

# WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE SCHOOL/UNIVERSITY ESSAY AND RELATED TERMS IN ENGLISH AND LATVIAN?

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MONTA FARNESTE

University of Latvia, Latvia

**Abstract.** In the constantly changing world, teachers and researchers of academic writing of English as a foreign language face the problem of differences in writing in the target language and the students' first language. They need not only to teach, but also to report on the contrastive research of writing in local and international conferences. Researchers encounter the problem of seemingly similar terms having a different meaning in the two languages. Thus, the paper aims at investigating the correspondence between the terms *school/university essay* writing in English (a foreign language) and their counterparts in Latvian (the native language) as used in theoretical literature. The analysis of the sources published in Latvia since the 1930s until today reveals that there is a tendency to introduce new terms, change the meanings of the existing ones and specify the conventions of essay organization under the influence of the English academic writing traditions. However, these new terms are applied somewhat differently, and the terms as such may vary depending on the personal views of the authors.

**Key words:** contrastive analysis, school/university essay writing in EFL and Latvian, genre, rhetorical patterns

## INTRODUCTION

The study was prompted by the fact that teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) dealing with academic writing not only need to explain differences in essay writing traditions between the first (L1, i.e. Latvian) and the target language (English), but also to use appropriate terms when publishing their research papers on contrastive analysis in both languages.

One of the problems faced concerns the terms the meanings of which differ in the two languages. When reading sources on English essay writing, we can encounter two terms – the *composition* and the *essay*, while in Latvian three terms – *sacerējums*, *domraksts* and *eseja* – are used. In some Latvian sources, when discussing narrative, descriptive and expository essays, two different terms *sacerējums* and *domraksts* have been used with almost a similar meaning (Cf.: Pauliņš, 1978 and Lāce, 2011).

In order to find out the difference between these terms, the following research questions were posed:

1. What is the meaning of the terms *composition* and *essay* in English?

2. What is the meaning of the terms *sacerējums*, *domraksts* and *eseja* in Latvian?
3. How do the terms correspond to each other?

It should be noted that the term *essay* (or *eseja* in Latvian) may refer to ‘a short piece of literature’ (Dictionary of English Language and Culture, 1992). In English, it may also refer to non-fiction writing, such as a newspaper or magazine essay, a film essay, a photographic essay and others; however, the present paper will deal only with the structured essay used to develop text organization skills in lower-level courses designed for EFL students. Because of the limited scope of this paper, we will not discuss essay writing in Latvian as a foreign language either.

Before discussing the terms in both languages, it is expedient to define the difference between a *genre* and a *rhetorical pattern*.

## THE NOTION OF GENRE AND RHETORICAL PATTERN

Knowledge about a genre is important for pedagogical purposes (Kay and Dudley-Evans, 1998: 308, Andrews, 2010: 160-162). Research on academic essay writing demonstrates that EFL students need to master the use of different schematic structures to meet the reader’s expectations (e.g. Kusel, 1992: 460; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996: 167; Paltridge, 2006: 43; Uysal, 2008: 197; Bacha, 2010: 229), because an unexpected structure of a text may slow down decoding of the intended message (Hoey, 2001: 168). This means that students need to master certain conventions for structuring written texts. The academic essay is mentioned among the commonly employed genres in different disciplines (see, e.g. Paltridge, 2004: 87; Gillett, Hammond and Martala, 2009: 8).

A genre is defined as belonging to ‘a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes [...] recognized by the expert members of the present discourse community’ (Swales, 1990: 58). Some linguists (e.g. Grabe, 2002) view *narrative* and *exposition* as two different macro-genres, while others (e.g. Berkenkotter, 2002: 287) consider that some texts may contain both narrative and exposition (viewed, then, not as a genre but as text elements). Thus, there are linguists who suggest distinguishing between *genres* and *text types* or *rhetorical patterns* (e.g. Paltridge, 1996; 2002; Lee, 2001).

