

Preparing students for writing essay with reasoning elements in English in the Unified State Exam in Russia

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to the study and analysis of the examination task in the written part of the Russian Unified State Examination. It is called an essay or a written statement with reasoning elements and has been being conducted in the Russian Federation since 2005. The aim of the paper is to work out a self-study algorithm helping examinees to complete task 40 (a written statement with reasoning elements) in the Unified State Examination format successfully. The author of the article paid much attention to the study of the history, aim, structure, and statistical results of the exam in the English language in 2019. The transformation of task 40 in the written part of Unified State Examination into the task with the possibility for an exam participant to choose one of two statements is considered and the peculiarities of this task are thoroughly described. The structure of task 40, assessment criteria, subject matter, language material (syntax, morphology, vocabulary, phonetics), typical mistakes are studied and analyzed. The Demo version of an essay 2020 is presented and analyzed in the paper. The work is based on the data of the Federal Service for Supervision of Education and Science of the Russian Federation.

Key words: unified state examination, communicative linguistic competence, essay, the English language, paraphrasing

Introduction

“Final exams in secondary schools, such as schools, gymnasiums, lyceums have always been considered a significant component in the Soviet and later Russian system of secondary education. The unified requirement for school leavers was to pass exams in such subjects as the Russian Language (Essay) and Mathematics. Students of the 11th grade used to pass double control of the quality of knowledge at the end of school and while entering higher educational institutions of the country. It should be noted that for a long time, there were no unified requirements for the structure of final exams, entrance exams, the form of their conduct, and the criteria for their assessment. Thus, school leavers passed exams twice for a short period of time. The situation with double exams and the lack of unified requirements for the structure and forms of examinations was changed in 2005. Some regions of the Russian Federation started approbation of the Unified State Exam in order to identify the conformity of the results of students’ mastering basic educational programs according to the Federal State Educational Standard” (Badelina, Orekhova, 2018: 41). The Unified State Exam (USE) was introduced in all parts of the Russian Federation in 2009. Over the years, the exam in foreign languages has been constantly altered and improved in accordance with its purpose. The purpose of the exam is to assess the level of students’ competencies obtained within educational programs of secondary general education, using tasks of a standardized form (control measuring materials) (Verbitskaya, et al., 2019: 9). The experience of the past years shows that control measurement materials (CMM) make it possible to assess the level of competences’ mastery of the Federal component of the state educational standard of basic general and secondary (complete) general education in foreign languages by graduates. In foreign languages, two levels of foreign language communicative competence of participants (basic and profile) are currently distinguished.

(http://fipi.ru/sites/default/files/document/1566546374/inostranny_yazyk_2019.pdf).

The part “Writing” of the written part of the USE includes 2 tasks (a personal letter and a written statement with reasoning elements). Performing these tasks requires demonstration of different writing skills related to two levels of difficulty (basic and advanced) (Specification of control measurement materials for conducting the Unified State Exam in Foreign languages in 2020, 2019: 12).

According to the Federal Service for Supervision in Education and Science, in 2019 more than 83 thousand participants took part in the exam on foreign languages. Compared to the previous years, the total number of participants increased slightly (more than 4% compared to 2018). According to the developers of the exam in foreign languages M.V. Verbitskaya and K.S. Makhmuryan, the increase in the number of participants is due to several reasons: the inclusion of the Chinese language in the exam on foreign languages and the increase in the total number of graduates. At the same time, among the European languages traditional for the Unified State Examination, a high proportion of participants in the English exam remains (96.6%); the share of participants in the German language decreased (German - 1.8% in 2019 and 2% in 2018); the share of participants in the Unified State Examination in the French language increased slightly (1.2% in 2019 and 1.1% in 2018); the proportion of participants in Spanish remained the same (0.2%). The number of exam participants in the Chinese language in 2019 amounted to 0.2% of the total number of exam participants in foreign languages (Verbitskaya, Makhmuryan, 2019: 3).

In 2019, there is an increase in the average test score and an increase in the share of participants with results in the range of high scores (81-100). The average test score increased slightly in 2019 compared to 2018 and amounted to 73.3 (in 2018 - 68.8). The exam developers suppose that the increase in the proportion of students with high scores can be explained by a change in the wording of task 40 and its transformation into an alternative task, giving the exam participants the right to choose the topic of a detailed written statement with reasoning elements (Verbitskaya, Makhmuryan, 2019: 4).

The analysis of the exam statistics in the English language shows that in 2019 all parts of the exam paper were performed slightly better than in 2018. As in previous years, in 2019 productive tasks with detailed answers (writing and speaking) were worse than all others (receptive: listening and reading, lexical and grammatical). The tasks of the part “Listening” were best performed, the worst of all was the part “Writing”. In 2019, the participants in the exam coped with the tasks of the “Writing” part more successfully, higher scores were obtained for a detailed written statement with reasoning elements. The transformation of task 40 into an alternative task with the possibility for the exam participant to choose the topic of a detailed written statement with reasoning elements played a positive role. At the same time, the results of the tasks of the parts “Writing” and “Speaking” (especially the “Writing”) are noticeably lower than the results of the tasks of the other parts, which indicates a lag in the development of productive skills from receptive skills (Verbitskaya, Makhmuryan, 2019: 10).

Nevertheless, an increasing number of exam participants has begun to complete task 40. This task is a productive task of a high level of difficulty and requires well-developed subject skills and meta-subject skills. It is designed to differentiate participants applying for scores in the range of 81–100. Naturally, graduates with medium and low levels of foreign communicative competence cannot cope with the task or get low scores. The reason for this is often a misunderstanding of the statement. Examinees do not understand and cannot show the problematic nature of the statements proposed. Many do not fully understand the meaning of the task due to the limitations of their vocabulary. Experts note the desire to extract from the statement wording a familiar word or to arbitrarily and incorrectly interpret the meaning of an unfamiliar word and write on this basis a text that has little in common

with the proposed topic and the communicative task (Verbitskaya, Makhmuryan, 2019: 29).

