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Discourse Awareness And EFL Students' Writing Effectiveness

Ahlem Setrallah^{1*}

¹ ENS Bouzareah, Algeria

Abstract

Writing is mainly a process of interaction between the writer and the reader. This interaction is often determined by a specific context which leads both the writer and the reader to select specific register, adopt a specific voice and interpret the meaning of the text accordingly. To clarify this idea, let us consider the following writing activities and see how they can help student writers be aware of discourse. Studying a model text. Peer editing where one peer is a writer and another peer responds as a reader. These writing activities are often used by teachers to make student writers aware of how discourse functions, how to use discourse to write effectively and what factors can determine how discourse is used.

Keywords : Writer, Reader, interaction, discours functions, students

Introduction

Because discourse is the product of a given cultural context, EFL students often face difficulties understanding and using English discourse since they have already developed literacy skills in a different culture. Thus, those students are at a disadvantage compared to their L2 counterparts since their L1 discourse is quite different from that of the English language. As a result, EFL students are often not aware of the English discourse which leads to ineffective writing and which does not take the reader's expectations into account. Helping those students develop to become effective writers requires raising their discourse awareness which is a priority in academic writing instruction. Thus, students have to build a new identity as members of the academic writing community by being aware of the characteristics of its discourse, the criteria of good academic writing and readers' expectations within this community. This paper aims at showing the importance of discourse awareness in writing effectiveness by focusing on how teachers can raise students' discourse awareness.

1. Writing Instruction and Discourse Analysis

To understand the relationship between writing instruction and discourse analysis, we need to understand the link between writing and discourse which is defined as:

“A piece of discourse is an instance of spoken or written language that has describable internal relationships of form and meaning (e.g., words, structures, cohesion) that relate

coherently to an external communicative function or purpose and a given audience/interlocutor. Furthermore, the external function or purpose can only be properly determined if one takes into account the context and participants (e.g., all the relevant situational, social, and cultural factors) in which the piece of discourse occurs." (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000:4)

Since writing is the process by which discourse is produced, it is clear that discourse analysis can be a source of insight for writing teachers. Writing and discourse analysis are inter-related to the point that it is difficult to teach writing in isolation from discourse. This is because writing is mainly a process of interaction between the writer and the reader. This interaction is often determined by a specific context which leads both the writer and the reader to select specific register, adopt a specific voice and interpret the meaning of the text accordingly. (McCarthy, 2000:25)

Widdowson (1978) clarifies the relationship between writing and discourse as follows:

« ...developing a discussion and arranging points in such a way as to persuade you, the reader, that I have something worthwhile to say. What is involved in this activity? There is certainly more than simply putting sentences together in sequence like wagons in a train. A good deal of time is spent going over what has previously been written and pondering how the discourse might most effectively develop from it. Thus, what I am writing now is dependent on my recollection of what has gone before. It is also dependent on how I think what I have written so far will be understood and on what I assume to be common ground between myself and you, the reader. " (Widdowson, 1978: 62 cited in Lynch, 1996:139)

From the above quotation, it is clear that writing is the process by which discourse is manipulated, developed and adjusted to meet the reader's expectation(s) and fit a given situation where the writer interacts with a potential reader through the text (discourse).

2. Importance of Discourse Awareness in Writing Effectiveness

Writing takes place within a specific context which determines the aim of writing, the reader and the message to be written. In this context, discourse awareness is the perception of how the situation influences the language used, and how this language can be used to fit the situation. Without this awareness, writing becomes a matter of putting chunks of written words together in an unrelated way. Even if what is written is grammatically correct, it cannot reach its aim and convey a message in a clear way as in effective writing.

So, writing effectiveness is in part the result of putting discourse awareness in practice when writing. As Celcie-Murcia and Olshtain (2000:143) put it:

"The writer needs to use language, content, and conventions of writing in a way that will enable the reader to extract the intended meaning effectively, even though the act of reading will be carried out at a time and place removed from and independent of the act of writing. The writer has to be fully "committed" both to the content and the form of the written text in order to ensure that the text communicates in a setting where interaction is decontextualized. In order to be successful in this enterprise, the writer must develop

evaluation and reformulation strategies as part of the writing process, continually reassessing the potential reader's position.”

3. Developing Discourse Awareness Activities as Part of Writing Instruction

At a theoretical level, different approaches have influenced the research conducted in the field of Discourse Analysis. For example, Genre Approach is based on the idea that each speech community has a specific discourse which is governed by a set of conventions. Thus, the English used at courts by judges and lawyers is different from the one used by teachers and students at university.

This influence is also present in writing instruction. The latter is reflected by the widespread tendency to integrate discourse awareness activities as part of writing instruction. To clarify this idea, let us consider the following writing activities and see how they can help student writers be aware of discourse.

- 1- Studying a model text.
- 2-Linking sentences together by filling the gaps with the right coordinators.
- 3- Re-ordering sentences to write a paragraph.
- 4- Role playing as a pre-writing activity.
- 5- Brain storming and pre-writing activities as a way to make students aware of who the writer is and what the aim of the writing task is.
- 6-Writing as a response to a reading passage (e.g. a friend asking for advice).
- 7- Writing reports based on surveys (e.g. women and sports activities).
- 8- Peer editing where one peer is a writer and another peer responds as a reader.

These writing activities are often used by teachers to make student writers aware of how discourse functions, how to use discourse to write effectively (meet the reader's expectations and fulfill the aim of the text) and what factors can determine how discourse is used.(Xing et al.2008:73)

Conclusion

Writing is a crucial skill that EFL students are required to develop. This development cannot take place without making students aware of how discourse is used in writing and determine good writing. Convinced by the importance of discourse in writing, teachers try to compensate for the cultural difference between students' L1 culture and the target culture (that of ESL/EFL) as this difference can affect negatively their writing effectiveness. As a result, writing instruction can involve a number of activities to create a context for writing and help students write with the reader in mind. This may make writing more engaging for students once they see how discourse can be used to write better.

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