unhealthy living
	Global issues	The environment
		Poverty / homelessness
	Travel and tourism	

Theme 3	Topic	Sub-topic
Current and future study and employment	My studies	
	Life at school / college	
	Education post-16	
	Jobs, career choices and ambitions	

In year 10, the students are divided in Foundation or Higher tier. The Foundation tier covers grades 1 to 5, while the Higher tier covers grade 4 to grade 9. It means that during year 10 and year 11, the students will have differentiated work. This also implies that teachers have to spend more time in planning the lessons and create differentiated worksheets depending on the students' needs.

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Old grades	New grades
A*	9
	8
A	7
B	6
	5 STRONG PASS
C	4 STANDARD PASS
D	3
E	2
F	
G	1
U	U

Paper 4: Writing

What's assessed

Communicating effectively in writing for a variety of purposes

How it's assessed

- Written exam: 1 hour (Foundation Tier), 1 hour 15 minutes (Higher Tier)
- 50 marks at Foundation Tier and 60 marks at Higher Tier
- 25% of GCSE

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Questions

Foundation Tier

- Question 1 – message (student produces four sentences in response to a photo) – 8 marks
- Question 2 – short passage (student writes a piece of continuous text in response to four brief bullet points, approximately 40 words in total) – 16 marks
- Question 3 – translation from English into French (minimum 35 words) – 10 marks
- Question 4 – structured writing task (student responds to four compulsory detailed bullet points, producing approximately 90 words in total) – there is a choice from two questions – 16 marks

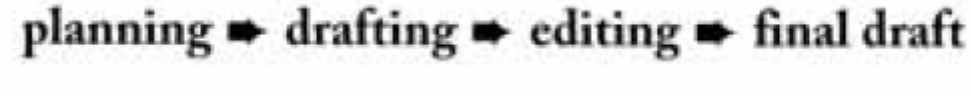
Higher Tier

- Question 1 – structured writing task (student responds to four compulsory detailed bullet points, producing approximately 90 words in total) – there is a choice from two questions – 16 marks
- Question 2 – open-ended writing task (student responds to two compulsory detailed bullet points, producing approximately 150 words in total) – there is a choice from two questions – 32 marks
- Question 3 – translation from English into French (minimum 50 words) – 12 marks

In other words, students are expected to communicate productively for a variety of objectives. Students must produce short texts, which are meaningful and clear, and express opinions and justifications. Students are also expected to manipulate the grammar and language, by using a great variety of vocabulary and grammatical structures but also by using the appropriate style and register.

Compared to speech, which is transitory, writing is permanent. This means that the writer has more time to think, plan and organize his or her ideas. At the same time, he or she can always re-read, re-formulate and even improve the content if not happy. The writer can imagine the reader's reactions but with no immediate feedback.

In *'How to Teach Writing'*, Jeremy Harmer divides the writing process as it follows:



Planning

'Experienced writers plan what they are going to write. Before starting to write or type, they try and decide what is it they are going to say. […]For some writers, this may involve making detailed notes. For others, a few jotted words may be enough. Still others may

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not actually write down any preliminary notes at all since they may do all their planning in their head.'

Drafting

'We can refer to the first version of a piece of writing as a draft. This first 'go' at a text is often done on the assumption that it will be amended later. As the writing process proceeds into editing, a number of drafts may be produced on the way to the final version.'

Editing

'Once writers have produced a draft they then, usually, read through what they have written to see where it works and where it doesn't. Perhaps the order of the information is not clear. Perhaps the way something is written is ambiguous or confusing. They may then move paragraphs around or write a new introduction. […] More skilled writers tend to look at issues of general meaning and overall structure before concentrating on detailed features such as individual words and grammatical accuracy.'

Final version

'Once writers have edited their draft, making the changes they consider to be necessary, they produce their final version. This may look considerably different from both the original plan and the first draft, because things have changed in the editing process.'

However, even if the students are being expected to write paragraphs from year 7, when they have to prepare for the actual GCSE, in year 11, they struggle in particular if they don't follow Harmer's writing process. Most students fail in planning and drafting their essays. Unfortunately, in the UK, during the GCSE exams, the students are not given draft paper. In this case, the question is: '*How are they going to plan everything?/What if they forget to include something?*'. Therefore, the teachers must prepare them more intense, so they can develop strong writing skills and gain time management skills. Obviously, for the students that work on Higher tier, it is much easier to produce a piece of writing almost naturally, effortlessly.

During exams, the issues that students face are related to inaccuracy. This can cause a delay in communication, because the students attempted to write longer sentences than needed. This represents a consequence for the fact that they barely plan what they are intending to write. We advise students to produce shorter and simpler sentences in order for them to communicate a clearer message.

In order to help students organising their ideas, we came up with the AVOCADO idea. In this way, we encourage them to use adjectives, verbs (as varied as possible/different tenses), opinions, connectives, adverbs and most importantly, be original.



