Meeting the challenges of writing a research paper in a foreign language

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Abstract: Scrisul academic presupune un gen aparte de interacțiune academică prin intermediul căruia membrii aceleași comunități discursive iși comunică gîndurile și cunoștințele. Prin urmare dezvoltarea abilităților de scriere academică ar trebuie sa devină o prioritate în sistemul de învățămînt superior. Ținînd cont de tendința de internaționalizare a învățămîntului superior, atenție sporită ar trebui acordat predării scrisului academic în limba străină. Articolul dat examinează posibilități de îmbunătățire a cpacității de scriere în limba engleză la studenți. Sînt prezentate și analizate modelele propuse de Swales și Feak, care au drept scop falcilitarea procesului de scriere in limba engleză a studenților non vorbitori nativi de limba engleză.

Cuvinte cheie: scrisul academic, lucrare de cercetare, interactiune academica, modelul CARS, structură.

Writing is an important productive skill that should be acquired by the student in order to be able to produce cohesive and coherent pieces of discourse in written form. The development of this skill should become a priority in higher education as the student conducting a research will have to write down the findings. Writing for academic purposes is a complex process that will result in a final product, i.e. the research paper. This process becomes even more intricate if the student has to write in a foreign language, where he/she should consider not only the formal and generic constraints but also the specific socio-cultural norms if he/she wants to be understood by his/her audience. In this respect, Candlin and Hyland state 'composing involves selecting and grouping experience in consistent and to a degree conventionalised ways, and thus implies the incorporation of a range of cultural knowledge and experience in any individual response to a writing task' (Candlin and Hyland, 1999: 11). Therefore, it could be useful to make the student aware of the mistakes he/she might commit, and, thus, help him/her to avoid them in the future.

Writing should be well structured in both form and content. As a matter of fact, cohesion and coherence are the two key elements that give every text its unity. That is why both macro and micro structures should be considered. While writing a research report/article, the scholar should be familiar with the rules of the scientific genre which will determine his/her choice of lexico-grammatical and discursive patterns. In Bhatia's opinion, 'a genre is identified by reference to the typicality of the communicative purpose that it tends to serve' (Bhatia, 1999: 24). Thus, it becomes essential for the writer to determine what exactly he/she wants to communicate to the reader. At the same time, the writer should know how this communication

is going to fit the acknowledged framework of the written discourse so that the reader perceives it as belonging to that particular genre. This generic construction will signal the author's membership to that specific community and thus enhance the writer-reader communication.

Mastering the genre of academic writing implies to be able to manipulate the given framework in order to communicate clearly one's ideas. Traditionally, it is thought that this refers only to the formal links, i.e. the surface of the text, that are characteristic of a particular genre, the so-called 'typicality'. Bhatia argues that generic classification goes beyond lexico-grammatical structuring and brings in the notions of 'flexibility, creativity and innovation' (Bhatia, 1999: 21). However, the writer can be flexible, creative and innovative within the boundaries of a specific rhetorical context.

The writer-reader interaction is also a particular one. The written act is intended for a definite readership. That is why in the process of writing the author should always think of his/her reader, moreover, 'writers and readers think of each other, imagine each other's purposes and strategies rightly or wrongly, and write or interpret the text in terms of these imaginations' (Myers, 1999: 40). In order to avoid ambiguity, the writer should employ the conventionalised patterns in his/her writing and imagine himself/herself in the reader's place. Both the writer and the reader should cooperate in the process of creation of meaning: the former – when he/she encodes the message, and the latter – when he/she decodes it.

Such a complex process may cause anxiety in the writer. It thus becomes important for the writer to overcome the stress. The more proficient and knowledgeable in his/her field of study the writer is the more confident he/she becomes. At the same time, the writer should be aware of, and have competence in, respect of conventions/choice of language. He/she should know how to organise the text by following the grammar rules, by selecting the appropriate words, and by constructing coherent paragraphs.

Every text should clearly exhibit smooth transition from one idea to another. That is why the writer should always consider the openings and closings of every section in the text. He/she should lead in his/her reader into the setting, raise the reader's expectations, and then, at the end, he/she should lead out the reader, by wrapping up what has been stated as well as by linking forward to the next parts of the text.

While writing a research paper it is worth considering the model suggested by Swales (Swales and Feak, 1994: 157). This model offers a visual support to understand the way a research report/article could be constructed. Thus, the introduction should be the leading in element to what the paper is going to deal with. The writer should proceed from more general to more specific information. This gradual transition prepares the reader to what will follow in

the article, it helps him/her acknowledge the membership with the author, and it arises his /her interest. Here the writer should make a literature review accepting or rejecting the existing theories, in doing so, he/she should bring forth solid arguments. Next the writer should focus on the methods used in his/her research. He/she should justify his/her choice. Then the writer should describe and analyse the results of the research. As seen these two parts, i.e. the methods and results, quantitatively occupy most of the article/report. They are extremely significant as they allow the writer to prove his/her hypothesis stated in the introduction. The paper should end with the discussion of the results leading the reader out, this time the writer will proceed from more specific to more general issues. It is also worth mentioning here what further research could be conducted in the future.

