

How to improve the writing skills at pre-University Education. A case study on the writing process in EFL high schools, Albanian context

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Abstract

The overall aim of this paper is designed to give an analysis on how the learners' writing needs should be encouraged and practiced in Albanian classes, and the ways how writing tasks are organized and evaluated. It is focused on the writing skills that have to be improved in class activities as important elements in teaching writing.

This study relies on qualitative and quantitative data through an experiment, held with Albanian English learners in the Secondary education, Albanian context.

The experiment implemented in this study, outlines the scope of written comprehension and written production, based on Common European Framework of References. It is based on the assessment for measuring the learners' engagement in the overall writing process.

This article reports the factors that affect positively or negatively the acquisition of the written task, the actual situation of learners, the difficulties they face in writing and what improves or prevents English language acquisition in writing skills.

The principal findings of the study are evidences of the facts that extensive practice needs to be applied in classrooms, besides with the development of the students' awareness in different kinds of writing and their grammatical accuracy, in the writing process, Albanian context.

Keywords: writing skills, CEFR, assessment, written production, writing process approach, secondary education, course book.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching the standard language is one of the main tasks of many Educational systems. Spoken language at home is not the written standard language at school¹.

The role of writing in everyday life has changed quite dramatically over recent decades. Beyond new ways of communicating, many people actually do very little writing in day- to day- life, and a great deal of what they write is quite short; brief notes to friends or colleagues, answers on question forms, diary entries, postcards etc. The need for longer, formal written work seems to have lessened over the years, and this is reflected in many classrooms where writing activities are perhaps less often found than those for other skills.

There are good reasons why it is useful to include work on writing in a course:

- Many learners have specific needs for working on writing skills: academic study, examination preparation, Business English etc.
- At most basic level, learners are likely to be involved in taking down notes in lessons.
- Writing involves a different kind of mental process. There is more time to think, to reflect, to repace, to rehearse, to make mistakes and to find alternative and better solutions.
- It can give the teacher a break, quieten down a noisy class, change the mood and pace of the lesson. ²

Teachers become aware that each of the learners' papers has its own history- they learn about the difficulties and successes they have encountered from inception to completion. This awareness has influenced the comments teachers write on the papers that correct and grade; they evaluate not only the product, but also take into consideration the knowledge that writing is an enormously complex activity³.

¹ Bernard Spolsky, *Sociolinguistics* Series editor H. G. Widdowson (Oxford University Press 2010), 74

² Jim Scivener, *Learning teaching* (Second edition Macmillian 2005), 192- 193

³ Richards Jack C. and Nunan D, *Language and Second Language teacher education* (Cambridge University press 2002), 238

II. THE STAGES IN THE WRITING PROCESS AND WRITTEN PRODUCTION STRATEGIES

In the writing task there is either a focus on the product of that writing or on the writing process itself. In the writing process, learners should be given enough time to be prepared in making a draft.

In each class the teacher plays an important role in making the written task as feasible and productive as possible. Written work, is structured in the following stages:

Pre- writing, brainstorming ideas, the aim discussion, composing: outline building, written work, choosing specific details (time, style, structure), style review, error correction, clarity, arguments support.

Learners are clarified since the beginning, on the aim of the written task, as well as the important linguistic elements and the basic lexicon to be used, before starting to write it.

The requirement to produce carefully structured, accurate text is less of a priority in this type of writing *overall written production*⁴

In order to illustrate this and other issues, an experiment with learners is conducted in this study. The learners participating in the experiment belong to B1 + CEFR level. General abilities in this level show that they can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within their field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence. They also can convey information and ideas on abstract as well as concrete topics, check information and ask about or explain problems with reasonable precision. They are able to write personal letters and notes asking for or conveying simple information of immediate relevance.

Written Production strategies are more or less the same as presented in companion volume: planning, compensating, monitoring and repair.⁵

Planning is concerned with mental preparation before writing and it involves thinking consciously about what to write and how to

⁴ Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment . Companion volume with new descriptors, (Council of Europe 2018), 75; www.coe.int/lang-cefr

⁵ Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment . Companion volume with new descriptors (Council of Europe 2018) 80- 82 www.coe.int/lang-cefr

formulate it. Key concepts operationalized in the scale include the following: ► working out how to express the point that needs to be got across, and perhaps rehearsing expression; ► considering how recipients may react to what is said.

