

Teaching Writing Through Communicative Approach In Military English

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Abstract

The paper speaks about teaching writing through communicative approach in English for Specific Purposes, especially in Military English. There are presented three different approaches regarding writing in ESP: product, process and social- constructionist approach. The recent developments in ESP writing consider the social-constructionist approach as the most appropriate one in making writing communicative. In order to make a writing task as communicative as possible, we should take into consideration the creativity and freedom of the writer to express his ideas openly like he does in his everyday life as well as to meet the expectations of the discourse community to which he addresses. Thus, teachers of military writing have to deal with all formal written texts that military students are assigned to do in their respective jobs. Therefore, military students take writing skill more seriously and become more motivated to communicate their messages through writing and at the same time to enhance their writing skills in a communicative way.

Key words: ESP, Military English, teaching writing skill, communicative approach.

Introduction

Writing in English for different various purposes is perhaps the main activity of all institutions all around the world. Almost all social activities such as student education, selling and buying of products, reports of official meetings, business meetings, military orders, etc. depend entirely on writing. Nowadays it is difficult to conceive the world without academic essays, scientific writings, commercial letters, e-mails for business purposes, medical reports, military memos, legal contracts, engineering reports or business annual reports.

As we mentioned above, writing is fundamental in every professional personnel, even in the Armed Forces. With the dominance of English as the official language of NATO, writing in English is of great importance to people who work in the Albanian Armed Forces. Communicating through writing is significant and vital for each military member who is assigned to operate in multinational army setting. Writing in military English is considered a difficult skill for cadets and officers who come from non-native English countries. Regarding military students, of any army branch, writing skill is always used as a tool to communicate with their international counterparts. These professionals can not operate and carry out their jobs properly without acquiring this skill.

The traditional rules of writing used in the General English differ to some extent from the way writing is taught in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). In teaching writing for ESP the focus is on the student and the acquisition of competence in specific genres. Teachers in this case do not teach just writing, but also specific types of writing that are estimated and are expected in several academic and professional contexts (Ken, 2013). However, the demands of the market and the modern world require teachers to be aware that their work involves much more than correcting language mistakes or explaining writing techniques. Therefore, the concept of the student's needs remains a key factor in the practice of ESP, which pays more attention to the process of communication than to the isolated parts of language. In General English rules of writing are well defined and embedded for decades and students sometimes find them abstract and incomprehensible for students. Thus the student of ESP should not be considered as a passive receiver; on the contrary he should have an active role by communicating clear messages through writing.

1. Literature Review

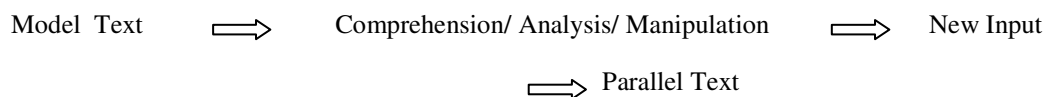
When we discuss about the teaching writing in ESP we take into consideration the distinction made between writing as a product and writing as a process. Many linguists, who have studied teaching writing in ESP, have

addressed this distinction in their researches. Current studies in this field propose a third approach, which is the social-constructionist approach.

1.1 Product approach in writing

One of the earliest approaches in writing is the product approach, which according to Nunan (1999) focuses on the final product which should be coherent, without mistakes and students will learn, copy and transform the models provided by the schoolbooks or by the teachers. Even Tangpermpoon (2008) states that students will begin from the first stage of drafting, to writing and then concluding with the correction. What is noted in this kind of approach is the development of student's knowledge, especially in terms of grammatical structures.

