

**Enhancing the Teaching of
Writing: New orientations**

**Aini N.A.Ounaceur
and Hassina Slimani
Laboratoire de recherche:
L.E.C.U.C.R.A- University
Badji Mokhtar, Annaba**

Abstract

In the present paper, we intend to investigate the actual teaching practice of the written expression module in the department of English at the university of Annaba. We will try to highlight the most common difficulties that currently impair the students' progress in writing. We will particularly refer in our work to some writing projects carried out by our team in a number of FL classes as potential solutions to the current problems experienced by our students. These field experiences significantly illustrate the utility of media pedagogic exploitation as it provides added value to the language learning process particularly in writing. We will end up with some practical suggestions that are likely to alleviate the hindrances presently faced by most of our students in this skill area

Introduction

The present reflection has come after we have conducted a first investigation about the improvement of the teaching/learning situation of the module of written expression in the department of foreign languages at the university of Annaba (cf. *The teaching of Writing at the department of English: a Case Study and Recommendations* by A. Ounaceur , H.Slimani & F.Z Terki 2005) .

Résumé

Dans cet article ; nous tentons une investigation sur la situation de l'enseignement de l'expression écrite au département d'anglais de l'université d'annaba. Nous essayerons d'identifier les difficultés que rencontrent les étudiants en expression écrite. Nous nous référerons à certains projets expérimentaux que notre équipe de recherche a entrepris dans des classes d'anglais langue étrangère pour proposer des solutions potentielles aux problèmes rencontrés par nos étudiants. Par ailleurs, nous essayerons de montrer l'importance et l'utilité de l'exploitation pédagogique des médias qui donnent une valeur supplémentaire au processus d'apprentissage en général et de l'écrit en particulier. Nous terminerons notre investigation par quelques propositions qui pourraient contribuer à résoudre les problèmes que nos étudiants rencontrent à l'écrit.

In that presentation, we have tried to describe and analyse the teaching/learning situation of the module of written expression in English and we came up with some suggestions among which an outline of a syllabus. In the present paper, we will attempt to highlight the pertinence of using media and technology in the written expression class to help students promote language acquisition, critical thinking skills and problem solving abilities.

The course of written expression in the department of English

The teaching of writing at the department of foreign languages in the section of English in the University of Annaba constitutes a thorny issue that significantly affects not only the learners' overall achievements, but also the teaching practice throughout the four years of study. It is really becoming a problematic issue in the sense that all teachers, whatever subject matter they teach, endlessly complain about the disastrous writing of the students at all levels. As for the students, they generally regard the module of writing as a rather difficult and painstaking chore.

The module of written expression is taught during the two first years of the curriculum, four hours and a half per week in the first year and three hours per week in the second year.

Coming from different secondary school streams, many first year students end up in the department of English despite their initial choices after their success in the "baccalaureat" exam. Consequently, the groups of the first year are often very heterogeneous. The teacher of writing is then faced with mixed ability classes that he finds very difficult to deal with. Concerning the content of the syllabus of this module, the different groups of learners taught by different teachers are not given the same content because there is no official exhaustive syllabus. Some teachers implement a ministerial syllabus that dates back to the 1980's, while some others teach a self designed syllabus without any preliminary analysis of the students' needs, wants or lacks. Generally, teachers do not work in conjunction with each other as the local pedagogical teams fail to function. However, in 1996 a pedagogical team of volunteers attempted to design a syllabus in written expression that would eventually meet the students' needs. Unfortunately, although the syllabus seemed more adequate than the previous one (1980) very few teachers adopted it.

As far as students are concerned, they often associate the writing task with stress, tiredness and boredom, not only because of their inability to write efficiently, but also because they find this module too demanding and painful. This alarming situation urged us to undertake an investigation to identify the source(s) of the teachers' frustration and the students' failure.

Procedure for gathering information

Through the administration of two questionnaires, one addressed to some students from the four years of study and one addressed to the teachers of written expression and to those that teach other subjects, but also through informal interviews with some colleagues, we attempted to get a clearer picture of the actual teaching/learning situation of the module of writing. We based our study on the analysis of the results of the two questionnaires and we will end up with some suggestions and recommendations.

Description of the students' questionnaire

In our questionnaire directed to students from the four years, we asked either direct or indirect questions that students were requested to answer anonymously. We started with simple questions, and then we moved on to more complex questions related to the most common problems encountered by our students in writing. The questions were about the teaching techniques used, the time and the duration allocated to the teaching of the module of written expression, and the students' difficulties, motivation and attitudes towards the module of written expression. The students were also given the opportunity to propose solutions and to make suggestions.

We addressed our questionnaires to a sample of fifteen students from each year of study and asked them to answer as concisely as possible. Keeping in mind that these students constitute just a sample from the different years, we attempted the analysis of the results of the questionnaire in order to have a better picture of the learning situation of this module in our department.