In order to achieve the aim of the research, the structure of task 40 (essay), assessment criteria, typical mistakes, subject matter, language material (syntax, morphology, vocabulary, phonetics) were analyzed, systematized, and presented in the tables below.

The Demo version of task 40 for 2020 includes the following instructions and is presented on the Website of the Federal Institute for Pedagogical Measurements in the following way (<http://fipi.ru/ege-i-gve-11/demoversii-specifikacii-kodifikatory>) (Table 1):

Table 1: The Demo version of USE 2020, Task 40

| | |
|--|---|
| The Demo version of USE 2020 ENGLISH LANGUAGE, grade 11. (2020 - 18 / 33) | |
| Choose only ONE of the two proposed statements (40.1 or 40.2), indicate its number in the ANSWER SHEET No. 2, and express your opinion on the proposed problem according to this plan. | |
| Comment on one of the following statements. | |
| 40.1 | University education is essential for young people. |
| 40.2 | Robots will soon replace people in all jobs. |
| What is your opinion? Do you agree with this statement? Write 200–250 words. | |
| | Use the following plan: – make an introduction (state the problem paraphrasing the given statement); – express your personal opinion and give 2–3 reasons for your opinion; – express an opposing opinion and give 1–2 reasons for this opposing opinion; – explain why you do not agree with the opposing opinion; – make a conclusion restating your position. |
| Check that each answer is given next to the number of the corresponding task. | |

The study and analysis of the structure and the instructions of task 40 allows concluding that in order to do this task successfully, a participant should demonstrate different writing skills related to a profile level of difficulty. According to control measurement materials (CMM), the levels of foreign language communicative competence of participants are determined by the assessment criteria proposed by the exam developers (Demo version of control measuring materials of the Unified State Exam 2020 in Foreign languages (written part), 2019: 28-33). The criteria under study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Assessment criteria for completing task 40 of high difficulty level (maximum 14 scores)

| Criterion number | Criterion | Scores | | | |
|------------------|---|--|---|--|--|
| | | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| K1 | The solution to a communicative problem | The task is fully completed: the content reflects <u>all aspects</u> specified in the task fully and accurately; style of speech is chosen correctly (<u>one violation</u> of a neutral style is allowed) | The task is mainly completed but <u>one or two aspects</u> of the content indicated in the task are not fully or inaccurately reflected; style of speech is mostly correct (<u>two to three violations</u> of a neutral style are allowed) | The task is incomplete: <u>one or two aspects</u> are not reflected in the content, OR <u>three or four aspects</u> of the content are incompletely or inaccurately disclosed, OR <u>one aspect</u> is not disclosed, and <u>one or two aspects</u> of the content are disclosed incompletely or inaccurately; there are errors in the speech style (<u>four violations</u> of a neutral style are allowed) | The task is not completed: all cases not indicated in the assessment for 1, 2, and 3 scores, OR the answer does not correspond to the required volume, OR more than 30% of the answer is unproductive (i.e., it coincides textually with the published source) |
| K2 | Text organization | The statement is logical, the means of logical communication are used correctly, the structure of | The statement is mostly logical (there are <u>one or two logical errors</u>), AND / OR there are <u>one or two</u> | There are <u>three or four logical errors</u> in the statement, AND / OR there are <u>three or four errors</u> in the use of logical communicati | There are <u>five or more logical errors</u> in the statement AND / OR there are <u>five or more errors</u> in the use of logical communicati |

| | | | | | |
|----|------------|---|--|--|---|
| | | the text corresponds to the proposed plan, the text is correctly divided into paragraphs | <u>drawbacks</u> when using logical communication, AND / OR there are <u>one or two deviations</u> from the plan in the structure of the statement, AND / OR there are <u>one or two drawbacks</u> in paragraph division | ons, AND / OR there are <u>three or four deviations</u> from the proposed plan, there are <u>three or four shortcomings</u> in dividing the text into paragraphs | ons, AND / OR the proposed answer plan is <u>not fully observed</u> , AND / OR there is <u>no division</u> of the text into paragraphs |
| K3 | Vocabulary | The vocabulary used corresponds to a high level of task complexity, there are practically no violations in the use of vocabulary (<u>one lexical mistake</u> is allowed) | The vocabulary used corresponds to a high level of difficulty of the assignment, however, there are <u>two-three lexical errors</u> , OR the vocabulary is limited, but the vocabulary is used correctly | The vocabulary used does not fully correspond to the high level of difficulty of the task; there are <u>four lexical errors</u> in the text | The vocabulary used does not correspond to the high level of difficulty of the task; there are <u>five or more lexical errors</u> in the text |
| K4 | Grammar | The grammatical tools used correspond to a high level of task complexity, there are practically no violations (<u>one or two non-repeating</u> | The grammatical tools used correspond to a high level of complexity of the task, however, there are <u>three-four grammatical errors</u> in the text | The grammatical tools used do not quite correspond to the high level of difficulty of the task; there are <u>five-seven grammatical errors</u> in the text | The grammatical tools used do not correspond to the high level of task complexity; there are <u>eight or more grammatical errors</u> |

| | | | | | |
|----|--------------------------|--|---|---|---|
| | | <u>grammatical errors</u> are allowed) | | | |
| K5 | Spelling and punctuation | | Spelling errors are practically absent. The text is divided into sentences with the correct punctuation (<u>one spelling</u> AND / OR <u>one punctuation error</u> is allowed) | There <u>are two - four spelling</u> AND / OR <u>punctuation errors</u> in the text | The text contains <u>five or more spelling</u> AND / OR <u>punctuation errors</u> |

According to Table 2, there are five criteria used by experts to assess task 40:

- communicative problem solution,
- text organization,
- vocabulary,
- grammar,
- spelling and punctuation.

