Academic and Professional Writing: The Professional Foundations

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1. INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out the main working assumptions which helped to shape the design and practical realities of the proposed writing programme to be offered by the Pusat Bahasa of the University of Malaya both on and off campus in the second half of 1994.

2. LANGUAGE

Language is seen as something that can be approached from two directions, from the point of view of the user or that of the thing used. In the former ('emic') case the user has 'business' of some kind to transact and makes selections from the pool of linguistic resources available (= 'the thing used') under the constraints of the norms, conventions and values (the 'rules of engagement') of the group, or discourse community (Swales 1990), of which s/he is currently a member The more we are dealing with an 'institutionalised speech setting', (as will be the case for the current writing project), the more restrictive, indeed prescriptive, these constraints are likely to be. Ann Johns (1990) provides the best summary of this position.

> "   the writing product is considered a social act that can take place only within and for a specific context and audience (Coe 1987)   the language, focus, and form of a text stem from the community for which it is written "

In other words, the learner must learn to operate the rules of the institutionalised speech setting of which s/he hopes to be a (more effective) member. Or

"in teaching writing, we are tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student's place and mode of operation within it" (Op cit. quoting Berlin)

In this writing project we must therefore

begin with the rules of discourse in the community for which the student writers are producing text. These rules, not the student's own, will become the standards for teaching and evaluating writing for the class. " (Op cit)

This view of language is fundamental to what follows.

3. THE LEARNER AS ACTIVE AGENT

There are similarly two broad ways of looking at the notion of 'learner', i.e the 'passive' learner who expects to be 'taught', and surrenders responsibility for the transaction to a 'teacher', and the active (proactive, ergative) learner who accepts full personal responsibility for learning outcomes, but could perhaps do with a little help The design of this project is based on the assumption of an 'ergative' learner (A contrary assumption would lead to a very different design) Thus it is assumed that where a member of a discourse community feels unable to compete adequately when it comes to negotiating successful outcomes in that community, s/he may be strongly motivated to rectify the situation by undertaking relevant training and to pay the high cost involved — valuable time not spent on more productive activities, inconvenience, sheer effort, and finally perhaps cash This learner drive (at least in the context of the intended customers of the present project) is in no way likely to be motivated by a liking for or interest in the language per se. It is rather seen as a necessary chore justified by the expected benefits at the end of the ordeal It is this LD which provides the input energy for all the effort which must go into the learning process. If the learner does not perceive the effort invested in a particular stage of the learning programme as being directly related to his/her (non-linguistic) goals, that driving force is likely to evaporate.

One of the principles on which the planned writing programme is based is that this LD must always be conserved. The 'work' of learning must be done by the learner This notion of LD relates closely to that of Discourse Community Pressure in Swales & Fredricksen (forthcoming)

4. THE NOTION OF CUSTOMER

This 'proactive' learner, the party soliciting the language services in question, in this case the acquisition of writing skills, is seen as the 'customer' seeking the assistance of the Language Centre. In the real world, however, it may not always be possible to identify a single individual as customer A number of individuals, or even groups, may have an interest in the transaction. Only two of these potential 'stakeholders' are considered here

4.1   The learner, as defined above, who may be having to bear the whole 'cost' burden as defined above, but whose contribution may in extreme cases be limited only to the required learning effort.

4.2   The paymaster (eg an employer) who may be bearing the brunt of the 'costs', eg cash costs, inconvenience, lost time and opportunity, etc

Now the motivation that induces the paymaster to meet his/her share of the costs may well be at odds with the Learner Drive. It is a basic principle of this programme that all such potential conflicts of interest be resolved before organised learning is embarked on LD must be maximised for the sake of learning efficiency, but the paymaster must have reasonable assurance that s/he is getting what s/he bargained for (Or there may be no more contracts.) This consideration leads to

5. THE NOTION OF CUSTOMER CONTRACT

What then is the customer (in both senses) actually paying for? The answer must inevitably be that which feeds the Learner Drive, i.e. achieving the ability defined in #3 above. Assuming here that there is no learner/paymaster conflict, the customer and supplier must agree beforehand exactly what is to be delivered and at what cost. These considerations form the basis for the customer contract. (In this connection, the current literature

on TQM, quality control and ISO 9999 as applied to the supply of educational services is recommended to the members of the two teams.)

