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Essay Titles – Getting the Best out of Students?

Summary

Essay titles are important (de)motivating factors that have an immense influence on the quality of students' writing. The article focuses on two questionnaires aimed at students of English, and at lecturers teaching, writing skills at the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. Both groups of respondents were asked to consider a list of essay titles taken from various authentic sources, deciding whether, to what extent, and under what circumstances they found them suitable. In addition, the respondents were asked to paraphrase each title in their own words to convey their interpretation and understanding of a particular title. The results and conclusions arrived at by means of the questionnaires are presented and compared to my prior expectations, stemming primarily from my teaching experience. The topic is also discussed in the light of what experts on essay writing say about essay titles.

Key words: (un)suitable essay titles, questionnaires, students' and teachers' feedback, suggestions for writing teachers

Naslovi spisov – iskanje najboljšega pri študentih?

Povzetek

Naslovi pisnih sestavkov odločilno vplivajo na motivacijo in končni izdelek, ki ga ustvarijo dijaki in študentje. Članek se osredotoča na dva vprašalnika, namenjena študentom prvega letnika angleškega jezika in lektorjem angleškega jezika na Oddelku za anglistiko in amerikanistiko Filozofske fakultete v Ljubljani. Vprašalnik vsebuje izbor avtentičnih naslovov pisnih sestavkov. Študentje in lektorji, ki so izpolnjevali vprašalnik, so presojali in ocenjevali (ne)ustreznost izbranih naslovov. Poleg tega so vsak naslov po svoje preubesedili, s čimer so razkrili in preverili svoje razumevanje določenega naslova. V članku so predstavljeni rezultati in zaključki, ki temeljijo na obdelavi izpolnjenih vprašalnikov. Nekateri prvotne domneve potrjujejo, drugi ovržejo, vsi pa prinašajo snov za razmislek. Članek obravnava temo tudi v luči spoznanj, do katerih so prišli nekateri strokovnjaki za pisni sestavek.

Ključne besede: (ne)ustrezni naslovi spisov, vprašalniki, odziv učiteljev in študentov, predlogi za učitelje pisanja

Essay Titles – Getting the Best out of Students?

1. Introduction

Essay titles are important (de)motivating factors that have an immense influence on the quality of students' writing. Good essay titles address students directly, making them want to say something of significance about a particular topic, and make them want to do it well. If, on the other hand, students are asked to write about a topic remote from their experience or too demanding for them to discuss persuasively, they are unlikely to create an interesting and fresh paper sparking with original insights. The same is true when the wording of an essay title is so difficult that the title itself becomes an insoluble reading comprehension task.

Over the years of teaching I have read hundreds of average, dull, irrelevant essays, but also outstanding ones. Especially those occasions on which a seemingly average student suddenly produced a paper that was remarkably better than anything that they had written before made me think about the impact of essay titles more and more. Sharing my experience with other teachers of writing, I have become familiar with some essay titles which my colleagues have thought of as well as with essay titles that have been assigned as part of the national school-leaving exam, referred to as the *Matura* Exam in Slovenia, and comparable to A-levels in Great Britain.

To verify my observation that students are frequently expected to wrestle with questionable essay titles, I decided to design two questionnaires, using primarily my teaching experience but also leaning on the ideas presented in *The St. Martin's Guide to Teaching Writing* by Robert Connors and Cheryl Glenn (1995, 53–76). The questionnaires were aimed at first-year students of English in Ljubljana and Klagenfurt/Celovec, and at lecturers teaching, among other things, writing skills at the Department of English at the Faculty of Arts in Ljubljana. The respondents were asked to consider a list of essay titles which students had either been assigned as part of their English studies, or at the *Matura* Exam. Regardless of whether they had been intended as home assignments or exam papers, the students generally did not use (and were not expected to use) any sources beyond the knowledge of topics acquired during their English and other classes, their general knowledge and experience.

