PRAGMATIC AND RHETORICAL COMPETENCE IN PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATIONS. ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

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"Meaning is not something that is inherent in the words alone, nor is it produced by the speaker alone, not by the hearer alone. Making meaning is a dynamic process, involving the negotiation of meaning between speaker and hearer, the context of utterance (physical, social and linguistic) and the meaning potential of an utterance". Thomas's [4] ideas of pragmatics as meaning in interaction emphasizes the fact that both speaker and listener are involved in the meaning making process.

Teaching of pragmatic and rhetorical competence entails a set of communicative purposes. Especially in the technical teaching domain, here as in other fields of EIL teaching there is a need for a new approach to language teaching which will shift the focus of attention from the grammatical to the communicative properties of language, in order to show the student how the language system is used to express scientific facts and concepts. In the University Politehnica of Bucharest teaching English language is taking a new character as a result of the need for many advanced students to use the language as a tool in the study of scientific and technical subjects. These needs involve the ability to see how sentences are used in the performance of acts of communication and at the same time the ability to manipulate the formal devices which are used to combine sentences in creating continuous passages of prose.

In recent years, at primary and secondary levels, it was usual to talk about the aims of English learning in terms of the so-called 'language skills' of reading, speaking and writing. Recently, a need has arisen to specify the aims of English learning more precisely to provide students with the basic ability to use the language, to receive and to convey information associated with their specialist studies. So, the initiative to teach second year students from different faculties of the University Politehnica of Bucharest to do professional presentations proved to be a beneficent action for their specialty training.

This association of English teaching with specialist areas of higher education has brought into prominence some problems connected with both pragmatic and rhetorical competence.

For second year students of the University Politehnica of Bucharest we have advanced teaching techniques such as essay writing, report making, comprehension of complex reading material. The purpose of this paper is to outline professional presentations as an approach which departs from that which is generally taken. What is involved is a shift of the focus of attention from the grammatical to the communicative properties of language. The difficulties which the students encounter arise not so much from a defective knowledge of the system of English language, but from an unfamiliarity with English use. We realized that their needs cannot be met by a course which simply provides further practice in the composition of sentences, but only by one which develops knowledge of how sentences are used in the performance of different communicative acts.

To quote J.P.B. Allen [1] in such an activity one might usefully distinguish two kinds of abilities which an English course should aim at developing at this level. "The first is the ability to recognize how sentences are used in the performance of acts of communication, the ability to understand the rhetorical functioning of language in use. The second is the ability to recognize and manipulate the formal devices which are used to combine sentences to create continuous passages of prose. We might say that the first has to do with the rhetorical coherence of discourse, and the second with the grammatical cohesion of text."

Professional presentation for the second year students of the University Politehnica of Bucharest defines itself by a grouping of indexes but all the language components should be taken into consideration. For example the semantics of verbs,

the differences between various thematic progressions. From a pragmatic point of view there is always the need to take into consideration the 'intermediate' levels between text and language.

The issue here is not about a certain kind of text (argumentative, informative, explicative etc.) but about an intermediate structure which corresponds to a certain attitude, to a certain position of the speaker. This position can be found in different kinds of presentation texts. For example the opposition story / discourse implies the speaker's distance towards the statement he makes.

In a discourse the distance is minimal whereas in a story there is a distance between the speaker and his/her text. It is more likely to take into account this intermediate level – neither text or language which is not connected to a particular type but which is found in all kinds of professional presentations. Any text of this sort should be related to the distinction story / discourse in a large scale of possibilities. The discourse / story is not clearly defined but there are intermediate stages – passages of story and passages of discourse.

Rhetorical competence, as it relates to the use of EIL, has been investigated in studies of contrastive rhetoric. U. Connor [3] defines contrastive rhetoric as 'an area of research in second language acquisition that identifies problems in composition encountered by second language writers and by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language, it attempts to explain them'.

In the discussion on pragmatic and rhetorical competence there are problems in using a native speaker model as a target. To the same effect attention to pragmatic competence should focus on developing an awareness of cross-cultural variation in spoken interactions rather than promoting pragmatic rules.

