

From Speaking to Writing: An Innovative Approach to Argumentative Writing Teaching in ESL/EFL Contexts

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Abstract – This paper is an attempt to response to a number of constraints faced by EFL learners when it comes to deals with argumentative writing. The work leaves aside the general stream to step a different way that can effectively and efficiently be conducive to the improvement and development of argumentative writing competences in EFL/ESL classrooms. The suggested method is revolutionary as it tries to consider the speaking skill as a fertile resource for the development of writing in general and argumentative writing in particular.

Keywords – Argumentative, EFL/ESL, Oral, Paragraph, Process, Speaking, Writing.

I. INTRODUCTION

Some years of language teaching practice bucked up with annual participations as a Bac exam jury member have led to draw a number of conclusions regarding the shackles faced by English as foreign or second language learners in general and candidates in particular when it comes to deal with writing tasks. The poverty of written productions submitted by the candidates should constitute an incentive for urgent action research meant to help teachers work out this heartbreaking problem as it represents a serious stumbling block to the success of many learners. Papa Mansour Diop has made the same remark with reference to learners' lack of tools to face properly writing tasks. According to him, the problem is national and the educative system actors in general are well aware of the alarming ongoing trend. He writes:

Au Sénégal, le débat sur la qualité des productions écrites des apprenants est une question de haute portée didactique et l'on impute les performances lacunaires des élèves à l'école tantôt aux conceptualisations contradictoires des spécialistes, tantôt aux stratégies didactiques inefficaces des enseignants ou au faible engagement psychocognitif des apprenants. (Diop, 2013: 145).

For a better approach to the issue one needs to look into the category of writing tasks submitted to students during classroom activities and exams. The general conclusion is that topics are more often than not argumentative. This article is a response to the requirements of the principles of Communicative Language Teaching which preaches the consideration of learner needs depending on the context. (Savignon, 2002: 7) The main purpose is to question a number of views that negatively contaminate the teaching and learning of the writing process before suggesting

practical solutions in order to pull learners out of this embarrassing situation. The principle, in this paper, consists in integrating oral argumentation patterns as a springboard to the development of argumentative writing competences.

II. A SYNOPTIC SAMPLING OF WRITING TOPICS FROM SENEGALESE BAC EXAM PAPERS OVER THE LAST DECADE

Topic 1: Do you agree with those who say that terrorists are just bandits and drug traffickers? Give your reasons. (2013)

Topic 2: Complete this discussion between Rama and Ousmane about terrorism. (2013) Rama: I don't agree with you. I think-----

Topic 3: Many people think that eating in restaurants, in fast foods or at street vendors' is a good way of saving money. Do you share their opinion? Why or why not? (2010)

Topic 4: What would you suggest to make the United Nations stronger than it is today? Develop your ideas by focusing on the weaknesses of this organization. (2007)

Topic 5: Letter writing: Write a letter to RTS Manager to ask for better programs for your people. (2008)

Topic 6: Some people think that television is the best means of communication. What is your point of view? (2008)

Topic 7: After her success in her Bac Exam, your sister wants to continue her studies abroad, but your father does not accept. You try to convince your father to change his mind. Write down your conversation. (2013)

Topic 8: "Educating a boy is helping one person but educating a girl is teaching a society." Explain this assertion. (2013)

Topic 9: Smoking is a big concern (=worry) in the world. Why? What are its consequences? What is to be done? (2009)

Topic 10: Write a letter to the Minister of Health and Medical Prevention to complain about the damage caused by smoking in your country. (2007)

Topic 12: Imagine a dialogue between two people: a defender and an opponent of smoking. (2007)

Topic 13: Do you think your country has a good health policy? Give the reasons for your opinions. (2006)

Topic 14: Do you think emigration is a solution to unemployment? Give examples to support your point of view.

Topic 15: Write an article in a newspaper about the causes and the consequences of air pollution. Propose some solutions.

III. NEGATIVE AND PESSIMISTIC CONCEPTIONS OF WRITING

The literature produced on the field of writing-skills development, especially in ESL/EFL contexts, is generally negative as it tends to convey an exaggerated view of the complexity of the task for teachers and learners. The attitude of teachers, with reference to the development of writing during classroom activities, can be regarded as a projection of this negative conception of writing which is often viewed as laborious, too demanding and challenging for learners. A glance at this literature will, undoubtedly, prove this pessimistic conception of writing that does not help learners feel free to indulge with assurance and confidence in writing activities. In his article "Integrating Reading and writing for Effective Language Teaching" Abu Rass delineates right, in his first lines, a perception of writing that is likely to demoralize language learners:

