

EFL Writing Tasks within a University Degree in English

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ABSTRACT

In this paper it is proposed that doing summaries of academic texts is valuable to undergraduates EFL learners for several reasons. If the informational content of a written composition is mutually known to writer and reader, feedback on recurring errors in the work of weaker writers can be given more effectively. It is also of value in introducing EFL undergraduates to the language of the academic discourse community. Furthermore, it serves to give learners a clearer idea of what kind of originality is required of them in their written compositions.

The past decade has witnessed a remarkable growth in the literature about teaching writing in the L2 classroom. The questions addressed in this respect range from those dealing with the cognitive demands that writing makes, through the subjective nature of the evaluation of writing tasks, to the part played by the teacher/instructor in promoting writing fluency in learners. Research from many fields—such as cognitive psychology or contrastive rhetoric—has done much to inform classroom practice. Yet the procedures followed in many L2 classrooms seem to implement only partially the theories that underlie the teaching of writing in a second language. The present discussion will be concerned only with teaching writing within the second language classroom in faculties (henceforth, the UEFL classroom). My concern is with two aspects of this question: why the teacher-learner interaction in writing classes may not work to great advantage, and how it might be optimized in the context of University degree courses. This involves consideration of the kind of problems which are most resistant to teacher intervention—the nature of the writer—and the communication activity taking place—the nature of the writing task.

In the UEFL writing class, as elsewhere, teachers adhere to the belief that “practice makes perfect.” After reading and studying texts on a particular subject, students are usually asked to write a composition on a similar or related topic, which is then read and corrected by the teacher. The individual feedback given to each student on their written work is, it is thought, of value to them. The results of research into this commonly held

belief are not so sanguine, however.¹ Provided the notation used by teachers is clearly understood by students, teacher correction, it is true, is of value in helping learners gradually to acquire control of grammar and vocabulary. If students are writing regularly, and receiving regular feedback, there should be perceptible progress in such problematic aspects of English as L2 as might be the case of the use of the article.² That is, if students write regularly, they will gradually acquire greater control of the grammar of the language. Similarly, the individual attention offered to learners does much to overcome the problems posed by over-large classes, and helps the teacher to accommodate to different levels of ability, rate of learning, individual difficulties, and so on.

In the UEFL writing class, however, the concern is not simply with promoting students' acquisition of discrete items of the language, but with teaching written discourse skills. Here teacher feedback does not appear to be very effective. It has been stressed that learners are less able to take advantage of advice as to the content of their composition, because they may not understand the feedback given, as Cohen and Cavalcanti point out (165). Indeed, according to this research, many language teachers say they do not mark for content at all (160), as their primary aim is to "teach the language," whatever this might be taken to mean. However plausible such a statement might appear at first sight, such a view of the teacher's concern becomes untenable. Written language, unlike spoken discourse, is most commonly used in society to transmit information. Whereas spoken language is primarily interactional in its function, written language is primarily transactional (Brown and Yule 4-15). And, of course, transactional language is message-oriented. If the message is not given its due importance, it is difficult to recognize and come to grips with the problems displayed by weaker writers. This may be illustrated by consideration of two extracts from weak compositions. Both are gross examples of their kind, occurring in simple descriptive and narrative compositions, but may be found repeated again and again in a wide spectrum of writing tasks:

- (1) John has a brother, he's a very good athlete.
- (2) My sister's got a dog, she lives in a flat in Cáceres. One day she had a problem with the dog, it barked at night, the neighbours didn't like it.

Both of these extracts are fairly typical of weaker writers' work, yet neither displays overt difficulty with L2. Such writers very often show an inability to distinguish between the speech forms appropriate to spoken discourse and those used in writing. Typically, these learners prefer paratactic phrases and the unspecific type of vocabulary normally associated with speech ("sort of," "nice," "have got," and so on). Loose coordination and run-on sentences are common features of spoken discourse, as is reiteration. The dense packing of information in pre- and post-modified noun phrases, adverbial modification or modality are as much beyond writers who fail to distinguish between the two modes in L1 as in L2. The cognitive difficulty of transmitting information through written language is apparent in their work.³ This may not be obvious to language teachers in faculties who, seeking to identify L2 errors, are instead confronted with very different kinds of problems. It may also be thought that such problems were less frequent when English language teaching was based on the written language. Whatever the drawbacks associated with such

methodology (and they are numerous), structure-based L2 courses, in the form of grammar-translation methods, guaranteed, by way of compensation, that undergraduate learners would recognize sentence boundaries, and be able to produce what was recognizable as a sentence, albeit an unidiomatic or grammatically flawed one. Now it would seem that intensive remedial work has to be done not only on the grammar of utterances of the kind seen above, but on the most simple of punctuation marks.