According to Dudley - Evans & St Johns (2000) the term product approach is generally used to refer to the importance of written text features, the final product that the writer has to produce. This kind of approach to writing usually involves the presentation of a model text, which is analyzed and then lays the path to the writing of a text, which is exactly similar or a parallel text. Modelling is the most important part of this approach and has always been considered as a useful resource to correct the students, as well as a very effective learning tool if you manage to incorporate it properly in the context of the writing process. Therefore, Robinson (1991) summarizes the method as follows:



According to Steele (2004) the model of product approach consists of four phases:

First phase: Students study the model texts and later the genre features. For example, if we study an official letter, we pay attention to the organization of the text into paragraphs and to the language used to make an official request. If a military student is required to write a military memo, he for sure has to get familiar with the structure of the beginning of such a letter: sender, receiver, subject and date.

Second phase: This phase consists in controlling the features of writing, usually in an isolated form. So if students are studying an official letter, they may be required to practice the language used to make official requests, for example, the practice of structure: I would be grateful if you would....

Third phase: This is an important phase that has to do with the organisation of ideas. Those who support this kind of approach believe that the organization of ideas is more important than the ideas themselves and as important as language control.

Fourth phase: This phase is concerned with the final product of learning process. Students choose from a similar set of tasks. In order to show that they can be competent and accurate as language users, the students use skills, structures and vocabulary they have already learned to produce the final product (Steel, 2004).

However, this approach has encountered objections and remarks regarding its effectiveness. Murrey (1980) speaks about the negative aspects of using model texts in writing classes in teaching the English language. The main disadvantage according to him is the fact that the model texts stifle student creativity. In the past, the use of the product approach resulted in a reproduction of the model text just by changing some of the words from the original text to produce a new one. So it was simply a mechanical work which did not include the thoughts and ideas of the writer, it did not leave space for the student's independence and it did not take into account the reader or community expectations.

Moreover, Escholz (1980) notes that the product-based approach encourages students to use the same plan in different settings, to implement the same forms, regardless of content, thus instead of enhancing their writing ability, this kind of approach prevents it. Therefore, the writer communicated with the reader in a cold mechanical way and the interaction between them was shallow, incomplete and non- communicative.

However, in teaching writing in ESP, presenting a model text for university students or for professional courses is still valid when the writer wants to adapt the model for specific purposes. This is often encountered in the

business world and in academic writings. But even in military writing, following a model text is considered rather positive, oriented and productive because the writer does not waste time with structuring, style, vocabulary and document format.

1.2 Process approach in writing

The process approach emerged in response to model text presented above, which focused only on final product. This type of approach is used to develop the capability of writing in a communicative way, focusing on the student as a creator, as a writer and as a transmitter of the message to the reader. Process approach emphasizes the idea of writing as problem-solving, with a focus on thinking and process (Dudley - Evans & St Johns, 2000). This is quite similar to the study offered by Flower (1985), which aims to show to the students how to identify the rhetorical problem, how to plan a solution or a set of solutions to the problem, and finally how to write an appropriate conclusion. This is the phase of thought. The process phase involves translating the plan into sentences and paragraphs, reviewing the first draft and then revising the text to get the final product. While teaching writing, editing and revising sub-skills are learned through reviews in the group or working in pairs. So, the first stage of the process has to do with generating ideas, selecting and then organizing them into different groups and finally putting them in a chronological order as they will be presented during writing (Dudley - Evans & St Johns, 2000).

Another researcher, Kroll (2001) defines the process approach as follows:

Process approach is used today as a summary term for many types of writing in different courses. What the term means is the fact that students are engaged in writing tasks more through a cycle approach than through a single approach. They are not expected to produce and submit complete and accurate responses in writing tasks without going through the stages of drafting and obtaining feedback on their drafts, either given by their peers or by the teacher, followed by a review of their texts.

However, the process approach aims to focus more on the different activities in the classroom that encourage the development of language use: brainstorming, group discussion and rewriting.