So in this level, B1 + of this stage, learners, can work out how to communicate the main point(s) he/she wants to get across, exploiting any resources available and limiting the message to what he/she can recall or find the means to express, considering the effect on the recipient(s) and inviting feedback.

Compensating is a strategy for maintaining writing when one cannot think of the appropriate expression. Key concepts operationalised in the scale include the following: ► deliberately using a 'wrong' word and qualifying it; ► defining the missing concept; ► paraphrasing and the extent to which such paraphrasing is evident.

In level B1+ of this stage, learners, can define the features of something concrete for which he/she can't remember the word and can convey meaning by qualifying a word meaning something similar.

Monitoring and repair covers both the spontaneous realization that the learner has into a problem and the more conscious and perhaps planned process of going back over what has been said or written and checking it for correctness and appropriateness. Key concepts operationalized in the scale include the following: ► changing tact and using a different tactic ► self-correcting slips, errors and 'favourite mistakes; ► the extent to which a communication problem must be evident before repair is undertaken.

All the above mentioned points, are seen in the writing experiment and at the end conclusions are drawn on how much do, learners adhere to these abilities.

The study

III. THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions in the experiment are selected to add insights into the concrete topic by exploring factors that have not been studied extensively and that may contribute to give ideas to learners.

Questions are asked and discussed in advance with learners to provide them with ideas for writing. How well is acquired a writing topic from foreign authors' coursebook, by Albanian learners in Korca region, urban and rural areas?

- Which factors affect positively or negatively this task acquisition?
- Which is the actual situation of learners, the difficulties they face in writing process?
- What improves or prevents English language acquisition in writing skill?

The results of the experiment have to do with the learners engagement in class and specifically on the way how to write an opinion essay. The writing topic is taken from "Blockbuster 3" coursebook, pages 98-99, in Secondary education, Xth grade.

IV. THE EXPERIMENT DEVELOPMENT AND THE PROCEDURES FOLLOWED

The measurement of results

The experiment relies on assessment to measure students' engagement in the writing process, structuring paragraphs, giving opinions, using the proper writing style, expoloring their points of view, at the relevant levels B1+.

The subjects involved in the experiment

Participant in this experimental group are informed about this experiment. They are chosen randomly from 2 different schools in Korca region. The experiment involves 20 learners in Xth grade, urban area, working with foreign authors' coursebook, and 15 learners in Xth grade, rural area. The groups chosen are diverse and heterogeneous, working with the same coursebooks by foreign authors. There is a total of 35 students. They belong to B1 + level, according to CEFR.

The experiment is extended in 2 hours of 45 minutes.

Learners are introduced with a short description of the experiment.

The experiment is conducted during English classes. Learners differencies are extremely important in experience, especially the community context, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours, by including

age, gender, race, level and native language.⁶ All these affect the way they write and acquire knowledge.

V. THE EXPERIMENT IMPLEMENTATION

Aims of the written task

Learners have acquired the necessary knowledge and proficiency in English in order to cope with the task of writing. Learners are clarified and left to understand that they are writing for a specific purpose; they are made aware of why and to whom they are writing. The teacher ensures that the learners follow the detailed plan outlined in the text. It is appointed that the assignment should be completed in class and not assigned as a homework. In this way learners feel more confident in their abilities when completing a writing assignment themselves.

Based on Common European Framework of References, there are 4 basic skills in learning a foreign language: Oral comprehension or listening comprehension, written comprehension, oral production and written production. Experiment is implemented based on written comprehension and written production. The procedure was communicated to teachers and to the directors of the respective schools, chosen for the experiment, two-three weeks ago. There is no need for territory preparation. The experiment tested learners' knowledge of television and the media, comments and ideas they shared; their experience on the use of English vocabulary related to media and internet; as well as their cultural judgement.

The type of writing task is compulsory, contextualized, and based on one or more preliminary texts, as well as listening material, as preparatory stages. Learners read the information provided, in order to structure the paragraphs.⁷

The topic chosen is: *“The Internet as one of the most important means of communication nowadays”*.