Writing is a difficult skill for native speakers and nonnative speakers alike, because writers must balance multiple issues such as content, organization, purpose, audience, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics such as capitalization. Writing is especially difficult for nonnative speakers because they are expected to create written products that demonstrate mastery of all the above elements in a new language. (1)

Rass' assertion is, basically, an overstatement as the conditions it poses might appear altogether, to be a Herculean challenge to meet for the language teacher or learner. His position takes the form of a very pessimistic theoretical formulation of the nature of the writing activity. The dramatization of the writing process remains a serious constrain, especially for second language learners who are likely to perceive the activity as completely out of their reach. Teachers and learners might lose confidence and motivation at their encounter with such statements. Carmen Manuel Cuenca and Rodrigo Fernández Carmona (2012: 45) have also been packed up in this virtually collective perception of writing. In their article, they tackle different types of writing. Still, their conception of the task, in general, remains the same as Rass'. Both hold the belief that writing is the hardest skill for student to develop as it requires a variety of challenging and rigorous behaviors.

This perception of writing, though relevant in many ways, does not participate in softening the writing task to language learners and teachers who are rather stressed and confused whenever they have to deal with it. I strongly believe in the possibility and the necessity to debunk this general mystification of writing by integrating the oral argumentative structure in the written argumentative process. The exposition of the 'kinship' between oral and written argumentation patterns has been momentous in dealing with argumentative writing with learners.

IV. DEBUNKING THE WRITING PROCESS: KINSHIP BETWEEN ORAL AND WRITTEN ARGUMENTATION PROCESSES

Most EFL/ESL researchers and teachers tend to discard the oral communication process when tackling writing-skill development with learners. The literature produced in the domain is often a promotion of reading as the fertile land that encloses the germs of writing and from which writing skills are supposed to spring up. Widdowson (1990), one of the giant theoreticians of CLT is a good exemplification of this tendency. His theoretical formulations rest on a postulation grounded upon the intertwining between reading and writing and the interdependence of the two skills. Mathiam Thiam steps the same perspective as Widdowson. For him, "the writing process starts with reading. It consists in exposing the learners to the mechanics of good writing by exploring discourse structure through organizational patterns or formats which can help the reader/writer perceive typical clause relations (...)." (Thiam, 2011: 82).

The above mentioned positions are relevant as they can serve as springboards to the development of writing skills. However, reading should not be taken as the sole way out to the development of writing. My belief is that the oral argumentation process can be of momentous help in teaching argumentative writing, especially, when it comes to deal with argumentative paragraph structuring. Let us remind that a paragraph is conventionally composed of three main parts. The first part is the topic sentence which constitutes the general idea, the leading idea of the paragraph. The topic sentence can be viewed as a sort of position-taking with reference to a theme. The second part of a paragraph consists of arguments supporting the taken position. The last part is the concluding sentence that can take the form of a summary of the illustrated taken position or a transitional sentence towards another position.

My postulation is that the written argumentative paragraph structure is nothing but an inspiration from true-life oral argumentation. Teachers should raise learners' awareness of their daily oral paragraphing. Learners should know that whenever they take a position in their interactions with their friends, schoolmates, parents, teachers, at home, on the street, in the school yard, during break times, at the playfield, with respect to a topic, they are indulging in a paragraph building process. It is because when they put forward a position/an idea (topic sentence) they might be required to convince their peers, parents, friends through illustrative arguments and examples. After giving the arguments that led to the position-taking, they may conclude with a pretentious statement as a sign of victory in an argumentative challenge they were invited. They may, also, conclude by recognizing the limits of the idea they had been illustrating. The written argumentative paragraph follows the same perspective, and sensitizing learners about that kinship between the oral argumentation they always go through and the written argumentation structure is a good means to debunk the task and earn learner courage and motivation.

V. HOW TO PROCEED

After exposing the structure of oral argumentation and its kinship with the written argumentative paragraph the teacher can lead learners to examples of real-life argumentation procedures which I call 'oral paragraph'.

A. THE ORAL PARAGRAPH: HOW IT WORKS

Step 1: Propose a general topic to students as a communication context for the oral argumentation activity and make sure the learners feel at ease with the topic regarding its semantic and lexical attributes.

Step 2: Ask learners to take any position they like about the given topic (context).

Step 3: Whenever a student takes a position regarding the proposed communication context, invite the classmates to ask him/her a question like "why do you say that?" "Can you give arguments to support your idea?" "What motivates your position?" "What do you mean by that?" "I do not grasp your point very well. Can you tell us/me more?" The teacher can even recommend classmates to give, as in real oral communication, more aggressive, radical and provocative responses as a way to incite the position-taker to give convincing arguments. Those provocative reactions, on the part of the classmates, can take the form of statements like: "I think what you are saying is totally false! "That's nonsense! How can you prove it?" "That's a fake and superfluous idea!" etc.

