Academic Writing as an Interactive Process

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Abstract: Academic writing is a particular type of writing involving a specific readership that shares the same knowledge. It is a communicative event intended by the writer who wants to produce a specific effect on the reader. Both the writer and the reader have to collaborate in order for communication to take place. That is why the writer should be constantly aware of the reader's presence and meet his/her possible expectations. The reader, on the other hand, should contribute with his/her knowledge in the understanding of the intended message and be aware of the writer's stance in the written text.

Introduction

The process of writing is an intricate type of interaction taking place between the writer and the reader where the medium is the written text. As a matter of fact, the text is intentionally created to produce a specific effect on the reader, to influence him/her. Like in any type of communication, both the writer and the reader have to collaborate if they want to succeed. Yet, their collaboration differs from the one occurring in face-to-face communication due to lack of the physical presence of the other interlocutor. It thus becomes essential for the writer to envisage his/her reader and apply the most suitable communicative strategies so that the reader is able to decode appropriately the intended message. Actually, 'in the process of trying to understand a written text the reader has to perform a number of simultaneous tasks: *decode* the message by recognizing the written signs, *interpret* the message by assigning meaning to the string of words, and finally, *understand* what the writer's intention was' (Celce-Murcia, Olshtain, 2000: 119, original emphasis)

Peculiarities of the Writing Process

The complexity of the writing process lies also in the background each participant is bringing to the construction of the meaning. Thus, each of them will use their particular schemata in the process. Their mental representations should help them to co-construct the meaning of the text. Yet, the awareness of the other in the processes of encoding and afterwards of decoding the written text is fundamental in this interaction. In Martin Nystrand's opinion

the participants of this type of communicative situation should follow the so-called 'reciprocity principle'. In the scholar's opinion, 'in any collaborative activity the participants orient their actions on certain standards which are taken for granted as rules of conduct by the social group to which they belong' (Nystrad, 1986: 48). That is why '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).

This interaction is necessitated by a practical task, i.e. the common needs both the writer and the reader have. For Geoffrey Thornton, 'writing is doing, a linguistic activity normally engaged in by an individual who is responding to a demand, and who is literate enough to switch into the written mode to make that response' (Thornton, 1980: 30). Thus, the writer needs to respond to a particular task that involves the production of a written text. On the other hand, the reader needs to respond to this very text, only in his/her case, by reading it, i.e. decoding, interpreting and understanding the writer's intention. Actually, when the needs of the writer coincide with the needs of the reader the communication becomes possible and 'results in stability and predictability of interpretation' (Myers, 1999: 45).

There are certain expectations the reader has before reading a text. His/her choice will depend on the degree to which these expectations were met by the writer. Therefore, they both should predict their interpretation of the written text.

Geoffrey Thornton speaks about the writer's task 'to satisfy the reader and himself' (Thornton, 1980: 18). The presupposition that his/her work must arise a certain reaction in his/her reader could be considered as a motivator to the writer. Whereas the end product of his/her laborious work could be viewed as the primary source of the writer's fulfilment. And it is this very text that should satisfy the reader who will possibly find the needed information.

The Co-operation between the Writer and the Reader

The writer and the reader establish a virtual partnership via the written text. They *co-operate* in the process of encoding and decoding the intended message. Paul Grice argued that communication is unfolding according to a principle. According to this principle, the language is interpreted on the assumption that the sender follows four maxims:

- the maxim of quality (i.e. the sender is true);
- the maxim of quantity (i.e. the sender is brief);
- the maxim of relevance (i.e. the sender is relevant);
- the maxim of manner (i.e. the sender is clear) (see Cook, 2000: 29).

Thus, the reader should assume that the writer is true, brief, relevant and clear. Undoubtedly, these four maxims cannot be obeyed in all situations. There are cases when they are flouted. Due to the conventions of a particular communicative situation the reader will be able to interpret appropriately the intended message and, thus, avoid the risk of considering the text a lie or even refusing to proceed reading it. That is why, 'success of any instance of communication, to a large extent, depends on the shared conventional knowledge of the genre to which the specific instance belongs' (Bhatia, 1999: 37). Moreover, the shared knowledge helps to make the text meaningful and coherent.