6. THE NOTION OF COST

The conventional notion of cost for educational services is often restricted to the most obvious surface component, cash, and it is left to the customer to work out all his/her hidden extras, which are frequently far more onerous than the cash element. It has been suggested above that for the kind of learning package envisaged other cost factors should be explicitly accounted for in the customer contract. It is also suggested that the customer be made aware of some of the costing options available. For example, the customer may, for his/her own convenience, prefer to accept a greater financial cost in return for a lower time/ inconvenience cost. One can thus draw up a table such as:

Customer Costs	Supplier Costs
learner effort	programme development
learning time	research time
travel time	face-to-face
inconvenience	materials
lost opportunity	plant
staff replacement	maintenance
cash	travel time
etc	inconvenience, etc

The important point to note here is the intertranslatability of certain customer and supplier costs. Thus customer travel time can normally be reduced only at the cost of supplier travel time. But the customer may place a higher value on customer time than on the cash equivalent of supplier travel time, and be prepared to pay a higher cash premium to make this saving. Indeed, all customer costs can be compensated down to a certain irreducible minimum by higher cash costs, to a certain extent even learner effort at the expense of greater supplier research time. How this equation will work out in practice is an empirical question which can be tested during the pilot stage.

7. THE 'GOODS' TO BE DELIVERED

Perhaps the most intransigent problem to be solved by this

project, and one which is consistently shied away from by our industry, is the actual specification of what it is the supplier undertakes to supply Clearly, what the customer wishes to purchase is the linguistic key to an essentially non-linguistic goal as discussed above to which the Learning Drive is attached. The conundrum is how one is to specify this in print in a way that lends itself to verification that the terms of the contract have been met and that the agreed payment has been earned. At the same time it will be necessary, not only to state the 'quality' of the 'goods' on order, i e. the tasks the learner wishes to be able to perform, but also to quantify them, that is to indicate the required degree of mastery of those 'goods' and the desired degree of sophistication Figure 1 suggests a possible approach to this problem which has been in use for some years now It offers four levels of accomplishment, from minimal up to sophisticated, for a given task (to be specified by the customer). The higher the level required the higher the cost. At the same time it specifies four possible levels of under-achievement, or the extent to which the learner's current level of ability falls short of the target level. Again, the lower this level the higher the cost to the supplier, and therefore the higher the charge agreed in the contract. It is for members of the project teams to work out a more detailed set of descriptors, meaningful to both sides, to serve as the basis for the customer contract.

8. THE NOTION OF 'TEACHER'

Servicing a customer contract of this nature so as to keep costs to a minimum without sacrificing efficacy, efficiency or effectiveness must inevitably mean a fresh look at 'production' processes. Put another way, it may be that, in the words of Eskey and Grabe(1988), the

" .. teacher may do very little of what we normally think of as teaching"

They were thinking in that context of the teaching of reading. But the same case can be made for the 'teaching' of writing. And

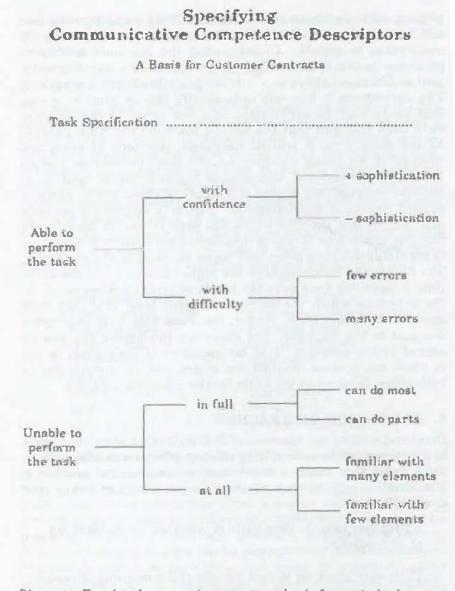"The students must of course do the learning for themselves."

Specifying
Communicative Competence Descriptors

A Basis for Customer Contracts

Task Specification ....

Figure 1: Template for generating competence levels for particular language needs. The various options read from left to right generate eight notional levels of competence to which a 'zero' level and a 'super' level can be added. For each class of task identified these notional levels can be interpreted in terms of job-related competence descriptor. The greater the gap between where the learner is now and the level s/he aspires to reach the higher the cost specified in the contract.

The aim therefore is to determine

"... how, and to what degree, the teacher of second language reading should intervene in his or her students' learning."

Again, for 'reading' read 'writing'. And I am certainly not alone in feeling that we need to revisit the notion of 'teacher' Widdowson (1990) quotes Cicero on the subject:

"Most commonly the authority of them that teach hinders them that would learn."

More recently, Stern (1983) says:

"In spite of the prolonged debate on teaching method, the concept of teaching as such has remained the least developed."

Likewise Richards (1990) feels the need for.

"a redefinition of the role of the teacher "

The principle advocated by this project is to leave the learning to the learner but to make that process as efficient as possible. The role of the teacher is then best summed up in the words of Clarke and Silberstein (1977), as quoted by Nunan (1989).

