

Teaching writing through reading: a text-centred approach

Pilar Durán Escribano

Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

Abstract

The aim of this article is to establish the relevance of teaching reading and writing skills to students at Madrid Polytechnic University, and to show the relationship and interdependence of these activities in EAP courses. The skills involved in reading and writing processes for academic purposes for L2 students are compared and commented on from a rhetorical point of view. Learning tasks based on text-type analysis are recommended as adequate activities to build schemata for writing and represent a synthesis of the teaching objectives proposed for reading and writing English courses.

THE NEED FOR LITERACY IN ENGLISH

The relevance of English as an international language continues to increase as more and more people are being required to express themselves in English, especially within the scientific community. Access to much scientific and technical literature is becoming increasingly difficult for those with no knowledge of English; moreover, the growth of business and occupational mobility among countries of the European Community is resulting in a need for the English language as a common medium of communication. Furthermore, as electronic communications affect language changing the way it is used and creating a need for a 'global' language, English is being chosen to fulfil that purpose. As it is often said, in short, people will have two languages, one for everyday use, the other for communicating with the formal world: that language will be English. All these demands and requirements have fostered the expansion of one particular aspect of language teaching, namely, the teaching of Academic and Professional English.

Students enrolled in Academic Writing courses at University have usually completed one or more 'general' courses of English and need to further their knowledge for academic purposes or for particular reasons connected with their research or their jobs. These students, in contrast to their formal school learning experience, are well aware of their purpose in learning the language; consequently, ESP teachers design courses based on the study of their academic needs. The language taught is usually based in particular disciplines at higher levels of education when the student is either about to obtain a degree or undergoing postgraduate studies; therefore, he is already

specialising in a particular field and will probably need to be able to master skills such as listening to lectures in English, taking notes, reading and writing reports and research articles, and reading textbooks, among others. Above all, the student needs English in order *to gain access* to knowledge and *to express* in English the knowledge which he already has, dealing with scientific content.

EVOLUTION OF ACADEMIC ENGLISH COURSES

English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses have evolved in the same direction as English Language Teaching (ELT); they are part of the recent trend towards a more communicative basis for teaching and learning in a given context.

If we consider some of the earlier moves in the teaching of academic and/or professional English, we will see that they were little different from those associated with traditional ELT courses, except that texts of general subject interest were then substituted for those of academic content, whether scientific, technical or other. The typical format of this approach consisted of a selection of written texts followed by some explanation of specific vocabulary items, comprehension questions and different language exercises in vocabulary and grammar. Texts were drawn from a field close to the interests of the group of students taking the course, in an attempt to match the topic to the learners' subject area. However, the particular style in which the texts were written was often inadequate, reflecting a literary rather than a scientific audience, and the texts were frequently not authentic texts.

Although the aim behind this approach was to enable the student to read scientific texts, the definition of *reading* was limited. Learners were not taught to develop reading strategies; comprehension questions following the texts had as their only purpose to make sure that the learner had grasped the content, and grammar practice aimed mostly at correctness. The novelty was the addition of vocabulary items drawn from the relevant subjects areas, but the consideration of language as a two-way instrument of communication between writer and reader was lacking.

Another step in the move to adapt EAP content to the student's needs, also based on written texts, attempted to familiarise the foreign student with the kind of writing and kind of statements he is likely to find in his reading of scientific and technical literature (Herbert, 1965). Herbert shows that certain linguistic and scientific notions can be expressed in a variety of structural forms, grouped under the appropriate notions, which he teaches to his students. This useful approach aiming at correctness, does not show the learner how sentences fit into the structure of a text, how a line of thought is presented to a reader. The contents of a course following Herbert's approach were selected in the main on an intuitive basis, from the point of view of his experience teaching English to non-native speakers in an academic context.

A further step which focused on courses based on research into scientific text was Ewer and Latorre's *A course in Basic Scientific English* (1969). The authors analysed more than three million words of scientific English, covering most of the areas of science and technology, taken from a variety of sources. From these same sources they chose the most frequent grammatical patterns, structural words and vocabulary items including prefixes and suffixes, common to scientific discourse. The result was an excellent selection of what to teach but little was said to the students as to when they should use each structure and what the structure means as an act of communication.

Other authors such as Eckersley and Kaufman (1973) focused mainly on structure and vocabulary, though they were also concerned with giving models, usually for business communication. We may say that non-native speakers were offered just a correspondence style for imitation which did not do much to encourage a student to consider specific English as a vehicle for creative communication. It was Widdowson (1978) who stressed this aspect of language, distinguishing between “usage” and “use”. He described “usage” as the language viewed as isolated items of grammatical structure whereas “use” the language employed to express ideas through a set of theoretical acts.

