

INTEGRATED SKILLS III: READING AND WRITING

M^a 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

lack the background knowledge to understand the text completely. We, teachers, should furnish them with some additional information about cultural items, like the teams, the imperial units of measure ("yards") and intertextual references like "The taming of the shrews". They don't easily understand its appropriateness in the text (the Shrews referring to Shrewsbury Town, which is beaten) and its origin (from a play by Shakespeare: *The Taming of the Shrew*).

A second thing for the students to do is to find characteristics of the journalistic genre -a narrative style, a striking title, precise data such as how many goals were scored, when, how and by whom, a quite objective tone all through the text, except for the last paragraph, which becomes a comment or personal opinion. There is, first, an account of what happened and then, an assessment of both teams' performance -whether they deserve the final score or not.

Finally, an incursion into cohesion has proved useful for a good comprehension of the text. Anaphora is not a straightforward device here. It is hard for the students to identify co-referents correctly. The "Bees" and "Brentford" are one and the same team and just the same applies for "Shrewsbury", "the Shrews" and "the Town". Verb forms are, on the other hand, easy to handle, as they are all forms of Simple Past. As for structure, the temporal order of the facts is clearly stated by means of ordinal and fractional numerals: "the first", "the remainder of the half", etc., which are also clues for the students to guess the right order of the text.

This is an example of a text that is apparently simple as refers lexis -especially for soccer fans, structure -it is easy to see the temporal order and grammar -very few subordinate clauses, just a few relatives and only a conjunction: the adversative "but", however, the general meaning may be obscured by the use of co-referents, long premodifiers with nouns: "the Bee's quickest ever League"... and verbs and prepositions concerning place and movement: "slot the ball home inside the left hand post", "laid the ball off to", etc.

Task 3

Materials: several poems of the same kind: "limericks" (appendix 3).

Activity: Students are asked for the tone of the poems, which is light and humorous, for the rhyme, which is AABBA, for the subject, a petty silly story and for the structure: a person from a certain place is always introduced in the first line and an anecdote follows. Then the students are encouraged to write a limerick in teams. This is an exercise of guided writing which allows for creativity while giving the best of guidelines: imitation.

Task 4

Materials and activity: A sample of the mottos of some commercials and ads (appendix 4) which is a particular discourse type that submits language and a secondary informative function to a broader and primary persuasive function. Basically, we can see that language is used in such a way as to draw the potential customer's attention, which accounts for the use of puns, polysemic words, homophones, contrasts, etc. By following this pattern, the students produce similar ads as witty and as persuasive as possible. This is also preferably done as teamwork.

Task 5

Materials and activity: A little poem (appendix 5) which is a mixture of two genres: poetry and brief notes, informal messages usually written on a scrap of paper that serve for practical purposes and are addressed to a relative or a friend. Here, it is rhythm and the arrangement of the lines that turn it into a poem. Again, the work in groups is to produce a similar poetic note.

The resulting limericks, ads and poetic notes from the tasks above described should be read out by the spokesperson of each group, or written on the blackboard. My experience is that they enjoy making up their own ads and poems, letting the others know what they have produced and listening to their classmates. They seem to be highly motivated and apparently they have thoroughly processed the reading as they are able to produce something similar.

I am not against creative writing but I consider that guided writing is better for a start. They have something to hold on to and they are encouraged by prompt results. Little by little, they can depart from patterns, although following the teacher's guidelines will always be advisable and they will be able to produce essays, reports, articles and even theses, in due time.

Task 6

Materials: A short poem that has been turned into a riddle by omitting the word in the title and in one of the lines (appendix 6).

Activity: The aim is to make students read something which could appear to them as dull and incomprehensible otherwise. However, what they see is that they have to guess a word, for which they need to find clues in the text, and consequently, there's no way but to read and understand it. The teacher's aid can come from emphasizing some key words, giving answers to the queries about meanings and explaining how close the failed attempts at guessing are to the right answer, which, by the way, is "apostrophe", the

symbol with which the poem starts.

Piecemeal, we have outlined a few ideas on discourse analysis and its relevance in the teaching of two communicative skills. Examples of real activities used in class have been shown and some proposals have been suggested for the exploitation of authentic materials.

All in all, the teaching is up to the teacher, who has the responsibility of settling on the methodology and the tasks he or she uses. To finish with, I will just quote a one-liner (with an intertextual reference): "Teachers...by their tasks you shall know them" (Swales, 1990:74).

