

Writing in learning/teaching in French (study case- freshmen "Alexander Xhuvani" University students)

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Abstract

Writing plays an important role in teaching and learning foreign languages. Students that can write in a foreign language have to verify their grammar, lexical and semantic performance and it is the role of the teacher to assess if students have learned rules correctly. This is both important for their reading and speaking skills and in general students are tested through a writing test. Writing is now an object of research and it is generally accepted that teaching/learning cannot be performed out of the communicative acts. Students are required to produce and interpret different documents such as letters, leaflets, journal articles etc. in a foreign language, in this case in French. The idea is that if you want to own the writing competency, you have to know very well both the lingual and contextual structure. This paper is based on a research conducted with the first year students, studying French at the "Alexander Xhuvani" University, Elbasan, Albania, taking in consideration the lingual, psychological and social factors that affect writing. From the conclusions was clear that students had difficulties in writing due to their limited lingual competencies that leads them to orthographical mistakes etc. We also noted that students are eager to acquire this competency because learning a language through writing does not merely mean to learn syntax but it also requires a de – contextualization and creating a chance for students to get in touch with everyday language texts.

Keywords: writing, learning, teaching, French.

Introduction

Writing in a foreign language is still one of the main challenges in teaching and learning, especially in French. The objective of this article is to highlight these problems and to discuss about the effects in different lingual levels. To fulfill this objective we created and spread out a questionnaire form to the first year French language students' and their answers helped us to understand better the real causes that influence and hinder students in acquiring the writing competency. This article is an attempt to find an answer for the main question listed below and that tackle directly the problems that are related with the writing competency:

- Which are the main difficulties that students face in writing? Which are the factors that influence it?
- Why students make mistakes when it is supposed that they know the grammatical rules and structure?
- Which are the means we have to use to help students to improve their writing performance?

In this article we have reflected some theoretical aspects that are related with concepts

of writing skills, focusing especially in textual grammar, the text, the discourse and texts' typologies. We have treated some other concepts such as:

- Writing in foreign language (French); importance of in the pedagogical approach)
- Textual characteristics in French, as a foreign language;
- Theoretical difficulties in writing;
- Working methodology;
- Interpretation and result analysis.

Theoretical aspects on writing and writing skills

Writing is a broad and old concept that exists in different forms and is practical for numerous purposes. In this article we will try to discuss about how writing is produced in school and to better define this concept we have relied on the lingual vocabulary and lingual sciences:

Writing is the antonym of speaking

Writing is a "way of introduction of the spoken language through graphical signs". According to Yves Reuter: "Writing is a social practice, historically built, including action and conflictual tendencies of knowledge, values and operations through one or more subjects that want to produce structural lingual meanings through the help of a mean, in a given social- institutional space (Yves Reute:1996). For Christine Barré De Miniac, writing is considered as "a mean of expression, an activity that moves the individual in his affective and personal dimension" (De Miniac, 2000:19). Writing "is in a way, saying, discovering: discovering emotions, feelings, desires or conflicts". While for Josette Jolibert, writing "fulfills the aims, understand cases, changes based on the situation, guarantees communication, storytelling and protecting traces" (Jolibert, 1994:11).

For the teacher/ lecturer, teaching to students writing skills, means to teach to them how to produce texts in real communicative situation, while for pupils/ students, writing means to have a strategy to produce texts because writing consists not only in the lingual baggage but also in the reflection, selection and reasoning of the material.

Textual grammar

Textual grammar is a branch of linguistics that was developed in the end of 60', as "textual linguistics. It does not describe lingual facts according to classes but it explains everything based on a functional perspective. This means that it takes in consideration "phenomena that lead to textual coherence coming from the postulate that a text is not a mere continuity of phrases, but a specifically lingual unit". Its study object is to define the connection between structure of phases and the context in which they are used. Generally speaking we can say that textual grammar defines the elements that make this text coherent or not.

