DEVELOPING WRITING SKILLS FOR BUSINESS PURPOSES IN MIXED-ABILITY CLASSES[1]

Abstract*: It has been widely agreed and proved that writing is the most difficult skill for language instructors to teach and for L2 learners to master, being even referred at as the " Cinderella of the four skills[2]". The teaching-learning process becomes even more difficult when the language instructor has to deal with a mixed-ability class. The purpose of our paper is to provide an example of how this challenge can be overcome in the Business English class by means of the genre-based approach to writing.*

Keywords*: writing skills, Business English, scripts, anchors.*

Whether they are linguists, specialists in language teaching methodology, or psychologists, researchers agree on the fact that writing is by all means more difficult and more resource-consuming than any other skill. Bourdin and Fayol (1994: 591) highlighted in the nineties that the complex process of writing is influenced by the limited capacity of the *working memory*[3], by the *cognitive load*[4] specific to each writing component, as well as by the fluctuations of the load needed for the achievement of one component, which increases or decreases the remaining resources available for the other components. The complex process which involves: planning, drafting, revising and editing, becomes even more difficult when the students do not have enough back-up information to rely their writing on. Bourdin and Fayol (2002: 219) insisted on the fact that "the number of ideas elaborated, and the coherence of the produced texts are lower when the supplied items are difficult to link and the production is in the written mode". Their hypothesis was based on a contrastive analysis of the oral and written production and emphasized the fact that oral production is definitely easier to achieve.

This theory would explain the situation where, the language instructor's spontaneous question to the class: "What would you like us to do today in the English seminar?" would categorically be answered: "We would like to talk about…." and very rarely, if never, "We would like to write about…" The students' reluctance (and sometimes teachers') towards this classroom activity is due to the fact that it involves both sustained mental and physical effort, and besides, it is also time-consuming, not to mention the fact that writing is a serious challenge even in L1. Therefore, operating the shift from L1 to L2, generating ideas and putting them into words under the circumstances where words in L2

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[2] http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/making-writing-communicative - viewed on 14th February, 2011

[3] The term working memory refers to a brain system that provides temporary storage and manipulation of the information necessary for such complex cognitive tasks as language comprehension, learning, and reasoning. […]. http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/1736359 - viewed on 14th February, 2011

[4] Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) is an instructional theory that starts from the idea that our working memory is limited with respect to the amount of information it can hold, and the number of operations it can perform on that information (Van Gerven et. al., 2003). That means a learner should be encouraged to use his or her limited working memory efficiently, especially when learning a difficult task (Van Gerven et. al., 2003).

http://www.southalabama.edu/oll/mobile/theory_workbook/cognitive_load_theory.htm -viewed on 14th February, 2011.

are not always at hand, and dealing simultaneously with grammar, spelling and punctuation issues is what gives students a hard time. On the other hand, however, difference should be made between "creative writing", such as poems, descriptions, and narratives and functional, formal writing that is, the kind of writing Business students would need further in their careers and should be able to master. From this perspective, the task that falls into the Business language instructor's responsibility is somehow easier to handle, since all piece of formal writing follows a script, a pattern that can be acquired and used subsequently whenever needed. Reppen (2002: 321) introduces the idea of "genre", which he relates with the necessity and efficiency of raising student's awareness on the metalanguage used to talk about texts, about the way they are structured, about the kind of commonly used language (structures, vocabulary), which, in his opinion has positive effects on the effectiveness and the quality of both their written productions and their peer editing and revision. The second theory about writing is one which puts emphasis on the writing process and on all the stages the writer should go through. The aim of this approach is to raise students' awareness on the procedure and the skills that should be put to work when writing. Harmer (2003: 258) represents diagrammatically the model of process writing conceived in 1991 by White and Arndt[1], which comprises an interrelated set of the following recursive stages: drafting, structuring, reviewing, focusing and generating ideas and evaluation. The use of process writing, although it trains thorough writers, is highly time-consuming and therefore not exactly appreciated by students, and, out of classroom management reasons or limited time, seldom used by teachers. Which is more, process writing would raise serious problems in a mixed-ability class, as classes at university level usually are, and as a consequence it might turn into a very frustrating and demotivating experience for the less proficient students, who would probably refuse to perform any other similar activity. Hence, instead of facilitating situations in which the students' response to the writing task is: "I have an idea, but I don't know how to put it in English", and in order to reach that frail balance where, in spite of their mixed-ability levels, all the students must get involved into the writing task, I prefer using the "genre" approach.

What would be then the Business "genres" students should be familiar with? There is a whole range of formal pieces of writing that might fall into this category, starting with the CV and the letter of application, or any other type of business letter (request, credit letters, complaints, claims, adjustments, sales letters, letters of reference and recommendation, letters of resignation or those declining a job offer), the interoffice memorandum or the report, a summary of an article, graph descriptions, a business plan, a scenario for a TV commercial or a market research questionnaire to mention just the ones that currently appear as writing tasks in Business English textbooks. The texts belonging to any of the above mentioned "genres" share some features that cover aspects such as layout, fix structures (opening and closing remarks) levels of formality, type and amount of information as well as the way it is introduced. Thus, when students have the opportunity to work upon similar texts to the one they will be eventually asked to write, the information they assimilate will work as anchors that will help them bridge the gap between the cost of elaboration and the management of the written production.

