A COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN TEACHING WRITING

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Abstract

In the globalisation era more and more people are asked to express themselves in English not only within the scientific community, but also in many other everyday life opportunities. Access to scientific and technical literature, sharing of ideas concerning topics of interest depend more and more on the ability to communicate in English. Communicative approach has change the way of teaching and learning writing, as well as students ’motivation. This theoretical approach underlines the fact that the teaching approach should be learning centred in order to help students to develop their own system of learning for improving their writing skills.

This paper shows what a marvelous adventure teaching writing can be for a teacher of English in a technical university.

1. Work Premises

The growth of business and scientific activities alongside with the opportunities of occupational mobility starting from the university period when students, future scientists or specialists, have the possibility to study and even work for a shorter or longer period in another European country reveals the need of using English as a medium of communication. On the other hand the electronic communications often performed in English require a fostering of written English knowledge for communication. In order to reinforce the communicative approach students are encouraged to take advantage of all kinds of life occasions for writing, from short messages to each other and their teachers or apologies, to initiate arrangements for meetings and business letters reports and essays writing. The communicative way of teaching writing develops the student’s self-confidence to succeed in professional and social encounters within an English-speaking global community.

That is why Course of Academic writing- Theory and Practice as well as Writing - Student’s book were written for the Civil Engineering Students from Bucharest Technical University, for those who try to complete their general knowledge of English already acquired during the first two years of University study within the Foreign Language Seminars. These courses addresses also to the students of the Department of Engineering in English as well as to all the graduates of the Technical University that want to improve their written skills in English.

It is a sad reality the fact that in our seminars one can see that writing has often been neglected in English learning. There are students who are proficient in speaking after a cross influence of school education and mass-media, or even music listening but when it comes to writing total nonsense appear, double subjects, homophones, inappropriate case of words crowd to destroy the work.
2. About the Writing Process

Writing is clearly a complex process, and competent writing is frequently accepted as being the last language skill to be acquired. Few people write spontaneously, and few feel comfortable with a formal writing task intended for the eyes of someone else. If the teacher is “the someone else” most people may feel uncomfortable.

People grow up speaking their first language, because speaking is acquired naturally, writing has to be taught. However, writing was for most of its history a minority occupation of relatively recent date. The history of mankind can be traced as back as 100,000 years ago while the earliest pieces of writing dates from about “only” 5,500. That means that the human activity of writing can be considered a rather recent one. Nevertheless it has become more and more important during the last period when acquiring a high professional knowledge is necessary. Do students need a special training for writing after almost ten years of language learning in colleges? Definitely the answer is YES. Let’s see why.

That is why writing has to be taught in a warm and supporting atmosphere. Specialists of all kinds as psychologists, linguists or methodologists consider that students must work with a partner or a group in order to simulate the real life activity of relation writer-reader. Otherwise the students write to an imaginary reader but cooperative writing makes the tasks more realistic and interactive.

R.F. Cohen and J.L Miller in their book *Reason to Write-Strategies for success in Academic Writing* (2003) point out that “writing in one’s own language is difficult enough, especially for students in technical and economic faculties. Imagine how much more daunting a task it is for students to write in a second language. If the weight of writing’s block does not inhibit their impulse to move forward with a writing assignment, their insecurity with the language and its particular in writing culture might make them stare at the blank page with trepidation.”

Therefore, they need a teacher and a good text book who can offer them models and can help the most reticent and timid writers overcome a potentially crippling writing phobia, and they must instill in their students the confidence needed to turn their thoughts into correct and acceptable English. Joseph M. Moxley (1994) in his book *Becoming an Academic Writer – Modern Rhetoric* points out that “Many of us fear that reflecting too much about how we write could dampen our creative attitude. Writing is not only an imitative practice but also an attitude.”

That is why Romanian students must realize that writing is not a self-contained process that emerges out of the relation ship between the writer and the emerging text. It is a process that requires awareness and self-evaluation of problems and willingness to practice it. To learn writing probes the contents of memory and the mind to discover the information, ideas and language that are the substance of writing. Writing is not only invention, arrangement, style, it is also the role of study how to do all these.

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3, Writing versus Speaking

Both writing and speaking are language skills that enable language users to express ideas and communicate them to others, but they are different because speaking is more related to here and now so it is more context bound—while writing is busy to consolidate a message to audience or an addressee (formed by one person in the case of a personal letter or more persons when it is a book or a scientific report, an advertisement for a new building material, etc.) In time and place receiver writing is more decontextualised.

Writing follows thinking, and it is common knowledge that a lot of people think in their first language. This is one of the reasons that make writing in a foreign language a difficult task, as communicative process writing, unlike speaking, unable users to record and to store information. Some of the main differences are listed in the following table.