The text

Gerard Vigner agrees that "in a first look, the written text should be considered as a modality of language use with the aim of reassuring communication between two or more communicators (Vigner, 1979:10). The last one is the transition of

the message to inform, react and experience a feeling, a system translated in signs functioning according to a known code by all communicators/ speakers. He says that in the moment of text editing, the writer develops a monolog and he has to refer only to the graphical form of the language, explain all the elements of the message and foresee the reactions of its readers. From the other side, Jean Michel Adam has shown special interests for the text and he has defined four organizational plans for it (Adam, 1997:23-34). The first refers to the aim of the author; the second has to do with different enunciation: written speech acts, actual discourse, non- actual speech acts, logical discursive acts and poetical one. In the third plan stands the semantic cohesion while the last one is the textual relation such as (the title, subtitle, punctuation, thematic progression and morpho-syntax etc.). Hjelmslev, gives another and broader definition of the word text, describing it as a declaration or discourse, written or spoken, long or short, old or new (Dubois, 1994:482). For example: Stop! Yes or no, are considered texts as well. While N.E.Enkvist adds that every text that achieves to cause a process of interpretation in a given situation, is considered to be successful (Enkvist cité par Tomas, 2002:17).

Discourse

In the lingual science dictionary authors give some definitions for this word (J. Dubois, 1994:100).

The first definition is that discourse is the synonym of the word: "Language put in action, spoken by the speaker". Secondly, it is an equivalent with the declaration: "an equal or superior unit that creates a message with a beginning and an end". Rhetorically, discourse is the development of speaking with the aim of finding a reaction by the other speaker; it is a "continuity of the development of speaking as a mean of persuasion, structured according to strict rules". Nowadays the discourse represents all speech acts compound by units, organized coherently and defined as a "superior speech of act, considered and analyzed within the structure". J.M.Adam has highlighted the importance of the context in producing a discourse, saying that it is characterized by texts and its existence in a real communicative situation. That is why he has proposed some formulas to better define the term "discourse" (Adam 2000: 28).

"Discourse= text+ and condition of production"

"Text= discourse – the condition of production"

Typology of texts

Typology of texts has gained much attention by many theoretical schools of thought. It is based on some clear criteria that facilitate classifying a text in relation to the others. Dominique Maingueneau agrees that "it is necessary to take in consideration the typological factors in the moment when the knowledge about the textual constituency is quite relative in relation to other texts attached to it" (Maingueneau, 2000:144). The criteria of classification are changeable and vary from one case to another and the diverse typologies are often a product of criteria such as: the functional goal, the

situation and the pragmatic aspects of communication, the themes and the formal organization. Among all these we chose two: the continuing typology elaborated by J.M.Adams that collect some structures and enunciations of Benveniste who defines texts based on some specific communicative circumstances.

Writing in a foreign language *The importance of writing in the pedagogical approach*

The act of communication is one of the milestones of teaching and learning a foreign language. But we do not have to forget the biggest preoccupation of the methodology and pedagogy which is teaching students to express themselves verbally and being capable to write in a foreign language during lesson classes. The road to achieve this goal is long and quite difficult because some methods decide the proper pedagogical approach while others put attention on some different components of the school environment: interaction, representations, the importance of language being studied, teaching objectives etc. What we are interested in is the fact that in different methods or approaches, the status and importance of writing is unstable. That is why we are focused in the altering ways between the spoken and writing acts, which are traditionally opposed to each other (Conseil de l'Europe, 1979:7).

Writing and speaking are two powerful lingual elements and it seems that the first dominates the second, but today thanks to technology this report has changed, because we continue to listen to the last voices through means of technology. The first method empowers writing while the second seem to give more power to spoken language; what we should remember is that each approach protects its main theoretical framework that affirms the choice they have made. In the lines below we will present briefly some main approaches and we will mention the biggest didactical tendencies that are related with this issue. The traditional and communicative methods, as two fundamental didactical approaches, are quite important because they are focused in the spoken and written variables of learning and teaching a foreign language, the French language in our case. According to G. Vigner: "writing does not possess a lingual status itself because it has lost its dominant position it held in the traditional school. It is nothing but a subject of the spoken language (Vigner, 1982:10).

Other methods give more importance to writing in the teaching process and we are more into the communicative approach, where writing continues to gain more and more importance, because communication is not only about speaking. Learning how to write is nothing but a way how to control speaking and according to S.Moirand, in his work "Writing situations" he says that: "teaching how to write is to learn how to communicate through the text" (Moirand: 9).