In the case of rhetorical competence some of the research findings of contrastive rhetoric demonstrate the manner in which textual development can differ cross-culturally. The use of EIL should not be associated with any particular rhetorical tradition. It highlights the need for students of English to be willing to process English texts that conform to a variety of rhetorical patterns.

Before reaching the final stage of a professional presentation we would need to consider alternative ways of developing skills practiced through composition and essay writing. These we may assume to be particularly those skills involving the ability to organize ideas in a sustained piece of writing. But organizational skills can be equally well developed through activities which involve some realistic forms of expression such as a professional presentation. In this domain examination requirements should not be neglected. The adoption of a functional approach to writing skills has certain advantages. For the purpose of remedial work we can review these items under the umbrella of particular language functions, such as expressing requests, suggestions, invitations etc. It is the systematic treatment of these functions, bringing together language which the students have already mastered, which is likely to be different. For example, comparison and contrast. The students are first exposed to a text which exemplifies the various items of language needed to express comparison and contrast. Their attention is drawn to the key items which include some alternative forms. As a second stage they are given opportunities for using these items orally. Finally they are given an appropriate writing task which shows how the function of comparison and contrast relates to a specific communicative approach.

Concerning my activities with second year students from the University Politehnica of Bucharest two major approaches to the teaching of writing a professional presentation have been under discussion for some time. The first, known as the 'product approach', focuses on the final outcome of writing, which is a logical, error – free essay. Students are given a model text, which they study, analyse and then reproduce. Different models are presented for different types of writing.

In contrast is the 'process approach' to writing which emphasizes the steps a writer goes through when creating a well-written text. Among the stages taught are: *brainstorming* or writing down many ideas that may come to an individual's mind; *outlining* which organizes the ideas into a logical sequence; *drafting* in which the student concentrates on the content of the message rather than the form; *revisions* in response to the student's second thoughts or feedback provided by peers or teacher ; *proof-reading* with an emphasis on form ; and the *final draft*. All of the processes should be explained, taught and practiced by students.

Some recent research suggests the value of focusing on various writing 'genres' in an effort to identify, compare and contrast writings in different fields such as different branches of science frontier domains such as systems theory, robotics, bioengineering etc. In Cohen's [2] view, the information should be used as a base line to determine what should be done in the classroom. As he puts it: 'Once descriptions of the speech acts are made available, the next task is to determine the

degree of control that learners have over those speech acts… Ideally, this information could then be used to prepare a course of instruction that would fill in the gaps in language knowledge and also give tips on strategies that might be useful for producing utterances'.

In general rhetorical devices are looked under three headings: logical, grammatical and lexical. Logical devices are words or phrases which indicate meaning, relationships between or within sentences. These include those of addition, comparison, contrast, result, exemplification etc. Grammatical devices are equally important for the cohesion of a text. For example, relationships between sentences by means of back reference(anaphora) with the pronominal form 'it' or a 'deictic' such as a demonstrative adjective or pronoun or an article. Lexical devices bring a deal of cohesion on a lexical level (key words, or the use of a synonymous word or phrase).

The writing of a professional presentation requires both an extensive understanding of the resources and considerable practice in using them in the appropriate form of written expression. There is obviously considerable danger in exposing the students to too many of these devices at one time. Their introduction must be gradual and systematic.

Therefore the following suggestions for teaching professional presentations can be highlighted:

- Teach students the stages necessary to writing: brainstorming, writing a first draft, revising, editing etc.
- Provide models of successful writing samples and discuss the features that make them effective.
- Discuss audience expectations of acceptable writing and how different genres use different writing styles.
- Select writing topics that are of interest to the students and represent tasks that students will need to master in future writing.
- Teach students real-life writing tasks.

Professional presentations which were done by second year students of the University Politehnica of Bucharest as a result of their study at class referred to themes directly related to their speciality technical training of each faculty. They were delivered in front of the group; they were discussed by colleagues and there was feed-back given. In this activity both pragmatic and rhetorical competence involved the speaker / writer or listener / reader in the meaning making process. And both entail a set of communicative purposes.

RÉFÉRENCES

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