

## **INTEGRATED SKILLS III: READING AND WRITING**

M<sup>a</sup> Belén Labrador de la Cruz.

*Universidad de León.*

## **PART I. TEACHING "READING AND WRITING" BY TEACHING GENRES**

When dealing with pedagogic matters related to reading and writing skills in a foreign language, there is a concept we cannot put aside, which is the concept of genre.

What we usually read or write are texts, that is, complete messages, varying in length, which are coherent (made up of several ideas organised in a logical and clear manner) and cohesive (achieving coherence by means of a series of semantic devices).

And texts can be classified into genres according to some criteria such as their purpose, their subject matter or their style. Swales defines genres as "classes of communicative events which typically possess features of stability, name recognition and so on" (Swales, 1990:9).

The ultimate aim of this paper is, in fact, to foster a kind of "genre awareness" both among teachers and students, in order to identify those linguistic conventions or norms that characterize every genre. As Cook says, a genre or "discourse type is something we all use everyday in order to orient ourselves towards the communication in which we are involved. Languages abound with names for discourse types... There is no need to introduce any technical terms for discourse types, nor should we hesitate to name them to our students for fear of burdening them with jargon" (Cook, 1989).

The intentionality, therefore, is two-folded. On the one hand, a proposal for using discourse types as suitable and authentic material for teaching is advocated (genre as a means). On the other hand, discourse types are thought to be the basis of every language, which means that learning how to process and to produce the different discourse types amounts to learning a language (genre as an end).

If learners are to understand the whole meaning of a text or to produce an acceptable piece of writing, it is undoubtedly helpful for them to find out about the function, the structure and the author of the text. And if they are to read or write more than one text, which is most likely, they will gain from the experience of comparing and contrasting them, thus discovering their similarities and differences, i.e. what those belonging to the same genre have in common and

what makes them different from the other genres.

Similarly, it is usually necessary to be familiar with the cultural context and to have some background knowledge that allows for an understanding of implicatures and intertextual references.

In order to achieve this goal, I have chosen a task-based approach to teaching and a top-to-down perspective on language. As far as the former is concerned, the teaching purposes are hidden behind a problem-solving activity which should be motivating and appealing for students. Once the task is initially fulfilled (the puzzle/ riddle/ problem, etc. is solved or the grouping/ ordering/ matching, etc. is done) the text can be further exploited by a deep analysis.

Regarding the top-to-down perspective on language, it has a major influence upon how to tackle the text. As teachers, we should get our students to read in such a way as to identify, first, elements that account for a certain context and some particular social relationships among the characters and between the author and the reader, then, a characteristic structure and function of the discourse type of which the text is a sample and the cohesive devices employed and finally, the grammatical rules and lexical items to be found in the text.

Summing up, so far we have seen that lessons which concentrate on reading and writing skills should not consist only of asking to write a composition or to read a text in the coursebook. Students do profit from dealing with a varied range of discourse types: captions, headlines, brochures, adverts, letters, C.Vs, questionnaires, application forms, descriptions, slogans, catalogues, instructions, bills, poetry, etc.

Similarly, a task should not consist only of reading or writing something on the part of the student, followed by an evaluation on the part of the teacher (e.g. comprehension tests, correction and assessment, etc.). The students can be required to carry out different tasks on the same text, tasks which involve reading and writing but which apparently have a more playful goal and tasks which start from a global view (e.g. taking the gist of a text) and go on into analyzing minor details (e.g. scanning for some particular information).

From now onwards, this brief theoretical explanation about the teaching of these two communicative skills will be applied to some concrete tasks that have actually been used with first-year students of the English degree at the University of León during the year 1996-97.

## PART II.

### Task 1

*Materials:* A handful of maxims collected from different resources: books, postcards, posters, etc. over a period of time (appendix 1).

*Activity:* The first thing students are asked to do is to divide those twenty-two maxims into five groups, taking the subject matter as the only yardstick and they also have to give an appropriate heading for each group.

The first contact with these short texts is therefore an overview. They only need to grasp the general meaning. Furthermore, not only do they read but they also start writing (some of them produced only an abstract noun as a heading but many came up with witty sayings in the manner of the given maxims).

The second step is to identify all the elements that imply some kind of morality, advice or teaching, which is characteristic of this discourse type, namely, maxim. It is now necessary to pay more attention to the style and tone of the quotations. All the authors (anonymous or well-known writers) state categorically something they are convinced of by virtue of their own experience or their attentive observation of life and Man's behaviour. Students can find textual evidence of this moralizing tone by a closer look at the maxims: expressions such as "right", "deserves", "is worth", "is good", "the secret of success", "quality", "you can learn/ win"..

The third thing to do is to notice that most of these quotations are in fact definitions, which constitute a different discourse type. As we can observe, genres intermingle and overlap; their boundaries are fuzzy and they are usually multifunctional. These definitions do not simply have an informative function, but a directive one as well. These statements comply with some norms used when defining: the term defined at the beginning preceded by no article whatsoever and followed by the verb "to be", similes, rules of three" (e.g. "what sunshine is to flowers, smiles are to humanity"), etc. They are, however, very subjective and peculiar types of definitions, though they can be regarded as such.

Finally, at the bottom of the analysis we can search for all the characteristics that render these quotations literary -figures of speech and everything that shows their wit. As a matter of fact, we could class these brief texts as another discourse type which could be called "one-liners" or "felicitous sayings", including in this category those famous quotations by Oscar Wilde and the "greguerías" by Gómez de la Serna. At this stage, students need to go into deeper detail to find parallels, rhyme, rhythm, metaphors, repetitions,

contrasts, puns, alliterations, polysemic words, etc. It is important to let them find what they may by themselves and only later to provide them with the technical term, instead of asking them to find particular figures of speech. They may also need some guidance as regards grammar (e.g. morphemes from Old English - "hath", "when" + past participle, conditionals, etc.), lexical items or fixed expressions (e.g. "from scratch", "to hold one's tongue", "beneath", "droll", etc.), culture-specific notions or objects ("the tea kettle" or even "the donought" for students from other cultures) and intertextual references, like the one to the Bible (Goliath and David).

### **Task 2**

*Materials:* A journalistic sports article, which has been cut into pieces and presented to the students in the form of jumbled pieces of writing (appendix 2).

*Activity:* Students are asked to reconstruct the text by ordering and joining those parts together. Furthermore, they have to state why they came to each decision. The text has not been broken up at random. There is always a clue in the form of a grammatical rule or restriction that is meant to be identified by the students: The first part is marked, at the beginning, by the title and at the end, by a transitive verb which requires a direct object like "the scorer". The second part ends with a proper noun which can well be an antecedent of a relative clause. The next clue is a prepositional group broken up. Next, the verb "to emanate" is followed by a particular preposition: "from" while the passive verb is followed by the passive subject introduced by the preposition "by". In the following part, a multiple subject precedes the indefinite "all", the expression "try and" is followed by a bare infinitive and finally, a conditional clause is joined to its main clause. This is the most difficult clue for the students to recognize, for the conditional is not one of the usual types -those introduced by "if" or "unless", but is made up using an inversion.

Another variant of this activity is to approach the text by giving them definitions and telling them to search for the defined words, for instance: "three goals scored by the same person in a football match" (hat-trick), "actions or things that are tried" (attempts), "during the whole of a period of time" (throughout), "possibilities" (chances). Or else, we can divide the class into groups and ask each group to translate or summarize one paragraph. Also, it can be fruitful to seek elements that abound or are significant in a particular text; in this case, for example, local prepositions that convey an idea of movement, or relative clauses.

Students are likely to be familiar with the subject but they may

