

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WRITTEN DISCOURSE COMPETENCE IN ELT MATERIALS: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Trends in discourse analysis have brought to language teaching an interest in communication through effective discourse, moving beyond the traditional focus on the sentence. We analyse this trend in communicative competence in writing, and establish some criteria for the development of written discourse competence in pedagogical tasks. We then review several ELT coursebooks, analyzing their provision of writing activities which fit the criteria. Text types, degrees of formality and informality, and linking words are present; however, there remains room for improvement in terms of raising L2 writers' awareness of audience, interaction and context, and of micro-level concerns of text structuring.

KEY WORDS: Communicative competence, discourse analysis, discourse competence, ELT materials, writing skill.

RESUMEN

En el presente artículo estudiaremos el tratamiento que ha recibido la competencia discursiva escrita en los principales modelos de competencia comunicativa y delimitaremos algunos criterios para su aplicación pedagógica. Después, analizaremos las actividades de expresión escrita que ofrecen una selección de libros de texto de inglés como lengua extranjera, en base a los criterios anteriormente descritos. Finalmente, constataremos que, a pesar de los avances realizados en el desarrollo de la competencia discursiva escrita en los materiales analizados, queda mucho que hacer todavía para concienciar a nuestros alumnos de la naturaleza interactiva del discurso, o de su estructuración a nivel micro-textual.

PALABRAS CLAVE: competencia comunicativa, análisis del discurso, competencia discursiva, libros de texto en inglés como lengua extranjera, expresión escrita.

It is in discourse and through discourse that all of the other competencies are realized. And it is in discourse and through discourse that the manifestation of the other competencies can best be observed, researched and assessed.

(Celce-Murcia & Olshain, *Context* 16)



1. INTRODUCTION

For many years during the first half of the xx century and well into the second half, language teaching, like linguistics, used the sentence as its basic unit of analysis. In language teaching this meant that rules, examples, exercises, and activities focused on individual sentences. This approach legitimized decontextualised language practice, and generations of learners were often left in the dark in terms of linking these sentences into meaningful stretches of discourse. However, from the 50s onwards, linguists have progressively become more interested in describing the characteristics of discourse, its use in context and its social meaning. Various schools of text linguistics have been very influential in shifting attention away from sentence-based study of language in second language teaching. This is the case of the model of textual cohesion associated with Halliday and Hasan (Halliday & Hasan, *Cohesion*; Hasan), or the studies on the generic structure of various types of spoken and written texts (Halliday & Hasan, *Language*; Swales). In the study of written discourse, Werlich's characterization of different text types (narrative, descriptive expository and argumentative), was also enormously influential among German teachers of English in the 1980s (cit. McCarthy, "Discourse"). Also in Northern Europe, the school of text linguistics associated with van Dijk, and de Beaugrande & Dressler addressed questions concerning cognitive processing of extended written texts which, together with Schema theory (Rumelhart), introduced a new understanding of the reading process as the result of the interaction between the reader's world and the text itself (Carrell). Finally, the school of rhetorical structure analysis (Grimes; Longacre; Mann & Thompson) together with the work of Winter ("Approach," *Grammar*) and Hoey (*Surface, Textual*) on clause relations also had their application in reading pedagogy and in the study of writing.

As a consequence of the application of all these studies (and many more) to language learning and teaching, discourse or text¹ has become the basic unit of analysis, and language textbooks present texts, short or long, as a basis for both understanding and practicing language use within larger meaningful contexts. Besides, discourse analysts have brought readers and writers to the fore, laying emphasis on the text as an intermediary between sender and receiver, rather than as a detached object in which meaning is somehow stored. In attempting to re-construct the mental processes readers go through, cognitive approaches to discourse have offered practical pointers for classroom methods, such as pre-text activities in the reading class designed to activate background knowledge (or schemata) or stu-

¹ A piece of discourse is "[...] an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g. words, structures, cohesion) that relate coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a give audience/interlocutor" (Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, *Context 4*). Text, however, is the medium through which discourse realises linguistically (Georgakopoulou & Goutsos).

dent analyses of their own texts as a step in process approaches to writing skills (Connor).

Another influence of linguists' progressive interest in discourse is the evolution of the notion of discourse competence within the different pedagogical models of communicative competence existing in the literature (Canale & Swain; Canale; Bachman; Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell; Bachman & Palmer; Alcón; *inter alia*). According to Widdowson (135):

Communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences and being able to employ such rules to assemble expressions from scratch as and when occasion requires. It is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules, so to speak, and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual standards.