According to Steel (2004), the model of process approach involves eight different stages. It considers writing from the first stage of brainstorming, where all the ideas come up from discussions, then the second stage has to do with planning of writing, in which the extended ideas are written down and then judged and goes on with the third stage or mind mapping, where the ideas are organized in various forms which later help the students how to relate them with each-other. After that, in fourth stage, students write the first draft. The fifth stage regards the peer feedback, where students exchange their respective drafts. The next one is the editing of the drafts based on the received feedback which consist the sixth stage. The final draft is written during the seventh stage. Finally, the students read each-other draft once again and give feedback if necessary.

1.3 Social - constructionist approach

Writing is always closely related to the context. Based on the context, we set specific constraints on what should be written and how the ideas can be expressed better. According to Dudley - Evans & St Johns (2000):

Social - constructionist approach favours the teaching of writing in which writers are shown how to take on board the expectations and norms of the community to which they belong (or which they aspire to join) and how these expectations shape the established practices of writing within a given community.

These communities are considered as discourse communities and to write successfully within such a community means to be aware of the values of this community and the expectations it has for written texts , as well as the ability to build a cooperative relationship between the writer's creative needs and norms of the writing community (Dudley - Evans & St Johns 2000) . Social - constructionist approach in teaching writing is associated with development of the genre analysis as a key element in ESP texts. Working in various genres such as academic writing, dissertations and business papers have shown how the stages of development of such texts may determine the communicative goals in certain genres. This kind of approach, considers the writers as part of the discourse community, therefore they learn to adapt to the style and attitude of this community.

2. What is the appropriate approach to the teaching of writing in ESP in a communicative way?

The first approach we discussed, the product approach, is now considered not as productive and as effective as it used to be. Copying a model and presenting a reproduction of it simply by changing a few words, with the main focus on grammar and vocabulary, completely evades the communicative aspects of the students in teaching writing in ESP. This approach is considered practical in terms of being familiar with the form and structure of an official format, but it suffocates the ideas and creativity of the writers.

The second approach, the process approach, favours ESP writer as an individual and it encourages him to propose various ideas and solutions as well as it helps him to organize and plan his writing better. However, this approach does not function properly with current texts that students have to write as part of their academic or professional area.

The third approach, the social – constructionist one, is considered the most appropriate and practical approach regarding teaching writing in a communicative approach in ESP. It is an integration of the first two approaches, product and process approach, where the best features of both are combined together to make writing as communicative as possible. So, the social-constructionist approach deals with the final product of the written text by a particular model, but this text is accepted by the discourse community, whether academic or professional one. Therefore, Dudley - Evans & St Johns (2000), based on social - constructionist approach, suggest the following stages in the teaching of writing in ESP:

- Developing rhetorical awareness by looking at model texts;
- Practise specific genre features, especially moves and writer stance;
- Carry out writing tasks showing awareness of the needs of individual readers and the discourse community and the purpose of writing;
- Evaluate the writing (peer review or reformulation).

According to Pincas (1982) you need to identify three aims in teaching English writing for communicative purposes:

- a) The scope of writing should be widened to go beyond the artificial, unrealistic school-type composition of traditional teaching to more genuine, practical and relevant kinds of writing.
- b) Writing should be as communicative, or functional as possible. It should be seen to fulfill the sort of communication purposes, or functions that writing is used in everyday life.
- c) It should go beyond merely reinforcing grammar and vocabulary lessons and deal quite specifically with those skills that are required for effective writing. The teaching of writing should be recognized as a special part of language teaching with its own aims and techniques.

3. Military Writing

Teaching effective writing is one of the top priorities of the Foreign Language Centre (FLC), in the Academy of the Armed Forces, Albania. Writing as a productive skill is quite challenging to military students of FLC. Most of them face difficulty in organisation, style, choice of words and grammar. Besides that, they have to be familiar with the Army Standard of writing, which has its own rules and restrictions.

