Difficulties and constraints in second language formal writing

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ABSTRACT *Writing is considered one of the most difficult language skills to be acquired and to teach but it is becoming ever more widely used thanks to the development of information and communication technologies. The aim of this paper is to array and explore the cultural, social and cognitive factors, which may hinder the acquisition of writing skills. The author links the theoretical knowledge with the practical outcomes of a questionnaire distributed among the academics at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove, Czech Republic. Finally, she proposes teaching methods and approaches that can be optimally exploited in order to teach second language formal writing effectively and purposefully.*

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, 2012). Writing has a unique position in language teaching since its acquisition involves practice and knowledge of the other three language skills, i.e. listening, reading and speaking. Moreover, it requires mastering and developing other knowledge and skills, such as metacognitive skills. Learners need to set an objective for their writing, plan it carefully, think over its layout and logical structure, revise it …..In the process of writing they are using cognitive skills while to analyze sources and synthesize them in a compact piece of writing, they must use metacognitive knowledge. Together, these make the skill of writing one of the most difficult to acquire in a foreign language (FL). In addition, writing requires a high proficiency of the target language. Therefore, this paper focuses on the constraints and difficulties that Czech students face in the process of FL writing acquisition.

Constraints and difficulties in the process of FL writing acquisition

One of the reasons why writing is not easy to learn must certainly be cultural differences in the way academic register is realized, perceived and understood in different countries. Clyne (1987) and Duszak (1994) characterize English as a low context culture while German, Czech or Polish belong to high context academic cultures. According to these authors, English academic texts are perceived as being more clear and easy to understand than German texts which are more complex, full of nominalisations, compounds and modals. However, recent studies show (cf. Biber, Gray & Poonpon, 2011; Biber & Gray, 2010) that writing, and particularly academic writing, is generally structurally 'compressed', with phrasal (nonclausal) modifiers embedded in noun phrases.

In the Czech cultural environment knowledge and skills of writing continue to be neglected because writing is still perceived as a linguistic skill which is taught mainly at elementary schools and achieved through the mastering of grammatical and spelling rules. The idea of being a good writer is seen as an individual gift (Cmejrkova et al., 1999: 34) and this used to be the case in the Anglo-Saxon world, too (cf. Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). However, now writing is perceived as a skill which can be taught, practised and mastered. As noted, Czech students also tend to lack experience in writing and therefore the level of their writing is often very poor, even in the native tongue. This is unfortunately also true for higher education (cf. Gillet, 2004).

Social reasons may also cause difficulties in writing, such as a student's negative attitudes toward the target language, a perceived continued lack of progress in the FL, a wide social and psychological distance between the students and the target culture, and, a lack of integrative and instrumental motivation for learning. Of these motivation is key (see also Frydrychova Klimova, 2011).

Writing is cognitively complex. Particularly, acquisition of academic vocabulary and discourse style is difficult. According to cognitive theory, communicating in writing is an active process of skill development and gradual elimination of errors as the learner internalizes the language. Acquisition is usually a product of the complex interaction of the linguistic environment and the learner's internal mechanisms. Anderson's (1985) model of language production addressing both speaking and writing in a second language can be divided into three stages: construction, in which the writer plans what he/she is going to write by brainstorming, using a mind-map or outline; transformation, in which language rules are applied to transform intended meanings into the form of the message when the writer is composing or revising; and execution, which corresponds to the physical process of producing the text. Besides knowing what they want to express and being under stress when writing, the most problematic stage of the writing process seems to be the process of transformation. The reason is that students most commonly lack a sufficient level of L2 and therefore they do not have a wide range of academic vocabulary and relevant discourse structures. Moreover, they try to apply certain linguistic rules in the target language on the basis of similarities with L1, which proves to be completely wrong. These errors are usually known as language interference.

Survey outcomes

In the winter semester of 2012, small-scale empirical research was carried out among 15 members of academic staff at the Faculty of Informatics and Management of the University of Hradec Kralove in order to discover what difficulties they encounter when they have to write in formal English. The research tools used were as follows:

·   educational test;
·   questionnaires;
·   statistical methods of processing the results of the research; and
·   observations.

The DIALANG test performed among academics of the faculty showed that academic staff possessed sufficient level of English. (For more information about this test see http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchenterprise/dialang/about.htm.) The test proved that most of the academics (11/73% out of 15) had sufficient B2 level of English according to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR).