Analysis of the results of the students' questionnaire

From the students' answers, we got a much better insight of the general attitude learners have towards the written expression module

and also about the most common problems encountered. Through the analysis of the questionnaire, we inferred that most of the students are facing more or less the same difficulties i.e. a number of weaknesses and a striking inability to write adequately in English, especially in content modules where writing is more than a prerequisite, such as literature, civilisation, etc. Besides, we found out that some students (40 students out of 60) prefer using the written language, and some others (20 out of 60) feel much more at ease when speaking.

The students who prefer the written form of the language explain that this is not because they are good at using it but because writing constitutes a kind of shelter for those who are unable to express themselves in English.

From the most important reasons which explain the choice of the first category of students, we have retained the following:

- The possibility to express their ideas more freely in writing. (Less inhibition and less anxiety)
- The availability of time in doing written activities (more time afforded for reflection and revision).
- More security and comfort in writing than in speaking. (As it is a private skill, they feel less threatened and less exposed to criticism than while speaking)
- Permanent attempt to achieve accuracy in the written form of language because there is less time restriction than in speaking.

The most outstanding point drawn from the students' answers is that they generally complain about the way written expression is being taught. Indeed, most of them find the written expression module too theoretical and "abstract" and even boring at times. Besides, the course of written expression, as it is presently taught, seems to fail to answer their needs and expectations, among which is the ability to write good essay-answers in the different modules.

The majority of students acknowledged that they lack the basic strategies to write good essays in literature, civilization and the like. This claim is reinforced by the students' answers in which they state that they prefer class activities in which the written form of the target language is not really required. They similarly prefer reading comprehension exercises to grammatical and lexical ones. We notice that they often try to avoid syntactic exercises because they are unable

to apply grammar rules adequately. They do not like lexical exercises either because they very often do not know the right spelling of the words.

Furthermore, most of our students asked for more sessions of writing. They even showed willingness to have written expression in the third and the fourth year as well. On the other hand, they complained about the teaching techniques and procedures used by their teachers. They stated that they would like to have sessions where there will be more critical thinking and more dynamic presentations such as works in groups, or in pairs under the coaching of an attentive, indulgent teacher. They also wished to have more opportunities to write freely without any “harsh” control from the teacher; i.e. have more possibilities to express themselves genuinely without too much constraint (fear of bad grades).

Description of the teacher's questionnaire

Trying to trace the roots of the problematic situation of the written expression module in our department from different standpoints, the teachers' questionnaire attempted to explore three main aspects:

- a- Personal information and teaching experience
- b- Written expression courses and materials
- c- Students' attitudes and difficulties

We addressed our questionnaire to a sample of 10 colleagues who have been teaching written expression for quite a long time (25 years) or a short time (1 or 2 years), and also to teachers of other subjects closely dependent on writing such as literature, civilization and the like . Most questions consisted of open and multiple choice ones where the teachers had to give their opinions or give justification about their choice.

Analysis of the teachers' questionnaire

Trough a careful analysis of the teachers' answers, we got a better and clearer view of the situation of the written expression module. We collected some valuable information that comforted us in our assumptions that triggered from a number of premises. The roots of the written expression thorny problem might be essentially due to the

lack or inadequate training and qualifications of the teachers in charge of the module along with their inability to keep abreast with today writing practice in the world . Besides, we also blamed the arbitrary orientation of the prospective students of English who were not all keen on joining the department of English . Additionally, the lack of an up to date, homogeneous and well designed syllabus and the scarcity or inadequacy of teaching material contributed to worsen the situation throughout the years.

To start with, we found out that most of the teachers who are in charge of the written expression module, regardless their qualifications and teaching experience , have not attended any preliminary teacher training course in either written expression or E.L.T in general (9/10).

As far as the time allocation is concerned, many teachers support the idea of having more hours devoted to the teaching of writing. The majority of teachers (7/10) think that it is necessary to extend the teaching of writing beyond the third year, and some (3/10) believe that it should be taught throughout the whole graduation.

One of the most striking results we got from our inquiry is that not only many teachers (7/10) do not have a clear picture of the objectives of teaching written expression in their department; but they do not adhere to any particular teaching approach (7/10) either. However, 3 over 10 teachers stated that they are eclectic in their teaching. All of them think that the syllabus that is implemented at present is totally inadequate, needs revision and content wise should be based on the students' real situations and interests. Besides they acknowledge that there is no teacher team work and no syllabus cohesion between the different teachers of writing, but they give no justification for their answer.

