

THE READER-WRITER RESPONSIBILITY SCALE AS A BASIS FOR PRACTICE IN THE L2 COMPOSITION CLASSROOM IN SPAIN

INTRODUCTION

Language typologies synthesize knowledge about languages into generalizations which can be used to gain further insights. Hinds proposes a “Reader versus Writer Responsibility” (RWR) typology. While some typologies are based on linguist factors such as word order, RWR is based on culturally determined expectations. English, in this typology, is a writer-responsible language because the writer or speaker is ‘the person primarily responsible for effective communication’; Japanese on the other hand is a reader-responsible language because responsibility lies primarily with the reader or listener. Hinds is at pains to point out that this is a tendency and not an inviolate rule. Nor are English and Japanese proposed as absolute extremes: computer languages, for example, offer a more extreme example of writer responsibility. My arbitrary positioning of Spanish on the scale (fig 1) does not mean that it is half-way between English and Japanese - merely that it is more reader-responsible than English.

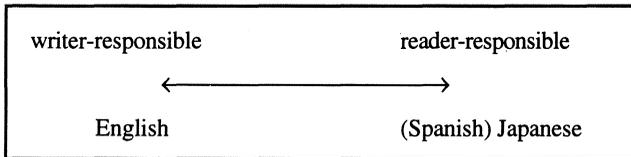


Fig. 1

Whatever the epistemological standing of this typology, it is useful as a starting point for highlighting some differences in English and Spanish expository writing. There are certain difficulties in defining exactly what constitutes expository prose (Grabe p. 115), yet all experienced EFL teachers have, and have to have, some kind of internalized model of what constitutes “good” writing. Here, I will be exclusively concerned with the kind of writing which is expected of candidates for examinations such as the Cambridge First Certificate (CFC) or Proficiency (CPE) examinations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

De facto, teaching goes hand in hand with passing judgement on our students’ exploits. Yet use of a simple “good-bad” scale, when looking at student writing, does little to encourage student achievement: it gives no information about what is unsatisfactory in the students’

work nor does it aid students in their search for improvement. Further, it smacks of facile judgement concerning the students' abilities rather than their achievements. Student difficulty with L2 writing in general, and English in this instance, arises out of a number of sources: L2 fluency, L1 / L2 rhetorical differences, cultural differences, and task interest to name four. The RWR typology is useful for building awareness of cultural and rhetorical differences.

TASK: Before continuing, readers who speak both Spanish and English might find it interesting to spend a couple of minutes briefly noting down those characteristics of writing in their respective L2s which they find most frustrating as readers.¹

If the writer is primarily responsible for the meaning of a text then we can draw some conclusions both about the form that text will take and the processes needed to construct it. The reader with such cultural expectations will want the message presented directly, in a clearly-ordered manner, and requiring a minimal effort to decipher. The reader, to exaggerate somewhat, wants instant gratification. This implies that the writer must make great efforts to clarify her thoughts by advance planning and especially by writing and editing multiple drafts of the text. Editing will often result in total rewrites of large sections, with clarification, reordering and further development of ideas. It may also involve eliminating sections which become superfluous in the editing process. The first draft may, in fact, be not much more than a vehicle for aiding writers to clarify their own ideas for themselves.

Reader-responsible writing on the other hand, one would expect, could be produced in a one draft process, rewrites being optional and likely to be limited to minor changes in lexical items: it will be up to the reader to decode the meaning. The difficulties that such writing will present to readers from a writer-responsible culture are precisely what add spice to the text for those from the reader-responsible background. Hinds (p. 145) provides evidence to suggest that Japanese readers "savor" "this kind of 'mystification' of language".