It may very well be that the kind of problems appearing in UEFL writing classes are a direct consequence of a communicative methodology that has over-emphasized the interactive function of language. Syllabuses based on interactive communicative functions cannot adequately account for language used in the compact transmission of information. So, for example, it is impossible to teach relative clauses "functionally." More serious is the fact that a problem such as this is not easily remedied in the L2 writing class, if writing skills from L1 are not being transferred. The kind of elementary level teaching needed to remedy such a lack of familiarity with basic writing skills cannot be provided in faculties, where large numbers of students do not need it, and would be unhappy if the language component of their degree course were to be reduced to this. The only way to help the weaker learners in the UEFL class is by providing the kind of individual feedback from which they can learn, but which does not interfere with the rhythm or rate of progress of their classmates. However, making this feedback effective is not always a simple matter, as may be appreciated if example (1) is considered carefully.

A typical teacher's correction would presumably draw attention to "he" and ask the writer to clarify for the reader who this pronoun refers to. The teacher here acts as honest reader, confused by inaccurate use of pro-forms. However, feedback of this kind, as is repeatedly demonstrated in the UEFL writing class, does not necessarily help the writer to self-correct. To the teacher, it is obvious that if "he" refers to "brother," then the relative pronoun "who" is needed; if not, then the sentence will have to be recast. For teachers and able L2 learners this is extremely straightforward, even elementary, but for the kind of learner who will produce this kind of utterance in the first place, the kind of pointers given may not clarify the issues at stake. Remedial work on grammar or punctuation is of little use either, for these learners will, in free composition, continue to produce this kind of utterance until, having "got the message" as they understand it, they stop using commas altogether. They then prefer to play it safe by using sentence after sentence of simple declaratives consisting of SVOA, risking, at the most, an inserted initial or medial adverbial to lighten the dead weight of these refrain-like utterances. While certainly not incorrect, this is far from what was intended by the instructor, for whom good writing is more than simply the production of grammatically acceptable utterances.

If we look at (2), culled from an equally weak composition by another student, it would seem reasonable to suppose that a teacher faced with this piece of writing would prefer not to over-correct, for this may lead to loss of fluency in L2 writers.⁴ So, in an effort not to cover the page with red notations, the instructor would single out the most important problem. As far as comprehension is concerned the second ambiguous "it" might be the most troublesome: was it the dog or the barking that the neighbours didn't like? When asked to clarify this point for the teacher, and help offered in recasting the sentence depending on the writer's intended meaning, the student admitted to not being

able to correct this, having forgotten, in the period between writing and receiving the corrected version (in this case a lapse of four days), what he meant by “it” in the first place!

Here the problem of the form/content divide is amply illustrated. Although the example may appear extreme, it is a common enough problem in the L2 writing class, and pinpoints one of the reasons why teacher corrections are little more than useless. Teacher feedback is, and cannot be, of any value to the student if the content (what the writer is trying to say) is as much a mystery to the writer as to the reader.⁵ The multiple roles that the teacher must play (reader, instructor, evaluator) clearly conflict with each other when the primary need of the learner for instruction has to take second place to the clarification request of the reader. If the teacher is to be of any use at all in helping the learner to develop the ability to produce reasonably unambiguous prose, to communicate effectively through grammatically accurate sentences, then the role of instructor must take precedence over other possible roles. This implies that, at least in the early stages of an advanced writing course, the content must be mutually known to the reader and the writer, if the teacher’s feedback in cases like those cited above is to be of any use to the learner.

This is only one of the reasons why the use of a current rhetoric approach to writing seems of little value in the UEFL classroom in the early stages. Such an approach centres on the “logical construction and arrangement of discourse forms,” to use Silva’s description (14), as if writing were somehow like assembling building blocks. Typically, this approach focuses on the paragraph as the basic unit of construction. Learners, through study of model texts, are introduced to the “stack” paragraph, consisting of a topic sentence which is developed in succeeding sentences through exemplification, comparison or contrast, and are shown how good writers mark transitions or draw conclusions. Attention is paid to the tripartite structure of a finished composition, echoing the paragraph in its introduction, development and conclusion, and learners usually practise essay writing of four discourse patterns: narrative, exposition, argumentation and description. Course books which follow this approach use topics of supposedly broad general interest to illustrate and practise these discourse types. Although the topics are often extremely sophisticated, there is nothing to guarantee their relevance and interest to the university undergraduate. If the topic itself does not appeal to the learner, then it provokes the instant forgetfulness that makes teacher feedback of such little use as in example (2).

