

The Role of Writing in English for Specific Purposes Classes

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Abstract:

The significance of writing skills cannot be overstated, as they are crucial for achieving success in professional settings and personal relationships. In our fast-paced world, written communication has become the primary avenue for obtaining information and interacting with other people. From writing emails, reports, CVs, and letters of application to preparing presentations, writing is an everyday task in most professions. The present paper is a review article which discusses approaches to the learning/teaching of writing, the main challenges that students are faced with while trying to develop their writing skills in English for Specific Purposes classes as well as ways to motivate them to develop their writing skills.

Keywords: communication, writing, effectiveness, classroom, workplace

Introduction

Employers throughout the world are looking for employees with a good command of English. Therefore, fluency in English is seen as a prerequisite for success and advancement in most fields of employment in our ever-changing world. But are employees aware that effective communication in English is one of the most valuable skills in most workplaces? Engineers, for instance, usually see themselves - and are seen by other people - as problem-solvers, applying scientific principles to real-world problems. Yet, effective communication skills are as important as technical expertise.

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The present paper is a review article which summarizes approaches to the learning/teaching of writing, with an emphasis on current trends that describe writing as a demanding, but also valuable skill to master. It also aims to analyse the connection between good writing skills and engineering students' performance in the classroom and their success in the workplace, the main causes of students' unwillingness to participate in writing activities, and factors that affect their learning.

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) is generally seen as the teaching of a specific kind of English to learners who will use it in a particular professional setting. Dudley-Evans and St John (1998) describe ESP as focusing on discipline-specific language (grammar, lexis and register), skills, discourse and genres as well as on the learners' specific needs, using teaching methods and strategies which differ from those used when teaching general English. Where English as Foreign Language (EFL) classes give equal attention to listening, reading, writing and speaking skills, ESP courses are more often aimed at developing students' communicative competence, which, as Richards (2006) shows, is the ability to use a language for a range of different purposes and functions in specific occupational or educational settings.

What is writing?

Writing plays a highly important role in the teaching/learning of ESP. According to Widdowson (2001), "writing is the use of visual medium to manifest the graphological and grammatical system of the language" (62). Crystal (2006) points out that "writing is a way of communicating which uses a system of visual marks made on some kind of surface. It is one kind of graphic expression" (257). Richards and Schmidt (2002) show that writing is viewed as a result of complex processes of planning, drafting, reviewing and revising. Flower and Hayes (1981) describe writing as a problem-solving process, which they divide into three stages: planning a text, converting propositions into verbal form and reviewing the written result.

Writing is closely connected with reading as they share the written form of language. Berninger et al. (2002) show that the same cognitive abilities are required in the processes of learning reading and writing. Speaking and writing,

on the other hand, require different cognitive management strategies. As Grabowski (2007) demonstrates, information stays active for longer in the writer's mind than it stays in the speaker's mind (Huhta, et al. 2023). The process of converting thoughts into a visual text makes writing more resource-demanding than speaking (Bourdin and Fayol 1994).

Writing well is seen as a major cognitive challenge because it tests memory, language and the thinking ability (Kellogg and Raulerson 2007). Students, as young adults, do more than tell the reader what the author knows (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987). To be deprived of the opportunity to write is "to be excluded from a wide range of social roles, which the majority of people in industrialized societies associate with power and prestige" (Tribble 1996:12). Harmer (2013) speaks about different literacies peculiar to different domains of life.

Filling in a form suggests literacy at one level, but if the same person is incapable of putting together an appropriate letter of application, then they are demonstrating a lesser standard of literacy than someone who can not only write a letter of application, but also construct a short story or write a complex report (323).

The writing process is much more complex than deciding on the information to include in the text, what to include in each paragraph, or checking grammar, vocabulary, punctuation and spelling. The different stages of drafting, reviewing, re-drafting and writing, etc. are done in a recursive way; we loop backwards and move forwards between these various stages (Tribble 1996:37-39). White and Arndt (1991) describe writing as "re-writing ... revision - seeing with new eyes" (5). They point out that writers may have to go back and re-plan and re-visit stages they considered completed.

Approaches to the teaching of writing

The teaching of writing in ESP has seen dramatic changes in the last 30 years. There have been numerous approaches to the teaching of writing.