Academic literature, and EFL teachers, may at times be guilty of cultural imperialism by implying that the English-style model of expository writing is the best. We should try and keep in mind that it is merely one cultural variation within one specific context. English language literature, for example, thrives on subtlety and ambiguity: no one would accuse Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* of being transparent. Hinds (p. 144) quotes one North American variation of a well-know aphorism for public speaking: "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em, tell 'em, then tell 'em what you've told 'em". This English speaking concern for clarity in written expository text, and in formal spoken discourse, is a cultural feature which is not necessarily

¹ Task: You may have some up with something of the following nature: a). Spanish (L1) readers of English texts might find them childish, dull, boring, too staccato, unsophisticated, uncultured, even insulting, with a limited vocabulary, and at the same time hard to follow. b). English (L1) readers of Spanish texts them badly organized, long winded, rambling, incoherent, full of "nice words" with little meaning, pompous, pedantic, with "sentences" are "not really sentences", lacking in punctuation, and hard to follow. Both these sets of possible perceptions, and I suspect whatever additional ideas you have had, can be put down at least in part to different cultural conceptions of what constitutes "good writing."

shared by other cultures. Spanish reaction to English expository text is very often that it is “childish” or even insulting to the reader’s intelligence. St. John (p. 119) quotes some of her subjects (Spanish scientists) as saying that “Americans and British write for *bobos*”. Conversely, the English speaker may accuse the Spanish writer of not organizing ideas adequately, of sloppy thinking and of wasting the reader’s time. Thus identical characteristics in a text can be labelled differently, according to the cultural background of the reader:

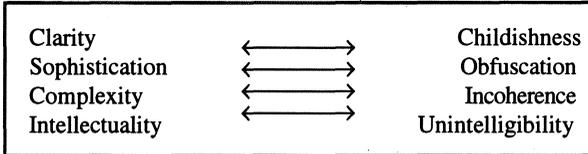


Fig. 2

The L2 teacher is faced with the task of “indoctrinating” students with the culturally accepted discourse pattern of the target language. For Spanish speakers learning English there is an added difficulty. While there is, a more or less, accepted canon of exemplary expository (essay) writing in English, a similarly accepted corpus seems to be lacking in Spanish. The essay is apparently not a favoured discourse form in Spain. “Hands-up” surveys in class also reveal that students have received little formal training in essay writing in Spanish secondary schools. Thus students lack of L1 knowledge may well be an additional handicap. Further, both student and teacher are regularly confronted with texts from authoritative sources which to English speaking eyes are deficient: *El País* for example recently told us that the eminently reputable US security firm Kroll Associates offered services such as sexual harassment, extortion and kidnapping (*sic*). RWR allows us to consider such matters in a different light. In this *El País* example there are clues prior to the “offending” sentence that allow us to deduce that what Kroll Associates actually does is investigate such cases or offer companies advice on how to prevent such happenings in the first place. In this sense of making inferences from the text Spanish speakers might be termed “better” readers than English speakers.

Let us consider how we can put this to practical use. Firstly, from the outset in a course on composition, we can emphasize that English expository writing is different from Spanish; that the differences are of a cultural nature and do not mean that one style of writing is necessarily better or worse than another - merely that it is culturally appropriate or not. The “instant gratification” which writer responsibility ordains and the existence of a widely accepted canon also imply prescription which is at times useful in the classroom. It is also worth pointing out to students that one result of the RWR is that English speakers jump very quickly to a conclusion about whether a text is “good” or “bad”. A text which deviates from the expected linear pattern or which does not deliver what its introduction promised is labelled as “bad”.

DIFFICULTIES FOR STUDENTS

I shall look at a small number of arbitrarily chosen problem areas.

1) Spanish students often seem to have a fixation about “repetition”. This concern may in fact stem from teachers’ loose usage of the word repetition as teacher talk for tautology. English seeks primarily to avoid *tautology* rather than lexical repetition, which may indeed be unavoidable. Thus students often weaken their work by seeking “synonyms” in order to avoid repeating some particular word. Students should therefore be made aware that absolute synonyms are not very common. Without some different shade in their meaning “synonyms” would be redundant and probably not survive. Thus substitution of one word for another “synonym” requires thought and may be unnecessary from an English-speakers point of view.