2. Questionnaires

2.1 Structure

Apart from putting down how they felt about each title by grading it, the students were also asked to paraphrase the titles in their own words to convey their interpretation and understanding of a particular title. In addition, they were encouraged to list some of the favourite essay titles which they had been, or would like to be, assigned in future. The teachers, meanwhile, noted

some of the titles which had proved to be popular with students, and which had, consequently, led to good results. Finally, both the students and the teachers were asked some other, more general questions concerning the issue, such as how many essay titles students should be given when taking an exam.

1. A list of essay titles					
• Grade them	YES	2	3	4	5
	NO				
• Paraphrase them	(Understanding, interpretation)				
• Use adjectives to assess them.					
2. List some of the essay titles you like(ed).					
3. Some general questions on essay titles, such as,					
Do you prefer to be assigned broad topics or specific titles?					
How many essay titles would they like to be given when taking an exam?					
4. The respondent's comment.					

Chart 1: Structure of the questionnaire aimed at students

Note: The questionnaire aimed at teachers basically followed the same pattern, which was adjusted to their role as teachers of writing.

2.2 The selection of titles

The selection of titles is primarily based on my teaching experience, and my personal perception of and response to any particular essay title. In designing the questionnaires, I attempted to include essay titles ranging from (what I felt were) absolutely unacceptable or at least highly questionable to (more) appropriate essay titles. Since students of English as well as those taking the *Matura* Exam are expected to master more complex modes of discourse, all the titles included require them to write the more abstract discursive essays, demanding higher-level generalisations or deductions and effective use of argumentative skills.

Examples of questionable essay titles are those that cover topics remote from students' experience, and/or topics that are too demanding, as well as titles that lead to too-short answers, and/or are too difficult to understand. Apart from "[encouraging] a brief, affirmative response" (Connors and Glenn 1995, 57), an essay title such as "The older we get the more difficult it is to make friends" (June 2000, *Matura* Exam), for example, does not enable students to draw

on their experience when supporting their point(s). How can we then expect such a title to engage young writers in the task to such an extent that they will find something (exciting) to say? (Cf. Cushing Weigle 2002, 91)

A Historical Overview of Theories of Written Composition in Slovenia (1850 – 2000) by Milena Blažić reveals an amazing fact, namely, that Slovene theorists dealing with written composition were aware, as early as 1906, of the need to assign essay titles which were close to students' personal experience and which they found interesting (Blažić 2002, 20–23)! And yet, as the author of the book points out, essay topics assigned at present, nearly a hundred years later, all too frequently address and reflect the teachers' rather than students' experience and perception of the world (Blažić 2002, 97). No wonder it is difficult for young writers to get "the writer's sense of ownership of [their] writing" that is occurs in "an effective environment for teaching writing". Only when students can write about topics encouraging them "to explore their own experiences and opinions" can such an environment be created (Bright 1995, 12).

An example of an essay title which seems much too complex for a young adult in his or her late teens or early twenties is "All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy" (June 2001, *Matura* Exam). As Connors and Glenn (1995, 57) point out, teachers should "keep in mind that [their] students do not usually have access to as wide a world of opinion, fact, or experience as [teachers] do". A teacher who expects students to write a good piece of writing fitting the title quoted above must have forgotten to keep this in mind.

Essay titles which are at least as disputable are those that are difficult to understand because of the way they are formulated: they either contain a vocabulary item which may be unfamiliar to students or they express a complex idea in a complicated, often highly metaphorical, way. This is less problematic if the teacher discusses the title briefly in class before students start writing, explaining the item and/or the meaning of the title to them. However, under the (external) examination conditions typical of the *Matura* Exam this is impossible. Of course, if the majority of candidates misunderstand a title, the external examiners will take this into account and also pass essays that, in fact, do not fit the given title. But the need to take such a measure actually proves the inappropriateness of a particular title.

