Teacher intervention in the process of L2 writing acquisition

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Abstract

It is generally known that first language (L1) writing acquisition differs from second language (L2) writing acquisition as far as the proficiency level, writing skills and strategies are concerned. However, teachers can indisputably positively intervene in the process of L2 writing acquisition and thus partially eliminate students’ difficulties and constraints in second language writing by reflecting on L2 learners’ needs and by employing and promoting relevant methodological principles, approaches and strategies, such as using consciousness raising, exploiting scaffolding, using a translation method, or providing feedback. The aim of this article is therefore explore some of the ways through which the teacher of English can positively intervene in the process of L2 writing acquisition.

Keywords: Approaches, intervention, L2 writing acquisition, teacher;

1. Introduction

Thanks to the development of modern information and communication technologies, writing is one of the most commonly used forms of communication nowadays (Frydrychova Klimova, 2012a). It has its specific norm, which is a structure of its kind. But it was not always like that. For a long time written language was seen to be an imperfect substitute for spoken language. This attitude is found even in de Saussure (1916). The situation changed after World War II, when linguists such as Pulgram (1951) and Berry (1958) started to research written language. In
the Czech Republic, the detailed theory of written language was outlined by Vachek (1973; 1989). He devoted over 50 years of his life to research on written language.

Writing has a unique position in language teaching since its acquisition involves a practice and knowledge of other three language skills, such as listening, reading and speaking. Moreover, it requires mastering of other skills, such as metacognitive skills. Learners need to set an objective for their writing, plan it carefully, think over its layout and logical structure, and revise it. In the process of writing they have to use cognitive skills; they have to analyse their sources and then synthesize them in a compact piece of writing.

2. Teacher intervention in the process of L2 writing acquisition

It is generally known that L1 writing acquisition differs from L2 writing acquisition as far as the proficiency level, writing skills and strategies are concerned. However, teachers can indisputably positively intervene in the process of L2 writing acquisition and thus partially eliminate the above mentioned difficulties and constraints by reflecting on L2 learners’ needs and by employing and promoting relevant methodological principles, approaches and strategies listed below, such as:

1. implementing philosophy of social constructivism;
2. promoting cooperation and collaboration;
3. using consciousness raising;
4. exploiting scaffolding;
5. using a translation method; and
6. providing feedback.

Ad1. Although there are many characteristics of the philosophy of social constructivism, the author sets out only those which are directly connected with the teaching of writing skills and they are important for the process of writing acquisition. Among these are:

- the learner’s previous knowledge constructions, beliefs and attitudes are considered important to the new knowledge construction process;
- knowledge construction takes place in individual contexts and through social negotiation, collaboration and experience;
- knowledge construction and not reproduction is emphasized;
- activities, opportunities, tools and environments are provided to encourage metacognition, self-analysis - regulation, -reflection and –awareness;
- problem-solving, higher-order thinking skills and deep understanding are emphasized;
- teachers serve in the role of guides, monitors, coaches, tutors and facilitators, particularly when they provide feedback on students’ work;
- scaffolding is used to help students perform just beyond the limits of their ability;
- decision-making is itself a learning process;
- learning situations, environments, skills, content and tasks are relevant, realistic, authentic and seek to replicate the natural complexities of the real world; and
- exploration is a favoured approach in order to encourage students to seek knowledge independently and to manage the pursuit of their goals;

Ad2. Cooperative and collaborative learning (one of the characteristics of social constructivism) are inseparable parts of the writing process since students do a number of tasks together, such as working on joint writing projects or peer editing. The names are sometimes used interchangeably because both favour small-group active student participation. However, collaborative learning can take place any time students work together towards a goal while in cooperative learning students work together in the same place on a structurally defined task/project. For example, collaborative learning can enable students to develop their computer, writing and editing skills while working together on an article for Wikipedia. In addition, there are further, more general, benefits of using collaborative and cooperative approach in the process of writing:

- students raise their intercultural awareness while working together with other NN and native students on the task completion;
- they develop interpersonal social skills, such the skills of reaching compromises;
- they develop skills of team work;
both approaches promote a more active approach to learning, each member of the group has opportunities to contribute; and

they enhance their cognitive and metacognitive skills.

It should be noted, however, that some critics have raised concerns that the mixed-ability groups of students might discourage the gifted students and require just lower thinking skills (cf. Radencich and Mckay, 1995; Randall, 1999).

Ad3. Consciousness raising is a top down approach to understanding language and it encourages learners to see grammatical features as the online processing component of discourse and not the set of syntactic building blocks with which discourse is constructed (Rutherford, 1987). It guides learners to explore key lexical, grammatical and rhetorical features and to use this knowledge to construct their own examples of the genre.