2) Spanish students sometimes attempt to avoid lexical repetition by using relative pronouns. As Spanish relative pronouns possess both number and gender, it is relatively easy to see what they refer to and thus easier (for a native speaker of Spanish) to keep track of the sense in a long sentence. The reduction from two parameters to one parameter (number only) in English immediately means that this strategy is likely to be less successful. While the reader of Spanish can work out which pronoun refers to what, the reader of English will have much greater difficulty: thus the writer is more restricted when it comes to sentence length and possibilities of subordination. Even where technically correct, the English reader or writer will shy away from long convoluted sentences.

3) Various problem areas, such as overlong “sentences”, brackets, direct speech, “etc.”, “...”, in learner composition can be explained satisfactorily in terms of RWR. English speaking readers expect concise sentences with a single idea presented so that “even a child could understand” (St. John). Anything else suggests that the writer has reneged on his cultural role. The kind of use Spanish students, when writing in English, make of brackets and dashes to provide additional comments aside from the main idea suggests the writer is too lazy or too incompetent to integrate these ideas into the paragraph in a grammatically correct manner. This may be a reflection of the fact that the combination of number and gender in noun, pronouns and adjectives and inflection in verbs makes the relationship between sub-clauses easier to follow in Spanish: English with its greater dependence on word order does not have these tools to add coherence. Direct speech is equally unacceptable and again gives the impression that the writer is shirking on her duty to apply the rules for converting from direct to reported speech. Incorrect use of “etc.” and “...” convey the same sense of writer laziness or even disrespect: they give the message that the writer was incapable of completing, or simply too lazy to complete, the sentence.

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Once the teacher recognizes the importance of this different cultural orientation s / he must find strategies to develop this awareness in the students and to help them develop ways of producing a culturally acceptable writing product. We shall look at this in two steps, namely, awareness building and writing process.

AWARENESS BUILDING

For awareness building three strategies are suggested. Firstly students can be made aware of the structure of English texts applying the model in fig. 3 to the paragraphs in sample English expository texts. General texts taken from The Economist weekly newspaper are excellent for this purpose. Despite the title and its concerns, this publication often contains numerous short articles which are of interest to the general reader. Students can be asked to identify sentence types in a number of paragraphs and to label them a, b, c, and d accordingly. In further exercises they can be asked to say what the article is about on the basis of the topic sentence of the first paragraph, reconstruct the text from sentences that have been put in the incorrect sequence, or to summarize each paragraph in one sentence. Various other sources of texts could be used according to personal taste.

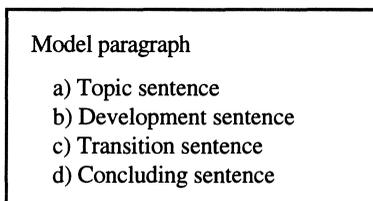


Fig. 3

A second strategy is to get students to compare the macro-structure of selected Spanish and English texts. Students might note that it is not always easy to predict the content of a Spanish text from the first sentence or first paragraph; they might also note the tendency in newspapers to combine two unrelated incidents using *por otra parte*. Texts can also be compared for typical sentence length (15-18 words in English), number of sentences of in a paragraph (3-6 in English). Students can also search for “etc’s”, dot-dot-dots, and brackets. It is also worth pointing out explicitly that the structure of a typical paragraph is echoed in the overall structure of a text. A stereotypical text could be used to illustrate this point. The third strategy is simply to discuss the 3 points made above with the students and to periodically remind them of these differences.

PROCESS WRITING

Teachers handbooks such as *Process Writing* (White and Arndt) or references for writers such as *The Little Brown Compact Handbook* (Aaron) give practical suggestions for working with this model. The process model involves the following steps:

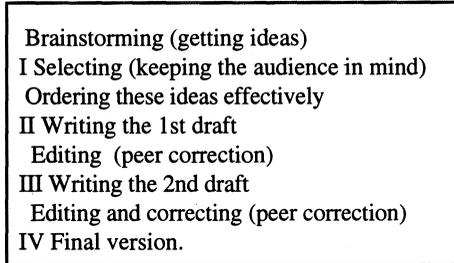


Fig. 4

Many students will be unfamiliar with the idea of brainstorming, or writing down as many ideas as possible in note format as quickly as possible. Students can be encouraged to carry out this process in L1 (Friedlander) if they feel more comfortable doing so, as the main objective is to get ideas. Students below CPE level will certainly find that ideas flow more easily in L1. When choosing which ideas to include, and which to eliminate, the reader of the text should be borne in mind. In the ordering phase attention should be paid to the connections between paragraphs so that there is a smooth transition from one to the next. A number of classes may have to be dedicated exclusively to learning this process.