The four rhetorical patterns – narration, description, exposition and argumentation – are known since Aristotle’s time. However, depending on personal views, there is a tendency to introduce other classifications of text types or patterns. For example, Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) consider that there are more than four text types: descriptive, narrative, argumentative, scientific, didactic, literary and poetic. This distinction seems to overlap as literary texts may contain elements of narratives, the same may refer to scientific texts which

may contain even several text types from the list, e.g. description, argumentation as well as narration. Grabe and Kaplan (1996: 352), in their turn, call definition, description, classification, comparison and contrast, problem and solution, cause and effect, analysis and synthesis *patterns of organization*. Paltridge (2002: 83-85) points out such text types as ‘description, compare and contrast, problem-solution, argument, discussion and cause and effect’. However, the proposed term ‘discussion’ when referring to writing a research report seems to be too general, as the writer may compare and/or contrast different views as well as provide arguments to support his/her ideas. Moreover, he/she can discuss causes and effects as well as problems and their solutions.

The choice of a genre is determined by the purpose of communication, the intended audience and an activity type (Lee, 2001) and a social context (Johns, 2002: 3). Different genres may employ elements from one rhetorical pattern (e.g. Paltridge, 1996, 2002; Hoey, 2001). For example, we can find elements from the problem-solution pattern (Problem, Solution, Evaluation and/or Conclusions) not only in the academic essay, but also in the research report (Flowerdew, 2000) and the letter of complaint, whereas the conventions for structuring these genres (i.e. the choice of moves) differ. Thus, when writing academic essays, students are expected to follow *moves* typical of this genre (see, e.g. Afful, 2006; Aviles, 2007; Farneste, 2012). Students need to know the basic characteristics of a particular genre in contrast to other genres, i.e. the type of information and its sequence in the introduction, body and conclusion in a particular communicative situation.

## THE COMPOSITION AND THE ESSAY

Narrowing the focus, it seems important to explain the difference between the meaning of the terms *composition* and *essay* in English and their application.

*Composition* is defined as ‘a piece of written work produced to practise the skills and techniques of writing or to demonstrate a person’s skills as a writer (Richards and Schmidt, 2010: 106). This term may refer to any piece of text which is composed by a student, but it may also be restricted to a text, demonstrating a student’s ability to apply grammar rules (Biaggini, 1962: 188), and thus a composition is used to develop his/her style (Hayakawa, ed., 1987: 105). School compositions may be classified into *controlled* and *free* (i.e. not guided) (Richards and Schmidt, 2010: 107). At the tertiary level, the term may also be used in such collocations as ‘a composition studies’ or ‘a freshman composition program’ (e.g. Graves, 1993), aiming at the development of writing skills in general. In regard to mastering a particular genre, the term *essay* (O’Rourke, Calvo, and McNamara, 2011) or *academic essay* (Paltridge, 2004) is employed.

The *essay*, however, may refer not only to writing done ‘as part of a course of study’, but also ‘for publication’ (ibid.: 203). The essay as a representative of non-fiction writing is expected to discuss the topic ‘in depth’ by demonstrating

the writer's viewpoint (Gillett, Hammond and Martala, 2009: 8). They may be classified into *school essays*, *university essays* (Lee, 2001; Andrews, 2010) and *scholarly essays* (Bazerman, 1989: 259; Kinginger, 2002: 240-241). The last type can refer either to articles (e.g. by Rex et al., 2005; Johns, 2011) or book-length research essays aiming at theory building (Varghese and Abraham, 2004). The school essay differs from the university essay in the level of formality and the content. While school essays may be personal, university essays are expected to be based on an objective and critical analysis of what has been read. While at higher levels (e.g. academic writing courses for native speakers in the USA) emphasis is laid on critical thinking and 'rhetorically effective' writing, 'deductively structured' five-paragraph essay dominates to help NNSs (non-native speakers) master 'native patterns' or 'native norms' in writing (see, e.g. Atkinson and Ramanathan, 1995: 563).