The first four criteria can be assessed from 3 to 0 scores. The fifth criterion is assessed from 2 to 0 scores. The important fact that should be mentioned is when an examinee receives 0 points in the criterion “Communicative problem-solution”, the answer to the task is evaluated at 0 points for all positions of assessment of the completion of this task.

These criteria for assessing task 40 were developed in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, described in detail in the monograph “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment”. Communicative linguistic competence is the key to assessing the level of proficiency in a foreign language. It consists of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic components, each of them, in turn, includes knowledge, skills. The analysis of the criteria presented in Table 1 shows that linguistic competence is given much attention when assessing the work of the examinee. It includes knowledge of vocabulary, phonetics and grammar and the corresponding skills and abilities, as well as other characteristics of the language as a system, regardless of the sociolinguistic significance of its variants and the pragmatic function of specific implementations. In relation to individual communicative competence, this component assumes not only

the volume and quality of knowledge (for example, knowledge of the meaning-distinguishing function of sounds, the volume, and accuracy of the dictionary) but also their cognitive organization and storage method (for example, the associative network in which the speaker puts a certain lexical unit), as well as their availability (recall, retrieval from long-term memory, use). Knowledge is not always conscious and cannot always be clearly formulated (for example, this may relate to the possession of the phonetic system of the language). The cognitive organization of the dictionary, its storage and accessibility can vary among different people and even one person (for example, in conditions of multilingualism) and depend on the individual characteristics of the students, as well as on the cultural environment in which the person grew up and studied (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, 2003: 12).

Let's consider the language material and subject matter presented in control measurement materials (CMM) (Codifier of content elements and requirements for the level of training of graduates of educational organizations for Unified State Exam in Foreign languages in 2020, 2019: 4-6), shown in Table 3 and Table 4. The CMM of the USE consist of a package of various kinds of communication skills and language skills testing tasks of different levels of complexity (The Order of the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia, 2013).

Table 3: Language material for assessing Task 40 of USE

| Language material | |
|-------------------|--|
| Syntax | |
| | Communicative types of sentences: affirmative, interrogative, negative, imperative sentences - and the word order in them |
| | Sentences with initial it. Sentences with there is/are |
| | Compound sentences with conjunctions and, but, or. Compound sentences with conjunctions и connective words what, when, why, which, that, who, if, because, that's why, than, so, for, since, during, so that, unless |
| | The sequence of Tenses and Reported Speech |
| | Sentences with constructions as ... as; not so ... as; neither ... nor; either ... or |
| | Conditional sentences of real present реального (Conditional I – If I see Jim, I'll invite him to our school party.) and unreal present (Conditional II – If I were you, I would start learning French.) |
| | Sentences with construction I wish (I wish I had my own room.) |
| | Sentences with construction so/such (I was so busy that I forgot to phone my parents.) |
| | Emphatic constructions like It's him who... It's time you did smth. Constructions with verbs ending in- ing: to love/hate doing something; Stop talking |
| | Constructions It takes me ... to do something; to look/feel/be happy |
| | Various means of communication in the text to ensure its integrity (firstly, finally, at last, in the end, however, etc.) |
| Morphology | |
| | Plural nouns formed by the rule and exceptions. Definite/ indefinite/ zero article |
| | Personal, possessive, demonstrative, indefinite, relative, interrogative pronouns |
| | Adjectives in positive, comparative and superlative degrees, formed by the rule, as well as exceptions. Adverbs in comparative and superlative degrees, as well as adverbs expressing the number (many/much, few / a few, little / a little) |
| | Quantitative and ordinal numerals. Prepositions of place, direction, time |
| | Most common finite verb forms in Active Voice: Present Simple, Future Simple and Past Simple, Present and Past Continuous, Present and Past Perfect. Personal Verb Forms: Present Perfect Continuous and Past Perfect Continuous. Personal |

| | |
|------------|--|
| | forms of passive verbs: Present Simple Passive, Future Simple Passive, Past Simple Passive, Present Perfect Passive. Personal verb forms in Present Simple (Indefinite) to express future actions after conjunctions if, when |
| | Finite verb forms in Passive Voice in Past Perfect Passive and Future Perfect Passive; Present / Past Progressive (Continuous) Passive; non-personal verb forms (Infinitive, Participle I, Gerund) (passive) |
| | Phrasal verbs (look for, ...) |
| | Modal verbs and their equivalents (may, can/be able to, must/have to/should; need, shall, could, might, would) |
| | Various grammatical means for expressing the future tense: Simple Future, to be going to, Present Continuous |
| Vocabulary | |
| | Affixes as elements of word formation. Affixes of the verbs: re-, dis-, mis-; -ize / ise. Affixes of nouns: -er / or, -ness, -ist, -ship, -ing, sion / tion, -ance / ence, -ment, -ity. Affixes of adjectives: -y, -ic, -ful, -al, -ly, -ian / an, -ing, -ous, -ible / able, -less, -ive, inter-. Adverb suffix -ly. Negative prefixes: un-, in- / im- |
| | Polysemy of lexical units. Synonyms. Antonyms |
| | Lexical co-occurrence |
| Phonetics | |
| | Adequate pronunciation and distinguishing recognition of all sounds of the English language; observance of the correct stress in words and phrases; division of sentences into semantic groups; observance of correct intonation in various types of sentences, including in relation to new language material |