In addition, the teachers of written expression confess that their students do not particularly enjoy taking the course because they find it too theoretical and difficult. The most recurrent difficulties that learners face, according to them, consist of reading and comprehending written texts, spelling words correctly, making use of grammar and syntax, and writing compositions. Therefore, all teachers are in favour of introducing the reading skill and propose to teach it in conjunction with writing as an integrated part of the written

expression module because it will largely contribute to improve the writing abilities of the learners in spelling, in the use of grammar and in that of rhetoric.

To end with, teachers put forward some suggestions to alleviate their learners' most serious difficulties. They advocated a much less theoretical teaching of writing. They called for a substantial increase in the time allocated to the teaching of writing throughout the graduation, along with syllabus adjustments for all the groups of the same year of study. On the other hand, they insist on the organization of some background teachers training, particularly with respect to the new approaches of teaching the writing skill.

General Recommendations

After having analysed the two questionnaires and studied the students and the teachers' suggestions and recommendations concerning the improvement of the teaching/learning situation of the module of written expression in our department, we came up with the following proposals:

- keep 6 hours in the first year and extend the teaching of written expression module to the third year of the graduation .The students will have more opportunities to increase their ability to write adequately.
- try to have more homogeneous groups from the first year onwards by means of a placement test that will be systematically organized at the beginning of the academic year.
- create remedial sub-groups to allow weak learners to catch up with their peers.
- institute team teaching on a regular basis. Not only will the teachers of written expression have to work in collaboration with each other, but with the teachers of grammar as well because the two modules are interrelated and complementary.
- Set up pre and in –service teacher training E.L.T courses that would not only initiate beginning teachers, but would enable the other teachers to keep abreast with the new language teaching approaches and practices presently used.
- reintroduce reading through the pedagogical exploitation of graded readers to foster our students' desire to keep on reading

even outside the class context. Indeed, we believe that it is only the daily practice of extensive reading outside the class that will contribute to alleviate most of the students' writing difficulties and weaknesses.

In addition to these general recommendations, we think that using new technologies could help both the teachers and the students to achieve their respective goals; i.e. effective teaching and learning. Media are used as pedagogical aids to deliver messages in a particular manner and to exemplify or elicit communicative language in a particular way. Therefore; we strongly advocate their introduction and pedagogical exploitation to promote a more effective teaching of the writing skill.

Media take different forms, from the simple picture to the internet going through the article of a newspaper, the tape recorder, the video, the television, the overhead projector and even the slides. All these audiovisual aids had been introduced in our educational system after 1962. They had been used for two decades then nearly completely neglected, mainly in teaching written expression. Today, very few teachers ever make use of these aids in their language classes.

Our objective, in this paper, is to try to show that even the newspaper, the less expensive media, could help alleviate most of our students' writing difficulties. Using English language newspapers of the English or American press, which are widely available on the world wide web, will undoubtedly be extremely beneficial to our learners. Indeed, isn't it odd that after six to eight years of studying English, most students have never read an English newspaper? Despite the fact that a great number of university students can read at an intermediate level, they are scarcely exposed to authentic newspaper articles. In the written expression class, students are shown how to write a paragraph or an essay, but are never introduced to newspapers specific style or encouraged to create their own department journal. Whereas the writing projects carried out by our research team in a number of FL classes (2002/2005) bear witness to the extreme utility of media and technology in enhancing communicative writing. In fact, we believe that involving the students in the production of meaningful creative writing would constitute one of the best means to improve our students' writing abilities.

Indeed, our successful field experiences of genuine type of communicative writing through the elaboration and the creation of a

media such as a school journal or an international multilingual on line journal created by youngsters to youngsters in some FL classes in Baie des Corailleurs college (CLEMI, *Ma Ville, Mon Village*, Journal Fax !International, 2002) in Annaba and in Larbi Ben Mhidi secondary school (CLEMI, *Musique Sans Frontières*, Journal Fax! 2004 and Projet "AMEJ" Ateliers Medias d'Expression Jeunes 2005), induces us to assume that involving our students in a similar media project might contribute to 'heal' our students writing deficiency. Doing and participating in the actual creation of a media (in our case a journal) will undoubtedly constitute a powerful learning tool since an active and fully involved learner will become a better and faster learner.

Keeping in mind that reading and writing are closely intertwined, and that the first consolidates the second and vice versa, we strongly believe that newspapers give a new and alternative type of reading which allows learners to experience a comprehensive selection of stories within a structured framework. Forrest (1997) states: "Reading the newspaper offers a different style of reading in which scanning articles of interest is a significant part of the experience. This is an empowering process, reinforcing independence and individual choice on the part of the students" (1997 p. 21). Most of our university students possess the necessary schema or background information to grasp the subject matter in an average English newspaper as the topics are contemporary and the stories often resemble those in the current native media. Forrest also suggests, a "significant advantage of using newspapers is that students usually have some background knowledge of current events, often enabling them to predict the contents of an article and more readily guess word meanings" (Ibid, p. 21). For instance one can ask students to find something they are interested in, read the article, and write a summary about it.