Similarly, it seems to be hardly recognized by proponents of current-rhetoric approaches that the cognitive demands it makes of learners is often far beyond their ability. This is particularly striking in mixed-ability classrooms, where weaker writers are struggling with quite different types of problems in their composition. The relationship between the ability to recognize the ways in which a text is constructed and the ability to produce a similarly constructed text is a tenuous one. Learners may be quite expert at identifying rhetorical patterns in others’ writing, correctly singling out topic, support or concluding sentences, and indeed even putting mixed sentences into the correct order. Their ability to dismantle these building blocks of a written text, however, seems to have little to do with the ability to produce them. Casting a good topic sentence (supposedly the basis of the well constructed paragraph) is often beyond their powers. Typically, UEFL students produce topic sentences which are such a succinct statement of what is to be said

that the “development” of the paragraph consists of a simple reiteration of what has already been said, or so general as to defy any specification or detail in its development. The reasons for these problems are again related to the message; knowing what one wants to say precedes how one says it, and learners frequently understand, from this approach, that the material of which the building blocks of prose are made could just as well be hay as brick.⁶

So much criticism has already been made of the current-rhetoric approach to teaching writing that it may appear irrelevant to return, even cursorily, to the question here. Judging, however, from recent lectures in congresses and symposia on language teaching methodology and advanced language text books for the EFL classroom, this approach still dominates the UEFL writing class. In the context of the present discussion on how to improve the value of teacher feedback, the lack of concern shown in approaches centred on discourse patterns with subject matter, what the student is actually required to write about, is worth recalling.

As has been said, a large part of the problem resides in how effective teacher feedback is if content is seen as unimportant, and is new or unknown information to the teacher. If discourse patterns have replaced grammatical accuracy as the paradigms from which we work, it is hard to see how this helps weak writers get to grips with unrelated—but equally important—problems in expressing themselves effectively. All too often these problems have less to do with unfamiliarity with L2 (for some students with limited grammatical competence are able to exploit the little they know to great advantage) than with discovering what they are supposed to, or are trying, to say in the first place. When explaining the difficulties they find in writing, students consistently blame their lack of fluency on a lack of ideas. They feel that they have been thrown in at the deep end when asked to write on a subject after having read only two or three short passages loosely related to their assignment, particularly when the topic is uncongenial to them. These students report similar difficulties in their L1 writing assignments when asked to turn in a “personal” piece of work related to one of the subjects they study as part of their degree course. The requirement to be original, which learners perceive to be the demand their teachers make of them, can be a great stimulant to the practised, able writer, but fills the poorer performer with a feeling of defeat before even setting pen to paper.

Apart from anything else, this is unfair to undergraduate learners, for writing in university settings, as practised by members of the academic community, is rarely as creative or original as this. New insights or advances in research typically build on, spring from or disagree with that which has gone before. Academic writers do not write without a heavy background of reading which is quoted, summarized and paraphrased in their own work, as Campbell points out (211). They employ terminology common to their discourse community, which they master only because of their familiarity with the ways in which others have previously used it. Only those most revolutionary of thinkers, or those with most stature in this particular community, produce what might be classed as original or creative writing, coining new terms for new ideas in ways unknown to their readers. It seems illogical, then, to ask university undergraduates for “original” writing on topics of broad general interest, as is common in the UEFL writing class.

English language students at Spanish universities study literature, history and philosophy, among other subjects. In order to graduate they are not required to have clear ideas on the advantages and disadvantages of advertising, for example, but on, say, the differences between the Petrarchan and the Shakespearian sonnet or the effect of the Norman Conquest on the development of the English language, to cite two very obvious examples. Students find it pointless to complete written assignments about capital punishment or local customs or whatever, when they have a wealth of informational content which could be brought to their writing, but which, in writing classes focusing on form rather than content, rarely is.

An approach which proves successful with the mixed-ability class is to base writing assignments, for at least a year, on summarizing articles, chapters and long passages from sources directly related to the humanities subjects students are working on elsewhere. Having all read and studied a given text, students are asked to recapitulate, for the language teacher, what the writer is saying. Help may be given to organize the information with macro-organizers like enumerative terms, time adverbials, and so on. More able and adventurous students will be asked to attempt summarizing and paraphrasing using their own words, while weaker students should not be discouraged from directly quoting the source text (using the necessary quotation marks to avoid plagiarism). Better students are branching out and able to profit from teacher feedback on their semi-original production, while weaker writers are also learning on two fronts: first, how another writer organizes the informational content of a piece of work, and secondly, how that content is rendered in the words used. Both kinds of learners are also learning about the mechanics of one part of academic writing, namely the citation of works used. Texts chosen for summary can, of course, be of any of the four discourse types traditionally identified; simple texts about history give practice with narratives, for example.