The product approach is focused on the features of the text that the writer is supposed to produce. A text is usually analysed and it serves as a

model for a new text. Although it may be seen as quite simplistic, “the use of models for text analysis and as a basis for thinking about the purposes and readership of a text can, however, have an important role to play in teaching writing” (Dudley-Evans and St John 2007:117).

The process approach is focused on the end product. It lays stress on thinking and process. Flower (1985) mentions two stages: the thinking stage, where students need to identify the rhetorical problem, plan a solution and finally come to a conclusion and the process stage, where they translate the plan into paragraphs and sentences, review the first draft and then revise the text.

The social-constructivist approach takes into account the whole context of the writing process. If writers do not pay proper attention to the context in which they are writing, the text produced by them might not meet the community’s expectations and standards.

Kay and Dudley-Evans (1998) argue that the genre approach helps learners develop their writing skills in a second language more than the process approach since this model helps students overcome their fear of writing.

Dudley-Evans and St John (2007) propose an approach which they divide into the following stages:

- Develop rhetorical awareness by looking at model texts;
- Practise specific genre features;
- Write texts showing awareness of the needs of individual readers and the discourse community and the purpose of the writing;
- Evaluate the writing.

Advantages of written communication

Written communication is usually used when the sender of the message and its recipient are physically distant, or when a record of the given communication is needed for future reference. Effective written communication refers to the use of clear and concise language, the logical organization of information, without neglecting the needs of the audience. It is typically more formal and structured than verbal communication, allowing for a wider audience to receive the message, regardless of time and distance. However, written communication can lack immediate feedback and emotional cues since it is asynchronous.

Some people prefer writing to speaking for various reasons. First of all, writing allows people to carefully choose their words, especially when they are approaching sensitive topics. They have enough time to re-read their message and reformulate it in case they are not satisfied with the way it sounds. Second, people who are not comfortable speaking in public feel more at ease when they express themselves in writing. For instance, introverts find writing less stressful and demanding than face-to-face communication. Third, people's preference for writing may be influenced by their professional experience and background. Someone who has worked as a computer programmer has not been motivated to develop their speaking skills, which is why they may prefer writing to speaking.

Disadvantages of written communication

Although written communication has several advantages over oral communication, it is not always the best choice.

When people communicate in writing, their communication can be delayed. If someone needs to receive some information urgently, sending them a message may not be the best option. We do not know when the recipient will read it.

According to Dr. Albert Mehrabian, author of silent messages, "7% of any message is conveyed through words, 38% through certain vocal elements, and 55% through nonverbal elements (facial expressions, gestures, posture, etc.)" (Sooriya 2017: 8). When it comes to written messages, it is needless to say that there are no nonverbal cues associated with them.

Writers also need to take into account the possible effects of the time-lag between production and reception, and the problems that may occur because their messages are read and interpreted by many recipients in diverse settings.

Challenges of learning writing

Learning to write in a first, a second or a foreign language is generally considered to be the most difficult skill for language learners to acquire in academic contexts because it involves the mastery of multiple

skills. The development of writing skills is traditionally seen by linguists as very challenging. It is challenging for students, which is why they resist it. It is also challenging for teachers and this is the main reason why some of them tend to overlook opportunities to engage students in writing activities.

Effective writing is a skill that requires a lot of time and effort to develop. Just like reading, speaking and listening, writing requires continual maintenance and extension. Engineers and engineering students need to be able to communicate in writing.

In the past, engineers were required to work in the same office where they could discuss and explore design architectures, codes and testing plans, but, nowadays, they have to write and use the written texts to connect with other engineers and transform knowledge into usable and sharable information (Du 2020: 12).

They need to be able to write clear, concise email messages, letters, reports, proposals, and informational documents. They need to acquire skills of spelling, vocabulary choice, sentence construction, paraphrasing and organization of the text. Consequently, they should recognize writing as essential to learning. They will master the skill of expressing themselves clearly and they will have full control over their writing when they are able to manipulate sentences. Being a good writer is not synonymous with being able to produce long sentences, but rather with the ability to produce a variety of written sentences which can be easily understood by the reader. If their messages are not properly written, they risk being misunderstood. If they use confusing words, inadequate tone, incorrect grammar or punctuation, readers might have a hard time decoding the message as intended to be received. Any grammar or spelling errors will cast a bad light on the writers. Successful writers are described as being able to “persuade readers of the validity of their arguments by using or adapting the conventions of the genre they are using while showing an awareness of the needs of the readership” (Dudley-Evans and St John 2007).