Appendix 1

1. "Success comes in cans; failures comes in can'ts"
2. "Words are like leaves, and where they most abound, much fruit of sense beneath is rarely found" Alexander Pope
3. The right angle to approach a difficult problem is the "try - angle"
4. "He who thinks by the inch and talks by the yard deserves to be kicked by the foot"
5. "Living would be easier if men showed as much patience at home as they do when they're fishing"
6. "Men are like fish. neither would get into trouble if they kept their mouths shut"
7. "A light heart lives long" Shakespeare
8. "A minute of thought is worth more than an hour of talk"
9. "Twixt optimist and pessimist, the difference is droll; the optimist sees the donught, the pessimist sees the hole" McLandburgh Wilson
10. "What sunshine is to flowers, smiles are to humanity" Joseph Addison
11. "Although the tongue weighs very little, few people are able to hold it"
12. "It is good to remember that the tea kettle, although up to its neck in hot water, continues to sing"
13. "Humour is to life what shock absorbers are to cars"
14. "The secret of success is to start from scratch and keep on scratching."
15. "Patience is a quality you admire in the driver behind you and scorn in the one ahead"
16. "Ignorance is always swift to speak" Cervantes

17. "One thing you can learn by watching the clock is that it passes time by keeping its hands busy"

18. "You can win more friends with your ears than with your mouth"

19. "Laughter is the sensation of feeling good all over and showing it principally in one place." Josh Billings

20. "He that hath knowledge spareth his words" Proverbs 17: 27

21. "It is worth a thousand pounds a year to have the habit of looking on the bright side of things" Samuel Johnson

22. "When confronted with a Goliath-sized problem, which way do you respond: "he's too big to hit" or, like David, "he's too big to miss"?"

Appendix 2

The taming of the shrews

Shrewsbury Town 0 Brentford 3

Carl Asaba wrote his name into the Brentford record book when he became

the scorer of the Bees' quickest ever League hat-trick at Gay Meadow. The goals came in the 14th, 18th and 21st minutes.

The first followed sheer determination by Paul Smith

who won the ball in the penalty area and enabled Asaba to slot the ball home inside the left hand post from 10 yards.

Paul Smith also played his part in the

second goal when his powerfully struck free kick from 25 yards was palmed away by the keeper into the path of Paul Abrahams who passed inside to Asaba who rolled the ball into the net.

The third emanated

from a good break by Abrahams who laid the ball off to Robert Taylor. The first effort was beaten away

by the keeper. But Taylor chipped the ball back across the goal

where Asaba headed home to complete his record breaking hat-trick.
During the remainder of the half Taylor, Abrahams and Marcus Bent

all had very worthwhile attempts saved by an over worked Benny Gall in the Town goal.

In the second half Asaba had two further efforts cleared off the line as Town looked to try and

redeem themselves. But the Brentford defence were magnificent throughout. In truth, had the Bees converted the chances they made,

a scoreline of at least 6 or 7 would have been a fair reflection of the domination they showed against 3rd placed Shrewsbury Town.

Appendix 3

Limericks

There was an Old Lady of Prague,
Whose language was horribly vague,
when they said, "Are these caps?"
she answered, "Perhaps!"
That oracular Lady of Prague.

There was a young lady from Spain,
who was exceedingly sick on a train,
not once but again,
and again, and again,
and again and again and again.

There was a young man from Rome,
Who had a small monkey at home,
One day he found
This monkey on the ground
Swimming in his shaving-foam.

There was a lady from York,
Who loved eating roast pork
The pork was diminished
And when it was finished
She found she was eating her fork.

Appendix 4

ADS

- 'Love at first bite' (Pizzahut)
- 'All men are created equal; all cars are not' (Honda)
- 'Anyone with a heart can give blood' (National Blood Service)
- 'Wine turns a meal into a banquet'
- 'Not just very clean but fairy clean' (Fairy)
- '...outstrips any other stripes' (toothpaste)
- 'the genes that made America' (jeans)
- 'Please use your change to make a change' (Greenpeace)

'We don't inherit the world from our parents, we borrow it from our children'

Appendix 5

A brief note

This Is Just To Say

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast
Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet and so cold

Appendix 6

The_.....

'twould be nice to be
an _____
floating
above an s
hovering
like a paper kite
in between the its
eavesdropping, tiptoeing
high about the thats
an inky comet
spiralling
the highest tossed
of hats

REFERENCES

- COOK, G. 1989. *Discourse*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- SWALES, J. 1990. *Genre Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- WHITE, E. (DE). 1996. *Brentford's Official Matchday Magazine*. 10th Sept. 1996.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- HACKMAN S. & MARSHALL B. 1990. *Re-reading Literature*. London: Hodder and Stoughton
- SHELS, J. 1988. *Communication in the Modern Languages Classroom*. Strasbourg. Council of Europe.
- TOMLINSON, B. 1994. *Language through Literature*. London: Penguin.