

SKILL BUILDING AND THE PROCESS APPROACH TO WRITING IN TEACHING RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

In recent years, language researchers and practitioners have shifted their focus from developing individual linguistic skills to the use of language to achieve the speaker's objectives. This new area of focus, known as communicative competence, leads language teachers to seek task-oriented activities that engage their students in creative language use. In the process of learning Russian language, writing is considered as one of the most essential skills. In addition to being a communicative skill of vital importance, it is a skill which enables the learner to plan and rethink the communication process. Therefore, teaching writing skills should be taught gradually starting from instrumental skill to content-based writing.

Keywords and phrases:

Linguistic accuracy, clarity of presentation, organization of ideas, notation, writing practice, expressive writing, composition

The writing process, in comparison to spoken interaction, imposes greater demands on the text, since written interaction lacks immediate feedback as a guide. The writer has to anticipate the reader's reactions and produce a text which will adhere to Grice's (1975) cooperative principle. According to this principle, the writer is obligated (by mutual cooperation) to try to write a clear, relevant, truthful, informative, interesting, and memorable text. The reader, on the other hand, will interpret the text with due regard to the writer's presumed intention if the necessary clues are available in the text.

Linguistic accuracy, clarity of presentation, organization of ideas are all crucial in the efficacy of the communicative act, since they supply the clues for interpretation. Accordingly, while the global perspective of content organization needs to be focused on and given appropriate attention, it is also most important to present a product which does not suffer from illegible writing. Writing is, in a very sense, a mirror image of reading. Both are interactive. Readers decode what writers encode. Both draw upon schemata. The reader brings prior knowledge to the comprehension of a text; the writer draws upon similar knowledge in composing a text.

Wilga Rivers [1] makes the distinction between notation, or writing practice, and expressive writing, or composition. Notation ranges from mere copying to the construction of simple sentences describing facts or representing typical, uncomplicated speech. Expressive writing or composition involves the development of ideas either of a practical or a creative nature. Pedagogically, there is considerably more control in the development of notational skills than in more expressive types of writing. The expectation is that the student will progress through several stages of writing practice to the early stages of creative composition. This development from control to creativity continues a line drawn throughout this manual in the chapters on dialogues, oral exercises, and reading comprehension.

The first activities are skill building exercises taking the learners from the very beginning to the mid-intermediate proficiency level. Here the focus is on structural detail and accuracy in the use of the written language. Learners are presented with textual segments, clues, and models of typical prose to assist them as they attempt to rearrange words or sentences, complete partially written texts, and imitate or modify entire paragraphs. In skill building exercises the progression is from simple to more complex structures, a so-called bottom up approach. The second part of the chapter, which is meant for intermediate and advanced learners, shifts the focus from the mechanical manipulation of structure to the more creative activities of process writing.

The process approach to writing is based upon a set of principles basically different from those underlying skill building. Where skill building exercises move from simple to complex structures, process writing, which is a top down model, starts with a concept or theme and works down to the grammatical and semantic units. In the process approach each learner completes a writing assignment in a group, exchanging ideas with other members of the group and receiving editorial help at various stages of composition. When conducted properly, process writing is a prime example of cooperative learning.

The process approach, with its stress on group interaction, is a direct offshoot of communicative language learning, just as pattern practice was a product of the audio-lingual method. For many years, preoccupation with structural accuracy allowed little room for the development of cognitive strategies in creative writing. Students, left to their own resources, were often at a loss as to how to formulate ideas on a topic or theme. Process writing provides for the formulation of ideas and plans through learner cooperation, Rivers eliminating much of the isolation, frustration, and uncertainty encountered in writing programs of the past.

Recent studies have attempted to redirect the process approach with its stress on the general mechanics of creative composition to training in writing for specific content areas. The reason for this is a fear that process writing does not prepare students adequately for an academic career. In a content-based approach students develop writing skills within specific academic disciplines so that they will be able to compose essays and reports using the specialized vocabulary and structures peculiar to these disciplines. Usually offered at the university level, such courses are often adjuncts to academic courses, such as economics, history, or physics. Sometimes they are taught by teams composed of a teacher and an instructor from the specific content area.

In conclusion, if teachers are eager to be more creative and innovative, they can find various activities to improve writing skills but they should take into consideration the following facts:

- 1) to create tasks in accordance with students' level of Russian and interest
- 2) to teach writing starting from skill building exercises to process based
- 3) to get started form pre-writing techniques to proof reading
- 4) to let students do peer checking
- 5) to combine reading and writing tasks
- 6) to use techniques mentioned above.

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