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A strategy to expand third year students' skills to build expository texts.

Estrategia para incrementar las habilidades para construir textos expositivos en los estudiantes del tercer año.

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Abstract

The teaching- learning process of building written texts constitutes a growing concern for the English major teaching staff at the University of Granma. However, in spite of the efforts made, some levels of dissatisfaction still persist as far as the students' preparation in terms of writing skills. Their records do not always meet the required needs to perform their duty appropriately. For these reasons, the authors of the present work decided to design a strategy supported on the text building process to develop and improve writing skills in the third year students of the English Major. They consider it suitable to apply the strategy along with expository texts taking for granted the complexity this mode of discourse poses for third year students.

Resumen

El proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de la construcción de textos escritos constituye una creciente preocupación para el personal pedagógico encargado de la preparación de los profesionales. No obstante, a pesar de los esfuerzos, todavía persisten algunos niveles de



insatisfacción en lo concerniente a la preparación de los estudiantes en términos de habilidades de escritura. Sus resultados no siempre cubren las necesidades para realizar su trabajo. En este sentido, los autores del presente trabajo se proponen como objetivo la elaboración de una estrategia sustentada en el proceso de construcción textual para desarrollar habilidades de redacción de textos expositivos en los estudiantes del tercer año de la Carrera de Inglés en la Universidad de Granma. Ellos consideran apropiado aplicar la estrategia conjuntamente con el texto expositivo partiendo de su complejidad y los niveles de dificultad que este tipo de texto representa para los estudiantes de este año.

Keywords: text building process, writing skills, expository texts, strategy.

Palabras clave: proceso de construcción textual, habilidades de redacción, texto expositivo, estrategia.

Introduction

Prospective English teachers have to know the language, about the language, and how to teach the language. However, the link between these three aspects is not always achieved, since for many instructors the possession of an adequate communicative competence has to do mainly with the skills students develop to communicate orally and downgrade written skills to a second layer. When referring to the communicative activity, they emphasize its oral component and minimize the acquisition of writing skills.

Writing, when related with the other linguistic skills -- listening, speaking and reading -- is the most difficult one, “since it entails the management of a wide range of both linguistic and rhetorical tools” Raimés (1985). “It is the most complex linguistic ability because it requires the instrumental use of other awareness during the writing process and the only one that allows a group to cooperate in its construction with different degrees of participation...” (Cassany,1991).



Therefore, students need to get exposed to proper teaching strategies in order to meet their needs and cover their psychological and academic dissatisfactions when facing the writing skill. However, teaching students to build accurate texts of any kind is not an easy task. It requires lots of observation, dedication, and research on the part of teaching staffs. It is their responsibility to design and put into practice appropriate strategies in teaching writing, taking for granted that proficiency in writing is a requirement for prospective English teachers as far as their academic formation and future professional endeavor.

However, in spite of the work done by researchers and the English teaching staff, prospective English teachers keep facing serious difficulties during the text building process. These difficulties are mostly associated with the following shortcomings:

- Writing is conceived as a mechanical practice centered mainly on the final product and not on the writing process.
- Prospective English teachers' linguistic preparation hardly ever meets the requirements posed by the different methods to build expository texts.
- They find it difficult to adequate the texts to a sociocultural context.

So as to find a way out to this problem, the authors of this work elaborated a strategy grounded in the process approach to improve the skills to build expository texts in the context of the subjects Integrated English Practice V and VI in the third year of the English Major at the University of Granma.

Population and sample

To determine and characterize the preliminary problem, the authors of this work used as population the whole enrolment in the English Major at the University of Granma (39 students). They intentionally decided to work with all of them as sample so as to guarantee a massive



preparation through the application of the strategy. The students share similar characteristics as far as age and academic formation.

Analysis of the results

Theoretical and practical reasons to choose the process approach and the expository text.

The Process Approach.

The process approach focuses on the writer as independent producer of texts. It emphasizes the cycle of activities in which the student moves, from the generation of ideas and the gathering of Information to the edition of a finished text. The process-oriented models assume this as a complex multidimensional activity requiring the development of different cognitive processes (planning, organizing, texting, revising) that take part in the macro process of composition. The main idea of these models is not only focused on viewing how a written product must look, but also on showing the intermediate steps and strategies occurring during the writing process.

