Thinking on the write path

Mohammad Ali Salmani-Nodoushan emphasises the importance of cognitive orientation to the success of EFL students in writing courses

Since 1970, when language teaching methodology released itself from the shackles of oral approaches, it seemed reasonable to develop a new method in which the curriculum would be consistent with, and ruled by, the objectives that the language learner had in acquiring a second language. Hence, some of the previously dark corners of the process of acquiring a second language began glittering in the light of new trends.

The skill of writing was rediscovered as soon as it lost its lowly status as a 'by-product' of the oral approach, and it stood as an ultimate goal by itself for an enormous number of foreign language learners.

Despite the fact that a sizable portion of the syllabus is allocated to writing courses, a desirable outcome has not often been obtained. Many class hours are spent on teaching sentence structures and combinations yet, when asked to write a short paragraph, the learners find it terribly painstaking. Inefficient writing is attributed to a number of factors, among which the inadequacy of cognitive competence stands out.

The purpose of this article is twofold. First, it will attempt to show how the skill of writing is in line with cognitive improvement. Second, it will try to propose a cognitively orientated approach to the task.

One of the terms used in education, linguistics and teacher training today is undoubtedly *competence*. We strive daily to produce language competency in our students, so that they can deal with facts, findings and opinions, as in the case of other academic disciplines. We try to develop in our students a relative mastery of language structures and usage, logical presentation and development of ideas, and the creative use of imaginative symbolic thinking.

Yet, in practice, we often feel rather embarrassed to confess that, not only have we not taken any successful steps further to achieve the goal, we might also have had a negative impact on our students' motivation.

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What is the cognitively orientated approach?

A cognitively orientated approach, in Mann's terms (1970), is "primarily concerned with the refinement of intellectual operation". It may seem that this description may rarely refer to curriculum content but, when examined more carefully, it can account for the central problems of curriculum in sharpening the intellectual process and developing a set of cognitive skills applicable to learning.

The approach is largely process-orientated in two senses: firstly, it identifies the goal of teaching as providing a repertoire of essentially *content-independent* cognitive skills and, secondly, it is concerned with understanding how the process of learning occurs in the classroom (Bruce, 1960). Here, the relationship between the learner and the materials is of prime importance. Syllabus can be, accordingly, defined as the constant interaction between the learner and the materials to which he is exposed.

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The problem of the syllabus designer is thus to identify the appropriate setting in which the learner can reconcile himself to the situation.

Typically, an analysis of what language learners need to know in order to effectively participate in their learning situations depends heavily on the particularities of those very situations. The aim of a cognitive approach is to develop an insight in the learner, enabling him to make his own selections and interpretations of the existing situation. The insight provides the learner with opportunities to stretch his skills beyond the classroom setting.

Cognitive orientation in writing

The cognitive orientation process tends to develop a *deductive approach* to the process of 'writing'. Unlike the inductive approach, in which writing is seen as a way of practising using a language, the deductive approach views writing as a way of organising ideas. In the cognitive orientation process, writing incorporates correct language into correct usage as a result of developing of linguistic competence. So, the bulk of class activity is devoted to enhancing 'usage' (Widdowson, 1984) such as subject/verb consistency, active/passive voice and so on.

However, writing is not a linguistic process *per se*. It encompasses a wide range of exercises that go beyond the linguistic scope.

It should be made clear that an emphasis on developing cognitive competence does not detract from the significance of linguistic competence. Needless to say, the student should have activities stimulated through the linguistic approach as well as activities introduced by the new approach. In fact, linguistic knowledge provides the building blocks of thought. The learner, however, needs to put the blocks into shape. He needs to learn how to think logically and how to develop his ideas convincingly. The teacher's job is, therefore, to develop the learner's cognitive abilities, rather than merely focusing on the problems of syntax and vocabulary.

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The cognitive approach conceptualizes writing as a means of enabling learners to assess their own structures, which, in turn, leads to the understanding of *communicative competence*. As Di Pietro (1982) states, matters of grammatical form are best explained in strategic contexts.

The process of writing is almost always directed towards readers whose expectations shape the form and content of the message. Therefore, writers should always discover solutions, as they move on, to the problem of interacting with readers. They should modify their discourse as they attempt to get closer to their intended meaning. This is the time when the teacher's role carries the greatest latitude in the classroom: it is the teacher's behaviour that guides the student's behaviour. The teacher's main role is to activate 'productive thinking' in his pupils by developing appropriate strategies that the writers can use to make their meaning clear.

Teachers can engage their students in different activities, use particular procedures or employ specific techniques.

Such an approach may look similar to *discovery learning* in the sense that active participation by the student is an indispensable condition for learning, and that it aims to enhance the learner's *productive thinking*. However, the two approaches should not be confused. The discovery learning approach is much too process-orientated to be able to identify any clear objectives - the structure of the stimuli is too complex to be determined in advance. In the cognitive approach, the role that the teacher plays in the classroom is of vital importance. He is not a mere mediator between the learner and the act of writing, but rather an authoritative source of information that appropriates and guides the productive thinking in his students.