The title "The hardest thing in life is to know which bridge to cross and which to burn" (June 1996, *Matura* Exam) is included in the questionnaires to illustrate the problem discussed above. Apart from being very demanding to discuss, the title is likely to cause trouble because of the two "bridge" metaphors. Students who are familiar with the idiomatic expressions "to cross that bridge when you come to it" and "to burn your boats / bridges" will probably get confused when confronted with the title. I did. Doing my best to forget the two idioms and attempting a "free" interpretation of the title, did not help me much either. The either-or fallacy which I sense in the title made it impossible for me to come up with a suitable paraphrase (interpretation) of the title that would fit both of its parts (the crossing and the burning of bridges) well enough.

If a teacher gets as bewildered by an ambiguous essay title, is it wise, let alone fair, to expect students to cope with it?

Obviously, students should be given essay topics which they are mature enough to discuss, which they are interested in and which they can relate to (Cf. Koseski 2003, 112; Cushing Weigle 2002, 91), that is, essay titles “[falling] within [their] own range of experience” (Connors and Glenn 1995, 58) Teachers should therefore be on the lookout for topics which student writers are familiar with and, therefore, knowledgeable about. There are areas of human experience which every (young) person is confronted with at least occasionally, such as lying.

To check my assumption that the topic would be popular among students because young people are generally sensitive to the moral dilemma of when (if ever) lying is preferable to telling the truth, I included two essay titles on lying in the questionnaires: “We should always tell the truth and nothing but the truth” (September 1996 and March 1997, *Matura* Exam) and “White lies are a necessary evil” (2000/01, Home Assignment for first-year students of English). I chose two titles on lying – which one and the same essay could fit equally well – to find out whether the way in which a particular aspect of a particular topic is worded influences students’ perception of the title.

Apart from being “easy”, are the two titles on lying “significant” and even “exciting” as well? I thought they were. Do students’ answers in the questionnaire confirm this and my other presumptions?

2.3 Presentation and interpretation of some of the answers

This part of my research includes answers given by 72 first-year students of English at University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts, 22 first-year students of English at University of Klagenfurt/Celovec, and 5 lecturers of English at University of Ljubljana, Faculty of Arts.

Chart 2, printed below, shows that the title “The older we get the more difficult it is to make friends” was much more popular than I had expected. Nearly a half of University-of-Ljubljana and more than a half of University-of-Klagenfurt/Celovec students liked it, whereas all the teachers thought it was, in fact, not suitable for the students’ age. One teacher did say ‘yes’ but gave it the lowest “pass grade” (2), describing it as “too abstract for youngsters”.

Chart 3 shows that University-of-Ljubljana students’ assessment of the essay title “All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy” confirms my firm belief that the title is not suitable for young adults. I was therefore quite surprised that 3 out of five teachers did not find it problematic, although they all stated that they would assign it only after a classroom discussion. Interestingly enough, the title was also quite popular among students who study English at University of Klagenfurt/Celovec: nearly a half of them did not mind it.

Before jumping to conclusions, though, it needs to be pointed out that only 9% of Klagenfurt students provided more or less accurate paraphrases of the complex title. Most of them used the title as a vehicle to bring up other aspects concerning democracy, which led to “paraphrases” such as “Does democracy really exist?” and “Too much democracy leads to anarchy”. Such answers can be seen as fairly reliable evidence that they would very likely create essays that did not fit the title if asked to write them. This suggests that the final decision whether a particular title is suitable for students should be based on teachers’ professional consideration, and not on students’ arbitrary taste.