The notion of communicative competence has evolved from Hymes' notion through Canale and Swain's work to provide a pedagogical framework with their division into four competencies: grammatical competence, socio-linguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Discourse competence was first defined by Canale & Swain and Canale as the ability to combine language structures into different types of cohesive texts. As we will see in the following pages of this article, the notion of discourse competence has progressively grown in different models of communicative competence from being characterized in isolation as just one of the four subcompetencies (Canale & Swain; Canale; Bachman; Bachman & Palmer) to prevail over the others as the central competency (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell; Alcón; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain *Context, "Analysis"*). Consequently, the latter scholars defend the aptness of a discourse-oriented curriculum in ELT which places special emphasis on three areas: context, text types and communicative goals.

As linguists, we share a vision of discourse competence which places the discourse component in a central position, "[...] where the lexico-grammatical microlevel intersects with the top-down signals of the macrolevel of communicative intent and sociocultural context to express attitudes and messages, and to create texts" (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell 13) However, as L2 teachers, we wonder up to which extent this vision of communicative competence and a discourse-oriented practice in ELT are present in our real day-by-day teaching activity. For example, it is common to find L2 students with serious difficulties to create coherent spoken and written texts with reference to a particular message and context. To this respect, Alcón, in her excellent article on spoken discourse competence, analyses samples of language present in widely used ELT materials and her conclusions are that they do not provide the necessary conditions (such as contextualization) for the optimal development of students' spoken discourse competence. To our knowledge, there are no studies of this kind on the development of discourse competence through writing in ELT materials used in Spain.

Therefore, our intention in the rest of this paper is to examine discourse taught through ELT teaching materials with the aim of obtaining insight into how



close/far we are from a discourse-oriented curriculum and, more specifically, to study how written discourse competence is developed in the ELT classroom in Spain. We firmly believe in the goodness of a discourse-oriented curriculum in ELT, where expectations related to student achievement centered on the students' linguistic and cultural background are taken into account; where texts and other teaching materials are selected or designed to be compatible with the student audience; where classroom activities simulate real needs outside the classroom, and so forth. To this end, we will first look more closely at the notion of discourse competence within the above-mentioned discourse-oriented models of communicative competence (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurrell; Alcón; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain *Context*, "Analysis"). From that discussion we will establish criteria for analyzing materials which would allow for the effective development of discourse competence through writing activities. We will then apply those criteria to a limited group of selected ELT teaching materials with a communicative approach which are widely used in Spain. It is not our intention to carry out an exhaustive analysis, but to reveal specific pedagogical practices in ELT materials. We believe the results of such materials-centred research in turn will enhance our understanding of discourse-based approaches to education in general and to language teaching in particular.

2. TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE NOTION OF WRITTEN DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

In this section we will approach some discourse-oriented models of communicative competence, in search of a pedagogical model which allows us to define the notion of written discourse competence and to establish criteria to test to what extent written discourse competence is developed in ELT materials.

How does the notion of discourse competence in writing fit into a pedagogical model of communicative competence? With regard to the notion of communicative competence itself, Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurell object to previous models such as those of Canale & Swain, Bachman, and Bachman & Palmer for two main reasons. First of all, in these models, the subcompetencies are presented as discrete units, with no specification of the relationship amongst them. Secondly, in the case of the latter two models (Bachman; Bachman & Palmer), these were conceived with the goal in mind of evaluating communicative competence, not teaching it. Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurell strive to present a construct of communicative competence that is "consumable for classroom practice" (29). In their model, communicative competence is viewed as consisting of five subcompetencies: sociocultural, linguistic, actional, discourse and strategic. Sociocultural competence is concerned with the speaker's knowledge of how to communicate appropriately within a given socio-cultural context of communication. Linguistic competence includes knowledge of the lexico-grammatical resources of the language, along with its phonological and orthographic systems. Actional competence refers to the ability to convey and understand communicative intent through speech acts. Discourse



competence concerns the organization of words, phrases, structures and sentences into a unified text.

The difference from previous models of Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurell's is in how the different competencies interact and relate with each other. They envision their model as a triangle with a circle in the middle. The three corners of the triangle belong to sociocultural, actional and linguistic competence, while the circle in the middle is the domain of discourse competence. Thus discourse competence exists in a reciprocal relationship with the other competencies and their model "places the discourse component in a position where the lexico-grammatical building blocks, the actional organizing skills of communicative intent, and the socio-cultural context come together and shape the discourse, which, in turn, also shapes each of the other three components" (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurell 9). The fifth competence, strategic, is presented as encircling the whole pyramid/circle structure, as it is "an ever-present, potentially usable inventory of skills that allows a strategically competent speaker to negotiate messages and resolve problems or to compensate for deficiencies in any of the other underlying competencies" (9).