A more recent teaching trend considers writing as a process and encourages students to engage in it understanding the conventions involved in written communication (Oster, 1987; White & Arndt, 1991; Carson & Leki, 1993). This approach implies an effort on the part of teacher and students, engaging both parties as *writers* and *critical readers*, understanding that meaning is not what one starts out with but what one ends up with as one moves from draft to draft. Judith Oster (1987) relates her experience as language teacher, saying that the student encouraged to take part in such creative process will feel he is working on something worthwhile, and consequently will be more willing to correct and rewrite his composition. “What we are calling writing, must also be a thinking process, an organized, intelligent activity, not just a way of covering a page; ... both teacher and student will be working together through the process of thinking and rethinking, writing and rewriting” a particular text in order to make it readable. (Oster, 1987:x).

Discovering what it is that one has to say may not come easily from the very beginning. In many an occasion, the writer will only be able to identify the main point during the writing of the draft; drafting is often the means of disclosing to oneself a focal idea which, as the writing progresses, may turn out to be different from what one originally thought. White and Arndt (1991) point out that the lack of such a focus has two main consequences. First, that the *writer* will find it difficult to organise ideas coherently since there will be no central idea around which to structure the peripheral ones; and second, that the *reader* will encounter difficulty in grasping what it is the writer is trying to get across, and may react to the text negatively.

Taking into account that engineering students need to master a specific English, related to the content of their field of studies, instruction turned to be content-based (CBI). At the same time a new teaching trend known as task-based language teaching (TBLT) developed, considering the very precise objectives of EAP courses. Recently, Carrell and Carson (1997) have compared CBI (content-based instruction) with TBLT (task-based language teaching), stating that both CBI and TBLT are based on the idea that communicative purposes are essential in real language learning since language acquisition occurs when the learner focuses on the completion of tasks rather than on the language used in the process. However, the curriculum organizing principle for TBLT is *task*, whereas for CBI is *content*; the latter more appropriate for reading for the purpose of extracting information, whereas the former, applied to a reading course emphasizes the learning of reading strategies.

Reading strategies must be taught that will enable learners to comprehend the text in a way that will allow them to produce an appropriate essay. /...Because task-based reading is grounded in learners' needs, EAP instruction that focuses on task mastery does maintain a clear connection with genuine language in genuine communicative interactions. (Carrel & Carson, 1997: 55-56).

Taking into account that experienced readers are able to pick up clues that help them understand the writer's train of thought, and anticipate or predict what the author is going to say next, provided the text is well-written, much of our effort should be conducted to train our students to interpret texts and to practise with them predicting skills which will help their development of logical thinking and communication patterns. Therefore, the E.A.P. courses we designed should aim at developing two inseparably related communicative abilities: *reading and writing*. This represents a new development to teaching which is expressed in the form of texts more closely linked to the skills required by the student and by a functional rather than by a structural approach. But new developments imply new methodologies, and these affect the learner as well as the teacher. Much E.A.P. material used in such courses should adopt a problem-solving approach, stressing involvement and participation of the student.

READING AND WRITING OBJECTIVES

To a student used to a methodology based on teacher-talk and note-taking practices as our engineering students are, involvement and participation in class activities may cause difficulty initially. If we consider *reading skills*, we realise that many students are used to a word-by-word approach and to a concept of reading which implies knowing the meaning of every word in a printed text rather than to an interactive approach; exercises to practise skimming and scanning a text, reading for a particular purpose, may have been foreign in many language classes or not as frequent as they should. Furthermore, if we take into account that in our technical schools at *Universidad Politécnica de Madrid*, English is a subject on the curriculum because the students, future engineers, need not only to consult bibliography in English but also to be able to write to institutions where English is the language spoken and to take part in international congresses, reading and writing skills become indispensable. What this means, of course, is that teacher and students alike will be facing a greater challenge. We want to introduce students to good writing habits and good reading is an important step toward good writing; this is why the teaching of *writing skills* should be preceded by good *reading ability*.

Kennedy and Bolitho (1985) consider that the problems of teaching reading and writing to students are similar in that both activities are concerned with a written text rather than with the spoken word. They point out that the signals and indicators that are mentioned with regard to reading are equally relevant in any discussion of writing.

The actual content of the written text may be the same but the difference is that reading is concerned with the recognition of aspects of that structure, whereas writing has to do with the production of the text. In this respect reading may be regarded as a necessary precondition for any writing task, since the writer must be aware of the structure of a particular type of writing before he can produce it. (Kennedy & Bolitho, 1985: 85).

The notion of the structure of a text is important and learners should be exposed to samples of different type of writing if they are to produce coherent texts, as it has

been said previously. Based on this premise, I have determined the learning objectives applied to reading and writing for one of the E.A.P. courses I teach, and which I present in table 1 just as an example of how such objectives may be established in a coordinated manner.