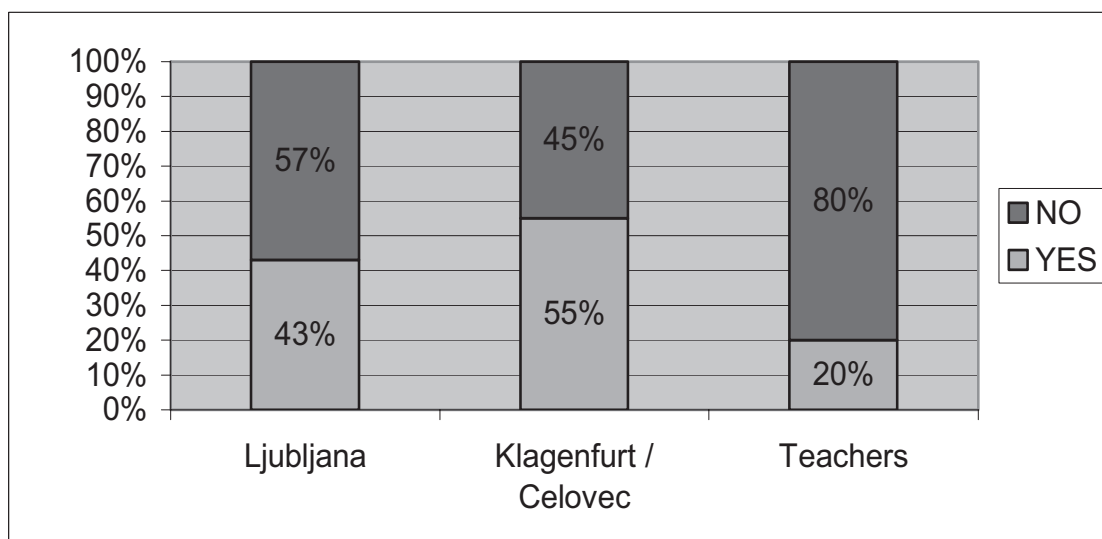


Chart 2: *The older we get the more difficult it is to make friends.*

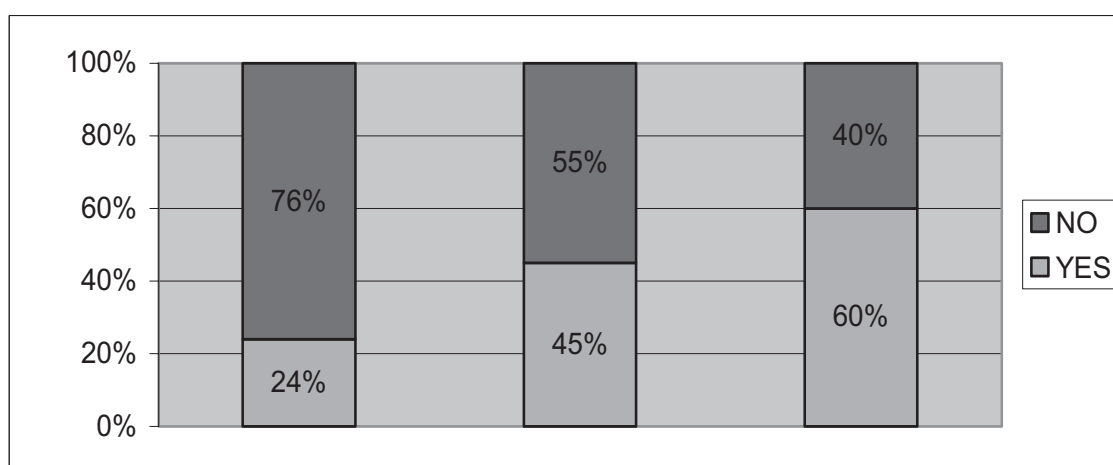


Chart 3: *All the ills of democracy can be cured by more democracy.*

The title “The hardest thing in life is to know which bridge to cross and which to burn” was, again, surprisingly popular, especially in Klagenfurt/Celovec. Most students put down vague paraphrases such as “An essay on making decisions” and “It is very difficult to choose the right path in life”.