This pedagogical vision of discourse competence as the core or central competency is not shared by some recent and fundamental publications on language teaching. For example, in the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (henceforth *CEF*) communicative competence is presented as consisting of discrete components: linguistic, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Linguistic competence is further divided into lexical, grammatical, semantic, phonological, orthographic and orthoepic competencies. Sociolinguistic competence deals with "the social dimension of language use" (118), including linguistic markers of social relations, politeness conventions, expressions of folk-wisdom, register differences, and dialects and accents. Pragmatic competence is subdivided into discourse, functional and design competencies. Discourse competence, being of special interest to our purposes, is defined as "the ability of a user/learner to arrange sentences in sequence so as to produce coherent stretches of language" (123) in terms of:

- topic/focus
- given/new
- 'natural' sequencing: e.g. temporal: *He fell over and I hit him*, as against *I hit him and he fell over*.
- cause/effect
- ability to structure and manage discourse in terms of:
 - thematic organization
 - coherence and cohesion
 - logical ordering
 - style and register
 - rhetorical effectiveness

- Grice's *cooperative principle* (the maxims of quality, quantity, relevance and manner)
- text design (knowledge of organization and conventions of different text types)



The interesting aspect of this list is that it demonstrates that, in spite of the fact that the *CEF* model presents the general competencies in a discrete way, the different competencies do indeed interact for the production of effective discourse. For example, register, which is included as an element of sociolinguistic competence, is deemed here necessary also for discourse competence. We agree with this perception of discourse competence as bringing together elements of the subcompetencies. To produce effective discourse, a learner/user needs to dominate the linguistic and the sociolinguistic code, to know the necessary lexical items, in a given situation for example, as well as the appropriate forms of address.

This view has been further developed in more recent studies on discourse analysis and language teaching (Celce-Murcia & Olshain *Context*, “Analysis”) and in Spain, by Alcón, in her article on spoken discourse competence and its development in the L2 classroom. Alcón coincides with Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurell as she also sees as positive the interrelationship amongst the different competencies; it is this interrelationship that leads to the creation of discourse. Alcón, like Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurell sees discourse competence as “el componente vertebrado al hablar del concepto de competencia comunicativa” (261). The main difference between Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei & Thurell’s model and Alcón’s proposal is that the former places discourse competence in a central position, holding a reciprocal relationship with the other competencies, sociocultural, linguistic and actional, while the latter views discourse competence as subsuming linguistic competence, pragmatic competence and textual competence. The following table illustrates Alcón’s model of communicative competence (262):

DISCOURSE COMPETENCE	LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE
	TEXTUAL COMPETENCE
	PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE
PSYCHOMOTOR SKILLS	READING
	WRITING
	LISTENING
	SPEAKING
STRATEGIC COMPETENCE	COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES
	LEARNING STRATEGIES

Table 1. Alcón’s proposed model of communicative competence

The reciprocity between the three distinct overall competencies in her model, discourse competence, psychomotor skills competence (reading, writing, listening, speaking) and strategic competence, comes about through how each of the different competencies serves the others. Discourse competence serves the four skills, which interact with each other in order that language be utilized communicatively,



while strategic competence is observable in the four skills, and includes communicative as well as learning strategies. From a pedagogical point of view, we feel that Alcón's discourse-oriented model of communicative competence is optimal, as "the unity of the text involves appropriateness and depends on contextual factors such as status of the participants, purpose of the interaction, and norms or conventions of interaction" (Schachter 43). Besides, Alcón's approach based on the interaction between discourse competence and the four skills allows us to frame our investigation on up to what extent discourse competence is developed through writing activities in ELT materials. Therefore, we will focus and expand on Alcón's spoken discourse competence, by applying it to written discourse.

With respect to written discourse, Alcón's linguistic competence includes mastery of the orthographic system of the language, as well as of lexical, morphological and syntactic elements, i.e., the ability to form meaningful and correct phrases and sentences. Textual competence is not clearly defined in Alcón's proposal, so we must assume she refers to the ability of writers to combine linguistic forms into cohesive and coherent texts. We believe Alcón's term "textual competence" is equivalent to Canale & Swain's or *CEFs*'s "discourse competence," in terms of content. This involves competence in the areas of "cohesion," "coherence," "deixis" and "generic structure" (formal schemata).