A structured essay is also employed in EFL classes of writing in Latvia to assess students' ability to express and link their ideas logically. In these classes students are trained to see that the choice of the rhetorical pattern is determined by the purpose of communication. They write narrative, descriptive, expository (e.g. definition, classification, comparison/contrast, cause/effect) and argumentative (also persuasive, problem-solution, opinion) essays (Farneste, 2012: 36-37). The latter two types are used at the upper secondary and tertiary level because they are more cognitively demanding. This approach to the classification of essays is convenient for pedagogical purposes, as EFL students become aware of the basic rhetorical patterns and their varieties that can be employed in different genres, such as letters, research papers and others.

In Latvia, essays are written in English to assess EFL student performance not only at the secondary level, but also included in some tertiary level study programmes. Essay writing in English is also included in several language courses, offered as additional language training to those who need to prepare for language tests (e.g. the Test of English as a Foreign Language, the First Certificate in English examination).

### SACERĒJUMS, DOMRAKSTS AND ESEJA

In contrast to the widespread essay writing in English, essay writing in Latvian is mainly taught at school; consequently, theoretical sources focus on school level writing exclusively. In these theories three terms (*sacerējums*, *domraksts* and *eseja*) dominate; however, in contrast to the clear distinction between the English terms, their meaning may differ depending on the personal interpretation of the author and the time of publication. As the development of essay writing theories in Latvia has been complex and even recursive (see Appendix 1), it seems important to describe it in a more detailed way.

In the 1930s, *domraksts* (literally 'putting down of thoughts') referred to texts in which students were expected to express their viewpoint. It was contrasted

to retelling of a text or a mere description of an event (Anševics, 1932: 7-9). According to Skuja, *domraksts* was not a scholarly paper, as its task was just to teach students to express their thoughts in a logical way (Skuja, 1938: 125). *Vēstījums* ('narration') and *apraksts* ('description') were written at the primary level, while *pārspriedums* ('exposition') was introduced at the secondary level, when students had to 'explain or prove' their ideas (ibid.: 125). At the same time their contemporary Ramāns used the term *sacerējums* ('composition') in the same meaning as *domraksts*: a text in which students are expected to express their ideas in a logical and clear way. He also specified that exposition may include definitions, comparison or contrast, proof or disproof of an idea, discussion of causes and effects (ibid.: 226-227). Thus, the terms *domraksts* and *sacerējums* referred to what is known as a *composition* in English – a product of a composing process, while *narration*, *description* and *exposition* were viewed either as types of *domraksts* (Skuja, 1938: 125) or as 'elements of a composition' (Ramāns, 1938: 225).

Similarly to Anševics and Skuja, Dziļleja (1947: 3) also defined *domraksts* as a reflection of students' thoughts and emotions. When assessing a text, the focus was on grammar and style (ibid.: 17). According to him, *sacerējums* implied a broader meaning than *domraksts* because in *sacerējums* students could write about their observations, adventures and experience, they could express their views and use images (ibid.: 3). Thus, *sacerējums* could refer to an imaginative piece of writing. According to Dziļleja, the meaning of *sacerējums* was closer to the German *Aufsatz*, the French *composition* and the Russian *сочинение* (ibid.).

Besides the basic types of *domraksts* – descriptions, narrations and expositions (used in the plural form – M.F.), Dziļleja (ibid.: 4) also distinguished several genres within each type. Narrations, for example, included the chronicle, the report, the minutes, the letter, the biography and other genres (ibid.: 6). Thus, *narration* was used to refer to the dominating structure in these genres. As the purpose of *domraksts* was to reveal students' thoughts and feelings, it may seem strange that such objective types of writing as reports and minutes were listed in this group.

His contemporary Kārkliņš (1947: 48-49), however, considered that the three basic types of *domraksts* – narration, description and exposition – are 'archaic', as they are commonly mixed in literary works. He stressed that more attention should be paid to *praktiski darbi* ('practical work') such as letters, applications, receipts and others.

In the Soviet times, most probably under the influence of the Russian composition writing traditions, the term *sacerējums* was frequently used instead of *domraksts*. For example, Pauliņš (1974: 5) defined *sacerējums* as a piece of writing where students had to demonstrate their ability to express their 'thoughts, independently, creatively and in an organized manner about the theme given or chosen using the grammar and style of literary language'. As seen from the definition, the idea about 'creativity' was introduced alongside with logical structuring of ideas.