The ability to write is one of the most important pieces of equipment in the armoury of any individual who needs to express their ideas with others. ESP teachers expect their students to possess good writing skills, but they often find out that students’ writing skills are not properly honed to

meet the demands of scientific discourse. When trying to develop their writing skills, one of the aspects ESP students should be aware of is that communication is a two-way process. It is complete only after the recipient has received and decoded the message adequately. When communicating face to face, it is easy to see when our messages are not understood because we can see our interlocutor's reactions. Thus, misunderstandings can be resolved on the spot. When it comes to written messages, valuable time is wasted until the confusion is removed and the message is correctly understood, if ever.

Students also need to know that technical writing is different from the style of writing they were familiar with when entering engineering programs. If technical documents are drawn up in an inappropriate style, they will become dry and cumbersome and the author will fail to achieve their purpose. Technical writing is not read for entertainment, so authors should get straight to the point when writing a technical document. They should have their readers' needs in mind whenever they are writing a technical document. Most technical topics are complex, which is why it is recommendable to keep their writing as clear and concise as possible. The more knowledge students have about the topic they are tackling, the easier it will be for them to simplify complex ideas and to make them accessible to their audience.

A questionnaire was given to engineering students in order to identify their opinion on the role of writing skills in ESP classes. It contained a set of 10 questions to identify levels of student engagement in writing activities, aspects they find engaging/disengaging when doing writing activities, main causes of low engagement, etc. The research participants were 60 engineering students. 52 students were in the 19-23 age group, 7 were in their thirties and one of them was in his fifties. 41 were male, 19 were female.

The results of the survey showed that 14 of them considered themselves to be highly engaged, 34 only lowly engaged and the rest - 12 students - said they were disengaged in the writing activities carried out in class. Among the aspects that increase student engagement, they mentioned the teacher's encouraging attitude (38), stimulating activities (14), and their desire to become confident writers of the language and be able to use it

productively in the classroom and in the workplace (8). They were asked to explain why they find writing assignments challenging. These are some of their answers:

S1: "I find it hard to express my ideas. I know I have to paraphrase, summarize, and integrate information from different sources into my own text, but I don't know how."

S2: "First, I think in Romanian and then I translate my ideas into English, but the result is not satisfactory."

S3: "I have good ideas, but I find it hard to express them because of my limited vocabulary and poor grammar."

S4: "I have always focused on developing my speaking skill and never on becoming a better writer."

S5: "I think nowadays communication is mostly spoken, not written. In the classroom and in the workplace, speaking is more important than writing."

As to the main causes of low engagement or disengagement, the students mentioned their low level of English, which hinders them from expressing their opinions effectively in writing (32), and their fear of being corrected (28).

As far as age differences are concerned, the study revealed that older students reported higher levels of engagement than younger students, because they find it easier to express their thoughts in writing than orally.

Challenges of teaching writing

Although effective writing skills are central to higher education as well as to the world of work that follows, students' writing preparedness is well below their teachers' expectations. Engineers need to be able to write clearly and succinctly in order to share their ideas with specialists and non-specialists in their field and thus bridge the gap between complex ideas and the general public. Besides, they need to be aware of the fact that developing written communication skills supports reading comprehension, vocabulary expansion and oral fluency.

Teaching writing skills is very challenging. It is the teacher's responsibility to help students understand the importance of writing for their future personal and professional lives. Engineering programs should place

more emphasis on developing their students' written communication skills to produce competitive professionals in an ever-changing marketplace. The first challenge that ESP teachers have to face is to admit that many students bring with them a resistance to the notion of engineering as a profession that requires literacy (Artemeva, et al. 1999). The sooner they understand the importance of writing skills for any engineering professional, the more chances they have to become good writers. Most likely, Mechanical Engineering students will find a course like Thermodynamics more important and more attractive than a course in technical writing because they think the former is more relevant to their future careers.

As Harmer (2013) shows, one of the challenges of teaching writing is getting students to focus on the process of writing since it takes time to brainstorm ideas or collect them from different sources, time to draft a piece of writing, then review it and edit it in various ways.

Some students are reluctant to write in English. They tend to believe that writing is a special language and that only people who have a gift for words can write well. What they need to understand is that, if they can think clearly, then there is no reason for them not to be able to write clearly, too.