TABLE 1.- EAP LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Reading Objectives

(Recognition)

- 1.- Distinguish formal-scientific from informal registers.
- 2.- Identify audience and medium.
- 3.- Identify type of writing and its structure.
- 4.- Locate main ideas: distinguish core statement from peripheral ones.
- 5.- Locate facts; locate opinion.
- 6.- Identify logical connectors.
- 7.- Identify referential words and their antecedent.
- 8.- Deduce meaning according to context.
- 9.- Summarise main facts & ideas.
- 10.- Deduce implied information.

Writing Objectives

(Production)

- 1.- Decide tenor and register according to audience and medium.
- 2.- Express scientific rhetorical functions (description, definition, classification, argumentation, exemplification, etc...)
- 3.- Lay out contents according to type of writing.
- 4.- Organize information deciding upon given/ new balance.
- 5.- Determine topic sentences.
- 6.- Write clear paragraphs.
- 7.- Use discourse markers and connectors.
- 8.- Keep textual coherence (repetition, referential words)
- 9.- Write a summary.
- 10.- Write an abstract.

Indeed, there may be other reading and writing objectives related to different type of courses. This particular one focuses on the organizational aspects of texts that help the *reader* to locate information easily and the *writer* to present his ideas in a logical and

coherent way; as well as on aspects of language related to appropriacy and readability, such as the use of adequate register and cohesion.

BUILDING SCHEMATA FOR WRITING

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) claims that we acquire language by understanding messages or obtaining comprehensible input; it accounts for the success of programmes in which students acquire a second language through the comprehensible presentation of subject matter in the second language and states that the key factor determining acquisition of competence in an L2 is *exposure* to large amounts of meaningful, interesting or relevant L2 input material. Krashen (1989) studied the power of reading on language acquisition on the basis that reading becomes comprehensible input provided that texts are both interesting and understandable so that they capture the learners' attention. His research on reading exposure supports the view that it increases not only reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition, but it improves grammatical development and writing style. Krashen (1989:109) states that "reading exposure is the primary means of developing language skills". Based on this hypothesis, Wai-King Tsang (1996) carried out an experiment comparing the effectiveness of an extensive reading programme and a frequent writing programme on the acquisition of descriptive writing skills in English by a group of Hong Kong secondary students. His findings show the importance of linguistic input in the acquisition of writing abilities, questioning whether students' writing can improve with activities that exclusively focus on output. Error correction affects learning 'about' the language, not acquisition; when our errors are corrected, we rethink and adjust our conscious rules which help one aspect of good style which is correctness, but only this aspect. As a matter of fact, Wai-King Tsang's study shows that in the area of language use, the reading programme was the only one of the three he administered to students which proved to be significantly effective on the acquisition of writing skills.

From the previous evidence, we may conclude that through reading we have the opportunity of being exposed to well-organized and well-written pieces of writing which help us to improve our language abilities and to build writing schemata. Through writing we acquire the habit of expressing our ideas in a clear, correct and coherent way, fulfilling a double purpose: to be a medium of communication with others and a means of personal intellectual growth. We cannot forget that writing shows off the competence gained by the student and helps him to correct himself and improve his level of language competence. "Writing is, however, a powerful intellectual tool for cognitive development - it can make you smarter. ... Writing enables us to explore and change the worlds of ideas and experiences the brain creates". (Krashen, 1987:116). But in order to be effective communicators, students should be familiarised with language purposes as they take the form of texts addressed to specific communities to fulfil concrete communicative goals; this is gained through the practice of text analysis frequently present in class activities.

A TEXT- CENTRED APPROACH

Specialised texts of any sort, whether written or spoken, have several characteristics which distinguish them from other texts. The type of text the learner is aiming towards will change its characteristics according to a number of variables. *Topic* will considerably affect vocabulary. The *medium* of communication will also have to be taken into account: journal, newspaper, letter,... The *mode*, that is whether the text is spoken but written down; spoken with no reference to written form, or written to be read. For the purpose of this article we have concentrated on written texts, since spoken ones do not fall within the realm of our concern at this point, as we have already said.

To communicate a message effectively, writers 'frame' a portion of all the possibilities for expression available to them by focusing upon a central idea or a viewpoint which will unify and inform the text they produce (White and Arndt, 1991). A reader's expectation is that a writer will have something to say; that there will be some intellectual commitment to a line of thought or to the transmission of certain information. Therefore, the writer should arrange his arguments logically so that he can be easily understood, bearing in mind the academic community to whom he is addressing his piece of writing.