This task tests the ability to assess, select information, express opinions, clearly present hypothesis, and beliefs. Learners are guided by the teacher to follow instructions, to write in the correct style, and to have a positive effect on the reader. Observing the examples and

⁶ Judith Wilde, *Guide to what works for english language learners* (Washington DC 2004), 16

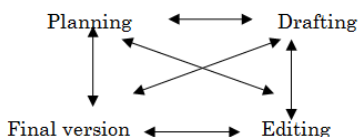
⁷ Virginia Evans, Jenny Dooley, *Blockbuster 3* (Express publishing 2005), 99

the model presented in the text, they see it as a model to base their work on as well as to give them help and ideas.

Data analysis

In this experiment is applied a process approach to writing. This process is focused on the various stages that a piece of writing goes through: planning, editing, re- drafting and finally producing a finished version of their work. A process approach aims to get to the heart of various skills. It is possible that editing and re-drafting are even more important when it is written in a foreign language. Learners are asked to develop the writing task based on the process wheel⁸.

Rural learners in contrast to urban learners, needed more time in the pre-writing phase. Learners belonging to rural area found more difficulties in understanding the task.



The results of the experiment are presented below in the form of a concept mapping, which is useful for generating ideas, and the quality of the content of this map is related to the success of written work of learners⁹. In addition to the comments, through this concept map, are given conclusions and negative and positive points for each class of the urban and rural area.

Evaluation of the Written Task

Tennant used 2 methods to correct student writing: (1) Writing the corrections on a sheet using a red pencil; (2) writing long comments explaining grammatical points and errors, raising questions about the meaning and logical development of the written work. It suggested alternative words and rearranged the text.¹⁰

⁸ Jeremy Harmer, *The practice of English Language Teaching*; 4th edition (Pearson education limited 2007), 326

⁹ S-Y Lin, *The effects of computer-based concept mapping as a prewriting strategy on the persuasive writing of eighth-graders at a middle school in southeastern Idaho 2003*

¹⁰ S.Tennant, *Useful Resources for Editing Academic writing in English*, (English Teaching Forum, Volume 32. No. 2 2001), 27

As Linda B. Nilson states, learners need teacher observation in their individual learning efforts. Writing is one of these individual learning activities, even though it can be very challenging and creative.¹¹

When it comes to proofreading and evaluation, assessing written work is difficult for teachers, especially when there is no criteria on which to base it. This is why the CEFR board is very necessary for written production, which is unfortunately not used by every teacher in Albanian context.

In our case the selected public high school teacher, in urban area, is aware and is based on CEFR assessment, whereas the selected public high school teacher, in rural area, is not based on this assessment, so I was forced to do the assessment by myself, based on the CEFR assessment criteria. Most of the teachers correct the written works orthographical and grammatical errors, without giving assessment with points, so that the learner is not clarified about this fact.

In the picture below, shows the writing task, taken from the foreign authors coursebook, "Blockbuster", which is taught in Secondary education, grade X.

The image shows two pages from a coursebook titled "35 In touch with the world".

Page 98 (Left):

- Skills Work**
- Vocabulary**
- 1** How do you find out what is happening in the world?
 - surf the Internet
 - watch TV
 - listen to the radio
 - read newspapers/magazines
- 2** Which of the following can you see on TV? Read in a paper? Which of them is your favourite?
 - documentaries
 - cartoon strips
 - news
 - soap operas
 - reality shows
 - quiz shows
 - chat shows
 - political discussions
 - business reports
 - comics
 - weather
 - international news
 - horoscopes
 - fashion shows
 - health programmes
- 3** Read the statement below. Do you agree or disagree? Give two reasons/examples. Then read the essay and see if you agree with the writer.

Television is a very useful source of information about the world we live in.

I (don't) think/believe/disagree that television gives us useful information about the world, because... Apart from that...

b) Read again and complete the gaps (1-10). Then listen and check your answers.