Table 4: Subject matter for assessing Task 40 of USE (supplement)

| | |
|---|--|
| A | Everyday life and life, distribution of household responsibilities in the family. Shopping |
| B | Life in the city and the countryside. Problems of the city and the village. |
| C | Communication in the family and school, family traditions, interpersonal relationships with friends, and acquaintances. |
| D | Health and healthcare, well-being, medical services. Healthy lifestyle. |
| E | The role of the youth in modern society, its interests, and hobbies. |
| F | The leisure of the youth: visiting clubs, sports sections, and interest clubs. Correspondence. |
| G | Home country and country/countries of the language being studied. Their geographical location, climate, population, cities and villages, sights. |
| H | Traveling at home and abroad, sightseeing. |
| I | Nature and environmental problems. |
| J | Cultural and historical features of the home country and the countries of the language studied. |
| K | The contribution of Russia and the countries of the language being studied to the development of science and world culture. |
| L | The modern world of professions, the labor market. |
| M | Opportunities for continuing education in higher education. |
| N | Future plans, the problem of choosing a profession. |
| O | The role of foreign language skills in the modern world. |
| P | School education. Studied subjects, attitudes towards them. Vacations. |
| Q | Scientific and technological progress, its prospects, and consequences. |
| R | New information technologies. |
| S | Holidays and significant dates in different countries of the world. |

When studying the content of language material, it should be noted that all of the listed elements belong to level B2, called the threshold advanced level. This level is characterized by language proficiency in:

- understanding the general content of complex texts on abstract and specific topics, including highly specialized texts;
- speaking quickly and spontaneously enough to communicate constantly with native speakers without much difficulty for either side;
- making clear, detailed reports on various topics and stating one's view on the main problem, showing the advantages and disadvantages of different opinions;
- expressing one's point of view clearly and thoroughly on a wide range of interesting issues;
- explaining one's point of view on the urgent problem, expressing all the arguments for and against;
- writing understandable detailed reports on a wide range of interesting issues;
- writing essays or reports, covering questions or arguing the point of view "for" or "against";
- writing letters, highlighting those events and impressions that are especially important (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, 2003: 23, 28).

Thus, task 40 (written statement with reasoning elements) is aimed to assess the knowledge and skills of the threshold advanced level (B2). An examinee has to state the problem paraphrasing the given statement, express his/her personal opinion and give 2–3 reasons for his/her opinion, express an opposing opinion and give 1–2 reasons for this opposing opinion, explain why he/she does not agree with the opposing opinion and make a conclusion restating his/her position.

Methodology

The given article uses the modern methodology of scientific research including a set of theoretical and empirical research methods. For the successful completion of the study, analysis and synthesis of the ideas and the results of linguistic and methodologic research on the studied problem were used. Different resources were employed, such as methodological recommendations, dictionaries, scientific and popular articles, Internet resources. The study and analysis of scientific sources and methodological literature made it possible to summarize ideas on the characteristic features of the Unified State Exam as a whole and Task 40 of the written part, in particular. The structure of task 40 (written statement with reasoning elements), assessment criteria, control measurement materials, subject matter, language material (syntax, morphology, vocabulary, phonetics), and the typical mistakes were thoroughly studied and analyzed. The empirical methods of research such as the method of observation, interview method, and analysis of exam written papers made it possible to reveal the most common mistakes made by examinees in Task 40, the attitude of examinees to the written part before and after working with the examinees' guide.

Results and Discussions

In order to work out a self-study algorithm helping examinees to complete task 40 successfully, the typical mistakes made by exam participants in the written statement with reasoning elements in 2017 - 2018 were studied and analyzed. Two groups of students of the 11 grade took part in the study. One group of students had an extra course "Preparation for the Unified State Exam in English" and had classes at Surgut State University in 2017 – 2018. Future examinees from different schools of the town had 2- hour classes two times a week. The second group included the

students from one class and they had the same course at school having 2- hour classes two times a week during a year.

At the beginning of the course, the students were asked to do task 40 in the classroom. The time preparation was 60 minutes. The analysis of the results of the practice exams in task 40 in both groups showed that the main mistakes are made in solving the communicative problem in the introduction.

For example, some students did not understand the statement “Volunteering is essential for teenagers”. The word “essential” was unfamiliar to the examinee and she arbitrarily interpreted it: “*Some people are sure that teenagers have to volunteer, while others consider taking part in volunteering is a personal choice.*”, “*... teenagers should not be made do what they are not interested in. ... if you oblige someone to take part in something unpleasant for him ...*”. The examinee understands the word “essential” as a compulsory duty, equating it to the modal “have to”. “Have to” expresses compulsory obligation, while the task refers to inner need, inner necessity, the importance of adolescent participation in the volunteer movement. It should be noted that according to the Cambridge Dictionary the word “essential” is a word of level B1, below B2, however, this exam participant does not know this word (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ru/essential>). The English word “essential” has the basic meaning of “very important and necessary” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/ru/essential>). Thus, the exam participant, not understanding the word “essential”, replaces the problem. Instead of discussing whether it is necessary, whether it is important for a teenager to participate in a volunteer movement, the participant writes whether the teenager should be forced to volunteer or if he should be allowed to do what he wants. The proposed statement does not allow such an interpretation. Often a misunderstanding of a statement occurs due to taking out separate words from it, or due to misunderstanding of the utterance as a whole. So, for example, trying to express her opinion on the statement “One cannot make real friends online”, the exam participant interprets the phrase “real friend” not as a best / real friend (true friend), but as a real, physically existing subject, as opposed to virtual fake character on the Internet.

As it is stated in the response plan, in the introduction the examinee should rephrase the proposed statement and show its problematic nature. Unfortunately, not everyone copes with this task. Let’s consider the example of the introduction to the statement “University education is essential for young”: “*University education is essential for young people. Very important topic, especially nowadays. However, people have different thoughts on it*”. This introduction does not rephrase the problem (only one word is added). The next sentence - “*Very important topic, especially nowadays*” - is extremely poorly worded. It is impossible to understand exactly whether the discussion point “*However, people have different thoughts on it*” refers to the fact that the statement is very important, or to the fact that University education is necessary for the youth. In addition, from a linguistic and stylistic point of view, if we consider the sentence “*Very important topic, especially nowadays*” to be completely descriptive, we will have to admit that such sentences are inappropriate in a neutral style, they are characteristic of media journalistic texts. Most likely, the author gave a direct translation from Russian, so he missed the article (necessary: a very important topic) and missed the subject and predicate (necessary: This is a very important topic, especially nowadays). In the wording of the second sentence, there is an understanding of the general meaning of the introduction and there would be no complaints about the style.