Once students have proceeded to produce a first draft, peer editing can begin. Essentially this means that fellow students read the text critically and help their colleagues reorganize and improve their texts. In practice this is quite difficult to achieve. Students are not accustomed to criticizing each others' work, however constructively it is meant. Secondly, by virtue of coming from a reader-responsible culture they are handicapped by the fact that they are likely to be very "patient" readers by the standards of readers from a writer-responsible culture. One relatively simple tool which students can use is summary: if it is possible to summarize the content of a paragraph or a text easily, then it is probably well organized. Two elements contribute to successful peer editing. Relatively homogeneous L2 language level among the peer editors means that corrections are more acceptable: the student offering the correction cannot be seen as an authority. Secondly, the higher the absolute level of L2, the easier it is for students to concentrate on meaning rather than on local grammatical difficulties. As classes which *filología* teachers deal with are not selected by language level, this implies difficulty as the level differences between any two students may be so great as to make this exercise unproductive. A list, such as that in appendix 1, may prove to be a useful tool.

CONCLUSION

We might summarize the arguments as follows. Beliefs about the respective roles of reader and writer are culture-bound. English speaking readers believe that the writer should do most of the work: in a sense, the reader is the customer and the writer the service provider. Awareness of the difference in these expectations can help students in their approach to writ-

ing. Analytical and comparative reading can help build awareness of these differences. The writer-responsible nature of English expository writing implies that teachers must use a process-based model in teaching composition. Peer editing, while difficult to implement, is a useful component in this approach.

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APPENDIX I: GUIDELINES FOR PEER ASSESSMENT

Read your partners essay and give it marks according to the following chart. Add up the marks from the four sections and divide by four to get a final grade.

Communicative quality:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Excellent 9-10 | * a pleasure to read |
| Very good 7-8 | * causes the reader few difficulties |
| Adequate 5-6 | * communicative although with some strain |
| Inadequate 3-4 | * understandable but with difficulty |
| Weak 0-2 | * unintelligible |

Ideas and organization:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Excellent 9-10 | * completely logical organizational structure; effective arguments and supporting material |
| Very good 7-8 | * good organizational structure; well-presented and relevant arguments and supporting material |
| Adequate 5-6 | * clear but limited organizational structure; some arguments unsupported or material irrelevant |
| Inadequate 3-4 | * logical breakdowns apparent; ideas inadequate and / or poorly organised |
| Weak 0-2 | * logical organization absent; no suitable material |

Grammar and grammatical vocabulary:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Excellent 9-10 | * wide range and fluent control of structures and vocabulary |
| Very good 7-8 | * effective use of an adequate range of grammatical structures and vocabulary |
| Adequate 5-6 | * adequate range of grammatical structures and vocabulary, but could be used more effectively |
| Inadequate 3-4 | * restricted range and uncertain control of grammatical structures and vocabulary |
| Weak 0-2 | * grammatical structures not mastered and limited range of vocabulary |

Punctuation and spelling:

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| Excellent 9-10 | * Punctuation and spelling show no faults |
| Very good 7-8 | * Occasional faults in punctuation and spelling |
| Adequate 5-6 | * Punctuation and spelling could be improved |
| Inadequate 3-4 | * Definite weaknesses in punctuation and spelling |
| Weak 0-2 | * Little mastery of conventions of punctuation and spelling |

(Based on Hamp-Lyons and Heasley: p. 146, 1987)

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