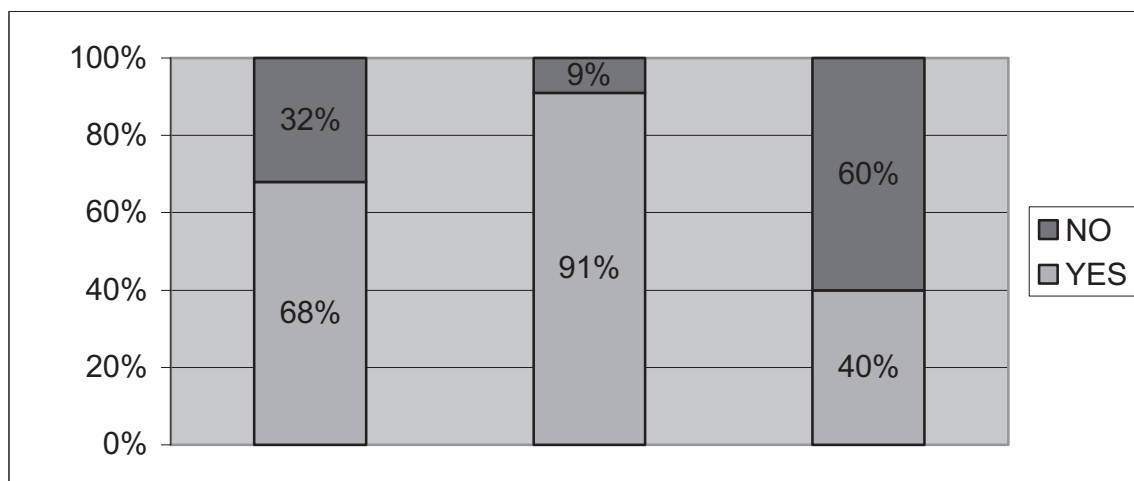


Chart 4: *The hardest thing in life is to know which bridge to cross and which to burn.*

Interestingly enough, the answers given by students in Klagenfurt/Celovec confirm my assumption that the title “We should always tell the truth and nothing but the truth” would be popular, whereas students in Ljubljana were not quite as enthusiastic about it as I had expected. Most teachers felt it was a good title.

Since the title on lying quoted above seems similar to “White lies are a necessary evil,” I had presumed that students would feel similarly about both of them. This appears to be true of students in Ljubljana at first sight, although it needs to be pointed out that only 12 (17%) out of 72 students disliked both titles. As much as 27% of students in Klagenfurt/Celovec prefer the former title to the latter. Out of 44% percent of students who did not like the second title, only 9% (2 students) dislike the title “We should only tell the truth and nothing but the truth”, too. A possible explanation could be that the second essay title includes more difficult vocabulary items (two idiomatic expressions); in addition, students’ personal opinion may have interfered with their assessment of the title, which can be inferred from some paraphrases such as “White lies are still lies”, and the adjectives assessing the title by moral standards, such as “inappropriate” and “false”.

All in all, 83% of students in Ljubljana and 91% of students in Klagenfurt/Celovec find at least one of the essay titles on lying acceptable, which, at the end of the day, confirms my thesis that lying is obviously a suitable topic for the majority of young adults.