Pragmatic competence, again with special reference to writing, has at its heart the understanding of the expression of social relations and politeness, along with register differences. This would involve a learner in manipulating linguistic structures which express greater or lesser degrees of formality, and thus understanding the conventions for interaction of the given genre. Without this understanding, it is difficult for writers to produce effective written texts, as "in pursuing their personal and professional goals, writers seek to embed their writing in a particular social world which they reflect and conjure up through particular approved discourses" (Hyland, *Discourses* 1). This embedding of their writing involves writers in not only understanding and being able to manipulate the conventions of a given genre or discourse practice, but constantly and consistently keeping in mind their readers. Hoey (*Textual*) distinguishes between the reader(s) of text and the audience, or "the intended readership, the imaginary person or persons whom the writer addresses [...]" (14). Thus, a major element in written discourse competence is the ability to manage effectively the interaction between the writer and the intended audience. In terms of interaction, the major difference between written and spoken communication is that the latter tends to (with major exceptions, such as radio, television and film) involve little distance between interlocutors (Alonso). However, writers write at a remove from their intended readership, and thus must provide texts which are strategically planned to allow for the writer's message to be decoded and understood. Thus, the writer is responsible for creating a well-written text that has cohesion and coherence and takes the potential reader's background knowledge into account. Experienced writers are sensitive to the reader as well as to background knowledge and potential content schemata and thus are able to use elaboration skills to create a text that is comprehensible and communicative in nature.



How do all these competencies come together in the production of written discourse? The understanding of the sanctioned practices in a given social and cultural context for a given piece of writing, as well as the desire to write a strategically effective text for interaction, will have a constant shaping effect on the linguistic choices made during the process of writing the text. These choices are at several levels; for example, in terms of the lexis and grammar of a text, writers need to make choices between, for example, latinized words or their Anglo-Saxon counterparts; between nominalizations with copular verbs or lexicalized verbs with shorter and simpler noun phrases (Jones; Martin; Gallagher & McCabe); passive or active voice (Halliday & Martin). These lexico-grammatical choices are in part governed by the genre: lab reports use the passive voice as agency is unimportant; and recipes in English conventionally use the imperative in giving instructions. The choices also have to do with the subject matter of the text, whether we are dealing with science or with the shopping list will determine if we refer to something as a tuberiferous root or a potato.

These choices are also caught up in the type of interaction the writer (either by their own choice or by the conventions of the genre) sets up with the intended audience, or, to put it another way, on the type of reader the author has in mind and constructs through the text. Authors may address their audience directly with second person pronouns, and indeed may refer to themselves directly, making their text more overtly interactional. Or they may construe their take on propositions through impersonal projecting clauses and extraposition (Thompson & Thetela; Whittaker; Hyland, “Boosting”).

Writers also need to make choices in terms of the organization of their text. For example, they need to decide on different types of cohesive devices, when to use exact repetition or synonyms, or when it is appropriate to use ellipsis. They need to effectively and efficiently structure and sequence phrases, clauses and sentences to provide for ease of processing of text based on thematization and information structure. They also need to know the formal schemata of different genres and text type (narrative, essay, report, etc.).

In this section, we believe we have provided evidence to support the thesis that discourse competence brings together linguistic, pragmatic and textual knowledge of discourses which function as communicative texts in written form. It involves understanding the contextual factors involved in the conception of the written text: the audience, the purpose, the generic conventions, the most appropriate register. It also involves a certain degree of competence within the lexico-grammatical system itself. Thus, Celce-Murcia’s work on discourse competence, together with Alcón’s application to spoken discourse, can also be adapted to a tentative framework of written discourse competence. We believe that ELT materials which serve to promote discourse competence in writing should provide tasks and activities which raise learners awareness of and allow them practice in:

- adaptation of texts to different contexts and situations
- awareness of possible readers’ cultural and situational specific schemata (i.e. the ability to adapt a text to different audiences, such as children and adults)



- the structuring of text at different levels:
 - cohesive devices
 - information structure (given/new)
 - Theme-Rheme patterns
 - rhetorical relationships between clauses and sentences
 - patterns of sequencing, such as general-particular and problem-solution
 - overall generic structures
 - text types
- the different linguistic choices which construe degrees of formality and politeness in written text
- typical lexico-grammatical choices for construing the subject matter of given genres and text types

In the following pages we will analyse writing activities in popular English language teaching materials in Spain to test to what extent they take into account the above criteria, and thus address written discourse competence. As we mentioned in the introduction, it is not our intention to carry out an exhaustive analysis, but to point out pedagogical practices in ELT materials which allow us to learn about how we develop written discourse competence in our daily teaching practice.