Sometimes the examinees express their opinion in the introduction. From the point of view of the criterion “Solution of communicative problem,” it is possible. It is important that the opinion is expressed. However, this means that the examinees do not follow the plan. In the second paragraph, it is clearly stated: “express your

personal opinion and give 2-3 reasons for your opinion”, while in the first paragraph there is nothing about this: “make an introduction (state the problem paraphrasing the given statement)”. Therefore, in this case, there is a mistake in the criterion “Text organization”.

Sometimes the examinees cannot correctly formulate the opposite point of view, as well as clearly argue it. Let us consider an example of a fragment of a written statement expressing an opposing opinion: “*According to other people, there are a lot of things which are more important than education. Undoubtedly, teenagers can do what they want. For example, there are so many exciting hobbies*”. The opponent’s opinion, although clumsy, is expressed: in addition to education, freedom of action is also important, such as a hobby. However, there is no argument that would support this view. Therefore, this aspect is incomplete.

The wording of the counterargument (explanation of why the author does not agree with the opposing opinion) is even more difficult for the examinees. Consider the following example: “*However, other people think that there are a lot of things which are more important than studies. For example, youngsters can do what they want because there are so many interesting things, like sports which can be a part of their job in the future*”. The student tries to give a counterargument, formulating it like this: “*But I not fully agree with this statement, because without well education, we cannot do what we like*” The answer expresses disagreement with the opinions of others, but the argumentation for the position is not given (the opponent’s opinion is slightly reformulated).

Unfortunately, there are still conclusions that do not correspond to the proposed plan and the general communicative task of the written statement with reasoning elements. These conclusions would be appropriate in a written statement in the Pros and Cons format, but they are unacceptable in the statement where an examinee should express his personal opinion: “*In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that each person can have his own opinion about education*”. Such a conclusion is not acceptable. The following conclusion is not acceptable either: “*To sum up, there are clearly more advantages than disadvantages of having a good education.*” The above conclusion focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of education, which means that there is a deviation from the statement. In addition, it is not clear whose opinion is expressed in it. The absence of words indicating that this is the opinion of the student is also a typical mistake in the conclusion. Recently, examinees have been often using the phrase “*My position stays unchanged*” in conclusion without explaining this position, which is also a serious drawback.

In task 40, logical errors and incorrect use of the means of logical communication are often observed, which is most likely due to the interference of the native language. The following statements can be examples of incorrect communications and logical errors:

“However, there are people who disagree with me. They believe that teenagers need education more than other things. Because of without education they cannot go to university, get a good job and earn a lot of money in the future. Besides, it makes them clever and many people like clever people. I cannot agree with them. Children can get a good job if they have a lot of experience”.

1. *However, there are people who disagree with me. They believe that teenagers need education more than other things. Because of without education they cannot go to university, get a good job and earn a lot of money in the future. Because of is a wrong means of communication, the preposition *because of* is used instead of the conjunction *because*. However, in order to correct the mistake, since one cannot simply replace the preposition with a conjunction, the whole sentence must be reconstructed, the causal clause with a conjunction cannot function as an independent separate sentence.*

2. *Besides, it* makes them clever and many people like clever people. *Besides, it* is a logical mistake, since it is not clear what the pronoun *it* refers to. Apparently, the author means education, but the pronoun *it* is too far from this noun, between these words there is a number of nouns which this pronoun can be related to.

3. I cannot agree with *them*. I cannot agree with *them* is a logical mistake, because it is not clear what the pronoun *them* refers to; in the previous paragraph it was only reported that there is a different opinion, so in the previous sentence there is no noun which the pronoun *them* can be related to.

4. *Children can get a good job if they have a lot of experience.* – Practically the whole sentence is illogical as children cannot get a job and cannot have a large experience.

5. *Some parents send their children to various extra courses thinking that it will make him happier.* In the adverbial participial phrase “*thinking that it will make him happier*” the pronoun “*him*” is related to the word “*children*”. Thus, the appropriate pronoun, in this case, is *them*.

6. *Knowledge and imagination can be improved by books which make them valuable for teenagers. ... which make them*” is a logical mistake, because it is not clear what the pronoun *them* refers to; in the first part there are two words “*Knowledge and imagination*” it is likely related to but there is one more word “*books*” closer to the pronoun “*them*”.

Along with the mistakes in solving the communicative problem, text organizing, and logic in Task 40, exam participants make a large number of grammatical, lexical, punctuation errors. Here are examples of the most typical mistakes.

Improper use of articles:

A most important thing in your job is satisfaction. The use of “a” is wrong in this case as the superlative degree of adjectives is used with a definite article “the”.

Improper use of parts of the speech:

To start with, if you feel good at work, you will feel joy in life. The adjective “*good*” must be replaced by the adverb “*well*”, as it the verb must be followed by an adverb “*a word that gives extra information about a verb, adjective, adverb, clause, or sentence*” (<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/adverb>).

Improper use of grammatical forms:

Moreover, when people ___really stressed at work they can have health problems. The form of the Present Simple Passive is incomplete. The verb “*are*” is missing.