If there is something to criticize about this two-stage approach to writing, from the perspective of the modern language class, then it would be the central role that the language instructor plays in the first stage, acting as a controller, guiding students through the

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[1] White, R and Arndt, V 1991, Process Writing, Pearson Education Ltd. quoted in Harmer, (2003), The Practice of English language Teaching, Pearson Education Ltd., p. 258.

material, eliciting answers and emphasizing layout and structure elements. This might seem to contravene to the intended outcomes of Communicative Language Teaching, but the activities I am going to describe below will prove that this is just an important step in building students' autonomy, in building their self-confidence and reaching the intended result faster, the piece of writing itself. After having provided the tools, and having risen students' awareness towards the expectations they have to fulfill with reference to the written text they are supposed to produce, the language instructor's role follows a downward trend leaving the stage to the students who are now supposed to make decisions "and progress from the role of active observers to autonomous learners" (REPPEN, 2002: 323)

The following activities represent a selection of materials that I was using successfully to teach students the most frequently required text belonging to the business correspondence genre, the letter of application. The sample of materials is made up of: a handout which contains two models of letters of application that the students have to analyze by contrast (H1)[1], a handout with a text for a job vacancy that they will have to read and extract specific information to fill in a recruitment file (H2)[2], and finally the assignment to write a letter of application, imagining that they apply for the job described in (H2). The activity is usually run throughout a whole seminar, and in case students do not finish the writing task in class they will take it at as home assignment. They will present it during the next seminar when the texts will be submitted to peer review and debate.

This writing lesson is part of a more complex unit on the topic of recruitment within which students also become familiar with the recruitment procedures both from the point of view of the employer and of the employee, with documents usually required by recruiters: the CV, the letters of application, the letter of reference. The writing class would start with the discussion on the two patterns of letters of application out of which one uses the appropriate, formal business tone and structures, while the second could be described as a list of Don'ts when it comes to such a letter type. Although working simultaneously on two texts might look like a difficult task to accomplish, I can state, based on class experience, that even under the circumstances of mixed-ability groups, students get involved in the analysis quicker, since the inappropriate pattern gives them a broad range of hints, which are easy to spot and comment upon, and by contrast they are able to identify the appropriate equivalents in the first pattern.

The instructor would start the text analysis with issues related to the structure of the text, the teacher eliciting answers from the students in an activity based on T-Ss interaction (paragraphs, and the kind of information that the reader would expect to find in each paragraph: 1. opening remarks and reason for writing, 2. age and qualifications/education, 3. work experience and personal qualities that recommend the applicant for the position, 4. other relevant information, 5. closing remarks). Having drawn up the outline of the letter, and after having noticed that, in terms of content, the two letter patterns do not differ significantly, the students may proceed to the next stage of the analysis: tone, degree of formality, vocabulary, language structures and syntax. As difficult as it may sound, students can perform the activity more or less guided by the teacher, while their reactions stand as a proof for the degree of self-confidence that they acquire when they

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[1] The activity is taken from Evans, V. (2000), Successful Writing, Intermediate; Express Publishing House, p. 29.
[2] This activity is taken from Cotton, D. and Robbins (1993), S. Business Class, Nelson English Teaching, London, pp. 64-65.

realize that they are able to understand and master the logic and technique of writing this type of functional text. The analysis, which is performed as a class discussion, highlights the official, polite and impersonal tone and structures, the use of advanced vocabulary, of long and complex sentences linked to each other by means of formal linguistic connectors. This part of the discussion is particularly important nowadays, when the temptation of using colloquial expressions and everyday vocabulary, or even the simple sentence structure frequently met when chatting on messenger are real pitfalls in students' both oral and written production. The approach is therefore highly efficient because it furthers the idea of target reader and appropriateness of the linguistic register function of this variable, and provides students the critical apparatus necessary to design, revise and assess objectively a piece of written text.

A list of frequently employed structures to introduce the main idea in each paragraph, out of which they may choose to personalize their writing, is always very helpful and reduces considerably the panic of not knowing "how to say it English". The students might be asked to underline special structures used at the beginning of each paragraph and then the teacher could elicit and supply when needed, equivalent structures to the ones in the text. At the end of the activity the students should have drawn up the following list:

1. To begin letters: I am writing to apply for the position of…… advertised in (*name of the newspaper)* of ……. (*day and month)*; I am writing in connection with/ with regard to the vacancy in your………Department, as advertised in (*name of the newspaper)* of ……. (*day and month)*

2. To introduce ideas about work experience /qualifications: I am currently/ At present I am employed as/ working as; I was employed as *(position)* by *(company)* from *(date)* to *(date)*; During this time, I held the position of …. /was responsible for… My duties included; I have/hold/ obtained/ was awarded a degree/ diploma/ certificate in….I have successfully completed a course in *(subject)* at *(place).*

3. To end letters: I enclose/ please find enclosed my CV/ references from….; I would appreciate a reply at your earliest convenience/ as soon as possible; I would be available for an interview at any time/ until the end of June; I would be please to supply you with any further information/ details…

The language chunks listed above will prove extremely useful in the third stage of the writing class, allowing students to personalize their letters and to avoid the recurrent use throughout the whole group of students of the structures in the model letter.