3. WRITTEN DISCOURSE COMPETENCE IN ACTION: A REVISION OF SOME ELT MATERIALS

The ELT materials (students' books) we have reviewed are: *File*, upper-intermediate; *Cutting Edge*, upper-intermediate; *English File*, upper-intermediate; *Inside Out*, level IV; *English Panorama*, advanced; and *Changing Skies*, advanced.

All of them approach ELT from a communicative perspective and have the following characteristics: they have been recently published; they cover 90-120 hours of work; they offer an integrated writing syllabus or mention writing as an important aspect of their methodological proposal; they are widely used in Spain in the Escuelas Oficiales de Idiomas, academies and State high schools.

All text books range from upper intermediate to advanced level of English since students at that level are supposed to have a significant level of linguistic competence; this would in theory leave more time and space available for integration of linguistic competence with both textual competence and pragmatic competence to promote overall discourse competence in writing.

At this stage we must point out that we have not considered here activities which centre on the planning stages of writing. Many of the coursebooks do aim at this aspect of the writing skill, as they urge learners to brainstorm, plan, draft and check, and then to rewrite. Also, a number of them include as a writing activity an explanation of how to take notes. In our opinion, this falls under the category of the psychomotor skill of writing in Alcón's framework. At the same time, the criteria for the development of written discourse competence included above



can be focused on through the other skills, speaking, reading and listening, and the coursebooks do contain activities in this line. For example, a very common task found in the ELT textbooks is one which presents a section on register, which is explained to learners through an example of two speakers (one of whom is more formal in his speech) as being affected by various variables related to the interlocutors (age, etc.) and to “the nature of the specific situation”. This is then practised in speaking situations (dialogues). Here, however, we focus mainly on writing activities which serve to develop discourse competence with respect to the criteria, except in cases where the activity design could feasibly be adapted to a writing activity. Also, we do not take into account activities which focus more closely on linguistic competence, such as rewriting sentences using alternative verb patterns or expressions.

The first criteria established is the focus in writing tasks and activities on the context and situation for which a text is written, and the impact of these on the final written product. All coursebooks include formal and informal letter writing, writing notes, memos, e-mails, etc., and some make mention of the contexts and situations for which these writing activities may need to be carried out, along with some focus on how these affect the final written text. However, for the most part, the connection between the samples provided and student’s written production is not made explicit. There are some exceptions, however. For example, *Panorama* provides a writing task which involves learners in analysing a CV through guided questions, and in discussing the appropriateness of including different sections depending on the job they are applying for. *Cutting Edge* includes an activity on writing formal and informal messages which involves learners in writing these messages for different situations. Overall, however, there is little focus on how the context and situation affect the written text learners produce.

The same is the case for the second criteria, taking into account the readers, especially their schemata and background knowledge. We found very few activities which brought this to bear on the writing tasks asked of learners. *Panorama* includes a section entitled “Writing for Your Readers” (166), which encourages learners to think about audience, in combination with the context and situation of text. Students are given different contexts/situations/ audiences and asked to think which style, formal or fairly informal, would be more appropriate. Then they are given extracts and asked which context/situation/audience they would be most likely found in. Then they write a similar content piece, but with different audiences/purposes. Another coursebook, *Changing Skies*, includes tasks involving a review of a book, play or film, in which learners are encouraged to think about audience, purpose and structure, following some guidelines. Also, at the end of the book, a “Guidelines for Writing” section is included with questions asking learners to think about: Who are you writing for? What can you assume about your reader(s)? What kind of experience do they have about the topic? What do they need to be told? What are their attitudes likely to be? Nonetheless, this is advice to L2 writers, while there is a scarcity of actual activities which encourage writers to think about possible readers’ cultural and situational schemata. There are plenty of reading and listening activities which are designed to bring out the learners’ own cognitive framework with



relation to a given topic or practice, and learners are often encouraged to compare theirs with what is presented to them through the texts they are exposed to. However, none of the writing activities focus the learners on taking into account a possible audience which does not share their schemata, and on ways that they might bridge cognitive gaps with their readers. Writing, then, becomes an activity for learners in which interaction is rather ignored, losing its communicative focus.

