TOWARDS A THEORY OF WRITING IN EST: CONSIDERING DIFFERENT APPROACHES

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As teachers of technical English, we believe that writing is a fundamental skill that our students need to develop, since they will have to produce texts both in academic and professional settings. In our view, writing instruction should be based on a theoretical framework, adapted to every particular teaching context, which accounts for all the elements that intervene and interact in such a complex process. In this paper, our aim is to put forward a theory of writing that meets our needs. In order to establish our theoretical framework, we have drawn on the tenets of some of the most influential approaches to teaching writing. Although they do not provide a comprehensive theory that caters for our specific needs, from all of them we can gain significant insights into the writing process. After reviewing these, we will define the assumptions on which our theory is based.

1. Introduction

Needs analyses carried out at engineering schools in Spain have revealed the need of these students to communicate through written English. This need is twofold: on the one hand, engineering students need to write in English for academic purposes, and on the other hand, as professional engineers, they may need to write different types of documents.

Writing instruction should be based on a comprehensive theory which takes into account all the elements that intervene in the writing process: writer, audience, context and text. In the case of students of English as a foreign language, this theory should also include those issues related to language learning. Thus, we feel that writing courses should be designed on the basis of a theoretical framework that accounts for the characteristics of the teachers and learners' particular setting.

Over the last decades, there has been a kind of pendulum movement in teaching writing. Different approaches have been suggested (controlled-composition, rhetorical approach, etc.), but each of them has been discarded and substituted by a brand new one, without fully considering whether the previous approach had any valuable contributions to make. As a matter of fact, all these approaches are valid in the sense that they focus on a key element of the writing process (the language, the writer, the text), but they fail to provide a comprehensive theory which accounts for all of them.

We aim to put forward a theory of writing which suits our particular needs, considering that we teach in an EST context. In the remaining of this paper, we will examine the most influential approaches to teaching writing, analyzing those assumptions that could still be valid in the framework of our theory. On the basis of these assumptions, we will then

define our approach to writing, taking into account each of the components of the writing process.

2. Review of different approaches to writing

The perception of the need for an approach to teaching writing is quite recent. With the rise of the audio-lingual method, when the emphasis was placed on the oral skills, writing exercises were considered a mere supporting tool. Writing consisted of exercises at sentence-level, based on grammar (sentence drills). "The writing reinforced or tested the accurate application of grammatical rules" (Raimes 1991). Although this approach was superseded by other approaches focusing specifically on the development of writing skills, this emphasis on grammatical accuracy (*focus on form*) has pervaded both teachers and learners' views of writing over the years, in spite of the coming of new approaches.

When trying to develop an approach to writing, some people advocated free composition (e.g. Brière, quoted in Silva 1990, 12). These views were quickly rejected on the basis of a behaviourist view of language learning, which was considered a habit-formation process, and thus, error was something to be avoided. These first attempts to develop the writing skills were based on *controlled-composition* exercises at paragraph or essay-level in which students had to develop, manipulate or imitate a passage following a model. Writing instruction was aimed at enabling students to produce grammatically accurate texts.

At a later stage, it was considered that there was more to composition than merely mastering grammatical patterns. Kaplan proposed an approach which *focused on rhetoric* (defined as the way texts are organized). The unit of analysis was no longer the sentence, but the paragraph or the text. In an EST context, these views were reflected in the works of Trimble (1970s-1980s), who developed a theory of the EST text —focusing on the paragraph, which was constructed on the basis of a series of rhetorical functions and techniques— and maintained that in order to understand a technical text, the student must first be aware of the way the text is organized (Trimble 1985). Although the move from the sentence level to the discourse level was a significant step in writing pedagogy, all these approaches viewed composition in terms of the final product, without considering the composition process. They focused on the text, emphasizing accuracy, neglecting the context in which writing takes place, as a response to a communicative need.

In the 1970s and 1980s, with the advent of the *process approach*, the focus shifted from the text to the writer, who was seen as the creator of the text. It was assumed that writing involved something more than simply putting together a series of sentences and that teaching writing should deal with what writers actually do during the composition process. The process approach had its origins in the research done on the L1 composing processes, and focused on the different steps that writers go through in the attempt to produce a text. As advocates of the process approach, White & Ardnt (1991, 5) point out that, "the writer, and the writer alone, is responsible for the text which eventually evolves from the raw material." As the creator of the text, the writer is also responsible for "constructing" the audience the text is addressed to. Following this approach, the role of the teacher of writing is:

> ...to engage our students in that creative process, to excite them about how their texts are coming into being; to give them insights into how they operate as they create their work; to alter their concepts of what writing involves. (White & Ardnt 1991, 5)

The process approach was readily accepted by the language teaching community. Some scholars, however, have pointed out the drawbacks of this approach (Johns 1990; Horowitz 1986). We would like to emphasize the following:

1-Process writing disregards the constraints of the context in which real writing takes place (choosing the topic, time constraints, audience,...).

2-Some students may feel uncomfortable using the sequence of techniques (outlining, structuring, drafting, etc.) imposed by the teacher. In fact, some researchers (Horowitz 1986) have suggested that the so-called "process approach", rather than an overall

approach to writing, might best be considered a set of techniques to be taken into account.

3- Although some teachers have implemented the process approach, in some cases there is a mismatch between pedagogy and assessment. For example, there are courses focusing on writing as a process which assess students' performance with a test which only considers the final product.

As many scholars (e.g. Silva 1990; Tribble 1996) have pointed out, while a process approach can enable students to create texts, it may fail to meet the needs of those students who have to address a specific audience, especially those who write in professional and academic settings. In this sense Swales (1990) suggested that writing should conform to the specified requirements of the discourse com- munity, and the text should follow the conventions of a specific genre. Thus, the *social/genre approach* would seem to be the most appropriate for ESP. With this approach, the focus is on the reader, that is, the discourse community, who decides on the acceptability of a text, according to whether it follows or not the conventions.

