Using writing to develop communicative competence in the foreign language classroom

Usando a escrita para desenvolver competência comunicativa na sala de aula de língua estrangeira

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Abstract: *This article discusses the possibility of developing communicative competence (CC) through writing activities in the EFL classroom. First we briefly review the role of the four skills (speaking, listening, writing and reading) in the EFL classroom and the concept and importance of communicative competence in teaching. Finally we discuss the role of writing and how it can contribute to communication and enhance student's communicative competence.*
Key words: *English teaching; communicative competence; writing.*

Resumo: *Este artigo discute a possibilidade de desenvolver competência comunicativa através de atividades escritas na sala de aula de língua estrangeira. Primeiramente discutimos o papel das quatro habilidades (fala, compreensão oral, escrita e leitura) no ensino de inglês como língua estrangeira e o conceito de competência comunicativa no ensino. Por fim, discutimos o papel da escrita e como ela pode contribuir para a comunicação e para melhorar a competência comunicativa dos alunos.*
Palavras-chave: *Ensino de inglês; competência comunicativa; escrita.*

1 Introduction

It's quite common to hear the question "Do you speak this language fluently?" when people want to know about your communication skills in a certain language. Strangely, both in English and in many Latin languages you use the verb "speak" as meaning that you are able to communicate in a certain language. No doubt someone would be intrigued if the answer to this question was "I do not only speak but I also write, read and understand what I hear in this language."

It may seem harmless to think we can use the word "speak" in this sense. However, it may become a problem when students absorb that as a general truth. For many years I have worked as an English teacher and it is impressive how attached students are to the notion of the supremacy of the speaking skill over the other ones. Students quite often ask for speaking classes. They many times claim that they can read and write in English but mainly, when it comes to speaking, they are not be able to communicate what they want. However, sooner or later students start to realise that the four skills have to go side by side if they really want to "speak English", and that all skills help consolidate the others.

The Brazilian Curricular Parameters (Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais, here forth PCNs) suggest that speaking and listening abilities as central to language teaching might not fully represent the use of foreign languages in our context as "even in the big cities the number of people who use the speaking skills of a foreign language in a work context is

relatively small"[1] (Brasil, 1998, p.20). The PCNs see FL learning not as a way for acquisition of the four skills as a set but as a contribution to the whole educational process so that students will not only be able to understand the foreign language but also be able to understand their mother tongue better. In order to make that possible, language has to be seen as a whole.

Much has been gained from dismembering the four skills to achieve communication competence in the EFL classroom. But the fact that language classes have to work with language as a whole has also been long discussed. Brown (2001) states the importance of keeping language as a whole even when the purpose of classes is just one of the skills. He represents it in form of a reading class that would include:

- a pre-reading discussion of the topic to activate schemata;

- listening to a lecture or a series of informative statements about the topic of a passage to be read;

- a focus on certain reading strategy, say, scanning;

- writing a paraphrase section of the reading passage.

(Brown, 2001, p. 232)

We might wonder what makes this a reading class as it focuses on the four skills. Would it be the time spent on each activity and having the reading as the longer part of the class or the focus on the strategies for that specific skill? An approach which would focus the class above on speaking might be changing the order of the activities and changing the focus of the strategies studied:

- reading a little passage anticipating the topic to activate schemata;

- listening to a lecture or a series of informative statements about the topic for discussion;

- focusing on certain speaking strategy, say, disagreeing;

- having a debate about the subject;

- writing down a short paragraph on how the debate changed you opinion on the topic.

We can observe that, in order to make it a speaking class, the main characteristic changed is the strategy that is being taught. Focusing on a skill does not mean teaching the skill itself

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[1] Author's translation.

but it means teaching the strategies needed to achieve competence to communicate through that skill. Hence it is important to focus lessons not only on the skill, the topic, the theme or the grammatical feature but also on linguistic strategies. However, we need to bear in mind that all these features are very important when preparing a lesson.

Brown (2001, p.69) mentions the importance of Communicative Competence (CC) as an important principle to which ELT needs to point toward. We might say classes should be based on communication strategies towards CC and for that we need to analyse a little closer what competence in a language is.

2 Communicative Competence (CC)

Knowing a language is more than understanding, speaking, reading and writing sentences, it is being able to use it to communicative effect (Widdowson, 1978, p.1). Therefore the idea of "speaking English" that learners seek is much more than just being able to formulate sentences orally in the target language but also to be able to effectively deliver the message they want. Communicative Competence may have many interpretations, Chomsky's performance and competence theory being one of them. Chomsky defends the dichotomy between what is our real ability when using the language versus what we really know about the language, that is, what we know despite the errors we make when using the language (Trask, 1999). However, I will not address these differences here. I do believe that affective issues can either enhance or worsen production but these issues are not to be addressed in this essay.

Sauvignon (1997) describes communicative competence as having four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. These four components can be the basis for curriculum design and classroom practice.

Grammatical competence is the mastery of the linguistic code, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactic and phonological features of a language and manipulate these features to form words and sentences. The sociolinguistic competence is the understanding of the social rules of language use. The discourse competence is the ability to interpret a series of sentences or utterances in order to form a meaningful whole and to achieve coherent texts that are relevant to a given context. The strategic competence is the sum up of strategies used to compensate for the factors that might limit communication, such as poor knowledge of rules, fatigue, distraction, and inattention (Sauvignon 1997, p.40-47).