The next stage of the writing seminar works as a bridge between the first and the third and is meant to supply enough elements so that students, once engaged in the third stage might concentrate on structuring and organizing ideas, the intended outcome being the production of the letter of application. What students have to do is to read a job vacancy for the position of sales negotiator and fill in the recruitment file according to a given outline. The activity may be worked in pairs or in groups, not only for the diversification of the interaction type during the seminar, but also as a means of balancing the discrepancy between the various proficiency levels within the group. Thus, instead of assigning it as individual work, and losing the less proficient students in the process, a collaborative approach creates a friendlier and more intimate framework, where students help each other with no fear of losing face in front of the whole class.

Their recruitment file should look as follows:
JOB SPECIFICATION
1.   Company: Texaco Limited

2. Location: 1 Knightsbridge Green, London SW1X 7QJ
3. Position: sales negotiator
4. Duties: negotiating spot sales-both prices and volumes-with ship owners and shipping lines
5. Salary: competitive and attractive benefits package
6. Benefits: a share option scheme; prospect for career advancement within the company
7. Contact: Peter Sweetman, Human Resources Adviser, Texaco Limited, 1 Knightsbridge Green, London SW1X 7QJ

PERSON SPECIFICATION

8. Essential qualities: gifted communicator, capable of rapid decision-making, able to work under pressure, an eye for a deal, good telephone skills, team work skills
9. Desirable qualities: a strong sense of geography, mastering a European language, a background in the oil and marine industries

After having performed this reading-comprehension activity, the students basically have all the data they should insert in the letter of application, which again is extremely helpful for the less competitive ones. During this activity the role of the teacher has been considerably diminished, the collaborative approach that was chosen providing more opportunities for student talk and negotiating of meaning, a more relaxed classroom atmosphere and implicitly greater motivation for learning.

If we were to correlate these two activities to Bourdin and Fayol's theory we could make the following observations: both activities work as anchors, preventing students from "drifting" due to the hardships of the writing process, while the supply of information helps to keep the balance between the resources used for various production components and the ones that remain available for their management (BOURDIN and FAYOL, 2002: 224). This should result in a higher number of elaborated and coherent ideas, by contrast with the situation in which the students cannot make use of prior knowledge in order to organize it within a coherent unit. What would happen in the latter situation, if we were to translate the theory above to the L2 class, is that the cost of brainstorming for ideas, the one supposed by translating them from L1 into L2, as well as the cost implied in framing the information and last but not least in dealing with spelling and punctuation issues would affect and significantly reduce "the residual capacity necessary either to maintain and organize the information in short-term memory, or to adopt a strategic approach to the composition of the texts" (Bourdin and Fayol, 2002: 225).

In case the shift from the second to the third stage seems too abrupt, the teacher may introduce another activity that would be worked individually and would consequently increase the students' level of autonomy, preparing them for the most difficult writing task. The activity refers to the recreation of a letter of application out of a set of mixed sentences. This is a two-step task. The first refers to the identification of the correct order of the sentences based on fix opening, closing formulae, or specific structures used to introduce various types of information in such a text, while the second step refers to arranging the sentences into paragraphs and give the letter its final version. To be able to work out this task, the students should have become aware of the constraints of the genre, while the activity in itself raises even more their awareness towards the "script" to be followed and towards content organization.

The third stage, which is also the most complex one, is based on the coherent management of all the aspects discussed so far but, based on previous experience, I can state that due to preliminary stages it turns into a more manageable activity, and eventually into a very rewarding one, because the students have the satisfaction of being able to carry it out and submit the end-product. The mental effort involved in this third stage is considerably reduced, because the students have already become aware of the constraints of the genre, and have been supplied with the information they need; the uncertainty related to structuring has also been diminished so, they can focus on the pragmatic aspect of their writing that is organizing the information to make it communicatively effective. This is by all means a skill Business students should be particularly good at, the pragmatic aspect of writing being crucial especially in the Business field. Therefore, the carrying out of this third stage is nothing else but an example of how the class is managed and of how language is used to achieve an end, reinforcing the sense of purpose that is frequently attached to Business English. In our case as stated by Ellis and Johnson (2003: 7) "performance objectives take priority over educational objectives or language learning for its own sake".

To sum up, I would like to add that this approach to writing fully verifies the hypothesis according to which "if the different processes involved in text production all draw resources from a common pool, the grammatical complexity, indexed through the number of correct propositions, the number of ideas, and the coherence level of text (i.e. organization of ideas) should be higher in script-based texts than in other types of texts" (BOURDIN and FAYOL, 2002: 222).

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