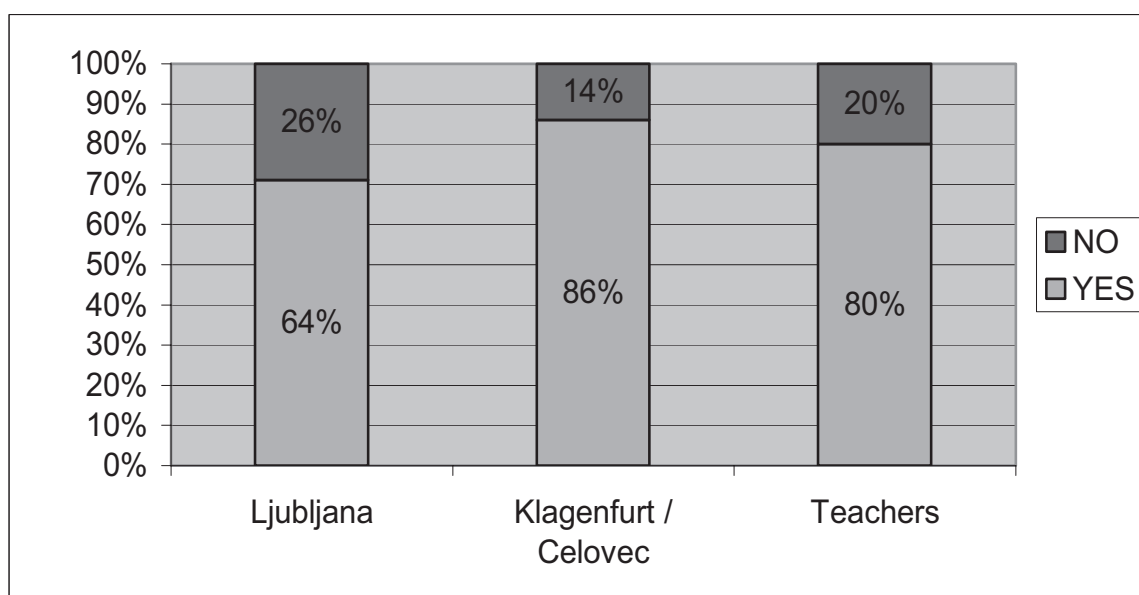


Chart 5: *We should always tell the truth and nothing but the truth.*

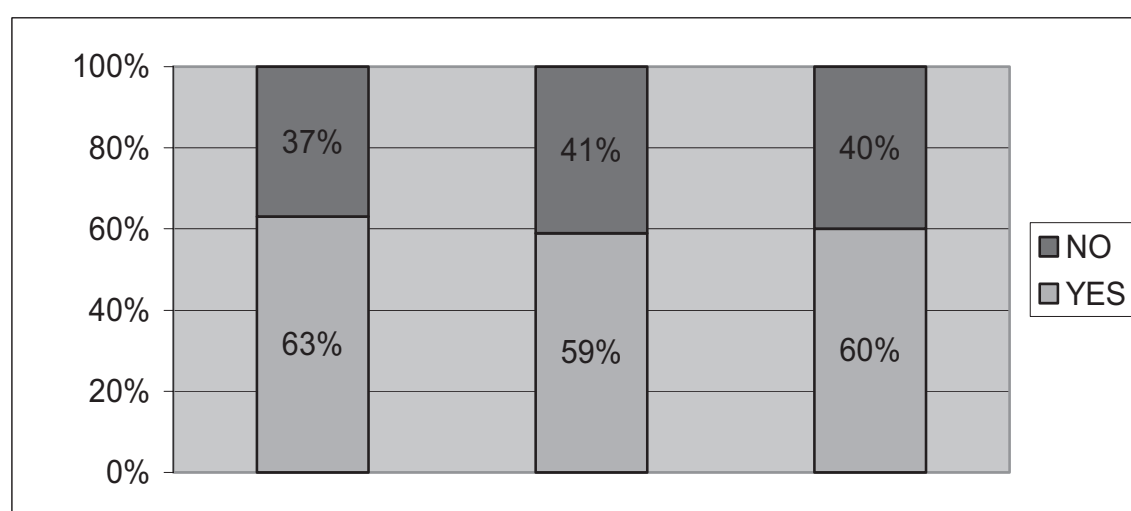


Chart 6: *White lies are a necessary evil.*

Apart from providing valuable insight into the kind of essay titles students (dis)like, the questionnaires enabled me to make some other interesting and useful observations. Some students' paraphrases reveal unique and creative interpretations of some of the essay titles, such as "Bridges tend to collapse" for "The hardest thing in life is to know which bridge to cross and which to burn". When students feel strongly about a (moral) issue, they want to express their opinion on it, which some of them did by choosing an adjective revealing their stance, and/or by thinking of "paraphrases" which express their view of the matter. Of course, it is still possible to assume that such a "paraphrase" could be used as the thesis of an essay that could fit the title perfectly, but it could also mislead the student into digressing. In addition, some students tend to take the keyword from the title, and then think of a topic related to it but irrelevant to the specific aspect a particular title addresses.

Generally, the students' answers should serve as a warning to teachers of writing that their assumptions about what a good essay title is are not necessarily equivalent to what their students like writing about. Therefore, they should be constantly in touch with their students' interests and needs. Finally, the old saying that tastes differ seems to be as true as ever. It therefore seems a good idea to offer students a wide range of diverse topics whenever there is no good reason to do otherwise.