What might have lacked most for those students who could not "speak" English was neither pure practice, vocabulary nor grammar but rather communicative competence. Brown

(2001) describes communicative competence as the goal of the language classroom and suggests that the instruction must point to its components. For him, the basis for learning should be on fluency rather than accuracy and on use instead of usage so that learners will be able to apply what they learned in the real world.

Based on Sauvignon and Brown's insights on CC we are going to try to formulate strategies to develop these competences by considering the four skills. Observe the chart below:

SKILLS					
		Listening	**Reading**	**Speaking**	**Writing**
C O M P E T E N C E	**Grammatical**	Knowing the linguistic features of spoken discourse	Knowing the linguistic features of written discourse	Knowing the linguistic features of spoken discourse	Knowing the linguistic features of written discourse
	Sociolinguistic	Understanding the social role of the speaker	Understanding the social role of the text	Understanding the social role of the listeners	Understanding the social roles of desired/ possible audience (readers)
	Discourse	Interpreting the utterances, having/empathy	Interpreting the text developing critical view of topic argued	Putting utterances together in an effective way to form a meaningful whole	Putting sentences together to form a meaningful whole
	Strategic	Asking for clarification, putting information	Skimming and scanning for ideas and specific	Paraphrasing, gestures, keeping channel of	Choosing the right genre for text's purpose, avoiding

		together, guessing from the meaning, showing empathy	information. Guessing meanings from context, using dictionaries	communication	ambiguity, catching reader's attention

Table 1 – Suggested strategies to develop competences by considering the four skills.

As we can observe, each skill works on different ways to achieve the CC goals. Teaching the skills might be more effective if we comply with these goals. Many times these are features that even native speakers have to develop, so helping language learners develop them can be very helpful.

3 Writing and Communicative Competence

One of the main difficulties of learning a foreign language is finding situations to practice the language you are learning. Differently from situations which occur when you live where the language is spoken, in a foreign country you need to try to find ways of using the language outside the classroom. It may occur that exercises in class are not enough to allow students to build up a solid basis for using the language in real situations. That is when writing becomes a very useful tool. Some reasons for that are that writing itself can be done outside the classroom, thus allowing students more hours of contact with the language; the possibility of topics and audiences for writing go beyond the ones for speaking as the written productions of students may be used inside the classroom as a tool to communicate to others outside the classroom.

Moreover, writing in the second language is a powerful tool for reflecting on language structure and thus promoting reflective learning. Through writing students may get feedback and reflect on it through the piece of writing. Also writing may be valuable in the construction of portfolios which have been proved to be great evaluation tools. They allow students "to observe changes in their work, compare different genres and writing experiences and discover something about the entries and their learning" (Hayland 2003, p.234).

However, writing in a second language is not an easy task. Learners might find difficulties in areas that native speakers would not, even though writing is not easy for native speakers either. Rivers (1981, p.291-292) describes writing as "communicating into space". Although the written text will have a reader, the person producing the text has the responsibility to make it as comprehensible as possible and adapt it to the reader without any instant feedback as it happens with speaking.

4 Writing in the ELT classroom

Hyland (2003, p.27) describes writing practice in the language classroom under 5 main orientations:

- content knowledge – of ideas and concepts in the topic area the text will address;

- system knowledge – of the syntax lexis and appropriate formal conventions needed;

- process knowledge – of how to prepare and carry out a writing task;

- genre knowledge – of communicative purposes of the genre and its value in particular contexts;

- context knowledge – of readers' expectations, cultural preferences and related texts.

Hyland (2003) emphasises the importance of all these characteristics in teaching writing and emphasises that writing might not be dismembered into a set of cognitive or technical abilities. Learning to write in a second/foreign language comprises all the five types of knowledge explained above.

Contrasting to all features Hyland suggests for writing in the L2, we may say the following features are to be developed in the students:

- knowledge of the topics proposed;

- language that students will need to carry on the task;

- the basic tools for producing this kind of writing and genre and structure knowledge necessary for the students to write it;

- the purpose of the writing piece, objectives that students may achieve through the writing production and the appropriate genre for this purpose;

- knowledge and empathy towards the audience.

If writing tasks are carried out taking such features into consideration it is possible that it will help students improve their knowledge of the language as a whole. Furthermore, teaching all these features to students will consist on a great opportunity to use the other skills while preparing students for their writing activity.

5 Final Remarks

The aspects presented by Hyland (2003) are intrinsically linked to the idea of communicative competence. Many course books for ELT nowadays have writing activities based on these principles and although they are still split into categories they do make use of these features to teach learners to write in the L2.

Although all these aspects may be present in textbooks it is also the teachers' job to keep the main goals of CC as the aims of the classroom and not to let the pressures of grading go beyond that. Teachers' feedback has to focus on the communicative aspects and not only in structure or language. In this case, strategic competence has to be assessed just as linguistic features are.

Therefore writing activities can become useful tools for both teachers and students as they can provide opportunities for the students to reflect about language in all the competence fields. Regarding grammar, they will be assessing the best grammatical features to express that idea. Regarding sociolinguistics, they will be choosing who their readers are and how language has to be tailored to those readers. Regarding discourse, the final text will have to be a coherent piece. At last, regarding strategy, they will need to choose the best genre so that the readers will be interested.

Finally, although Rivers' (1981) words for describing writing are "communicating into space", they do not mean at all that there is no audience for students' writing. Rather there must be one. Students and teacher have to work out better ways to make writing truly communicative and make sure that the written pieces will be available to their true readers, thus gaining the most realistic feedback ever: those from real life.

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