Other approaches try to balance their role, giving the same importance to writing and speaking, something that makes us think about the cognitive approach that gives a special role to writing and tries to create a balance between speaking and writing in teaching and learning foreign language (Bibeau 1986).

Characteristics of French written texts, as a foreign language

Les caractéristiques des textes écrits en FLE:

Main characteristics of French written texts are listed below:

- Written texts are shorter: especially the texts written by Hall and Silva, showing that produced texts by students are generally short (Hall, 1990: Silva, 1992) (C, Raymond. P.M, 1999: 64). They say that these short texts have little information and less content.
- -Limited lexical vocabulary: Connors says that the vocabulary used by students is relatively small and you can find that many words are often repeated (Connor1987: 64).
- A simple syntax: Texts in foreign language are characterized by a simple syntax in comparison to the mother tongue; less conjunctions as is affirmed by Woodley (1985) and Scarcella (1984), in their research on foreign language. Carson and Scarcella further affirm that expressing oneself in a foreign written language seems to be difficult and students are obliged to use a simple language and syntax (Carson, 1988: Scarcella, 1984).
- -More mistakes: Hall affirms what we already know that writing in a foreign language produces more mistakes, especially when we refer to the form of the text more than its syntax.

The writing process in a foreign language

Speaking about the process of writing in a foreign language, Cornaire and Raymond say note that:

-It takes a longer time to write: students of foreign language dedicate more time to the writing process, to verify what they have written, pronunciation and grammatical rules. Generally speaking they face more difficulties in expressing and translating their thought and opinion in the foreign language from their mother tongue. Hall (1990) says that students also admit to spend some amount of time in editing what they have written (C, Raymond. P.M, 1999:64). He noted that it takes longer time to edit a text written in foreign language because they have to correct grammar and lexical mistakes.

- A limited number of strategies: a considerable number of writers have a limited number of strategies that are often collected and used to produce a short text. Said this they only write for themselves, same as the unknown writers in their mother tongue.
- A limited lingual competency: research has shown that it exists a minimal level of lingual competency that plays an important role in learning a foreign language, even though it is not absolute and can vary from one student to the other.

Theoretical difficulties in writing

Writing is a complex activity that coordinates many intellectual and interactive operations. Said this, students are aware of the difficulties they have to face when

performing writing. Owing the writing competency means to own the inner structure that helps you to articulate clearly the ideas, to possess a rich lexical baggage but most importantly to possess writing skills.

Typology of mistakes

All writers find common mistakes when they edit their texts, mistakes that are to be found in the work of students during their academic years as well. They are obstacles to the communication process and for this reason we found reasonable to remind some of the most common mistakes, divided in 6 main categories such as: syntax, lexical mistakes, grammar mistakes, semantics, punctuation etc. Mistakes mentioned in the category of lexical mistakes are: stress, word endings, double letters, prefix and suffixes, apostrophe and capital letters.

Writing rehab

Learning French in our classes means to learn a language in the perspective of a foreign language because the students have to face themselves verbally and socially with this lingual reality and the only contact he has is the written one. Teaching French as foreign language makes you use the text inevitably (texts can be written by authors or produced by students themselves). This testifies that class work gives more space to the textual analysis. If we read the program and official instructions, we can see that students have to be autonomous in relation with the language. The actual teaching methodology aims to install communicative competencies and proposes a process based on the student without leaving aside writing techniques. Said this, writing is thought to be an essential skills when learning and/ or teaching French as a a foreign language in Albania.

Describing the textual corpus and working methodology

Foreign language classes are always heterogeneous in terms of the social life the students conduct but the social, familiar and psychological factors they come from are unknown. It is the duty of the teachers as principal actors with direct relationship with students, to teach them the foreign language, taking in consideration the competencies and strategies that are part of their communication. In parallel, the activity of producing texts becomes an integral part of teaching process and follows the same conditions that lead to higher level textual productions. The research sample created for this paper is compound by the first year students, studying French and Italian, at the "Alexander Xhuvani" University, Elbasan, Albania. It is compound by 30 students and the period when the study was conducted is the previous academic year 2015-2016. We have analyzed their writing works during this academic year and to better assess the difficulties they have faced we have compiled a questionnaire, filled in by them. We have firstly used the descriptive method and then the analytical method, so we could better assess and avoid possible mistakes made by the students.