Content-wise the types of *sacerējums* were classified into:

- compositions about literature (i.e. analysis of literary works),
- *nosacīti brīvie sacerējumi* ('relatively free compositions'), which were a combination of the analysis of literature and the expression of the writer's viewpoint,
- *brīvie sacerējumi* ('free compositions'), which were not linked with literature, but were based on the student's experience (Pauliņš, 1974: 20-21).

In the case of free compositions, students could also write literary essays.

As to the form, they were grouped into narrations, descriptions, expositions and 'a dialogic type of composition' (Pauliņš, 1974: 24). Referring to the first three types of *sacerējums*, we could use the term *school essay* in English.

Exposition included such subtypes as (1) definition, (2) classification, (3) comparison/contrast, (4) cause/effect, (5) statement-(counter) argumentation (Pauliņš, 1974: 42; 45; Pauliņš, Rozenbergs, Vilāns, 1978: 264). It should be noted that the fifth subtype is known as one of the pattern variations typical of English argumentative essays (see more in Farneste, 2012: 69-70).

Although Kārklis (1976: 6) also used the term *sacerējums*, he explained its relationship with genres. Similar to Pauliņš, Kārklis distinguished two large groups of types of *sacerējums*. However, he considered that the classification of the first group is based on the 'sources used', while of the other group, on 'the ways of narration' or the ways of telling. He included 'narration, description, characteristics, exposition and reflection' in the second group. Kārklis also distinguished several genres or 'outer forms' of composition, such as the letter, the diary, the monologue, the dialogue, the review and others. Additionally, he distinguished 'mixed genres'. Thus, in this case the term *sacerējums* refers to the process of composing.

In the same period, some other authors (e.g. Laure, 1975: 33-35) used *domraksts* as an umbrella term for *narration*, *description* and *exposition*. Concerning the last type, she noted that students should deal with the solution of a problem based on the knowledge of relevant notions and cause-effect relationships. In contrast to the English writing traditions, the problem-solution essay was viewed as a separate type of essay.

In the dictionaries of the Latvian language (e.g. Guļevska, ed., 1987), *domraksts* is treated as an equivalent of *sacerējums*. *Sacerējums* implies two meanings: (1) 'that what is composed' and (2) 'an extended creative piece of writing at school' (ibid.). When Latvia restored its independence in the 1990s, the previously widespread *domraksts* was reintroduced in schools for the reason that *sacerējums* implies also 'a negative shade of meaning' in the Latvian language (Blaua, 1999: 3). However, in contemporary dictionaries these two terms are still used interchangeably. In a dictionary of pedagogical terms (Beļickis et al., 2000: 151), the term *sacerējums* has two meanings: (1) representation of thoughts in words (poem, story, novel, paper, etc.), sounds (works of music), visual images (works of art), and (2) *domraksts*. Thus, in both dictionaries, the first meaning of

*sacerējums* refers to the product of the composing process that can be represented in different genres. *Domraksts*, meaning the expression of students' thoughts in writing, is translated as the *composition* and the *essay* in English (ibid.: 41). However, as discussed above, the English term *composition* may also refer to a controlled composition, which implies a completely different meaning than the *essay* in an EFL classroom.

Lately one more term – *eseja* ('essay') – has been introduced in school programmes. According to Beļickis et al. (2000: 50), it is defined as a composition written either at school or university at the end of a course or a theme. It may contain elements of research. In contrast to *domraksts*, *eseja* has a 'special structure of paragraphs and discussion of the theme', namely, the introduction is expected to provide 'the purpose of writing and the main ideas'; the body paragraphs should start with a topic sentence, and the conclusion should comprise a summary of ideas and provide solutions to the problem or further development of the main idea (ibid.). This definition of *eseja* corresponds to that what is understood by the problem-solution essay in English. It should be noted that this definition provides the necessary moves in writing. However, in English not only the problem-solution essay, but also expository argumentative essays employ similar moves in the introduction and the conclusion (see Farneste, 2012). Moreover, some earlier views on *domraksts* mentioned problem-solution as typical of expository *domraksts* (Laure, 1975); thus, it is confusing why two terms are needed to refer to seemingly similar writing.

