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PSYCHOLOGY OF LEARNING: BEHAVIOURAL AND COGNITIVE ASPECTS

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ON ADOPTING A COGNITIVE ORIENTATION IN EFL WRITING CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

The present paper underscores the importance of the cognitive orientation of EFL students in their success in writing courses. A few suggestions are made as to how EFL teachers can put their students on the right cognitive path in their writings.

Keywords: Cognitive Orientation, EFL writing, Rhetorical Organization

INTRODUCTION

Since 1970, when language teaching methodology released itself from the shackles of 'oral approaches', it seemed notably reasonable to develop a new method in which the curricular plans would be consistent with, and ruled by objectives that the language learner conceives in relation to acquiring a second language. Hence, some corners of second language process, which were kept in dark, began glittering in the light of new trends. 'Writing', by definition, was a skill whose identity was rediscovered when its negligence as a 'by-product' in oral approaches was removed, and stood as an ultimate goal by itself for an enormous number of foreign language learners.

Notwithstanding 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 will find it terribly painstaking. The inefficiency with writing courses, as has already been detected, is attributed to a number of factors, among which the inadequacy of cognitive competence stands out.

One of the terms currently used in education, linguistics, and teacher training today is undoubtedly *competence*. The teachers strive daily to produce language competency in students so that they can deal with facts, findings, and opinions, as in the case of other academic disciplines. Teachers also try to develop a relative mastery of language structures and usage, logical presentation and development of ideas, and the creative use of imaginative symbolic thinking in students. Yet, in practice the teachers are in a position to confess with embarrassment that, they have not only taken any successful steps to achieve the goal, further but they also have deteriorated the kinds of motivations with which students had armed themselves to face the eventualities of the course.

The purpose of this article is two-fold. First, an attempt will be made to expound how the skill of writing is in line with cognitive improvement. Second, an effort will be made to propose a cognitively oriented approach to the task.

1. Cognitively Orientated Approach

A cognitively oriented 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. However, when examined more carefully, it can well account for the central problem of curriculum as that of both sharpening the intellectual process and developing a set of cognitive skills are applicable to learning.

The approach is largely process oriented in two senses: (1) it identifies the goals of teaching as providing a repertoire of essentially 'content-independent' cognitive skills; and, (2) it is also 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. The problem of the syllabus designer is thus to identify the appropriate setting through which a reconciliation is made between the learner and the situation.

Typically, an analysis of what, groups of language learners require to know in order to effectively participate in their particular situations depend heavily on the particularity 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 situations. The insight provides the learner with opportunities to stretch his skills beyond the classroom setting.

2. Cognitive Orientation In Writing

The cognitive process orientation tends to develop a deductive approach to the process of 'writing'. Unlike the inductive approach in which writing is seen as a practice in language usage, the deductive approach views writing as an organization of ideas. As for the former, writing incorporates correct language into correct usage, resulting from the development of linguistic competence. So, a major bulk of class activity is devoted to the enhancement of '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 affords the building blocks out of which the learner's thought is shaped. The learner, however, needs to get 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. The cognitive approach conceptualizes writing as a means of directing 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 interaction 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 behavior which guides that of the student. The teachers' main part is to activate 'productive thinking' in their pupils through developing appropriate strategies with which the writers can approximate their meaning. They 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 '*productive thinking*' of the learner. However, the two approaches should not be confused. Discovery learning approach is too extremely process-oriented for which, assigning any objectives is refused to count. In other words, one cannot identify any clear objectives for such an approach, because 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/she is not a mere mediator between the learner and the phenomenon of writing, but rather an authoritative source of information that appropriates and guides the 'productive thinking' in their students.

3. The Teachers' Roles

In this approach to writing, the student's attention should be towed away from mere linguistic structures to the 'communicative part', linguistic ingredients play in 'writing'. The learner should be made aware of the

functions of different grammatical structures. Actual writing begins when learners have already acquired the basic principles of the language, how different forms are made and what functions they fulfill. The common term for this stage is 'paragraph writing'.

Usually at 'paragraph writing', the learners become familiar with different methods of paragraph development. They are taught the narrative, descriptive, and other paragraph types. They learn how 'rhetorics' 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. The compositions are then proofread by the teacher. Unfortunately, the main part of the teacher's correction concerns that of the learner's grammatical mistakes and are done with respect to the overall organization of the composition.

It is mainly at this stage that students find themselves at a loss, (i.e. 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 different sentence structures, and have done a lot of practice in this relation. 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, then it could be said that the sections appearing between the higher nodes and the lower ones tend to be missing in the students' compositions.

Very often we notice in our students' compositions that an idea is left out without being fully developed, and that there is a sudden leap from the rhetorical functions to the rhetorical techniques. This problem can be attributed to the student's excessive preoccupation with correct structures, which overwhelms their reasoning capacity. They are so absorbed in the forms that the outlining of their ideas is neglected. Here, through concentrating on the logical expansion, the student should be informed of the primacy of thought over linguistic expressions.

It is necessary that the operational intermediates be employed 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 follow their line of argument with ease. They should also learn how to order and sequence their ideas so that the readers will not be left alone in the labyrinth of the writer's clumsy composition. Students also need to be equipped with knowledge of the so-called 'Cohesive Devices' and the application of this knowledge in writing. Although their significance has been repeatedly indicated to the students, cohesive devices are often absent in our students' compositions. Often, the sentences written by the students are so loosely conjoined that the readers may feel they have been unevenly fit in the wrong place. Therefore, a good deal of practice in using cohesive devices seems necessary. It should be noted that the teaching of 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 are practiced.

4. Cognitive Process Techniques

The most common sequence in practicing types of writing suggests that the narrative be exercised first. (Psycho)logically speaking, is a good start, as Goldman (1972) says, "*people have less trouble when components of any entity are given to them*". In narration the writer is provided with the subject matter he wants to write about, since narration demands little or almost no reasoning capacity. The students are often successful in narrative writing, for they need almost no extra *components* about the sequence of events to cope with. However, the students 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 should think of a logical or natural sequence for the pictures.

Description is another type of writing. It is often suggested that description 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 need 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 argumentation, that are the most difficult, for the students should think of both the subject matter and rational writing to convince the readers. At this stage, pictures are of little use because they do not provide 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 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 work independently. Still the teacher also can help. At this stage, the teachers' 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.

Conclusion

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 writings, predicting the problems they may have, and the possible reactions they may show towards their writings. 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 interactional attitude, and enhance productive thinking in the students.

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