This conventional knowledge implies an appurtenance to a specific readership that will manipulate with the particular socio-cultural norms accepted by that particular group in the process of encoding and decoding the text. Ken Hyland argues that: 'texts cannot be seen as accurate representations of what the world is like because this representation is always filtered through acts of selections, foregrounding and symbolisation; reality is seen as constructed through processes that are essentially social; involving authority, credibility and disciplinary appeals' (Hyland, 1999: 100). The writer's authority and credibility could lie in his/her ability to be true and brief, whereas, his/her disciplinary appeals in his/her ability to be relevant and clear.

As seen, the generic appurtenance of the written text is crucial for its interpretation. It will signal the writer's intentions on the one hand, and will help the reader decode them appropriately, on the other. Thus, the one reading a newspaper article will have certain expectations from that piece, which most probably have been considered by the writer.

Greg Myers has suggested the following assumptions characterizing the writer-reader interaction via the written text:

- Writers and Readers are strategic selves, calculating choices or interpretation of choices in line with singular aims, matching the form to given functions of the text, or functions to the given forms.
- Interpersonal elements are seen as modifications of a basic message or content for greater effectiveness, standing out against unmarked forms.
- Society or a given community functions as a body of norms to which individual Writers and Readers turn as a background for interpretation.
- The task of the analyst is to generate possible categories of forms and functions, and base interpretation on the relations between these categories.

- Explanations of these form/function relations may draw on social practices, cognitive processes, communicative efficiency, or institutional structures (Myers, 1999: 46).

Academic Writing as a Particular Type of Interaction

As seen, writing is an intricate process where the writer and the reader engage in a process of collaboration where they co-construct the meaning manipulating with the specific socio-cultural conventions of the particular group they belong to. The readership belonging to an academic environment will manipulate with the norms and conventions of academic discourse. In this way, the writer will encode his/her message in such a way as to meet the expectations of his/her readers. On the other hand, the reader will expect to find the 'matching of needs' (Myers, 1999: 45) in the written text.

In Vijay K. Bhatia's opinion 'much of academic writing is an individual's response to somewhat predictable rhetorical contexts, often meant to serve a given act of communicative purposes, for a specified readership' (Bhatia, 1999: 22). The writer, in this case, will respond to the demand of the academic community by following the specific norms and conventions that will determine the micro- and macro-structure of the written text. The writer is aware of the fact that 'in academic writing you are expected to produce logically-structured ideas with well-argued, substantiated points, taking different opinions into consideration' (Gillett *et all*, 2009: 88).

Writing should be well structured in both form and content as it '*is* a matter of punctuation and spelling, but is much more than that' (Thornton, 1980: 18, original emphasis). As a matter of fact, cohesion and coherence are the two key elements that give every text its unity. Cohesion is a surface feature of text, independent of the reader. Coherence, on the other hand, results from the interaction of the reader with the text. It does not mean that cohesion and coherence function independently. Writers intentionally use cohesive devices with the aim of making their texts easier to follow, i.e. to make them more coherent. But if the text is nonsense, no amount of formal links will make it coherent. Coherence is traditionally described as the relationships that link ideas in a text to create meaning for the readers. In Greg Myers's opinion 'coherence is not just a property of a text, but is a social relation between Writer and Reader based on shared knowledge' (Myers, 1999: 53)

While writing a text for academic purposes, the scholar should be familiar with the rules of the scientific genre which will determine his/her choice of lexico-grammatical and discursive patterns. The writer should 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 it meets the expectations of the reader. 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.