This approach highlights three fundamental moments or stages that occur during the text building process which have been named differently by different authors. Tribble (1990) and Brandon (2003) call them pre-writing, writing, and post writing. Flower (1985) and Halliday (2001) name them planning, texting, and revising; while Dr. Angelina Roméu (2006) refers to them as orientation, development, and control. In spite of their names, however, they are all oriented towards the same tasks.

Nevertheless, the follow up of these stages as simple lineal models has been firmly criticized by a great number of professionals and researchers because these kinds of models do not offer a real picture of what actually occur while writing. Many experts, Raimés (1995 and Sinclair (2001) among them, describe this process as recursive, cyclical, and complex. They mean that, in



spite of the fact that these stages are perfectly identifiable, writers commonly move back and forward in the stages before completing a text.

Raimes states that “contrary to what many people suggest, students never follow a lineal sequence of planning, organizing, writing, and revising. When a text is being written, the process involved is absolutely not lineal, but recursive...” (Raimes, 1995).

In the pre-writing stage, the students gather data and information on the work. Here the professor must explore their knowledge on the topic and their levels of motivation. This stage must be preceded by an analysis of a text related with the mode of discourse in question. It guarantees a point of departure.

In the writing stage, the students start to write the text taking into account the following aspects: the actions accomplished during the previous stage, the particularities of the kind of text, the professor’s observations, and the students’ self-valuation of their works.

In the post writing stage, the students check, revise, and edict their possible final work. This stage marks the students’ achievements and limitations for further treatment.

Taking into consideration the results obtained in the teaching-learning process of writing skills in the third year of the English Major and its poor current state, the authors of this work consider that the teaching of writing should be undertaken through a process-oriented approach.

The Expository Text

The selection of the expository text is associated with its complexity and the difficulties the students face when writing this mode of discourse. When characterizing this type of text, it is important to emphasize that it is mostly used in academic institutions to take advantage of its cognitive function and its role to ease the comprehension of concepts. The communicative function of expository texts is related with transmitting information about these concepts or



exposing points of view so as to inform, convince, or persuade. Its communicative intension is, in general terms, to explain.

Expository texts have the following structure: introduction, development, and conclusions. The extension of each of these parts depends on the contents and the objectives. The development is usually the most extensive part and it constitutes the core of the exposition.

Expositions can be developed by means of the following methods: comparison or contrast, cause-effect relationships, classification, exemplification, and definition.

- *Comparison or contrast*: They constitute forms of analogy. This is the method used to establish the similarities or differences between two or more subjects. When using this method, the following elements should be considered:
 - a. Selection of the subjects to compare.
 - b. Concentration on the points of comparison.
 - c. Concentration on the aspects to emphasize (similarities or differences)
 - d. Pattern of comparison to use (subject by subject or point by point)
 - e. Purpose (explain, inform, persuade)
- *Cause-effect relationships*: This method focuses on the relations between reasons (causes) and results (effects) in a given process or phenomenon.

Aspects to consider:

- a. Selection of the process or phenomenon.
 - b. Element to emphasize (causes, effects, or both)
 - c. Purpose (explain, inform, persuade)
- *Classification*: This method is used when dividing a subject, a phenomenon, or process into types, classes, or groups in terms of a particular principle.



Aspects to consider:

- a. Selection of the subject, phenomenon, or process.
 - b. Declaration of the principle of classification.
 - c. Presentation of the groups, classes, or types depending on the principle.
 - d. Characterization of the groups, classes, or types.
 - e. Purpose (explain, inform, persuade)
- Exemplification: This method is related with the use of examples to illustrate a point of view or opinion. The examples can be selected from personal experience (specific), habitual situations (commons), or suppositions (hypothetical).
 - Definition: This method clears out the meaning of terms or concepts. This is a complex method because it has to be extended by means of the combination of other methods such as exemplification, classification, comparison, and others.

Description of the strategy:

The strategy is made up of three stages and phases closely interconnected one another.

Stage I: Diagnosis of the students' skills to build expository texts.

Objective: To test the students' skills to build expository texts so as to determine their current states and potentialities.

Actions:

- a. To determine the objective of the diagnosis.
- b. To limit the contents under evaluation.
- c. To establish the indicators to evaluate the diagnosis.

Stage II: Application of activities. This stage includes the following phases:



Phase 1: Knowledge expansion. Objective: To strengthen the students' theoretical information in terms of expository texts.