In the theories on school writing, we can also encounter different interpretations of the term *domraksts* even within one source. For example, Felš-Milberga lists three types of *domraksts* – *the narration*, *the description* and *the exposition* (2002: 4), but she also points out that students may write it 'in different genres' (ibid.: 31). However, when listing such genres as 'stories, fairy-tales, poems, plays and legends', she writes that they may be written in addition to *domraksts* (ibid.: 4). Thus, the term *domraksts* refers not only to a representative of a genre, but is also used as an umbrella term for several genres of imaginative writing.

Milzere (2003), in her turn, distinguishes *eseja* and several types of *domraksts*. The term *eseja* is grouped with *pārspriedumi* ('expositions') and *tēzes* ('the theses') as short types of *domu raksti* ('writing based on thoughts'). The term *domu-raksti* was used by Laimiņš in 1894. It should be noted that *exposition* in the English tradition refers to the rhetorical patterns employed in several genres, essays inclusive. *The theses*, in its turn, may be grouped with 'research-process genres' such as abstracts, research articles, monographs, and others (see, e.g. Swales, 1990: 177-178).

Similarly to Laure (1975), Urževica (2010: 64) views *pārspriedums* as a problem-solution type of paper, which in English is grouped with the variants of argumentative and evaluative essays (e.g. Swales and Feak, 1994: 57) or is distinguished as a separate essay type (e.g. Paltridge, 1996; 2002). However, she also uses the term *argumentētā eseja* ('the argued essay'), where the student is supposed to 'discuss his/her opinion on the chosen theme' by supporting

the proposed thesis. In this case, the student should follow certain moves: a proposition – the main three arguments – the discussion of each argument – conclusions and a summary to prove the proposition (ibid.: 80). These moves could be found in the *opinion essay* in English; moreover, it is not the only possible organization of argumentative essays (see Farneste, 2012).

Lāce (2011: 5) has expanded the meaning of *domraksts* from the expression of thoughts to the inclusion of research elements in a text, thus to some extent it resembles the definition of the *essay* proposed some years ago by Beļickis et al. (2000). Lāce mentions such types of *domraksts* as narration, description, exposition and the review (ibid.: 12), the latter, however, could be viewed as a different genre. According to Lāce, expository writing may also employ argumentation and may comprise elements from the problem-solution pattern (i.e. problem – its analysis – conclusion) or the opinion essay (i.e. opinion/proposition – argumentation/support – conclusion) (ibid.: 26), which could be grouped with the subtypes of argumentative essay in English (Farneste, 2012).

Similarly to Urževica, Lāce also mentions the term *eseja* pointing out that its meaning has become broader nowadays as it refers not only to fiction, but also to student writing known as *argumentētā eseja* ('the argued essay'). Lāce stresses that the structure of the argued essay is similar to expository writing (ibid.: 37), without explaining either the similarities or differences.

The definitions of the two terms reveal that the main difference between *domraksts* and *eseja* is in bringing out the student's emotional attitude in the latter case. *Domraksts* is defined as 'a text where the author expresses his/her thoughts, views or conclusions that are the result of their thinking process' (ibid.: 5), but the *argued essay* is 'a composition where the author expresses his/her view about a definite theme and supports it as well as shows his/her *emotional attitude* to the problem or phenomenon under discussion' (Lāce, 2011: 37; italics by the author of the paper).

The analysis of the sources demonstrates that there exist different views as to the classification of essays and corresponding rhetorical structures in Latvian. There is a tendency to introduce new terms and change the meaning of the existing ones.

## CONCLUSIONS

Both in English and in Latvian, there is no single approach to the use of the term *genre*, the classification of genres and rhetorical patterns. The distinction between the terms *sacerējums*, *domraksts* and *eseja* in Latvian mainly depends on the personal interpretation of the authors of different theories.

In some theories both *sacerējums* and *domraksts* are viewed as a product of writing in general, while in others they may refer to what is understood by the school essay as a genre. In recent years, the term *domraksts* seems to replace its counterpart *sacerējums* in the sources on school writing. Like in English, there is a



tendency to classify *domraksts* types according to the form or ways of telling into a narrative, description and exposition.