| Spoken communication is dynamic transient, it is a natural process that results from exposure to it | Writing is space-bound, static, permanent, it has to be consciously learned |
| Spoken communication operates in the “here and now” world of immediate interaction, it is transient, it flies away. | Spoken communication transcends time and space, it tends to be more permanent, words stay for years and ever. |
| Because participants are typically in face-to-face interaction, they can rely on such extra linguistic cues as facial expression and gesture to aid meaning (feedback). | Lack of visual contact means that participants cannot rely on context to make their meaning clear; nor is there any immediate feedback. Most writing therefore avoids the use of deictic expressions, which are likely to be ambiguous. |
| We know or assume to whom we communicate thus deciding what to say in order to get. The addressee is more specifically known, we can see him or listen to him through the telephone. | The audience is known to be a more general addressee (a business partner, a bank director, a teacher). |
| Many words and constructions are characteristic of (especially informal) speech. Lengthy coordinate sentences are normal and often of considerable complexity. There is nonsense vocabulary, obscenity, and slang, some of which does not appear in writing, or occurs there only as graphic euphemism. | Some words and constructions are characteristic of writing, such as multiple instances of subordination in the same sentence, elaborately balanced syntactic patterns, and the long (often multi-page) sentences found in some legal documents. Certain items of vocabulary are never spoken, such as the longer names of chemical compounds. |
| Speech is very suited to social or “phatic” functions, such as passing the time of day, or any situation where casual and unplanned discourse is desirable. It is also good at expressing social relationships, and personal opinions and attitudes, due to the vast range of nuances that can be expressed by the prosody and accompanying non-verbal features. | Writing is very suitable to the recording of facts and the communication of ideas, and to tasks of memory and learning. Written records are easier to keep and scan; tables demonstrate relationships between things; notes and lists provide mnemonics; and text can be read at speeches that suit a person’s ability to learn. |
| There is an opportunity to rethink an utterance while it is in progress (starting again, adding a | Errors and other perceived inadequacies in our writing can be eliminated in later drafts without |

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3 Anne Laws Writing Skills, Summertown Publishing, 2006, p 3
We can change the flow of communication within the process of speaking according to the first exchange of conversation. However, errors, once spoken, cannot be withdrawn. The speaker can live with the consequences. Interruptions and overlapping speech are normal and highly audible.

The sender and the receiver often swap roles as the communication continues. The sender can repeat, rephrase or use “time buying” expressions like “so it is”, “well”, “you know”.

Unique features of speech include most of the prosody. The many nuances of intonation, as well as contrasts of loudness, tempo, rhythm, and other tones of voice cannot be written down with much efficiency.

It is an instant spontaneous but it involves planning and drafting in the speaker’s mind if the communication is formal or academic.

The sender and the receiver do swap roles when answer occurs and usually know each other (informal letters). In formal letters the sender introduces the authority to his problems and asks for help.

Unique features of writing include pages, lines, capitalization, spatial organization, and several aspects of punctuation. Only a few graphic conventions relate to prosody, such as question marks and underlining for emphasis.

It is more complex than spoken communication because it usually implies preparation, revision, organization, paragraph construction, choice of vocabulary.

Therefore, writing lacks the multitude of expressive possibilities that empower the speech:

- There is no place for gesture, body movement or silent language, facial expression, pitch and tone of voice, stress and hesitation.
- There is no the use of dialogue, or of techniques of negotiation and communicative management.
- There is no feedback or backtrack to clarify or revise ideas as in oral communication.

There are however some common methodological principles of speech and written communication. According to Gilles Ferreol and Noel Flageul⁴ (1998) these are:

1. Clearly define and understanding target of communication
2. The search and the organization of ideas to be communicated using different means (resources, effort of structuring the ideas, a certain plan etc)
3. The choice of appropriate vocabulary, of correct grammar structure and of clear style.

All these different purposes for language will imply differences within the sentence at the level of grammar and beyond the sentence at the level of text structure.

Hammond⁵ (1987) believes that it is crucial to understand the relation between oral and written language in order to develop an effective pedagogy for teaching.

It is sometimes suggested that the distinction between spoken and written language is the fact that spoken language is simpler than written language and is less structured.

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⁴ Ferreol, Gilles & Flageul, Noel (1998) Metode si Tehnici de exprimare scrisa si orala, Iasi, Polirom
⁵ Hammond (1987)
Holliday points out both written and spoken languages are complex. Spoken language is complex in the way clauses are linked together; written language is complex at the level of clause.

4. Scientific and Academic Writing

When writing for academic purposes some steps have to be followed. First one has to look for up-to-date books and articles. Then comes the next step meaning reading the bibliographies of these sources and look for any useful materials you find listed there. To use alternative on line bibliography from the internet and quote your sources may be of great help. After checking all sources one has to think carefully about the purpose of the writer and any possible bias they might have in writing, read selectively, taking brief notes that will help you to answer your questions. Note any areas of disagreement between your sources. Sometimes experts disagree, and this is worthy of discussion. When writing it is important to set a time limit on your reading to ensure that you start writing early, and to avoid plagiarism and quoting sources directly.

Teaching creative writing it may look impossible for a teacher dealing with future engineers. We often here phrases like that "I can’t think what to say” “I hate creative writing exercise” Writing essays may seem a difficult task but it becomes easier if students follow certain rules like don't try to write an essay from beginning to end, but rather write what seems readiest to be written. Despite writing so freely, they keep the essay's overall purpose and organization in mind, amending them as drafting proceeds.

Students have to face their problems. Some of the most frequent are listed below:

- General knowledge of the subject
- Grammar knowledge
- Vocabulary
- Getting ideas in order
- Expressing your ideas
- Spelling and punctuation

5. Conclusions

Teaching writing is a constant challenge so the final conclusions are hard to design but here are the most outstanding:

- teaching approach should be learning centred in order to help students to develop their own system of learning for improving their writing skills.
- functional patterns of writing. It aims to help students how to write, how to select and use information or to use their own creativity
- well designed practical tasks and exercises accompanied by short theoretical notes (essential information for tasks’ solving), should help students to acquire ability to complete an everyday writing task appropriately, coherently, showing a good control of structure vocabulary spelling and punctuation.
References