The academic staff were also given a questionnaire in order to discover what difficulties they have in formal written English, which is a prerequisite for publishing their research results. They were offered a list of the common issues which might make their writing in a foreign language difficult:

1. a choice of relevant topic;
2. expressing one's thought in a foreign language;
3. logical structuring of ideas in a foreign language;
4. insufficient knowledge of vocabulary in a foreign language;
5. incorrect transfer of rules from the native language, e.g. of syntax into the foreign language;
6. insufficient knowledge of grammar in the target language: a) word order; b) use of articles in English; c) use of tenses;
7. punctuation;
8. spelling;
9. use of formal language; and
10. writing bibliographies and references in a foreign language.

According to the questionnaire results, the most problematic area of writing for most respondents (12/80%) was perceived insufficient knowledge of grammar. This was followed by insufficient knowledge of vocabulary (8/53% respondents) and incorrect transfer of rules from the native language into the foreign language (7/47%) respondents). The last position was occupied by expressing one's thought in a foreign language, writing punctuation and use of formal language (6/40% respondents). The remaining issues were not considered that important (see Fig. 1).
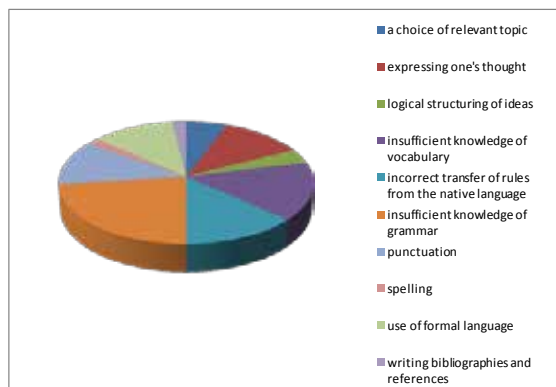

Figure 1. An overview of the most common writing difficulties in percentages

From personal observation and the analysis of hundreds of scientific papers, the author feels that even academics still need to master differences between formal and informal English in the written mode, grammar (word order, articles and prepositions in particular), and collocations.

Teaching methods and approaches to writing

Probably the most effective method when one speaks about writing is to let students write as much as possible during the course and provide them with diagnostic, constructive, useful and encouraging feedback on their writing performance. The feedback can have different forms. At the faculty a course of academic writing is taught as a blended course, which means that students meet a teacher once every two weeks to discuss and clarify the mistakes they made in their assignments (i.e. essays/articles), while at the same time, students are expected to undertake deep self-study of the materials that form their online eLearning course.

Probably one of the most challenging approaches to writing can be seen in task-based activities. One of such activities is writing an entry for Wikipedia. The online encyclopaedia Wikipedia represents both a great opportunity and a great challenge for academic writing classes at our faculty. Students exploit it not only as a reference source for general information but actively collaborate in its expansion (see Fig. 2).

Figure 2. An example of student's product for Wikipedia

In addition, students in the course of academic writing are instructed to use their critical thinking skills, which can be promoted through using the wiki. When collecting information for their articles, they must, for instance, use these skills in order to conduct reliable and valid research.

Wikipedia presents new opportunities for learners to take greater control of their own personalized learning, in this case learning how to write in formal written English. Besides developing thinking skills and critical thinking skills, acquiring the relevant linguistic and stylistic patterns, they learn how to conduct research and get it published in the same way as native speakers. That means that they also learn how to avoid plagiarism which is an issue for L2 and native-speaker writers alike.

The wiki creates a social platform since it represents a collaborative web-based space that can be modified by any user. Finally, this kind of writing requires an independent, autonomous learner who will take on a responsibility for his/her own learning.

Conclusion

Teachers can make second language writing less of a challenge for students if they take into account and then work to alleviate the burden of their students' personality, cultural, social and cognitive difficulties and constraints by using appropriate teaching methods/approaches and tasks. Undoubtedly, the most effective strategy is to promote writing as often as possible, together with (critical) thinking and conscious reflection on it, for example, in form of continuous assessments. Moreover, students must be provided with proper, ideally double or triple, feedback on what they have written in order to realize the errors they have made because without sufficient and relevant feedback students are not able to improve their writing skills.

As it has been described above, the task-based activities with immediate real world application might be a good solution to students' difficulties and constraints in writing. And in particular, the entry for Wikipedia seems to handle the cross-cultural, social and cognitive issues in question.

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