Page 99 (Right):

- Linking words**
- 5** Which of the underlined words/phrases in the essay does the writer use to:
 - a) sequence ideas?
 - b) show contrast?
 - c) add a point?
 - d) give an example?
- 6** Replace the linking words/phrases in the essay with the following:
 - to begin with
 - furthermore
 - on the other hand
 - all in all
- 7** Find the topic/supporting sentences in paragraphs 2-4 in the essay.
- 8** Replace the linking words/phrases in the essay with the following:
 - to begin with
 - furthermore
 - on the other hand
 - all in all
- 9** Listen to Mary and Pete talking about the Internet. Who says what? Mark each statement with *I* (for Mary) or *P* (for Pete).
- 10** Read the rubric. Use the viewpoints in Ex. 8 and your own ideas to write your essay. (120-150 words)
- Writing** (an opinion essay)
- 11** Choose one of the topic sentences above and write a paragraph. Use appropriate supporting sentences. Exchange paragraphs with a partner. Correct them.
- 12** Read the rubric. Use the viewpoints in Ex. 8 and your own ideas to write your essay. (120-150 words)
- 13** You've had a class discussion about the following statement. The Internet is one of the most important means of communication nowadays. Write your essay.
- Now Write**
- Introduction (Para 1)** Introduce the topic, state your opinion
- Main Body (Para 2, 3 & 4)** Give reasons (2-3 reasons), opposing viewpoint (2 reasons/examples), Conclusion (Para 5)
- Now Write**
- 14** Write an answer to the question: "What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet?"
- 15** Write an answer to the question: "What are the advantages and disadvantages of the Internet?"

Learning the syntax and vocabulary of a foreign language is a key element in developing learners' writing skills. In fact, learning a

¹¹ B. L. Nilson, *Teaching at its best. A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*, (Third edition Jossey – Bass a Wiley imprint, 2010), 4

second language is as much a process as the writing process is in itself¹².

Written production is one of the basic criteria in foreign language teaching and it is based on the criteria of CEFER. It pays attention to a perfect spelling¹³.

According to CEFR standards, the student at level B1 + should be able to write on a wide range of topics, linking a series of elements in a linear sequence as well as synthesizing and evaluating information and arguments obtained from various sources. The learner in this level, can write a simple text on topics of personal interest, can write personal letters, experiences and impressions¹⁴.

He/ she can write clearly well structured texts, on personal interest topics.; describes an imaginary or real event, describes a book summary, based on his/ her personal opinion, writes letters on his/ her own experiences, by including feelings, can write short reports on a certain situation, by submitting pros and cons arguments¹⁵

The table below, gives the criteria where the written work assessment of level B1+, is based on¹⁶.

Topic The learner can match the written production with the proposed subject, by observing the minimum length specification indicated.	0	0.5	1	1.5	2				
Sociolinguistic skills The learner is able to use the right language register and to adapt the language level with the circumstances of its use.	0	0.5	1	1.5	2				
Ability to express opinions and to present facts. The learner can give impressions, present facts related to the presented situation. He/she is able to give arguments on a certain topic.	0	0.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3		
	0	0.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3		
Coherence and cohesion The learner can link a series of short, simple and distinct	0	0.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4

¹² Al-Buainain Haifa, *Students' Writing errors in ESL: A Case Study* (The 2nd International AUC OXF conference on Language and Linguistics. Egypt 2006), 8

¹³ http://www.lb.refer.org/fle/cours/cours2_CE/evaluation2/cours2_ev213.htm

¹⁴ *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), 2001; 26

¹⁵ *Programi i lëndës anglisht për klasën X* (IKT, Tirane 2008), 7- 8

¹⁶ www.marocagreg.com/forum/sujet-grille-d-evaluation-pour-la-production-ecrite-4499.html

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elements in a discourse which is linked									
Lexical competence and spelling									
The learner has a sufficient vocabulary to speak on current subjects, if necessary using periphrases. Lexis The learner is able to use the right vocabulary and a range of lexical structures.	0	0.5	1	1.5	2				
Mastery of vocabulary The learner can have a good mastery of vocabulary but serious errors still occur when it comes to expressing a more complex thought.	0	0.5	1	1.5	2				
Orthography/ Spelling	0	0.5	1						
Grammatical competence The learner can master the structure of simple and complex sentences.	0	0.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	3.5	4
The ability in the use of phrases.	0	0.5	1	1.5	2				

The total sum of points for written production is 25 points.