Why do ESP students find writing more difficult than speaking?

Most engineers spend a significant amount of time writing. As they move up the corporate ladder, they will have to spend even more time writing memos, reports, proposals, procedures, manuals, etc. Since engineers do not live in a vacuum, they interact with other engineering and non-engineering colleagues on a daily basis.

Many engineering students and engineers display a discrepancy between their speaking and writing skills. They find writing more difficult to master for various reasons. First of all, ESP students' ultimate goal when starting the ESP course is to become fluent speakers of English. Why speakers and not writers? Because in the workplace, just like in the classroom, there are a lot more opportunities to speak than there are to write. They speak more than they write and, when they have to write, all they have to handle is an email, a report or a short presentation.

Secondly, most engineering students and engineering professionals are quite reticent about expressing their ideas in writing because of their fear of making mistakes and being corrected. They know that teachers lay emphasis on fluency, rather than accuracy, while doing activities aimed at enhancing students' speaking skills. When dealing with a written assignment, they feel that the red pen is their enemy. They do not know how to deal with corrections. Some may respond emotionally rather than rationally. However, there are students who focus on getting their ideas across to their readers and never worry about making mistakes and being corrected by their peers and their teacher. They know that a message can be understood even if its spelling is incorrect. Unfortunately, as Harmer (2013) points out, "all too often, bad spelling is perceived as lack of education and care" and mistakes are acceptable up to a certain point (324).

Thirdly, when we speak, we usually use short sentences, basic vocabulary and basic grammar. When undertaking a written task, students assume that their teachers have higher expectations. They expect to see a text that is not only correctly written (it contains no errors of grammar, punctuation and spelling), but also has a definite purpose, supports it with specific information, which is clearly connected and arranged, contains appropriate words and correct, concise sentences.

Last but not least, most ESP students are not used to writing. Most science and math classes do not give them the opportunity to develop their writing skills since the amount of time spent on writing is usually minimal.

How can ESP teachers help students develop their writing skills?

First and foremost, ESP teachers should treat writing as a core skill, not as a peripheral one. Teachers need to help unenthusiastic and unconfident writers build the writing habit so that they recognize writing as a normal part of classroom practice (Harmer 2013).

If approached with a bit of ingenuity, teaching writing can be dynamic and fun. Teachers may have to fight with students' reluctance to express their ideas on various topics. Most students are used to receiving and processing information. They rarely feel free to make statements of their

own. The better teachers know their students, the easier it will be for them to find the right methods to engage them in writing activities.

Teachers can integrate writing more often into their lesson plans. They should not approach it in isolation, but alongside other activities which students find more enjoyable. Few students are willing to spend the whole class doing writing tasks. Writing is seen as “a difficult and tiring activity” which “needs time for reflection and revision, plus a peaceful environment, none of which are generally available in the classroom” (Dudley-Evans and St John 2007:119). On the other hand, students need their teacher’s guidance, which is why some of the writing tasks should be done in the classroom, while others should be carried out at home.

Teachers can offer suggestions and come up with various strategies and techniques that will engage students in writing. They can start by encouraging them to read as much as possible. Good readers are often good writers. They can teach students how to learn to write by imitation. If they read extensively, they will unconsciously transfer the techniques used by writers, their way of choosing words, of structuring and organizing the text to their own writing.

Students should be constantly provided with positive feedback, which will boost their self-confidence. Negative feedback may be demoralizing. Yet, if it is provided tactfully, it can be constructive, giving students the opportunity to benefit from their teachers’ insights. The more practical and specific the teacher’s observations are, the more likely students are to use them to their own advantage.

In order to teach writing effectively, teachers should be effective writers themselves. It is essential for them to never stop honing their craft. They should permanently offer a model to their students, especially to the least experienced ones who need to see how writing should be tackled and what techniques should be used.

Conclusion

Nowadays, effective communication is more important than ever. Being able to communicate information, our thoughts and our ideas in a way that allows our readers to understand and absorb our message correctly is essential in both our personal and professional lives since employees are

looking for candidates with excellent written communication skills. Teachers are faced with a lot of challenges when teaching writing skills. Students come from various backgrounds with different levels of proficiency in writing. Developing their writing competence requires time, which may be a problem for teachers, given the limited class time. They also have to fight students' reticence about writing and also their preconception that writing skills are not as important as speaking skills.

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