As for the third criteria, text structuring at different levels, we begin here at a more macro-level. Most of the books reviewed provide activities which focus on different text types and how to write them; this is probably the most common type of writing activity across the coursebooks. The text types included are CVs, narratives, descriptions, different types of correspondence, reports, biographies, and instructions. Activities such as “Write a Biography” and “Write a Description of [...]” are common to all of the coursebooks, with a wide range of variations, such as writing an open-ended story, or dynamic activities involving different groups in a classroom writing to each other. However, within the text types, very few of the books focus on the most common way of sequencing information in each of the types. In other words, activities related to text types tend to show a model and then ask students to write a similar text of their own, without focusing the students’ on the typical generic structure of the text. We did find some exceptions to this. For example, most of the writing activities included in *File* provide in addition to a model text, guidelines for the students in terms of the typical patterns of sequencing of the text type. Here is an example which will illustrate this, as it is writing an essay.²

Write an essay titled *Alternative Medicine*. Write four paragraphs, like this (37):

Paragraph 1: Introduction about alternative medicine becoming more and more popular these days. Some examples of alternative medicine.

Paragraph 2: The arguments for alternative medicine, including the examples given of asthma and reflexology.

Paragraph 3: The arguments against alternative medicine, including the example of the blood cot.

Paragraph 4: The conclusion, giving your beliefs.

A couple of the coursebooks also focus students’ attention on this aspect of text through scrambled paragraph or section exercises, where students have to put texts in the right order. Many of the coursebooks also include a writing task which involves learners in producing a formal letter following the widely accepted generic structure of such letters. Often when models are provided, the learners simply

² This exercise goes after a listening exercise in which the students listen to the discussion between a doctor and a patient about orthodox and alternative medicine.

follow the single model given, rather than coming to an understanding of how these models exemplify a widely accepted generic practice. This could result in learners imitating texts, rather than coming to an understanding of different generic structures.

This is with regards to the macro-structure of texts. With respect to textual elements which provide structure at a lower level, such as theme-rheme patterning, rhetorical relations between ideas and cohesive devices, far fewer activities can be found. Although a great deal has been written about information structure and theme-rheme patterns and their importance for writing, including the L2 writer (cf. Witte; Weissberg; Bardovi-Harlig; Vande Kopple; Bloor & Bloor; Nwogu; Alonso & McCabe “Patterns”, “Tools”; Schleppegrell; *inter alia*), we found no activities which provided learners practice in manipulating such structures to greater effect. Some attention is given to these aspects of textual structure in other activities, such as in *Changing Skies*. One of the *Language Focus* activities in this book explains information structure through theme-rheme patterning. It explains the effect of foregrounding information by moving it to theme position. Students then carry out an activity in which they check the effect of fronting information by moving it out of a later position in a set of sentences from a text to theme position. This could perhaps easily be turned into an activity involving their own writing; however, this connection is not made explicitly through a writing activity in the coursebook. Thus, none of the materials analysed focuses on this aspect of text through writing activities.

Also at a more micro-level, here with respect to how the expression of relationship across and hierarchies of ideas is achieved in text, in the upper-intermediate coursebooks, but not in the advanced, some work on linkers is included. These activities focus attention on correct placement of the devices as well as on the meanings they indicate between different ideas. For example, in *Cutting Edge* (Module 8), the writing skills section centres on linking ideas and arguments. Learners first analyse sets of sentences which use linking devices and underline those devices. They then match the linking words with their explanation (e.g. “to link arguments for and against –however”). They are directed to a section of the *Language Summary* at the back of the book where linking devices are summarized. They then complete a gapped composition with the appropriate linking words. *Inside Out* also offers activities to practice with linkers of all kinds. None of the coursebooks, however, provide any practice in patterns of sequencing at the micro-level in text, e.g. providing evidence for generalizations, using the problem-solution pattern, etc. *Changing Skies*, again in a *Language Focus* section, asks students to answer a set of questions (about a text they have read):

Which of the sentences below:

- i. offers an explanation?
- ii. introduces a specific example?
- iii. adds further information?
- iv. announces the context and the main topic?
- v. returns to an earlier topic?

- vi. introduces a new topic?
- vii. adds further speculation about the future?

This focuses the students' attention on how rhetorical relationships are made manifest through text. Again, this could also be turned into a writing exercise focusing on students' own written texts, as could another activity included in *Changing Skies*, also under the heading of *Language Focus: Text Patterns* (72). Here, one possible organization of text is explained as consisting of a general statement followed by any number of specific statements followed by a reinforcement of the general statement. Learners then examine a text searching for examples of the pattern. The transfer of this to their own writing is not made explicit, however.