3. Suggestions for writing teachers: what can be done?

Most students both in Ljubljana (81%) and Klagenfurt/Celovec (91%) claim that they would perform better if they could write an essay on a topic of their own choice. This is not surprising. Connors and Glenn (1995, 53) point out: "When students determine all the elements in their assignments, they can feel more emotionally invested in their writing than they do when they are responding to a teacher's specifications." But when asked whether they preferred broad topics to specific ones, 47% of Ljubljana students opted for the former and only 33% for the latter. Admittedly, the majority of students in Klagenfurt/Celovec chose broad topics (68%), but this still means as much as 23% less than 91% (see Charts 7 and 8). The results appear to suggest that students generally feel better if they are guided by a specific title. Some of them offered an explanation for this, saying that it took them too much time to think of what to write about, and that they found it more difficult to stick to the point if the topic was too general. At first, it sounds great that one can write an essay on anything but if students get a chance to do so (and I have tried this out a couple of times), they tend to be lost, finally choosing the usual stock topics that they have been assigned by a teacher at some point during their education. The resulting essays are generally rather dull, displaying predictable structure and arguments.

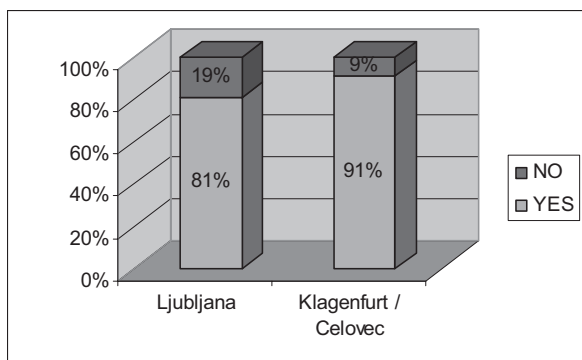


Chart 7: A topic of students' own choice?

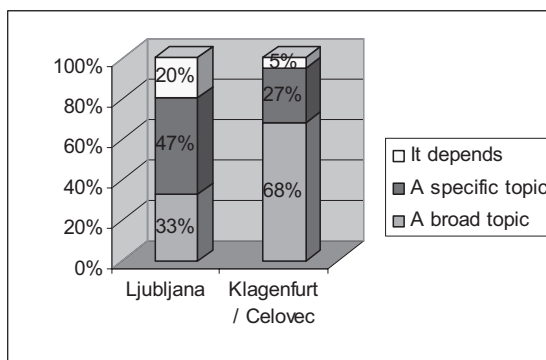


Chart 8: Specific or broad?

Judging by the list of more popular titles suggested by students, they enjoy writing about personal matters (topics such as 'friendship', 'the generation gap' and 'childhood'), which makes it possible for them to draw on their own experience to make (a) powerful and well-supported point(s). It must not be forgotten, however, that some students may be frightened or put off by what they perceive to be too personal an essay title (Cf. Connors and Glenn 1995, 57; Cushing Weigle 2002; 92).

Although some studies have shown that allowing writers to choose among several tasks/titles can have disadvantages since “writers do not always make the best choice and [...] choosing among tasks takes up time that could be spent writing”, there are also several arguments in favour of giving students a choice of titles, one of the most important being that “writers may choose to write on the task that they feel they know most about or have the most interest in, [which] may reduce anxiety and allow writers to perform their best” (Cushing Weigle 2002, 103). The answers given by student respondents in the questionnaire show that the majority (63% in Ljubljana and 59% in Celovec) would like to have three titles on various topics to choose from. Those who offered an explanation said that if they are given more titles they have difficulty in deciding which one to choose whereas fewer titles can mean they are given topics or a topic which they are not interested in or which they do not know enough about. Two out of five teachers agree with the students who think that they should be given three titles.