Moreover, using the newspaper in class provides an opportunity for critical thinking as students discuss and write opinions about what they have read. As Davidson (1994) explains, "an instructor's challenge is to lead students step-by-step along the path of becoming able to analyze and think for themselves. The first step is to make them conscious of various distinctions among types of statements and media representations" (Ibid, p.23). Using newspapers in class helps learners gain confidence"... through a sequence of activities connected with newspaper lessons, they discover that they can

actually read them. It is a satisfying learning achievement for the students when they realize they are able to purchase an English paper, physically hold it in their hands, scan the different sections, choose and read an article, think about the topic, write a brief analysis of the issue, discuss their opinions...”(Wayne K. Johnson 2007) Another alternative is to induce students to create their own journal with different articles that they would themselves write on various and particular topics they would be particularly interested in.

The other means we would like to exploit to improve the students' ability to write is the computer. Liaw (1997) states that teachers should offer English language learners a language-rich environment in which students will be constantly engaged in language activities so as to interact with each other, and the best means for this is to use computers. In fact, computers do not only facilitate and increase verbal exchange but can also help students develop their writing skills.

According to Lewis (1997), composition for beginning learners should be a guided activity so that students do not become frustrated because writing paragraphs in an unfamiliar language can be difficult. However, when using a computer, the use of graphics can make this more enjoyable and appealing. Moreover, using clip art can help students convey their thoughts more clearly. We think that this can be similarly applied even to adult learners in EFL classes.

Many researches have been made to show that computers can help improve writing. Trenchs (1996) carried out a case study and used electronic mail as a medium of instruction to improve her students' writing. Students voluntarily engaged in e-mail transmissions with their teacher who acted as a receiver, a sender, and a coach. The students were found to be particularly self-motivated while using the target language in such a new lively and creative way. One of the benefits of using electronic mail included the scrolling feature that allowed the students to view the incoming message and use its structure as a model for producing a reply. Another benefit of using e-mail as a learning activity is that students are totally involved in using authentic texts ; i.e., they are genuinely making use of both their receptive skills (reading / comprehending) and productive skills (producing & communicating through writing) in a true life -like event (Ybarra & Green 2007) .

Conclusion

The premise of this paper has been, on the one hand, to investigate the teaching/learning situation of the course of written expression in the department of foreign languages at the university of Annaba, to give an idea about the teachers' and the students' opinions through the analysis of the results of the questionnaires, and to make some modest recommendations to improve the alarming overall situation. On the other hand, we have tried to pinpoint that media judicious pedagogical exploitation in a foreign language class, in our case newspapers and computers, have a significant impact on our students' learning process and learning strategies. Indeed, the newspaper allows students improve their writing skill by reading and then writing about something they are truly interested in. As for computers, they permit students increase their ability of writing and foster their vocabulary and grammar. However, it is worth underlining at this point, that no technology and no media whatever its sophistication and elaboration can ever replace a concerned, efficient and reflective practioner.

References

- Caroline Mei Lin Ho, **Developing Intercultural Awareness and Writing Skills Through Email Exchange**, *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. VI, No. 12, December 2000
- CLEMI, **Musique Sans Frontières**, *Journal Fax !* n°202. , 2002 pp.30-31
CLEMI, **Ma Ville, Mon Village**, *Journal Fax !* , 2004
- Davidson, B. (1994), **Critical Thinking: A perspective and prescriptions for language teachers**. *The Language Teacher*, 18 (4), 20-25.
- Forrest, E. (1997), **Reality bites: Structuring a fourth year reading class**. *The Language Teacher*, 21 (6), 19-24.
- Lewis,P.(1997),**Using, productivity software for beginning language learning+Part1.The word processor. Learning and Leading with Technology**, 24(8),14-17
- Liaw,M.L.(1997), **An Analysis of ESL children's verbal interaction during computer reading**.*Computers in Schools*,13(3/4),55-73.
- Ounaceur A. ,Slimani H. &Terki FZ(2005) , **Teaching of Writing in the Department of English at the University of Annaba: a Case Study and Recommendations** , *Symposium on Writing 2005* .
- Projet (2003/2005), “AMEJ” Ateliers Medias d'Expression Jeunes, Code: PNR3 :01/15/2009, L.E.C.U.C.R.A
- Trenchs,M.(1996),**Writing strategies in a second language:Three case studies of learners using electronic mail**.*The Canadian Modern Language Review*,52(3),464-497.
- Wayne K. Johnson (2006), **Subscription for Critical Thinking: Newspapers in the ESL Classroom**, *The Language Teacher journal* 2007
- Ybama, Renee & Tim Green (2003), **Using Technology to Help ESL/EFL Students Develop Language Skills**.*The Internet TESL Journal*; Vol.IX.n3,2003)