Analyzing and interpreting results

Question 1:- Do you speak French fluently during lesson classes? Yes/ No

Yes 20%

NO 80%

1. As it is revealed by the data, only 20% of the students accept to speak fluently French, while 80 % of them say they don't, even though they are in the same class, age and learn French using the same method and teachers.

Question 2: - Do you watch French TV channels at home? Yes/No

Yes 30%

No 70%

2- Only 30% of the students declare that they watch French TV channels at their homes, revealing a small percentage of them who are really interested in learning French or know more about the French culture. The rest, 70%, of the sample says that they don't watch TV shows in French.

Question 3: - Do you visit the library? (To read books in French) Yes/No

Yes 25%

No 75%

Same, students showed a huge lack of interest in reading books in French and only 25% declared to have visited the library for this reason.

Question 4: - Reading in French is something you find: easy, somehow difficult or difficult

Easy 20%

Somehow difficult 30%

Difficult 50%

The answer we had, show that students face difficulty in writing, because a student who reads texts with difficulty will face more challenges in writing a coherent text. Rules that are used for speaking a language are almost the same as the rules of the written language.

Question 5: - How do you evaluate the activity of producing written texts at the university? Do you think it is easy, somehow difficult or difficult?

Easy 15%

Somehow difficult 10%

Difficult 75%

From the answers we can affirm that students consider writing to be a difficult activity so if we want to have a higher writing level, we as teachers have to be more engaged and collaborate more with students because it is important to create a solid lingual basis, especially in the first academic year.

Question 6: Where do you think lays the problem? (Grammar, lexical aspects, vocabulary, topics)

Grammar 40%

Lexical 30%

Vocabulary 15%

Topics 15%

Students think that grammar and lexical aspects of the language are the most problematic ones, saying that writing is a difficult task that requires a special attention by all lingual components (grammar, lexical and semantics etc.)

Question 7: - What do you do when you face difficulties to write a text?

- Do you ask your professor?
- Do you try to resolve it yourself?
- You don't do the task?
- Do you ask your professor? 50%
- Do you try to resolve it yourself? 20%
- You don't do the task? 30%

We notice that students tend to collaborate with their professors when they have difficulties to finish a task. But on the other side, professors know what the problems their students face are. That is why they have to be ready to find a solution based on researches that can improve students' performance when dealing with writing group or individual tasks.

Question 8: - what are the reasons for facing these writing difficulties?

- Because you do not understand the request?
- Because you do not know writing strategies?
- Because your lingual baggage is not sufficient?
- Because you do not achieve to understand during the lesson classes?
- Because you do not understand the request? 10 %
- Because you do not know writing strategies? 50%
- Because your lingual baggage is not sufficient? 30%
- Because you do not achieve to understand during the lesson classes? 10%

This question is quite important because the answers show us that 50% of the students are not that familiar with writing techniques and 30% of them do not possess a rich lingual baggage. This is the reason why they have difficulties in producing a text, especially in their first academic year.

Conclusions

The writing task is a complex activity performed by students and that in consists in writing down their ideas or fulfilling the tasks given by the teachers. There are three main factors that influence students and that are directly related with the practices of producing a text in French. Firstly, they are not motivated enough to fulfill the tasks given by the teachers of French because they think that learning English is much more important and profitable. That is why they do not do anything to improve their lingual level. Secondly they do not have sufficient lingual knowledge to finish written task. Thirdly, students of the first academic year tend to have more difficulties to write a text due to the limited lingual baggage and having little information about grammar rules or writing techniques. Students tend to spend less time practicing writing skills and when they do they tend to make many mistakes in grammar, semantics or using poor vocabulary. That is why it is important for students to learn more about the writing techniques and to minimize their mistakes. We would also advise students to possess and use a French dictionary, as the only way they can

consolidate their knowledge on grammar, syntax and lingual structure. We have to say that the majority of students tend to avoid dictionaries as an old fashioned way of learning a foreign language. Last but not least, it is important for teachers to use more audio-visual tools because the improve students' auditory and communicative skills and drills.

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