Moreover, the line of thought, focal idea or thesis, which the writer wishes to put across, should be the answer to the reader's question: *what are you trying to tell me?* Both reading and writing are interactive processes between the reader and the writer of every text. We should take into account that the constitution and use of texts are controlled by the principles of effectiveness and appropriateness: a typology of texts must be correlated with typologies of discourse and situations, since the appropriateness of a text type to its setting is essential. Therefore, learning to write in a foreign language implies much more than acquiring the linguistic tools needed to communicate meaning. What is also required is knowledge about how different kinds of texts are conventionally structured and presented to the scientific community. Thus, the *argumentative* text type, for example, has a contextual focus on the evaluation of relations between concepts; the *expository* text type is laid out taking into account the analysis and synthesis of the constituent elements of given concepts; the *instructional* one aims at the transmission of knowledge and the formation of future behaviour. Text types are expected to have certain traits which fulfil certain purposes. Consequently, the reader will also have to bear in mind the discourse community to which the text belongs and deduce the writer's aims in publishing such piece of writing; semantical aspects related to specific terminology will also be conditioned by discourse communities, and this knowledge will be of great help for the exchange of information.

As Swales has it,

A discourse community has developed /... discursal expectations leading to the development and use of distinctive text-types involving specialised terminology, appropriacy of topics, the form, functioning and position of discursal elements, and the roles texts play in the operation of the discourse community (Swales, 1990:26).

In order to facilitate a good structuring of texts to our students, we should familiarise them with text analysis. Thus, the reader, as the writer has previously done, should study the text configuration and decide whether it is an argumentative article; or the description of a process; or a piece of research; or a narrative type of text. McCarthy (1991: 147-152) points out that the analysis and classification of texts is a good teaching activity. He considers that learners of English as a second language will greatly benefit from the analysis of different text types which he conceives as adequate learning tasks not only for English as a foreign language learners, but for native speakers, too. The same author (McCarthy, 1994:22 - 23) details how to analyse texts in their context and provides the example of a *report* written in seven different contexts to suit seven specific goals. Along the same line, Bhatia explores the particular genres of legal texts and discusses text-task relationship in English for legal purposes courses (Bhatia, 1993: 175-182).

But given the hybrid nature of texts, which are as varied as the author's goals in writing, the teacher cannot leave aside the training of his students in the identification and use of the most important rhetorical functions of scientific English, as well as in all the reading strategies which enable learners to understand texts and their genres, as I have mentioned above when specifying the writing objectives. He should also practise with the students the identification and the use of markers; and the cohesive devices and logical connectors most appropriate to each of the different type of texts. Not from a theoretical, lecture-type approach, but providing them with abundant practical applications in groups and individually.

CONCLUSION

Text analysis is an important means for building schemata for writing. Comparing characteristics of text types helps the student to succeed matching the reader's with the writer's expectations. Writing is seldom done exclusively in one rhetorical mode, so students need to practise different discursual functions so they can construct good, clear pieces of writing. As readers, we have certain expectations about the content, structure, development and graphic appearance of diverse types of written texts. These expectations are used by both writers and readers in composing and reading, and when they coincide, clarity and comprehension are facilitated. Therefore, familiarity with different type of texts will help reader and writer to exchange information satisfactorily.

If we take into consideration that authors write to be read, we come to the conclusion that our students -future engineers- should be trained to do everything possible to ease their potential readers the task of finding relevant information. Reading puts the learner in touch with other minds so that he can experience the ways in which writers have organized information, selected words and structured arguments. Teaching writing through reading becomes an important pedagogical instrument which may be the basis for successful academic writing courses.

REFERENCES

- Bhatia, V.K. (1993). *Analysing Genre: Language Use in Professional Settings*. Longman.
- Carrell, P. & Carson, J. (1997). "*Extensive and Intensive Reading in an EAP setting*", *English for Specific Purposes*, Vol. 16/ 1: 47-60.
- Carson, J. & Leki, I. (1993). *Reading in the composition classroom: Second Language Perspectives*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Crookes, G. (1985). '*Towards a validated analysis of scientific text structure*', *AppliedLinguistics* Vol. 7/1: 57-70
- Ewer, J and Latorre, G. (1969). *A Course in Basic Scientific English*. Longman.
- Herbert, A. (1978). *The Structure of Technical English*. Longman.
- Kennedy, C and Bolitho, R. (1985). *English for Specific Purposes*. Macmillan.
- Krashen, S. (1985). *The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications*. Harlow: Longman.
- Krashen, S. (1989). *Language Acquisition and Language Education*. Prentice Hall International, U.K.
- McCarthy, M and Carter, R. (1994). *Language as Discourse. Perspectives for Language Teaching*. Longman.
- McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers*. C.U.P.
- Oster, I. (1987). *From Reading to Writing*. Little, Brown and Co. Boston.
- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis*. C.U.P.
- Wai-King Tsang (1996). "*Comparing the effects of reading and writing on writing performance*". *Applied Linguistics* Vol. 17/2: 210-233.
- Widdowson, H. (1978). *Teaching Language as Communication*. London, O.U.P.
- White, R. and Arndt, V. (1991). *Process Writing*. Longman.