Below you can find the written production task results in the 2 experimented classes.

Class X Public High School Urban area- Foreign authors textbook		
Written Production		
Learners	Points	Mark
1	23.5	10
2	7	6
3	21	10
4	17.5	8
5	9.5	7
6	13.5	7
7	19.5	9
8	23	10
9	20	9
10	18.5	9
11	22	10
12	7	6
13	0	4
14	21.5	10
15	12.5	7
16	20.5	9
17	20.5	9
18	19.5	9
19	16	8
20	17.5	8

The above results are expressed in percentage below:

25% of the learners in this class, have reached the highest grade; mark 10; 30 % mark 9 ; 15% mark 8 ; 15% mark 7 ;10% mark 6 dhe 5% have failed.

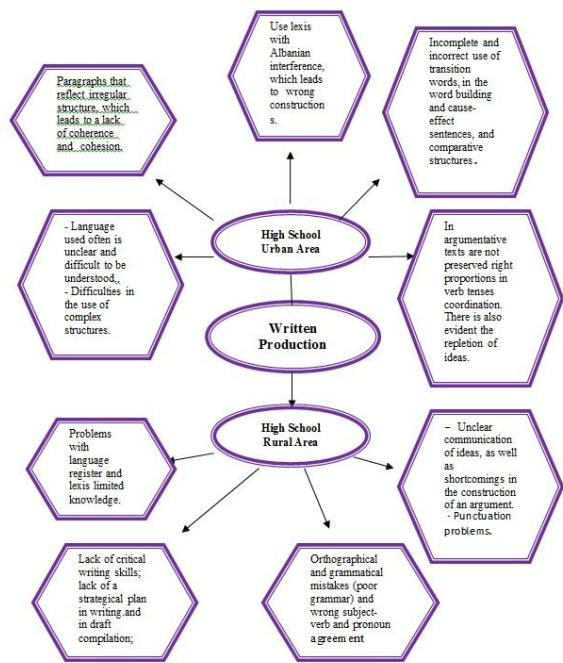
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Class X Public high school, Rural Area- Foreign authors textbook			
		Written Production	
Learners		Points	Marks
1		22	10
2		18,5	9
3		0	4
4		5.5	5
5		16	8
6		2	4
7		13	7
8		9	7
9		18	9
10		12.5	7
11		7.5	6
12		12.2	7
13		7	6
14		10	7
15		17.5	8

This data show that: Only 6,7% of learners have reached maximal assessment.13,3% mark 9, and 13,3% mark 8 ; 33,3 % mark 7 ; 13,3% mark 6 ; 6,7% mark 5 and 13,3% have failed.

The difficulties learners face in Written Production.

In this concept net, are presented the most frequent mistakes, and where learners of both areas face difficulties in.



Other comments

Even though the expectancies from the learners of High School Urban Area were higher, there were deficiencies in their written work. In the High School urban area, the teacher relied on the criteria set by CEFR for evaluating student work, which was not done in the rural area, where the teacher did not specify where students had difficulties and what skills they needed to improve.

Foreign authors' coursebooks, used in both areas; urban and rural, offer the necessary instructions for compiling good essays, according to the presented tips and criteria. In spite of this, there were many problems in the learners' written works, in their understanding of the task, and in the application of the respective steps in the way they perform it. Maybe this is due to the fact that learners have worked with different coursebooks in different grades, which may have been an obstacle in the language assimilation.

Generally Albanian learners in urban and rural areas, lack meta- cognitive skills for knowing the fields where they have insufficient skills and knowing which skills they need to improve. It is the teacher's responsibility to perform this task.

Although in some cases the language used by the learner was simple and not at the proper B1 + level, it was clear. There were times when mistakes did not prevent the comprehension of the written text.

Orthography/ Spelling: The higher percentage of high school learners in urban areas had fewer spelling mistakes, compared to a relatively high percentage of high school learners in rural areas.

In addition to mistakes in written production, it is worth mentioning the positive side of their work. Learners in urban areas, compared to rural ones, were more successful in using grammatical structures from the simplest to the most complex ones. They also adhered to the minimum number of words required in the task.