Improper use of vocabulary:

In the society there many professional chiefs and cookers. The student uses the word “*chief*” instead of the word “*chef*”, and the word “*cooker*” must be replaced by the word “*cook*”. The meaning of “*chief*” is “*main or most important*” (https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/chief_1). The word necessary in this context is “*chef*” meaning “*someone who cooks food in a restaurant as their job*” (<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/chef>). The meaning of the word “*cooker*” is “*a large piece of kitchen equipment that is used for cooking*” (<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/cooker>) and the appropriate word in this context is “*cook*” with a meaning “*someone who prepares and cooks food, either as their job or for pleasure*” (https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/cook_2).

Punctuation mistakes:

To start with nowadays students need control because not all teenagers can force themselves to study. The parenthesis “*To start with*” must be followed by a comma.

However, there is an opposite point of view that some students can get higher education without teachers. The parenthesis “However” must be followed by a comma.

Last but not the least the mistakes made by examinees in Task 40 are the number of words and shortage of time preparation (Denel, 2014: 87).

The number of words should be within 200–250 words. Despite the fact that the number of exam papers with excess or loss of words has become much less, there are still some. The requirement for exam participants to keep up the given volume is not purely formal, it is directly related to the content of the written statement and the implementation of the communicative task. Lack of the required number of words is an indicator of a low level of language proficiency, limited vocabulary, and lack of language skills (Milrud, 2019: 6).

Exceeding the volume also shows the examinee's inability to think about the communicative task set before him/her, to select the material that is really important for its implementation and to clearly formulate his/her thoughts. Often the excess of work is caused by the fact that the examinee tries to insert memorized passages from the “topics” into his work, which prevents from keeping up the statement and sometimes results in a complete replacement of the problem.

The study and analysis of the typical mistakes made by students in an essay made it possible for the author to work out a self-study algorithm for writing an essay in English in the Unified State Exam in Russia (See Table 5).

Table 5: Self-study algorithm for writing an essay in English in the Unified State Exam in Russia.

| | | |
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| 1. | Read the instruction of the task carefully | |
| 1.1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> number of the proposed statements | 2 statements |
| 1.2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> structure of the statement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> introduction (state the problem paraphrasing the given statement); express your personal opinion and give 2–3 reasons for your opinion; express an opposing opinion and give 1–2 reasons for this opposing opinion; explain why you do not agree with the opposing opinion; make a conclusion restating your position |
| 1.3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> number of words | - 200–250 words |
| 1.4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> choice of the statement | <p>When choosing a statement for writing with reasoning elements, it is recommended to consider the following points:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> length of a statement; clarity (not duality) of the statement, knowing sufficient amount of vocabulary on the subject, personal experience on the topic, sufficient argumentation. |
| 1.5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> classification of statements | <p>Types of statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a statement including facts: <i>Virtual Internet communication results in losing real-life social skills.</i> |

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| | | <p><i>Volunteering is essential for teenagers.</i> <i>Public libraries are becoming less popular and they will soon disappear.</i></p> <p>- a statement including opinion: Some people think that extreme sports help to build character. <i>Some people think that to get a good education one should go abroad.</i> <i>Some people think that learning foreign languages is a waste of time and money.</i></p> <p>- a statement including should / shouldn't do something: <i>Every city and every town should have a zoo.</i> <i>Fast food outlets should be closed.</i> <i>One should read about historical sites before sightseeing.</i></p> <p>- a statement including can/can't do something: <i>A person who is fluent in a foreign language can easily work as an interpreter.</i> <i>A person who is fluent in a foreign language can easily teach it.</i> <i>Computers cannot replace people.</i></p> <p>- a statement including comparative/superlative degree of adjectives: <i>Space exploration was the greatest achievement of the 20th century.</i> <i>Playing sports is better than watching others do it.</i> <i>Distance learning is the best form of education.</i></p> <p>- a statement including it is (not) wrong/right to: <i>It is wrong to make pupils read a lot in summer.</i> <i>It's not right to be strict with little children.</i></p> <p>- a statement including time period: <i>Nowadays natural sciences are more important than humanities.</i> <i>Science is the first thing to be financed in the modern world.</i></p> <p>Limiting words in the statements Limiting words make a broad topic workable. They focus the topic area further by indicating aspects you should narrowly concentrate on (http://www.unsw.edu.au/), the word "limiting" in Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners is defined: "preventing someone or something from developing or improving" (Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners, 2007: 876).</p> <p>- Little children/teenagers: <i>It's not right to be strict with little children.</i> <i>Volunteering is essential for teenagers.</i></p> <p>- Teachers / parents:</p> |
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| | | <p><i>Some people think that young people should follow in their parents' footsteps when choosing a profession.</i></p> <p>- The greatest / more important: <i>Friendship is the greatest gift in life.</i></p> <p>- Better / the best: <i>The best time is spent with family and friends.</i></p> <p>- The key to...: <i>Digital literacy is the key to success in any occupation.</i></p> <p>- Too / enough: - Essential, impossible, valuable: <i>University education is essential for young people.</i> <i>An interesting job is more valuable than a high salary.</i></p> <p>- Every: <i>Every city and every town should have a zoo.</i> <i>Everybody would like to work from home.</i></p> <p>- Replace: <i>Robots will soon replace people in all jobs.</i></p> <p>- Nowadays, modern / (will) in the future: <i>Nowadays natural sciences are more important than humanities.</i></p> <p>- Will ... soon: <i>Public libraries are becoming less popular and they will soon disappear.</i> <i>Robots will soon replace people in all jobs.</i></p> <p>- Should / should not: <i>Some people think that young people should follow in their parents' footsteps when choosing a profession.</i></p> <p>- Can / cannot: <i>One cannot make real friends online</i></p> <p>- (not) only: <i>Some people think that you can have only one true friend.</i></p> <p>- No longer: <i>With the Internet we no longer need TV.</i></p> <p>- Without: <i>It is easy to live without the Internet.</i></p> <p>- If / before: <i>One should read about historical sites before sightseeing</i></p> |
| 2. | Start writing the introduction. | |
| 2. 1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Background statement | <p>Background statement can be formulated as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - some background information; - current relevant information; - a definition; - a quotation; - a surprising / interesting fact. <p><i>It is a common fact that modern people place great emphasis on ... / attach a lot of importance (value) to</i> <i>Nowadays it is impossible/inconceivable to imagine ... without ...</i></p> <p><i>It is not a secret that nowadays ... is increasing in popularity / has become extremely popular.</i></p> <p>Statement: <i>Some people think that learning foreign languages is a waste of time and money.</i></p> |