While dealing with introduction section, Swales and Feak suggest the CARS (Create a Research Space) model to the writers who should organise their introduction by following three moves.

> Move 1   Establishing a research territory
>
> a. by showing that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way. (optional)
>
> b. by introducing and reviewing items of previous research in the area, (obligatory)
>
> Move 2   Establishing a niche
>
> a. by indicating a gap in the previous research, raising a question about it, or extending previous knowledge in some way. (obligatory)
>
> Move 3   Occupying the niche
>
> a. by outlining purposes or stating the nature of the present research, (obligatory)
>
> b. by announcing principal findings, (optional)
>
> c. by indicating the structure of the RP. (optional) (Swales and Feak, 1994: 175)

As seen the introduction is a kind of reader road map that highlights the writer's direction. It is a guide that will help the reader to understand the writer's niche and see how the latter explores it in his/her article.

When it comes to the literature review, the writer should offer a comprehensive and accurately selected list of major works in the field of his/her research. Special attention should be paid to the most recently appeared works. The review should be focussed, i.e. the writer should be both analytical and critical in order to give an appropriate overview of the existing theories. He should give solid arguments for either supporting or rejecting a concrete theory.

The study should comprise the following sections:

- Method

- Subjects
- Materials
- Procedures
- Analysis

The author should from the very beginning dwell upon the methods used in his/her research. He/she should clearly state his/her preference for either qualitative or quantitative methods applied in his/her research. Definitely, it is possible to apply mixed methods. The writer should be very explicit why he/she used that particular approach to his/her study.

Special attention should be devoted to the subjects of the research. The participants should be described accurately so that the reader understands who they are and to what extent the research affected them.

The writer should give an account of the materials used in his/her research. It is namely the analysis of this materials that will allow him/her to prove his/her thesis. Yet, the writer should describe the procedures used to analyse them. As to the analysis, it should consist of a clear presentation of the findings of the research. It is the part where the writer gives answers to the questions addressed in the introduction after the literature review.

The importance of the discussion section in a research paper should not be underestimated. There are cases when the researcher avoids altogether giving an account of his findings. This is wrong as the article will not be viewed as complete. Thus, the researcher will not lead out his/her reader. There are some useful moves to be considered while writing the discussion section:

- tie up – summarise the findings;
- refer back to the introduction and literature review;
- explain the (un)expected outcomes;
- give explanations of unsatisfactory results;
- make hypotheses;
- discuss implications and applications for the discipline;
- discuss future directions of the research.

As seen the discussion section is a restatement of the problems addressed at the beginning, only this time, it offers the solutions (i.e. the explained findings of the research). Thus, the writer is able to support or decline his/her ideas; he/she can contest an existing theory or hypothesis. It is also important to show in which way the discipline might benefit from the results of the present research. At the same time, there should be clearly seen the continuity of

this research, thus the writer should suggest further directions to be taken in the future. One should always remember that conducting a research is an ongoing process.

Paragraph composition is another important issue to be considered while writing a research paper. The paragraph in itself is a thought unit that should reveal how the idea stated in the topic statement is exposed. It should be internally coherent, and at the same time it should be linked to the next paragraphs in the text. As a rule, a paragraph consists of:

- topic statement (TS) –
  - states the main idea;
  - usually at the beginning of the paragraph;
- supporting sentences (SS) –
  - explain / develop the TS;
  - every sentence relates to the TS
- a concluding sentences (CS) –
  - summarizes the SS;
  - states a conclusion about TS;
  - not needed in some paragraphs.

A good writer should achieve paragraph unity, i.e. all of the supporting sentences relate to the topic statement. Thus, the paragraph is a mini research in itself as there is the leading in element (TS), the body (SS), and the leading out part (CS). The sentences within the paragraph should be cohesive, i.e. formally connected with each other. The writer should connect the components of the surface text (e.g. the actual words we hear or see) within a sequence. In doing so, he/she should follow the grammar conventions, lexical conventions and the rhetorical conventions of the particular language in which he/she is writing the research paper.

Yet, cohesion is not enough. The paragraph should also be coherent. Coherence represents ways in which the components of the textual world, i.e. the configuration of concepts and relations which underlie the surface text, are mutually accessible and relevant. There are several hedging elements, signposts that can help the writer achieve coherence in his/her writing.

In conclusion, writing a research paper might seem a difficult task to achieve. Yet, it is not impossible if the writer follows the specific steps revealed above. The researcher should always be focused and think of his/her reader. Indeed the research paper seems to be the medium through which the writer-reader interaction occurs. The writer should also clearly understand the purpose of the paper he/she is writing. He/she should plainly state the questions

addressed and then, at the end, offer the solutions to them. At the same time, the writer should be clear and relevant if he/she wants to produce a comprehensive research article that will have an impact on the reader.

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