Actions:

- a. To update previous knowledge on the exposition and its characteristics.
- b. To recognize the differences between the different methods to build expository texts.
- c. To drill the contents related with these methods.

Phase 2: Model text processing. Objective: To discuss and analyze expository texts of different kinds.

Actions:

- a. To select the method of development.
- b. To discuss and analyze the model text.
- c. To value the structure and interrelation of the pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic dimensions in the model text.

Phase 3: Development of expository texts. Objective: To put into practice the knowledge acquired in the building of expository texts.

Actions:

- a. To create the writing communicative situation through writing workshops.
- b. To build the expository text following a process approach.
- c. To follow up the different stages of the students' writing process.

Stage III: Process control. Objective: To corroborate the effectiveness of the strategy to build expository texts on the basis of the process approach.



Actions:

- a. To evaluate the fulfilment of the actions devised for each of the stages and phases of the strategy.
- b. To set up the final results of the strategy.

The strategy becomes really visible through a system of activities for each of the moments the process moves on. They are structured in the following way:

- Activity
- Objective
- Instructions to the teacher
- Instructions to the student

System of actions for the Didactic concretion of the strategy to improve the development of writing skills through the text building process of expository texts in the third year of the English Major at the University of Granma: An illustration.

General objective of the system: To favor the development of writing skills on the bases of the text building process of expository texts.

Writing expositions using comparison or contrast as method of development.

Activity 1-The reading connection

Objective: To identify the characteristics of a text developed by comparison so as to favour the student's preparation to build this kind of text.

Instructions to the teacher: Provide the students with a text developed by comparison with a corresponding set of questions.

Instructions to the students: Read the following text carefully, then answer the questions given below.



Holmes and Dupin

Edgar Allan Poe introduced his detective Auguste Dupin in 1841. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle created his Sherlock Holmes in 1886. The first is American and the second is English. There have been lots of controversies and arguments around both detectives. However, in spite of the time and distance, we can find common grounds between the two characters as far as professional situation, personality, and social relations.

First of all, the conditions under which they work are alike. While most other detective characters take cases on their own, Dupin and Holmes act as consulting detectives: the former for the French police and the latter for the English one. Nevertheless, both detectives dislike the policemen they work for, and they provide their reasons. Still, Dupin and Holmes somehow control their scorn while they work out their cases. The consulting detectives keep the satisfaction of solving cases, but let the police steal the glory.

Their personalities also match. They are both loners. They accept the narrator's company, but no one else's. Poe says Dupin "is in love with darkness". In fact, when he finishes a case, he closes his house and locks himself in. Holmes, on the other hand, withdraws from ordinary life with the help of cocaine.

Finally, even when Dupin and Holmes actually enter society to solve cases, they remain mentally separate from other men. Both show an amazing energy. This energy involves them in society, but it does not mean that they really join society. Instead, each stays separate by remaining unemotional. They appear to be minds without feelings.

They act in the same way. They dislike their police associates. Neither can stand the world of normal men. And even when they work with ordinary men, they do not relate. As a matter of



fact, they share so many things in common that some people think these similarities are too obvious to be accidental.

Questionnaire:

1. What is the writer's communicative intention?
2. What method of development does the writer use to expose his ideas?
3. What is the thesis of the text?
4. What's the writer's purpose?
5. Pick up all the transitional elements and connectors that indicate comparison.
6. What subjects is the writer comparing?
7. Which are the points of comparison?
8. What is the writer making emphasis on?
9. Is he developing the comparison point by point or subject by subject?
10. What devices does the writer use to keep his text coherent?

Activity 2: Workshop for prewriting activities.

Objective: To gather and organize the information to write a comparative essay.

Activities before the lesson:

Instructions to the teacher: Ask the students to prewrite a comparative essay following these steps:

- a. Find a couple of subjects to compare and gather information about them.
- b. Concentrate on the aspect you want to emphasize(similarities or differences)
- c. Select the points of comparison
- d. Decide the pattern to use(subject by subject or point by point)
- e. Declare the purpose of the comparison(explain, inform, persuade)



f. Write a preliminary working thesis containing the subjects and the aspect you want to emphasize

g. Organize the information using an outline, a diagram, or a list.

Instructions to the students: Prewrite a comparative essay using your professor's instructions.