"The teacher as teacher is necessary only when the class is attempting to resolve a language problem, for it is only in this situation that the teacher is automatically presumed to possess more knowledge than the students. This role can be minimised if the students' attack strategies have been effectively developed."

For "class" in this context read "learner" And following Breen and Candlin (1980) on can think in terms of three roles for the teacher:

8.1 facilitator (to which I add 'guide' and 'mentor')

8.2 independent participant

8.3 observer and learner

It is suggested that the above general principles be adopted by the project.

9. FOUR PHASES OF LEARNING

How this teacher/learner relationship works out in practice depends on the stage of learning taking place within the context of the learner's pursuit of his/her perceived objectives. In the case of target situations involving face-to-face oral interaction, it is considered useful to distinguish at least the following four overlapping modes or phases.

9 1   the 'in vivo' mode, where the learner is on his/her own in the target community, from which the 'teacher' is automatically excluded - that is where the learner is actually putting into practice what has been learned during earlier stages. From the learner's point of view, this may be the most powerful learning mode of all, and must be explicitly built into the overall learning programme.

9.2   the 'in vitro', or simulation mode, where the learner undergoes experiences as closely related as possible to those of the 'in vivo' mode. Here the emphasis is on the teacher's role as facilitator and independent participant, as well as observer and learner - i.e. observing the learner and learning about him/her

9.3   the exposure mode, where the learner is immersed in a controlled way in the target discourse so that it becomes fully familiar and almost 'second nature' However, there may be no need for actual face-to-face contact between facilitator and learner during this mode

9 4   the elucidation mode, where systematic regularities in the target discourse not immediately apparent to the learner are brought into focus. Here there is an obvious role for a facilitator who will analyse the target discourse in order to identify the most obvious features requiring elucidation. The project team should investigate the extent to which there may be a need for face-to-face (or possibly telephone or e-mail) contact during this mode, and justify the call on this costly facility in terms of learning enhancement.

But in the case of purely written communication it is possible, to great pedagogic advantage, to merge the in vivo and in vitro modes, since the facilitator can remain invisible to the target community The 'speech act', or document, being produced can

be 'tried out' on the facilitator at the various stages of its production as it grows into the speech act eventually launched in vivo. Writing is not usually a 'real-time' activity in the sense that face-to-face interaction is. The writer can often take 'time-out' to consult a mentor.

10. THE INDEPENDENT LEARNER

But as long ago as 1979 Allwright was saying:

> "Language teaching that does not cope satisfactorily with the problem of independence training is simply a sad waste of time, no matter what else gets done well in the classroom "

And one of the problems this project will have to tackle is precisely this need for 'independence training' in a society where teaching is conventionally viewed as something 'ergative' and learning as something passive. The pilot project will need to investigate how best to wean the learner into a system where 'teaching' becomes instead anticipatory and reactive, but otherwise leaves well enough alone.

11. TOP-DOWN PEDAGOGY

The modes or phases of learning referred to above are not of course the same thing as the pedagogic phases which can be translated directly into a list of times, venues and activities. These, it is suggested, should be arrived at using a 'top-down' approach This derives from the principle discussed above of always keeping the learner's mind firmly fixed on the goal from which s/he derives the necessary motivating energy, and ensuring that the link between that goal and current learning activities is always fully clear At the outset the learner will probably have a notion of the 'document' or 'instrument' aimed at, but not the elements and sub-elements which constitute it. It is suggested that one must proceed by a process of constituent analysis (top down) showing at each stage how the parts are 'glued' together, right down to any necessary morphosyntactic insights into the conventions of the target literature. The following basic pedagogic stages are offered
Project teams.

11 1. agreeing the terms of the customer contract with the paymaster;

11.2. facilitator creates corpus of exponents of target genres;

11.3. ensuring compatibility of Learner Drive and the terms of the contract;

11.4 clarifying with the learner all the learning stages leading to the agreed goals,

11.5. ensuring the learner can read the target corpus fluently;

11 6 learner specifies the intended outcomes aimed at through the document,

11 7 learner explores target genres for macro-structures and transitional cohesion,

11.8 learner maps own variables into template so derived,

11.9. exploring each element in the macro-structure for basic 'moves' and their cohesion markers;

11 10. learner maps own variables into each element (not necessarily in chronological order);

11 11. learner realises these moves in his/her own context by close reference to browsable concordances and other analyses of the corpus,

11.12. delivery of the document;

11 13. feedback and 'post-mortem' on the outcome.

It is unlikely that these phases will work out exactly like this in practice, but it is suggested that they should all be aimed at and, in some sense, accounted for

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