Other cohesive devices receive some attention in the coursebooks, although not always in their writing sections. In a grammar section, *Panorama* includes ellipsis with an explanation, followed by filling in and cutting out activities. *Changing Skies* also focuses on reference, ellipsis, and other cohesive devices in various reading activities and tasks. *Cutting Edge* contains a writing section devoted to "avoiding repetition in writing" where learners are asked to replace repeated expressions in a given story by using pronouns, auxiliary verbs to replace full verbs, synonyms, omission, thus practicing reference, substitution and ellipsis.

Thus, overall, with respect to text structure, the coursebooks do provide through their writing activities a more or less explicit focus on overall text organization and structure. However, the more micro-level concerns and how learners might address these in their writing, are usually left to the realm of reading or other types of skill practice.

The fourth criteria calls for focus on the different linguistic choices which construe degrees of formality and politeness in written text. Writing activities which focus on expressing degrees of formality are present in most, if not all, of the coursebooks. This is included often in activities which focus on language or on speaking, or simply on appropriateness, without honing in on any one skill. An example of this is an exercise where students read several sentences and have to decide whether they are formal or informal. In terms of writing, this interactive aspect is almost always included through a focus on formal and informal letters. It is more difficult to find, however, activities which focus attention on politeness, and on how it is construed in English, perhaps in contrast with their own language and culture. *File* does include an activity under the heading of "Using Appropriate Language" which asks students to reflect on differences in the way they "make requests, apologise, express thanks" (23) in their own language with English. In terms of writing activities, nonetheless, very little attention is paid to this in any of the coursebooks.

English File does include at the end of the book a "Writing Bank" which includes tips to writers, one of which refers to style. Style is explained as meaning formal ("no contractions, no colloquial expressions, more formal expressions, e.g. "To sum up," etc.") and informal ("use contractions and colloquial expressions, e.g. "Anyway, That's all for now," etc.") (140). In *Cutting Edge*, the writing skills section of one of the modules is on formal letters and formal language. There is an interest-



ing comparison made between a formal letter of complaint and the same complaint in a phone conversation. Learners then match a list of less formal expressions with their formal counterparts in the letter. They then analyze the layout of the letter, and choose one situation out of four, and write their own letter of complaint. Module 10 focuses on formal and informal messages, where the learners compare a business fax, a telephone message, a congratulations card to a friend, and an informal memo to a colleague. There are gaps in all of the samples, and learners fill in the blanks from a list of expressions. They then analyze the samples for use of ellipsis, emphasis, and for which is “the most formal in style” (116). They then choose two situations from a list and write messages of their own. It is interesting to note the little focus there is on formality in writing and that it is mainly limited to more overtly interactive texts, with very little work on other types of texts, such as reports and academic essays.

We move on to the fifth criteria: linguistic choices which construe the field. This category is also rather neglected in coursebooks, beyond the suggestion to learners that, when writing, they “Ask your teacher about any words or phrases you need” (*Cutting Edge* 83). *Panorama* includes a writing activity which focuses on this area to some extent in a section on “Choosing the Right Word,” and learners are informed that “when writing, even more perhaps than when speaking, you have to choose the right word for the context.” Learners carry out an activity in which they match the right sports vocabulary to the sport. Later in the unit, in an exercise on accuracy in writing (which consists of raising awareness of the most common errors in writing—but also mentions choosing the right words as part of accuracy), students are asked to write an essay on a sport they like. They are encouraged to make a list of all the related vocabulary—one suggestion is to read a related article to glean useful words and expressions.

Other activities not labelled as writing activities also focus on this area of discourse to some extent. For example, *English File* provides a reading activity to help learners understand a scientific text which involves them in looking at formal words and expressions used in a scientific text, and matching them with more colloquial ones (e.g. “cease to function” vs. “stop working”). *Panorama* also shows learners how to read a scientific article, and introduces vocabulary often found in scientific writing; also explained and illustrated is the importance of precision in writing in a scientific article. It may be the case that this kind of focus in writing belongs more to the realm of ESP, and, thus, really very little attention is paid to this aspect of text through writing activities in general coursebooks.