Activities during the lesson:

Instructions to the teacher: Tell the students to gather in teams to discuss their projects and hear classmates' suggestions. After this, they will be asked to stand in front of the group to present their projects. Here the teacher acts as an adviser interacting with the group and suggesting changes if they are needed.

Instructions to the students: Gather in teams to discuss your projects and hear team-mates' suggestions. After this, you will stand in front of the group to present them and hear any further advice.

Activity 3: Writing the comparative essay.

Objective: To verify the students' abilities to write comparative essays.

Activities before the lesson:

Instructions to the teacher: Ask the students to write a comparative essay following the working project.

Instructions to the students: Write a comparative essay following the working project discussed in class.

Activity 4: Revising and checking the comparative essay.

Objective: To verify the students' abilities to correct writing errors.

Activities during the lesson:

Instructions to the teacher: Ask the students to revise their works paying special attention to



their relation with the working projects and with such linguistic aspects as vocabulary and grammar. After this, have them exchange their essays among classmates for further revision and discussion. Once this activity is over, be ready to collect the essays.

Instructions to the students: Revise your work paying special attention to its relation with the working project, its unity and coherence, and such linguistic aspects as vocabulary and grammar. Make any necessary correction and exchange your work with your partner. Discuss with him/her and hear any possible suggestion. Hand in your work to the professor.

Instructions to the teacher: Read and revise each individual work. Do not correct any error. Just act as a collaborator marking or jotting down brief comments on particular weak areas using a code of symbols previously agreed with the students. Devise separate sheets for each student to write down their difficulties and needs so as to follow up their improvement and capacities to make self-corrections. Give the paper back to the students.

Activity 5: Writing and revising the second draft.

Objective: To verify the students' abilities to write and correct the second version.

Instructions to the teacher: Ask the students to rewrite the essay following the suggestions provided.

Instructions to the students: Rewrite the essay following the teacher's recommendations. Make any necessary change and go back to previous stages if appropriate. Revise again focusing on the markings of the first draft.

Activity 6: Proofreading the second draft.

Objective: To read the essay aloud so as to detect any unnoticed error or dissatisfaction.

Instructions to the teacher: Ask the students to proofread their works so as to detect any unnoticed error or dissatisfaction. Tell them that this is an activity they can do by themselves, in



pairs, in teams, or in groups. They can also have somebody else read the essay for them.

Instructions to the students: Proofread your work so as to detect any unnoticed error or dissatisfaction you might have. Follow your teacher's indications. Revise again if needed.

Activity 7: Editing the essay.

Objective: To verify the students' proficiency at finding any deficiency affecting the essay.

Instructions to the teacher: Ask the students to read the essay again so as to detect any possible difficulty, mostly in the areas of spelling, punctuation, and mechanics which could not have been noticed. Tell them to go back to revising and checking again if needed.

Instructions to the students: Read the essay again so as to detect any possible difficulty. Concentrate on spelling, punctuation, and mechanics. Go back to revising and checking again if needed.

Activity 8: Writing the final copy.

Objective: To assess the degree of proficiency acquired by the students for writing comparative essays following the writing process.

Instructions to the teacher: Ask the students to write and hand in the final copy after making sure everything is "next to perfect". Check every student's work thoroughly and write down specific comments to be discussed later.

Instructions to the students: Write the final version and, after making sure everything is correct, hand it in to your professor.

Activity 9: Discussing results.

Objective: To discuss the final results of the process.

Instructions to the teacher: Give the papers back and make a general reference to common successful or weak areas. Point out specific points which need further treatment. Call each



student individually and discuss with him/her the remarks jotted down on his/her sheet all along the process. Now the teacher acts as an evaluator.

Writing expositions using classification as a method of development

Activity 1-The reading connection

Objective: To identify the characteristics of a text developed by classification so as to favour the student's preparation to build this kind of text.

Instructions to the teacher: Provide the students with a text developed by classification with a corresponding set of questions.

Instructions to the students: Read the following text carefully, and then answer the questions given below.

Types of Night Clubbers

Dancers are not the only men who go to nightclubs. Having worked in and attended various clubs, I have come to realize they attract different types of guys. These guys can be grouped taking into account the way they act.

First, there are the dancers. They are out on the floor most of the night. They are not concerned with their appearance. They usually wear jeans or shorts and a T-shirt. They are there to dance and sweat.