The teachers at FLC try to meet officers' needs and to enhance their writing skills in accordance with their job requirements. Typical army writings are:

- Military Report
 - Pre-mission report
 - Post-mission report
 - Multinational Exercise/Training report
 - Daily/weekly/monthly/ annual report etc.
- Memo
- Order

- Briefing
- Presentation
- Formal/informal letters
- E-mail

Thus, if you would like to use the communicative approach in teaching military writing, we should take into consideration the communicative needs of military students. Why do they need writing in their everyday job? Who do they have to write to? How efficient are they in writing, etc. So, the writing process itself involves the communication between two or more persons. Therefore, the way the students interact with others through writing is vital. In order to achieve a real life interaction among military students we should use as much real life writing tasks as possible. The writing tasks should be taken from military settings, which the students are familiarized with.

Another effective way of using communicative approach in teaching military writing is by presenting students with different approaches of military writing. Introduction of various authentic materials in military writing makes the students understand how important this skill is in the army. The teacher can bring in class English military brochures, pamphlets, magazines, newspapers, military publications, military reports, orders, memos etc. In fact, military students have to use such kind of English writings in their working environment. Thus, they will feel more motivated to be engaged in writing tasks presented to them in class. They will finally understand the relevance of what they are doing in class to their professional life.

Moreover, the military students must learn and practice the specific features of military writing genre. According to 'Writing and Speaking Skills for Army Leaders' effective Army writing transmits a clear message in a single, rapid reading and is generally free of errors in grammar, mechanics, and usage as well as concise, organized, and right to the point (Command and General Staff School, 2009). It is required to state the key argument at the beginning of the writing text as well as to use the active voice. Active voice writing emphasizes the doer of the action, shows who or what does the action in the sentence, and creates shorter sentences (Command and General Staff School, 2009). So, military students should be aware of some principles that derive from Army Regulation which are required to be applied in military writing. These principles are:

- Short, sensible sentences and paragraphs;
- Efficient phrases, vocabulary, and images;
- Active voice (primarily);
- Packaging that supports (Command and General Staff School, 2009).

Another way of making writing as communicative as possible is self-evaluation or peer evaluation. By self-evaluating they will be able to recognize if their written ideas are expressed clearly to the reader and if they need improvements. Taking the role of the teacher in reviewing what they have already written makes them more responsible and aware of self-corrections. Besides that, a good way of giving writing an interactive and communicative nature is peer evaluation. By correcting each-others writing tasks, students find writing more effective because they welcome and discuss each-other suggestions and later on they reflect them in their writings.

Recommendations

Teaching writing to students and professionals who study English for Specific Purposes requires dedicated and hard-working teachers. It is the teacher's responsibility to identify the ESP student specific needs in writing and to pay attention to their academic or job requirements regarding this skill. By identifying the students' needs, the teacher will be aware of the materials that he/she should use in class. He will also be able to orient the writing tasks towards their level of language knowledge and proficiency.

Another important issue in teaching writing to ESP students is the teacher's perspective about writing. Different ESP teachers treat writing in various ways. Based on the information that is presented in this paper, the social-constructionist approach seems the best option in developing ESP writing. It engages the students to follow a model to help them with the vocabulary, grammar and the lay-out of the document, then it allows them to express their ideas by offering different patterns of composing it from the draft form to the final product and finally it has to be in accordance with the standards of the discourse community, whether academic or professional.

Applying social-constructionist approach in teaching military writing has several advantages. Following a model of a formal document in the army it is quite acceptable and common practice in all chains of command. Then, the officers can write their personal message according to the army style of writing having in mind the reader, who can be a superior, a colleague or a subordinate regarding their military duties or orders.

Moreover, if we expect our military student to be competent and professional in writing, we should engage communicative writing tasks to help them be as practical as possible in their current or future jobs. English teachers who teach military writing have to include in their curricula all the written texts that the military students are assigned to do in their respective duties. The writing tasks practiced in the classroom have to be taken from real life situations and military environment, leaving aside abstract and non-authentic tasks that they may never face in their daily routine.

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