The teachers' role

In this approach to writing, the student's attention should be diverted away from mere linguistic structures to the communicative part that linguistic ingredients play in writing. The learner should be made aware of the functions of different grammatical structures. Actual writing begins when learners having already acquired the basic principles of the language—how different forms are made and what functions they fulfil. The common term for this stage is *paragraph writing*.

Usually during paragraph writing, the learners become familiar with different methods of paragraph development. They are taught narrative, descriptive and other types of paragraphs. They learn how rhetoric is used in different texts. After a general statement about each type, sample paragraphs of a specific nature are presented to the learner. This is where writing begins. Students are asked to write a similar paragraph on a suggested topic and the compositions are proofread by the teacher. Unfortunately, the main part of the teacher's correction concerns that of the learner's grammatical mistakes and little is done with respect to the overall organisation of the composition.

It is mainly at this stage that students find themselves at a loss (being unable to write an acceptable composition). Often they know where to begin but they do not know how to develop a piece of

writing. The problem is not with *rhetorical functions* (to use Trimble's term, 1985) in writing since they have been taught about each type of paragraph effectively through a lot of explanation and examples. Nor are the students incapable of producing *rhetorical techniques* since, in their earlier courses, they have been exposed to, and practised, different sentence structures.

The main trouble lies in the intervening sections, or what can be eloquently termed *operational intermediates*. If the process of writing is sketched in the form of a tree diagram, it could be said that the sections appearing between the higher and lower nodes tend to be missing from the students' compositions.

Very often we notice in our students' compositions that an idea is not fully developed and there is a sudden leap from the rhetorical functions to the rhetorical techniques. This can be attributed to the student's excessive preoccupation with correct structures, which overwhelms their capacity for reasoning. They are so absorbed in the forms that they neglect to outline their ideas properly. Here, through concentrating on the logical expansion, the student should be informed of the primacy of thought over linguistic expressions.

The operational intermediates should be used in all types of paragraphs. The learners should know how much information they are required to put in their compositions so that the readers may easily follow their line of argument. They should also learn how to order and sequence their ideas so that the readers will not be left alone in a labyrinth of clumsy composition.

Students also need to be equipped with knowledge of the so-called *cohesive devices* and how to apply them to their writing. Although their significance has been repeatedly indicated to the students, cohesive devices are often absent in our students' compositions. Often, the sentences are so loosely conjoined that the readers may feel they have been put unevenly in the wrong places. Therefore, a good deal of practice in using cohesive devices seems necessary. It should be noted that teaching such devices in isolation would not be of much use. Rather, it would be more advantageous if they received sufficient attention while different types of composition — argumentative or expository — were being practised.

Congnitive process techniques

The commonest sequence in practising types of writing suggests that the narrative be exercised first. (Psycho)logically speaking, it is good start.

In narration, the writer is provided with the subject matter he wants to write about, since narration demands almost no reasoning capacity. The students are often successful in narrative writing, for they need no extra components about the sequence of events. However, they still need to develop productive thinking in order to connect sets of events together. The usual procedure in the narrative is that the topic is given to the students, and they are required to depict an imaginary or real situation on which they write.

The suggestion here is to hand out pictures that, when looked at serially, provide a brief account of stories. It is assumed that such pictures can spur the cognitive ability of the students. They

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should think of a logical or natural sequence for the pictures.

Description is another type of writing. It is often suggested that description should be presented after narration. Description is a little more troublesome for students because it is, in fact, the first step towards reasoning. In writing descriptive paragraphs the students need to think of the important details they want to put into their compositions. They should be informed as to which pieces of information are needed for their specific compositions. Pictures can still be used to provide the students with the theme of their compositions. After looking carefully at the pictures, the students should judge what is essential to put into their writing.

The other types of writing include explanation and discussion, which are the most difficult, for the students should think of both the subject matter and rational writing to convince the readers. Pictures are of little use here because they do not provide

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an in-depth cognitive framework for the students. By this time, the students are supposed to have developed their reasoning capacity in such a way as to write convincingly and appropriately. Their compositions are expected to qualify for both sufficient information and logical ordering.

Now the teacher's role becomes less important, and the students are expected to have reached a level of language competency to be able to work independently. Still the teacher can help: at this stage, his job is to identify the common logical fallacies that the students may face. Teachers can also provide their students with examples — of written materials — that illustrate these fallacies and pitfalls; they can also make some suggestions as to how the students can avoid them.

In brief, the main component of instruction in a cognitive approach is *revision*. As they take on the role of both writers and readers, the students are taught to review their writing, predicting what problems they may have, and what possible reactions they may have to their writing. The suggestion here is to write some of the compositions on the board or to use an overhead/opaque projector to this end. The students may then be urged to identify the mistakes, both grammatical and rhetorical, in their compositions. This procedure can develop an inter-actional attitude, and enhance productive thinking in the students. ■

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