Generally, the calligraphy in both observed classes is good; in the highest percentage rural area learners' tasks, some mistakes affect directly the understanding of the written work.

Another problem in both classes was the order of progression¹⁷. Many of their sentences did not bring new information, but occasionally there was repetition of previous information.

¹⁷ http://www.lb.refer.org/file/cours/cours2_CE/evaluation2/cours2_ev213.htm

There is a good use of connectors and grammatical and lexical items.

Teacher’s role in the written task

Motivator. One of the principal roles in writing tasks are to motivate the learners, creating the right conditions for the generation of ideas, describing the usefulness of the activity, and encouraging them to make as much effort as possible for maximum benefit. This may require special and prolonged effort on the teachers’ part for longer process- writing sequences¹⁸. This help is offered in the urban area high school learners, at the beginning of the class in the explanation of procedures for the writing topic.

Resource. The teacher needs to tell learners that they are available and be prepared to look at their work as it progresses, offering advice and suggestions in a constructive and tactful way.

Feedback provider. Teachers should respond positively and encouragingly to the content of what the learners have written. When offering correction, teachers will choose what and how much to focus on, based on what students need at this particular stage of their studies and on the task they have undertaken¹⁹.

When correcting the task, teachers besides the evaluation criteria, use correction codes to indicate that students have made mistakes in their written work.²⁰ These have been applied even in our case.

Symbol	Meaning
S	A spelling error
WO	A mistake in word order
G	A grammar mistake
T	Wrong verb tense
C	Concord mistake(e.g. the subject and verb agreement)
Λ	Something has been left out
WW	Wrong word
{}	Something is not necessary
?M	The meaning is unclear
P	A punctuation mistake
F/I	Too formal or informal.

SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There are different ways and methods in explaining writing process from the teachers.

¹⁸ Jeremy Harmer, *The practice of English Language Teaching; 4th edition* (Pearson education limited 2007), 330

¹⁹ Jeremy Harmer, *The practice of English Language Teaching; 4th edition* (Pearson education limited 2007), 331

²⁰ Jeremy Harmer, *The practice of English Language Teaching; 4th edition* (Pearson education limited 2007), 149

Some of the issues that have to be taken into consideration in writing process, and are widely practiced in foreign authors' coursebooks and more concretely in the coursebooks taken in this experiment have to do with: 1) Providing extensive practice in the process of writing; 2) expanding the students' awareness of different kinds of writing: descriptive, narrative, argumentative, creative writing, etc. 3) enabling students to be grammatically accurate while writing on a variety of topics; and 4) focusing on planning, drafting, correcting and redrafting of different genres of writing²¹.

One of the main objectives of written work is the writing of paragraphs. Learners work on combining sentences. They pay special attention to punctuation and spelling. They work on discovering ideas and organizing them into paragraphs, using summarized sentences at the beginning of each paragraph, development points and conclusions²².

Writing needs to be encouraged and practiced in each class, because writing activities are important elements in teaching writing.

Writing is a productive skill. It is one of the most difficult ones, especially for non-native English speakers, because learners are expected to create writing output that demonstrates their ability to organize content, to address properly to the audience, and to demonstrate their linguistic skills. (vocabulary, punctuation, etc.).

Based on the writing work analysis, mistakes are systematic and should be seen by both teachers and students as the key to understanding and solving problems. So it is the teacher's responsibility to adapt, adjust and even develop procedures which help in improving students' level, minimize their mistakes and apply the right methods to the needs and interests of the learners.

The ability to communicate could not be completed without grammar. According to Chomsky, grammar consists of different levels, which are related to each other. Teachers need to be realistic in their expectations²³. Writing is a hard work not only in the native language but also in the second language. So developing the right skills in improving student writing is a hard work. So teachers should rejoice in any kind of progress of the learners, no matter how small it may be.

²¹ Al-Buainain Haifa *Students' Writing errors in ESL: A Case Study* (The 2nd International AUC OXF conference on Language and Linguistics Egypt 2006), 11

²² D. Wilkins *National Syllabuses* (Oxford University Press 1976)

²³ Noam Chomsky *Knowledge of language: its nature, origins and use* (New York 1986)

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