It seems that second language writing pedagogy has followed a pendulum movement. Each approach has been substituted by another, without considering whether any of the tenets of a former approach could still be valid. On the other hand, some of these approaches have not totally disappeared, and although it is not fashionable to claim that one follows a controlled-composition or a rhetorical approach, one can easily find them in current writing textbooks. In our view, a specific writing situation can benefit from valid contributions provided by the different approaches.

3. Our approach to writing

As Silva (1990, 17-20) says, all the aforementioned approaches focus on a key element of the writing process (the reader, the text, or the writer), but none of these approaches addresses all of them as a whole. In the light of this, it seems clear that we need a comprehensive theory of second language writing which accounts for all the elements that

intervene in the composing process (e.g. Silva 1990; Johns 1990). To develop such a theory, we can draw on theories of L1 writing, considering such factors as the writer, the reader, the context and the text as well as including insights from second language learning (e.g. Johns 1990).

As Johns suggests, each of these elements can be examined from three different perspectives: expressivist, cognitivist, and social constructionist. The expressivists advocate a process approach to writing, thus placing the emphasis on the writer as a creator of the text. The social constructionists view writing as conforming to the requirements of the discourse community, which seems to be most appropriate for EST; but we should consider whether we want our students to be "sucked in" by the community without allowing them to have a say (e.g. Clark 1992). In addition, students should confront the problem of double estrangement that they have, since they are neither experts in the community within which they have to function nor native speakers of the language. Finally, cognitivists view the writing process as one in which writers

> not only have a large repertoire of powerful strategies, but they have sufficient self-awareness of their own process to draw on these alternative techniques as they need them. In other words, they guide their own creative process. (Flower 1985, 370)

Cognitivists have also been associated with the idea of interactivity between reader and text as explained in ESL reading literature (e.g. Nuttall, Wallace), adapted to the process of writing. This results in the construction of meaning out of the text by both writer and reader.

Taking into account all the aforementioned conside- rations, we suggest a theory of writing suited to our particular context, which is based on the follo- wing assumptions:

a) We view writing as communication in which there is an interaction between writer and reader through the text. We should account for all the elements that take part in it: it is a social act which takes place in a specific context; both reader and writer have a purpose; the reader uses his or her

previous knowledge to interpret the text. There is negotiation of meaning; that is, since the reader is also responsible for the interpretation of the text, it is the duty of the writer to state his ideas clearly, which can be achieved by means of the organization of the text, or by providing supporting evidence. In order for successful communication to take place, the writer must consider the reader in terms of schemata, the purpose for reading, etc.

b) Writing is a non-linear process which involves a series of recursive steps. These steps are viewed as a tool which students can adapt to their particular needs and learning styles. Rather than prescribing a fixed sequence of strategies, our aim is to offer them a set of techniques which they have at their disposal. These include planning, considering the audience, gathering information, selecting ideas, among others. In our view, writing instruction should enable the learner to become aware of the process, and to control all the stages.

c) This process involves making linguistic choices, which correspond to conveying different nuances of meaning, to adopting different stances, or to projecting one's best possible image as a writer (adopting a particular style). Some aspects to be considered are *impersonalization, hedging,* and *organization of the text.* It is important that our students are aware of these choices and what they imply. Since they are foreign language learners, they often find it difficult to express themselves with precision in English. Besides, they only consider alternatives in terms of being right or wrong, and overlook linguistic options together with the meaning they convey. Our instruction thus aims to be an empowering tool to help them overcome these problems.

d) The role of the teacher consists in *guiding* and *assisting* the learners through all the stages of the process and providing feedback on the learner's work. Since we consider writing as interaction between reader and writer, this feedback is essentially provided from the point of view of the *reader*, without looking at grammatical accuracy until a later stage. Clark (1992) provides three reasons for using this procedure:

first, there is no guarantee that my interpretation of what a student is trying to say is accurate; second, I believe that the students learn from having to try to solve problems themselves first, once the problems have been pointed out to them; third, and perhaps most importantly, I do not want to focus on grammatical accuracy but on the ideas the writer is expressing. (134)

Since our emphasis is mainly on intelligibility, we do not focus on accuracy until the revision and editing stages. *Assessment* by the teacher will take all these aspects into account.

e) The learners are in control of all the stages in the process, and are responsible for the final product. This means that they will choose the techniques that best suit their needs. They should view language as a resource, rather than as a constraint; that is to say, they should not just adapt to specific language patterns (e.g. use the passive voice because they are writing a technical text), but they should choose those alternatives that best express their ideas. As a writer, it is the learner who makes all the decisions.

4. Conclusions

In an EST context, both teachers and students need a theory of writing which provides a framework for course design to account for the particular learners' needs. To develop such a theory, we have taken into account all the elements that the writing process involves. Over the years, the emerging approaches have assigned different roles to these elements, emphasizing one of them and subordinating the rest to it. Moreover, every time that a new approach has emerged, the previous one has been discarded without considering whether it had any assumptions that could still be valid. Our purpose has been to analyze some influential perspectives in order to draw those aspects that could be effective to develop writing skills in our setting.

Our writing theory comprises several assumptions which view writing as a non-linear process, in which there is an interaction between the writer and reader as they build up the meaning out of text. The

language component is seen as an enabling and empowering tool which allows the writer to overcome linguistic barriers and to exercise choice. The teacher guides the learner through the process as a reader but it is the learner alone who is responsible for the final text.

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