Then, there are the posers. They go to model and show off their clothes and hair. They will not dance for fear of messing up their appearance, or even worse, sweating.

The third group is the scammers. Scammers go to pick up women. They usually stand around and check out the body parts of all the people as they pass by. A person close to them can see the lust in their eyes.



Finally, there are the boozers. They can be seen stumbling around, falling down, or lying in some corner where they have passed out.

Nightclubs attract those four types of men. At times, I am a member of a fifth group: the observers.

Questionnaire:

1. What is the subject of the text?
2. What is the writer's communicative intention?
3. What principle did he follow?
4. According to that principle how many groups or classes did he declare?
5. What did he do with each of the groups or classes he declared?
6. What connectors or transitional elements does the writer use to introduce each class or group?
7. What is the thesis of the text?
8. What does it tell?
9. Is there unity and coherence in the text?
10. How did the writer manage to achieve them?

Activity 2: Workshop for prewriting activities.

Objective: To gather and organize the information to write a classification essay.

Activities before the lesson:

Instructions to the teacher: Ask the students to prewrite a classification essay following these steps:

- a. Find a subject to classify and gather information about it.
- b. Select a principle of classification.



- c. State the different groups or classes according to the principle.
- d. Describe the different groups or classes.
- e. Provide examples of each group.
- f. Write a preliminary working thesis containing the subjects and the aspect you want to emphasize.
- g. Organize the information using an outline, a diagram, or a list.

Instructions to the students: Prewrite a classification essay using your professor's instructions.

Activity 3: Writing the classification essay. (From here on, the typology of activities is repeated in the rest of the methods)

The application of this strategy is, definitely, time consuming and demanding in terms of work and activities. However, the teachers should play a triple role as advisers, collaborators, and evaluators to guarantee the performance of every action and every activity. The authors recommend the use of a portfolio to follow the student's records and improvements.

Control experiment.

After putting the strategy into practice, the students were given a test with the following indicators in mind: Correspondence between text and communicative intension, unity, coherence, and vocabulary use. They were required to present three expository texts using different methods of development to be discussed with the teacher. These works were to be graded as good, average, poor, and very poor in correspondence with the indicators listed above.

The texts produced by the students showed significant results, highly superior to those exposed before the application of the strategy. In general terms, they were able to adjust to the communicative situation under question, being précised in the use of language and the basic requirements of expository texts.



Indicators	Good	%	Average	%	Poor	%	Very por	%
Text- communicative intention correspondence	15	38,4	19	48,7	4	10,2	1	2,5
Unity	16	41	15	38,4	5	12,8	3	7,6
Coherence	11	28,2	23	58,9	8	20,5	1	2,5
Vocabulary use	21	53,8	15	38,5	3	7,6	---	---

Students' results after the application of the strategy

In review, after having carried out an integrated valuation of all the indicators, the students were given the following general category:

- _ Fifteen students were classified as Good.
- _ Twenty students as Average.
- _ Three students as Poor.
- _ One student as Very Poor.

	Good	%	Average	%	Poor	%	Very poor	%
BEFORE	6	15,4	11	28,2	13	33,3	9	23,1
AFTER	15	38,4	20	51,3	3	7,7	1	2,6

Comparative analysis of the students' integrated evaluation before and after the application of the strategy

It is important to point out that during the individual discussion with each of the students, they generally demonstrated an adequate theoretical preparation that paves the way for their transit along the stages of the writing process. They were able to characterize the methods of development they used, as well as their inner features and techniques. All this, together with the levels of help required and offered by instructors, will enable them to build better texts every



passing day, not only in regard to expository texts but also in those related with other modes of the written discourse.

Conclusions

1. English teachers must consider the possibilities to improve students' writing skills though the elaboration and putting into practice of writing strategies focused on the process approach or on a combination of approaches.
2. The strategy for the development of expository texts is theoretically grounded in the writing process and proposes, as didactic concretion, a system of activities that integrates the pragmatic, semantic, and syntactic dimensions of expository texts.
3. The instrumentation of the strategy during the teaching-learning process of the subjects Integrated English Practice V and VI demonstrated the efficiency of the system of activities it proposes. From a qualitative point of view, it increased the students' motivation towards the writing activities and improved their independence and creativity.

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