Thus, for example, in the teaching of L2 writing skills, students can compare formal and informal essays/letters in order to raise awareness in which these differ in response to audiences and purposes. Or they can reflect on grammatical features and how far they correspond with their use in their L1.

Ad4. Scaffolding is another approach to the teaching of writing skills and the approach through which the teacher can successfully develop students’ writing skills. It follows the ideas of Vygotsky (1978) about collaboration, interaction and scaffolding, which emphasizes interaction with experienced others, in this case teacher, in moving learners from their existing level of performance, what they can do now, to a level of potential performance, what they will be able to do without teacher’s assistance. Thus, scaffolding aids at setting students from teacher-supported learning to students’ autonomous learning. Particularly in the teaching of L2 writing, scaffolding approach is strongly desired by L2 students because they need and demand some kind of input and controlled activities at the beginning of learning writing skills. The author provides an example from the Course of Academic Writing at FIM: Students are usually Tabulae Rasae in the first lesson of the course.

At this stage of instruction they have only a faint idea of what a piece of writing should look and read like. Therefore, as well as some theoretical input on the explanation what English for Academic Purposes (EAP) actually is; the product approach to writing is used at the beginning of the first 90-minute lesson. This involves students being given a short text on how to make a paragraph and its characteristics, which they are asked to read. They then receive an ‘open question’ exercise, which they have to complete while referring to the text they have been given on paragraphing. The purpose of this activity is to help students understand the steps in making a coherent paragraph. Students then discuss the exercise with a peer sitting next to them, and this is then followed by a group discussion on the correct completion of the exercise. Finally, they receive their first assignment. Since the students are still not ready to write a coherent text, they are asked to write for the next lesson a summary of a lecture or a seminar they had/ have that week. Then, a process approach sets in because students have to brainstorm ideas on how to structure such a summary. Consequently, they agree on the logical order of the selected ideas and on the paragraph/s layout. In the end they are guided through possible mistakes they might make. Fig. 1 below shows how scaffolding works in the whole course and how students move from teacher-supported learning to autonomous learning.
As one of the course participants puts it:

Academic Writing is the most beneficial but also the most time demanding English I have ever come through in such a short time. Especially, the first lesson was like the water of life that suddenly made me advance significantly after three-year stagnation.

Ad5. In order to develop in the students a linguistic awareness of contrast between L1 and L2 grammatical structures, and thus counteract interlingual interference here, the teacher can quite legitimately get students to translate L1 sentences designed to pinpoint and clarify structures and patterns the student still has not assimilated (Perkins, 1985). The most common interference errors the Czech students make in their papers concern the word order, then agreement in subject and predicate, prepositions or punctuation.

Example:

......the use of questionnaires determines what is its influence on environment in the Czech Republic and what is its economic gain. (wrong)

...... the use of questionnaires determines what its influence on the environment in the Czech Republic is and what its economic gain is. (right)

In this article is described the first lesson of Geography of this semester. (wrong)

In this article the first lesson of Geography of this semester is described. (right)

Ad6. Assessment plays a crucial role in the teaching of writing. In writing classes formative and summative assessments are used. However, with respect to learning and acquiring writing skills, formative assessment should prevail since one of the major purposes of writing assessment is to provide feedback to students (Frydrychova Klimova, 2012b) and it gathers information about students’ learning.

Trupe (2001) offers the following steps as to how to make a formative assessment work:

• respond as a real reader of a text rather than as a teacherly authority controlling a student’s text; comment on what interests you, what you question, what you want to see more information about;

• make as many positive comments as you can about what you see in the student’s text;
• be specific in your positive comments;
• ask questions in the margin to elicit amplification, reorganization, sharper focus, or transitional wording;
• make suggestions that encourage global (whole-text) revision in addition to local (word or sentence-level or punctuation) revision;
• comment in general terms rather than editing a student’s writing, leaving some of the editing work for the student while giving sufficient explanation for the student to understand what is wrong; you may wish to reference handbook sections, encouraging students to develop better understanding of the principles involved; and
• avoid *ad hominem* negative comments.

Furthermore, in the Course of Academic Writing the teacher provides both online and face-to-face feedback. A significant alternative to teacher’s feedback is peer responsive. It brings about several benefits:
• it encourages a formative developmental process;
• it supports students’ co-operation and collaboration;
• it reduces subjectivity of assessment;
• it might decrease emotional undercurrents;
• it develops thinking and reflective skills;
• it teaches students to be critical but in a constructive way; and
• it also develops other language skills.

For more information on the assessment of writing and its evaluation see Frydrychova Klimova (2012b).

3. Conclusion

The learning of writing is a complex process, influenced by several factors, such cultural differences, social reasons or cognitive skills, which play an important role in the whole process of writing acquisition. Therefore, teachers have to consider all these factors and positively intervene by employing relevant methodological approaches and strategies in order to help their students succeed in the development of their writing skills.

References

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