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To help students being organized, apart from advising them to follow Harmer's writing process, we advise students to include all bullet points in the instructions. It is always better to attempt to write some ideas rather than omitting any, to tick off the bullet points once the question is answered / included in the paragraphs. For the SEN students, it is harder to identify what they have already answered or included in their essay. Most importantly, students need to identify what time frames they need to include and, at the same time, to double check if the verb formation is accurate. Therefore, before they hand in the written paper, the students must ensure that they have checked the SPaG (spelling, punctuation and grammar)

Similarly, in '*The Practice of English Language Teaching'*, Harmer states:

'-Decide on the information for each paragraph and the order the paragraphs should go in;

-Note down various ideas;

-Select the best ideas for inclusion;

-Write out a rough version;

-Check your writing for unnecessary repetition of words and/or information;

-Check language use (grammar, vocabulary, linkers);

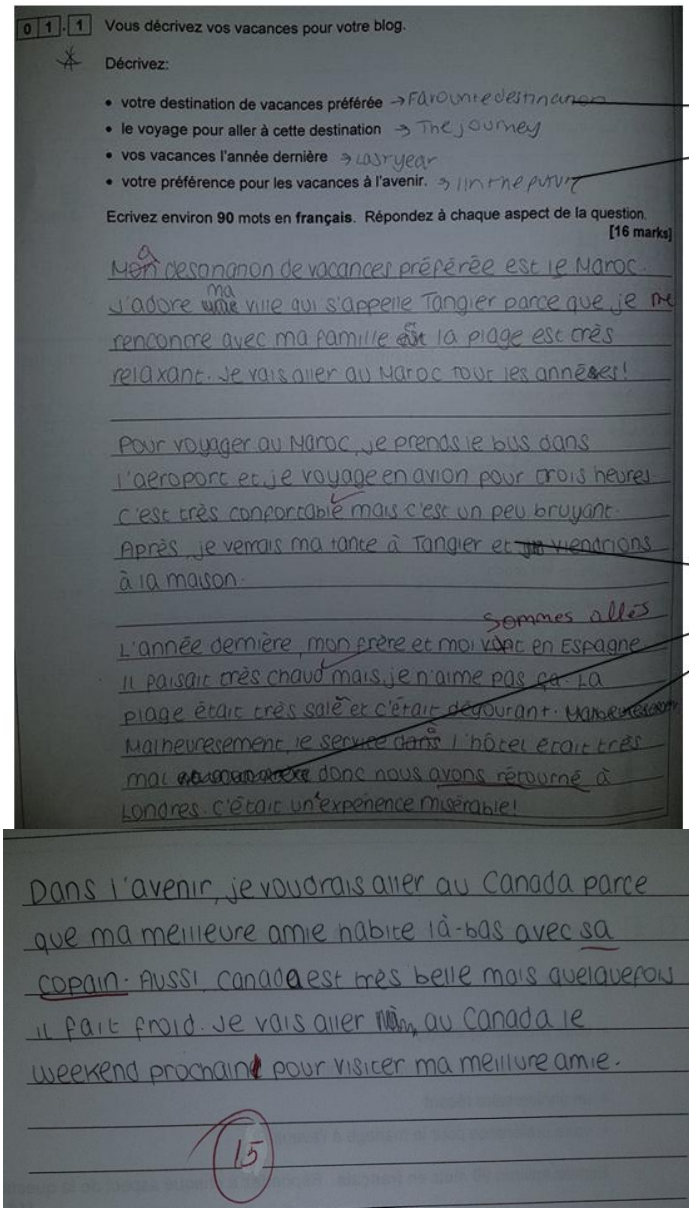
-Check your spelling;

-Check punctuation;

-Write a clean copy of the corrected version.'

Another mistake that students do during their exams is related to proofreading. In '*Strategies of Teaching and Testing English as a Foreign Language'*, Adriana Vizental explains: '*No matter how many readings the essay writer has performed while working on the essay, a proofreading of the final product is compulsory. Even though the final product does not accept many changes and improvements to be made, the student should still check the paper for spelling errors (e.g. omission of letters), mistakes of grammar (e.g. the sequence of tenses), faulty punctuation (e.g. commas, quotations marks), or other mistakes*.' Once, a student who only received fifteen marks out of sixteen asked me what she needs to do in order to improve. The piece of advice I gave her was that she needed to proofread her essay before she hands it in, just to double check any possible errors. See below:

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The notes are written on the exam paper, not on draft paper.

Note the scribbles that are made during the exam; In Romania, this is not acceptable.

Conclusions

To summarise, the production of GCSE written texts represents a complex process and requires a lot of work and specialized skills. This serves to highlight that, for developing elaborate writing skills, as teachers, we must prepare students at a certain level and it is crucial to infer that gradual development is needed. In order for efficient learning to take place, the students must cover the entire range of writing activities. More importantly, they must write frequently and regularly.

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