The term *eseja* or *argumentētā eseja* has been lately introduced to refer to school and university argumentative essay writing that may also contain elements of research. At school level, this type of essay is expected to support the writer's proposition; it may also correspond to what is understood by the *opinion essay* in English.

As to the translation of the English terms into Latvian, the most appropriate translation of *composition* could be *sacerējums*, when referring to the product of composing. In contrast to essay writing in EFL classroom, there is no dichotomy between *guided* and *free compositions* in Latvian as L1. The term *brīvie sacerējumi* ('free compositions') in Latvian has a different meaning: 'essays written on a theme other than literary texts'.

Depending on the purpose of communication and the dominating rhetorical structure, the term *essay* might be translated into Latvian using either *domraksts* or *eseja*. The term *domraksts* could refer to the narrative essay and the descriptive essay. *Domraksts* could also refer to some subtypes of expository essays in English such as the definition, classification, comparison/contrast or cause/effect essay. When rendering the *domraksts* types employing the *problem-solution* or the *argumentative* pattern, the term *argumentative essay* or *problem-solution essay* could be more appropriate.

Like in English, students in Latvia should follow certain moves in the introduction, body and conclusion when writing *argumentētā eseja* ('the argued essay'). Although it is indicated that the organization of the expository essay and the argued essay in Latvian is similar, the basic similarities or differences, if any, are not explained (see, e.g. Lāce, 2011). In contrast to English, it seems that in Latvian the topic sentences are expected to be provided only in one essay type, i.e. the argued essay.

The present study has revealed the need for more thorough research on curriculum genres, essay writing inclusive, and for some unification of terminology. More research on the distinction between a genre and rhetorical patterns or text types and their varieties would help in designing methodological materials and course books and, consequently, would help students in developing their writing skills.

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## APPENDIX 1

Table 1 Use of the terms *sacerējums*, *domraksts* and *eseja*

Sources	Sacerējums	Domraksts	Eseja
Anševics (1932)	–	+	–
Skuja (1938)	–	types: narration, description, exposition	–
Ramāns (1938)	elements: narration, description, exposition	–	–
Dziļleja (1947)	+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• narrations (the chronicle, the report, the minutes, the letter, the biography, etc.)</li> <li>• descriptions</li> <li>• expositions</li> </ul>	–
Kārklīšs (1947)	–	types: narration, description, exposition, but mainly mixed	–
Pauliņš (1974) Pauliņš, Rozenbergs, Vilāns (1978)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• narration</li> <li>• description</li> <li>• exposition, which includes argumentation</li> </ul>	–	–
Laure (1975)	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• narration</li> <li>• description</li> <li>• exposition which discusses solutions of a problem</li> </ul>	–
Kārklis (1976)	narration, description, characteristics, exposition and reflection		
Guļevska (ed., 1987)	+	means the same as <i>sacerējums</i>	–
Beļickis et al. (2000)	+	means the same as <i>sacerējums</i>	with elements of research and a specific structure

Felš-Milberga (2002)	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• narration</li> <li>• description</li> <li>• exposition</li> </ul> May be written in 'different genres'	–
Milzere (2003)	–	+	belongs to the subgroup of <i>domu raksti</i> , alongside with <i>exposition</i> and the <i>theses</i>
Urževica (2010)	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• narration</li> <li>• description</li> <li>• exposition (i.e. a problem-solution paper)</li> </ul>	<i>argumentā eseja</i> (with a specific structure)
Lāce (2011)	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• narration</li> <li>• description</li> <li>• exposition (based on the problem-solution-conclusion pattern and the proposition-argumentation-conclusion pattern)</li> <li>• the review (could be with some elements of research)</li> </ul>	<i>argumentā eseja</i> (similar to expository writing; with a specific structure)

**Monta Farneste** (Dr. Paed., Assoc. Prof. in Applied Linguistics) is currently working at the University of Latvia. Her research interests include written communication and communicative grammar. Email: mfarneste@lanet.lv