In sum, while the criteria for written discourse competence can be developed through many of the activities throughout the coursebooks in varying degrees, often this development is not focused on specifically through *writing* activities. The main area within the criteria to receive focus in writing activities is that of overall text organization, mainly through models, and on occasion through illustration of overall generic structures. Following this in terms of frequency of appearance in writing activities is some focus on degrees of formality in various forms of correspondence, followed by work on linkers (in the upper-intermediate coursebooks). The other criteria receive very little focus through writing activities. This



state of affairs with respect to the development of written discourse competence would need to be further tested in other ELT materials as well as in the corresponding workbooks of the books analysed, although the distribution of activities in the workbooks is proportionally similar to the students' books.

4. SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

From the above analysis, it is clear that the materials analysed are far from fully developing the notion of written discourse competence in the ELT classroom. The discourse-oriented written practice offered provides a more or less explicit focus on text types, overall text organization and structure, but the transfer of knowledge about different text types to the student's own writing is not made explicit in most of the ELT materials reviewed, and as a result, learners imitate texts when writing, rather than coming to an understanding of different generic structures. Besides, activities which contribute to the development of inner text structure, such as patterns of sequencing and information structure, are very much neglected in ELT materials. The sum of all these omissions leads to the common reality of our daily teaching practice: many ELT students with an average knowledge of English that still show problems in organising their ideas in their written production at the macro and micro level. Hyland points out a possible reason for this:

[...] students are often given little advice on how to structure their writing experiences according to the demands and constraints of target contexts. There is often an emphasis on writing to discover one's thoughts (through drafting) than to appropriately express them; students thus need to acquire strategies of engagement and response to a community's discourse. (*Teaching* 81)

We believe that written discourse competence to use different text types does not lie in our ability to identify monolithic uses of language, but to modify and blend our choices according to the contexts in which we write. In this sense, there are interesting proposals to provide students with more familiarity and practice with a range of text types, for example, working with a mixed-genre portfolios (Swales; Cope & Kalantzis; Johns; Schleppegrell; Paltridge *Genre*; Gallagher; *inter alia*).

We have also illustrated how none of the writing activities analysed focus the learners on taking into account a possible audience which does not share their schemata, and on ways that they might bridge cognitive gaps with their readers. Given that many authors consider texts as “[...] the visible evidence of a reasonably self-contained purposeful interaction between one or more writers and one or more readers, in which the writer(s) control the interaction and produce most of the language” (Hoey, *Textual* 11), we can conclude that writing activities offered by the materials reviewed ignored writer-reader interaction and therefore lose their communicative focus. In our opinion, this is an important fault that should be corrected in the classroom by incorporating a range of real and simulated audience sources. Our task as ELT instructors is to improve our students' writing competence by developing their ability to tailor both informational and interpersonal

aspects of messages to recipient needs and knowledge. In sum, the more learners become familiar with the genres and expectations of their target communities, the greater the accumulated store of experiences they can draw on to meet those expectations.

In addition, there is also little focus on how the context and situation affect the written text learners produce. Writing activities on register and politeness are very scarce and most of them are limited to one or two text types. It would be very useful to broaden the typology of texts worked on in the classroom and to provide some practice on the most common politeness strategies in English so that the students could contrast them with the ones used in their own language (for further research in this area, see Ballesteros). Finally, the other criteria receive very little focus through writing activities.

To summarise, effective writing instruction involves guiding students to an awareness of their readers, and the interactional strategies, background understanding and rhetorical conventions these readers are likely to expect. These are premises that the writing activities reviewed do not meet. As a result, we firmly believe that there is still a great deal to be done in developing the notion of written discourse competence in the ELT classroom. In our opinion, a possible way of improving this situation could be providing second and foreign language teachers, as well as for materials creators with professional training in pedagogical discourse analysis. However, when most ESL teachers think of discourse analysis, they usually consider it as an unpractical and non-applicable information for their language classroom, which, not incidentally, is difficult to read because it is so technical. It is our task as both researchers and ELT instructors to help them get close to understand that the discourse perspective gives us a view of language form that reflects language use, that is part of communicative competence and is thus ultimately compatible with communicative approaches to language teaching. In Coffin's words, "[...] acquiring the tools of discourse analysis is a valuable enterprise for English language teachers" (119). Until training catches up with needs, appropriate reading materials, in-service training and professional conferences are some of the ways to fill the gap. In this sense, there are several very useful books now available to address this educational need (Cook; McCarthy, *Analysis*; Hatch; Peytard & Moirand; Nunan; McCarthy & Carter; Riggenbach; Carter et al.; Paltridge, *Discourse*; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, *Context*, "Analysis").



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