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| | | <p>Background statement: <i>It is not a secret that nowadays studying foreign languages is increasing in popularity.</i> <i>or</i> Statement: <i>Some people think that you can have only one true friend.</i> Background statement: <i>It is a common fact that people attach a lot of value to friendship.</i></p> |
| 2.2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Problem/ clash of opinions | <p>Statement: <i>Some people think that learning foreign languages is a waste of time and money.</i> Discussion: While many people support the idea that...., there are some who remain skeptical about this. <i>or</i> Statement: <i>Some people think that you can have only one true friend.</i> Discussion: Although most people believe that ..., some individuals, however, disagree with this.</p> |
| 2.3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The focus of the statement | <p>Statement: <i>Some people think that learning <u>foreign languages</u> is a waste of time and money.</i> Statement: <i>Some people think that you can have only one true friend.</i></p> |
| 2.4 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restrictors of the statement | <p>Statement: <i>Some people think that <u>learning</u> foreign languages is a <u>waste of time and money.</u></i> <i>Some people think that you <u>can</u> have <u>only one</u> true friend.</i></p> |
| 2.5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Paraphrase | <p>to <u>express</u> what someone else has <u>said</u> or <u>written using different words</u>, without changing the meaning (https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/paraphrase-1).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Don't paraphrase word by word. - Work with ideas (What is it really saying?) - Take ideas from the question and add your own interpretation. - Synonyms (<i>adjectives, nouns, verbs, adverbs</i>) - Word forms (<i>adjective -> noun, verb -> noun, adjective ->adverb</i>) - Change structures: - <i>active-passive</i> - <i>comparatives (than – as...as, best – there is nothing better than...)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>modal verbs (can – is possible, should – is a good idea to do... / is the best thing to do..., must – is necessary)</i> - <i>although – despite – however</i> - <i>conditionals (If ..., ...)</i> - <i>cause-effect (... leads to / results in)</i> <p><u>An effective paraphrase:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - has a different grammatical structure to the original, - has a mainly different vocabulary, - retains the same meaning, |

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| | | <p>- keeps some phrases from the original that are in common use: conventional words/phrases (people, teenagers, children, etc.) and specialized words/phrases (low grades, school uniform, etc.).</p> <p>Statement: <i>Some people think that learning foreign languages is a waste of time and money.</i></p> <p>Paraphrasing: <i>Although many people believe it is useless to spend money and time on studying foreign languages, some individuals disagree with this opinion.</i></p> <p>Statement: <i>Some people think that you can have only one true friend.</i></p> <p>Paraphrasing: <i>While most people support the idea that only one person can be your real friend, there are some who remain skeptical about this.</i></p> <p>Statement: <i>It is always <u>best</u> to follow in your parents' footsteps when choosing a profession.</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) There is an opinion that <u>the best thing to do when choosing</u> a future profession is to follow in your parents' footsteps. 2) There is a popular belief that children <u>should</u> always follow in their parents' footsteps when they choose their future profession. 3) It is generally believed that <u>there is nothing better than</u> following in your parents' footsteps when choosing a profession. |
| 3 | Express your personal opinion and give 2–3 reasons for your opinion | |
| 3.1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phrases to express a personal opinion | <p><i>In my opinion</i></p> <p><i>In my view</i></p> <p><i>Personally, I think/ believe/feel that</i></p> <p><i>I am sure that</i></p> <p><i>I believe that</i></p> <p><i>From my point of view</i></p> |
| 3.2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phrases to give reasons for personal opinion | <p>- Phrases to enumerate arguments: <i>Firstly/ secondly/ thirdly etc.</i> <i>Also/ besides/ then/ more over etc.</i> <i>To begin with/ after that/ last but not least etc.</i></p> <p>- Phrases to express arguments-perspectives: <i>From a scientific standpoint, ... has led to significant advances (in...).</i> <i>From a social viewpoint, ... play an important role because...</i> <i>From an educational standpoint, it is vital that ...</i> <i>From an economic perspective, ... is obviously a step in the right (wrong) direction.</i> <i>From a moral/ethical perspective, ... is a wrong decision.</i> <i>As far as religion is concerned, ... is not a proper thing to do.</i> <i>On a personal/social level ... is (can be) a very positive step, too.</i> <i>Politically, ... is (can be) a very positive step towards building integration between countries.</i></p> |