Even when provided with a choice of a few titles, some student writers may realise that none of the topics suits them. In such cases Peter Elbow recommends to struggling writers: “Work out alternative assignments with your teacher so that it will be easier and more natural to give your writing to others” (Elbow 1981, 229). He suggests that the new task may be quite close to the original assignment, it may represent a significant variation, or even turn out to be something completely different. A writing teacher should be flexible enough to let this happen when appropriate. Ideally, he or she will even encourage students to negotiate the topic of their writing. Admittedly, this kind of negotiation has its limitations in any school context where writing needs to be tested at some point. Personally, I think that it is very suitable for home assignments, whereas I would be more tentative about using it in an exam situation where it could be abused.

To reduce the need of looking for alternative topics/titles, writing teachers can encourage students to co-operate in the choice of topics although, as the students’ answers suggest, it is simply impossible to please everybody. In addition, it is in the nature of things that we sometimes have to produce texts on topics which we are not interested in or which we know little about. Why not occasionally at school as well?

Regardless of how many essay titles students are given or whether they are allowed to change the title of their composition (slightly), it remains any writing teacher’s (let alone examiner’s) duty to word their titles carefully and clearly. Difficult vocabulary items, complicated metaphors and profound statements about deeper meanings of life uttered by important people and taken from various dictionaries of quotations (the root of much evil in the area of essay titles, I regret to say) should be avoided.

The least those teachers who cannot help assigning such titles should do is to discuss them briefly with their students prior to writing, in order to help them clarify the writing assignment. Four out of five teachers who filled in the questionnaire never do that, the main reason being, as they say, that they do not want to interfere with their students’ interpretation of the title. But apart from offering

students essential assistance in understanding a complex title, class discussion enables students to “discover and create additional knowledge for writing. The time for discussion also provides teachers with opportunities to shape and extend student ideas, giving students additional resources to use in their writing” (Grabe and Kaplan 1996, 270–71; see also Clark 2003, 538–9).

Sometimes students will be confronted by complex titles when the choice is beyond their teacher’s influence as in the case of any external examination. Therefore, they should be well-equipped to cope with them. Their writing teacher can help them by teaching them to paraphrase difficult essay titles to check their understanding and, possibly, to work out the title’s meaning. If this proves to be an extremely difficult or even impossible task, students should change their minds and choose another topic (which is hopefully there – on the question sheet).

All this takes time. A lot of time will be spent on choosing the topic before moving on to gathering ideas, organising them in some way, possibly making an outline, and then writing the first draft. In the 45 minutes which secondary school students in Slovenia are mostly given to write a full-length argumentative essay (surely more demanding and time-consuming than, say, a narration) under exam conditions, one can hardly expect them to embark on a second or even a third draft. If we want them to do so, they should be given much more time. If they are not given more time, the writing teachers’/examiner’s responsibility to choose student-friendly essay titles becomes even more a matter of pressing concern (cf. Koseski 2003, 87).

Finally, a writing task becomes much more appealing when it is not restricted to a school situation where it can easily be perceived as practised for its own sake by (too) many students. Lending students’ writing a tangible purpose by, for example, encouraging them to have it published in a students’ paper, increases young writers’ motivation considerably. As Hyland (2002, 81) puts it: “[...] writing tasks should be as authentic as possible to provide students with the options they need to accomplish real rhetorical purposes in target contexts” (cf. Clark and Ivanič 1997, 125; Connors and Glenn 1995, 57; Grabe and Kaplan 1996, 254).

4. Conclusion

The respondents’ feedback received from the questionnaires confirms my assumptions about what students and teachers feel are good essay titles to some extent only. However, the unexpected results seemingly rejecting my assessment of a(n) (un)suitability of a particular title, often turn out to be less out of tune with my view on closer examination. As we have seen, the majority of students may find a fresh title such as “The hardest thing in life is to know which bridge to cross and which to burn” quite appealing but, judging by many vague and also inaccurate paraphrases, this does not necessarily mean that they are up to writing a good piece of writing fitting the title. Of course, further research beyond the scope of this paper would be essential to arrive at a more reliable conclusion while the responses given in the questionnaires and discussed in the article should mainly give food for thought to writing teachers, hopefully making them assign essay titles more carefully.

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