Features of Academic Writing

Both the writer and the reader encode and respectively decode the intended message taking into account the shared knowledge they have. It implies that they both manipulate with specific patterns that characterise academic writing as a genre. That is why academic writing is seen as 'the use of various devices to enhance persuasiveness, drawing on either a rhetoric of impersonal objectivity, or one of reflexive awareness, to appropriately frame disciplinary submissions' (Hyland, 1999: 100). In order to persuade the reader, the writer should be clear, concise and provide appropriately referenced ideas supporting his/her argument.

One feature of academic writing is the use of formal vocabulary which helps to render the writer's claims more authoritative and substantial. At the same time, the formal words will make the language clearer to the reader. They will remove the doubt as to what the writer intends to communicate. Phrasal verbs are also to be avoided in academic writing as they belong to the informal vocabulary. It is therefore important for the writer to select the words carefully.

Another characteristic of the academic writing is the predilection for passive voice. The active voice is usually used in informal speech and very often is ambiguous, especially when the doer of the action is not specified. For example, when using 'people', 'somebody', 'they', 'we' or 'you' it is not clear who the person actually is. It is therefore recommended to change the sentence into passive voice to avoid ambiguity. However, the writer should be very careful as he/she might sound too pretentious if he/she overuses or misuses passive voice. That is why

the writer should know exactly what is the most appropriate style for the piece of writing and thoughtfully consider the audience.

While constructing his/her ideas into a unified whole the writer should use cautious language. On the one hand, he/she will not sound too imposing upon the reader. On the other, the writer should always remember that there are different points of view which might differ from his/hers. The writer should be aware that his/her claims cannot be conclusive and undisputable. His/her writing should actually generate further reflection upon the issues he/she is revealing in the text. That is why caution is preferred, and it can be achieved by using particular modal verbs, adjectives, adverbs and lexical items that will diminish the writer's harshness.

Objectivity should prevail in academic writing. It is also recommended to avoid using emotive language. The text might sound implausible. Yet, the text cannot be totally lacking emotive language which shows the writer's personal attitude. Once again, he/she should be very careful while selecting the words that will reflect his/her attitude. Ken Hyland argues that writers need to project themselves in order to sound credible and involve the reader, in his opinion 'the use of stance is an important aspect of professional academic discourse, conveying the field-specific expressive and interpersonal meanings which help readers to evaluate information and writers to gain acceptance for their work' (Hyland, 1999: 120). Yet, the writer should not exaggerate.

Academic writing also implies the ability of critically combine, compare, adopt, or reject other viewpoints. The written text is the result of a long and deliberate process of analysis and comparison of other texts, discussions. That is why writing involves critical decision-making as to which point of view to adhere.

An essential feature of academic writing is referencing. A good writer consults other sources too. After a careful selection of what he/she might need, the writer could include some pieces in his/her own text. Yet, he/she should not forget to acknowledge the authors whose ideas he/she cites in the text.

Paragraph composition is another important issue to be considered in academic writing. The paragraph in itself is a thought unit that should reveal how the idea stated in the topic statement is developed. It should be internally coherent, and at the same time it should be linked to the next paragraphs in the text. A good writer should achieve paragraph unity, i.e. all of the

supporting sentences relate to the topic statement. The sentences within the paragraph should be cohesive and coherent.

Conclusions

Academic writing is an intricate interactive process that is taking place between the writer and his/her reader via the written text. Like in any type of communication, the participants have to co-operate in order to avoid communication failures. This process becomes even more difficult due to the fact that there is no immediate physical presence of the other in the interaction. That is why, the participants base their encoding and decoding of the intended message on the shared knowledge they both have. The appurtenance to the same readership helps them build a special relationship. The writer tries to meet the reader's expectations by following the socio-cultural and linguistic norms of the group they belong to. The reader proceeds in the same way only his/her intention is to decode appropriately the message.

Academic writing is an important productive skill for higher education students. Most of the assignment are done in written. Thus, it becomes essential for them to acquire this skill in order for them to be able to produce cohesive and coherent pieces of discourse in written form. Therefore, I intend to look for means that will motivate them and help them to acquire this skill. In my opinion, technology could help in this case as it could boost interactivity among them via the texts they are going to produce.

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