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| | | <i>Psychologically, ... is extremely beneficial to / for...</i> |
| 4. | Express an opposing opinion and give 1–2 reasons for this opposing opinion | |
| 4.1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases to express an opposing opinion | <p>Although there are many advantages in ..., the opponents still consider ... a bad idea to ...</p> <p>However, it could be argued that the decision to... is appropriate in this situation. The opponents insist that...</p> <p>Despite/ In spite of</p> <p>Nevertheless</p> |
| 4.2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases to give reasons for an opposing opinion | <p>- Phrases to enumerate arguments: <i>Firstly/ secondly/ thirdly etc.</i> <i>Also/ besides/ then/ more over etc.</i> <i>To begin with/ after that/ last but not least etc.</i></p> <p>- Phrases to express arguments-perspectives: <i>From a scientific standpoint, ... has led to significant advances (in...).</i> <i>From a social viewpoint, ... play an important role because...</i> <i>From an educational standpoint, it is vital that ...</i> <i>From an economic perspective, ... is obviously a step in the right (wrong) direction.</i> <i>From a moral/ethical perspective, ... is a wrong decision.</i> <i>As far as religion is concerned, ... is not a proper thing to do.</i> <i>On a personal/social level ... is (can be) a very positive step, too.</i> <i>Politically, ... is (can be) a very positive step towards building integration between countries.</i> <i>Psychologically, ... is extremely beneficial to / for...</i></p> |
| 5. | Explain why you do not agree with the opposing opinion | |
| 5.1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases to express your disagreement with an opposing opinion | <p><i>While it is true under some circumstances, in real life it is not so.</i></p> <p><i>While it seems likely that..., it is also evident that...</i></p> <p><i>Nevertheless, the arguments above do not appear well-founded to me. One should take into account that...</i></p> |
| 5.2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phrases to give reasons why you disagree with an opposing opinion | See 4.2 |
| 6. | Make a conclusion restating your position. | |
| 6.1 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Answer the question if you agree with this statement | <p>All things considered, I would like to emphasize that + <u><i>Do you agree with the statement?</i></u></p> <p>To sum up, <u><i>I am fully convinced</i></u> that + <u><i>Do you agree with the statement?</i></u></p> <p>To sum up, <u><i>I firmly believe that</i></u> + <u><i>Do you agree with the statement?</i></u></p> |
| 6.2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summarize the essay's key points | <p>After all, <i>the facts</i> I have presented/put forward speak <i>for themselves</i>.</p> <p>After all, <i>the evidence</i> I have presented seems</p> |

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| | | conclusive enough. |
| 6.3 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Call for action/ advice, recommendation/ predictions about the future | <p>After all, <i>it can offer ... invaluable benefits</i> and do them a lot of good / do them more good than harm.</p> <p><u>I have no doubt about it</u> because despite some minor risks / potential flaws/drawbacks/ possible pitfalls ... <i>is the best solution (option) for ...</i></p> |
| 7. | Check your essay thoroughly | |

At the classes the students of both groups used the self-study algorithm while discussing Task 40, preparing the plan of writing the task, checking their own exam papers. At the end of the course, the students stated that the use of the self-study algorithm made it possible for them to understand the core of the task. They learned how to choose the statement, what types of statements can be, how to write an introduction, what an effective paraphrase is, what assessment criteria an examinee should keep in mind while completing the task etc.

Conclusion

The paper studies and analyzes the examination task in the written part of the Russian Unified State Examination in the English language. This task is called a written statement with reasoning elements or Task 40. The total score for the USE is 100 scores. The maximum score an examinee can get for this task is 14 scores. The time for task completion is 60 minutes. The aim of the exam is an objective assessment of the quality of training of students who have mastered the educational programs of secondary general education, using tasks of a standardized form (control measuring materials).

The analysis of the exam statistics in the English language shows that in 2019 all parts of the exam paper were performed slightly better than in the previous years. Yet, the results of the task of the part “Writing” are noticeably lower than the results of the tasks of other parts, which can be explained by insufficient development of productive skills from receptive skills.

In order to achieve the aim of the research: to work out the student’s guide helping students to complete task 40 successfully, the author studied the Demo version of task 40, the structure of task 40 (written statement with reasoning elements), assessment criteria, language material (syntax, morphology, vocabulary, phonetics), subject matter and analyzed the typical mistakes in Task 40 made by students at practice exams.

The study and analysis of the material on the problem under consideration made it possible to work out a self-study algorithm for examinees who are going to take a USE exam in English.

Firstly, when completing Task 40, it is important to read the instruction of the task carefully, pay attention to the number of the proposed statements, preparation time, and the number of words. Due to the fact that two statements are currently being offered for choice, the examinee should not be afraid to spend several minutes thinking about his choice: length of a statement; clarity (not duality) of the statement, knowledge of sufficient amount of vocabulary on the subject, personal experience on the topic, sufficient argumentation. It is not recommended to start writing one essay, and then move on to another. As a rule, in this case, the exam participants do not have enough time to complete the task. It should be noted that the rewritten statement of the assignment itself is not included in the word number of the text. It is necessary to show examinees the techniques that will allow them to increase or decrease the volume written by them: add or cross out some adjectives or cross out individual words or sentences that do not carry information and are redundant.

Secondly, it is important to know the criteria for assessing the essay and be aware of the fact that if an examinee receives 0 scores according to the criterion “Solution of the communicative problem”, the whole exam paper is assessed at 0 scores for all positions of assessment criteria. Thus, in the introduction, it is recommended to identify the kind of the statement, to single out the focus and the restriction words of the statement, to find the synonyms of the words given in the statement, think of alternative grammar structures, and paraphrase the statement. While writing the introduction, it is advisable to include a background statement, problem/ clash of opinions and use paraphrasing. An effective paraphrase has a different grammatical structure to the original, has a mainly different vocabulary, retains the same meaning, keeps some phrases from the original that are in common use: conventional words/phrases (people, teenagers, children, etc.) and specialized words/phrases (low grades, school uniform, etc.).

Thirdly, when expressing a personal opinion, the examinee should state his position clearly and support his opinion by 2-3 weighty arguments. When formulating the opposite opinion, the exam participant should understand that the arguments of the opposing opinion must differ from the arguments used to support his personal opinion. Moreover, the examinee must be able to disagree with the opposing opinion and the arguments supporting it. The counterarguments proposed by the examinees in the fourth paragraph should be logical. It is advisable to prove one’s point of view not in the same words as before but to use paraphrase and synonymy.

Fourthly, making a conclusion the examinee must restate his position. It is recommended to answer the question of Task 40 if he agrees with this statement and briefly summarizes the arguments supporting his opinion.

Lastly, it is necessary to check the essay thoroughly paying attention to grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation

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