It has already been shown by A. L. Brown, *et al.* or Taylor and Beach that learning how to summarize is helpful particularly with expository texts. Similarly, as Campbell suggests, this kind of assignment encourages the development of academic language in non-native speakers (226). For historical reasons, the rhetoric of Spanish academic discourse is different from its English counterpart in several important ways. Ostler suggests that Spanish rhetoric may be more akin to Arabic. Extensive and intensive reading of academic texts in English is useful to all university undergraduates, in familiarizing them with the characteristics of this kind of discourse.⁷

Equally important is the fact that the semi-copying involved in such writing tasks gives weaker writers confidence and helps them to become more fluent writers. When they write using others' words and ideas, following closely patterns presented for them, learners do not tend to produce the kind of interference from speech patterns seen earlier. Because they are not entirely original, sentences are recognizable as such, and, if ambiguities of the type in (1) or (2) above appear, these may be quickly resolved by reference to an outside source. It should not be underestimated how resistant writers can become to suggestions about how to improve their work, as Burkland and Grimm (245) or Sperling and Freedman (357) have pointed out. Over-correction and poor marks may make learners defensive about their compositions, and the lack of receptiveness to a teacher's remarks can quickly lead to a situation in which the "learning" process becomes a struggle between two

radically opposed points of view. The appeal to a third authority, the source text, provides a neutral background against which to work, and helps establish a more helpful learner-teacher interaction.

Basing composition tasks in the UEFL classroom on the informational content of other subjects provides motivation for the student, if only because this must be known if students are to pass examinations in these related subjects. Similarly, it guarantees that students and teachers have background knowledge in common, and feedback on the persistent errors of the kind mentioned earlier can be given more efficiently. While obviously learning language in general, the student is becoming socialized into the academic discourse community to which he evidently belongs, and from parroting others' words, can move on to freer expression. Summaries can, of course, be done of two or more texts on the same subject, and here the teacher will help learners use macro-organizers like contrastives or contradictives. These summaries can be returned to at a later date, and learners invited to add comments to another writer's views, using concessives, coordinate relative clauses, embedded "that" clauses, and so on, in order to practise expressing, still in a fairly controlled way, personal opinions or viewpoints.

Most would agree that wide reading makes for better writing. Weaker writers in UEFL classes are frequently those who do not read extensively. Such learners do not benefit from the kind of short extract often presented in the L2 classroom. Doing summaries of whole chapters of books or articles spanning several pages helps promote the kind of reading fluency which is ultimately beneficial to writing. Following the kind of rigid training suggested here, in which self-expression and creative thinking are severely curtailed, learners welcome the chance to progress to freer tasks. Having gained in fluency, learners are less afraid to tackle assignments which make greater demands on their own ideas, and have more realistic notions of what kind of originality is actually required of them. More importantly, learners will benefit more from the feedback given to them as they will have gained greater insights into the value and meaning of the comments written on their work. A positive interaction has been established when the context of message, fundamental to this kind of communication, has been clearly and unambiguously placed in the front line. In the UEFL classroom, as elsewhere, it is pointless to continue to talk of elements of language as if they were divorced from the communicative acts which they serve to express. English language teachers within University degree courses have enormous advantages over those teaching in non-academic settings, where advanced writing tasks are difficult to place in any meaningful context; these advantages should be exploited to the full.

Notes

1. Knoblauch and Brannon or Hillocks review different ways of responding to student writing. They conclude that teacher comment has little impact.

2. Fathman and Whalley (187) find that "when teachers underline grammatical errors in the students' texts, students showed significant improvement in grammatical accuracy." This finding is supported by empirical evidence from the classroom.

3. For a fuller consideration of this difficulty, see Beaugrande.

4. Proponents of the “expressivist” movement in composition theory advocate non-intervention by teachers, preferring to facilitate classroom activities that promote fluency in writing. Self-discovery and problem solving place the emphasis on the individual process of writing. This lack of teacher intervention or formal correction of students’ writing has led to much discussion; it is claimed, for example by Horowitz, that this ill-equips undergraduates for the kind of writing actually required of them in academic settings.

5. This is, of course, one of the main objections to process/expressivist approaches to teaching writing. After having played “facilitator” during the planning of compositions, the teacher is suddenly transformed into an “evaluator” of the finished work—an uncomfortable transformation for both the teacher and the learner.

6. Raimes argues that content determines form and that imposing organizational patterns discourages the thinking necessary for successful writing. As he says, “choosing topics should be the teacher’s most responsible activity” (266).

7. The kind of text used as model in the L2 writing class must be chosen carefully. As S. Peck MacDonald has pointed out, basic tenets of academic discourse such as intelligibility or readability are not necessarily common to the writing of all literary critics. In her view, the influence of continental theories of literary criticism on scholars in Britain and America has a direct influence on their discourse, which is radically different from traditional Anglo-American rhetoric.

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