Step 4: Ask the position-taker to answer his classmates' questions/attacks by giving arguments. Here, the teacher can associate the whole class in the argumentation process to help the position-taker with illustrative details and examples.

Step 5: As a last step, the teacher can ask the position-taker and the classmates, as a whole, to give his/her/their last word at the end of the argumentative perspective they have gone through. The last word can be a satisfactory assessment/summary regarding the illustrated leading idea. It can also serve as recognition of the limits of the formulated and illustrated position.

NB: The teacher can repeat this activity over and over to ensure a better command of argumentative process structure on the part of the learners.

B. FROM THE ORAL TO THE WRITTEN ARGUMENTATIVE PARAGRAPH

This phase is the ultimate aim of the previous activity. The success of the first phase will presage a positive achievement of the present stage. Here, the challenge to meet is less demanding as it simply consists in writing out the spoken text, i.e. the oral argumentative paragraphs produced in the previous activity. Furthermore, the steps to take are, virtually, everywhere the same. In a Senegalese school context, the chalk board can, first and foremost, serve as room for the transcription of the oral argumentative paragraph.

Step 1: The teacher can divide the chalkboard into several parts (this will depend on the length and width of

the board). Each part of the chalkboard is supposed to accommodate a paragraph related to the suggested writing topic.

Step 2: The teacher can ask the learners to repeat the positions (topic sentences) they took during the oral paragraphing phase and then write down each one in a specific divide of the chalkboard.

Step 3: Each taken position should be developed into a full written argumentative paragraph. The process consists in remembering or finding out arguments that have served as illustrative elements in the oral activity. The teacher's role will be twofold. S/he will, mainly, play the role of a journalist or investigator towards the learners. Secondly, s/he will serve as transcriber or secretary of the learners' answers on the chalkboard. The teacher will involve the whole class in the interaction. The activity is, therefore, a written collective investigation and search for supportive arguments and last impressions to each leading idea (topic sentence).

VI. FROM TEACHER-DEPENDENCE TO LEARNER AUTONOMY: TYPES OF CONSOLIDATION PARAGRAPH BUILDING ACTIVITIES

As the production of written argumentative paragraphs is the ultimate goal of the lesson, the teacher should take the necessary time to lead students through the different stages that are essential to the building of learner autonomy. According to Jerrold Frank, "good teaching is timeless" (2012: 28). Besides, a successful teaching of writing in ESL/EFL contexts will require lots of patience and assistance on the part of teacher. Learners need time-consuming guidance through a relatively long process of learner autonomy building. We believe that the achievement of learner writing autonomy does not occur in short spans of time, especially in ESL/EFL environments.

The postulation I always put forward to achieve this goal is based upon the metaphor of the learner as someone living a prison-like condition marked by obscurity and ignorance of realities beyond the walls. A brutal bridging of the gap that separates the two conditions can be a cause of confusion and disorientation as the two worlds are totally different and their marriage should not be a forced one. The learner is then comparable to that prisoner who is about to be released after a long period of detention. The prisoner needs assistance and guidance all the way from prison to society. The support of the penitentiary officials, the social workers, and the family will be necessary to endow the prisoner with social reinsertion competences. This process-oriented approach aims to lay the grounds of a successful social reinsertion of the prisoner who should be able to remain in line with social expectations and live as a normal individual agent. The following activities comply with a certain logic that is meant to help learners get gradually their independence from the teacher.

Activity 1: Identification of paragraph logic and structure: This activity consists in proposing jumbled sequences of a paragraph. The students will be required to

reorder the different sequences of the paragraph by identifying the Topic Sentence, the Supportive Arguments and the Concluding Sentence. Students will use their knowledge of oral and written paragraph structure to indulge successfully in the task.

Activity 2: Producing appropriate Topic Sentences and Concluding ideas. Here, the teacher puts at the disposal of the learners some supportive arguments to a missing Topic Sentence. The students' task will consist in producing appropriate Topic Sentences based upon the given arguments. The teacher can direct learners to the production of specific types of Concluding Sentences such as giving a brief summary of the argumentative process or showing/recognizing the limits of the illustrated idea (traditional sentence).

Activity 3: Paragraph completion: Here, the teacher only provides Topic Sentences and asks the learners to complete the paragraph by supplying illustrative arguments and concluding sentences.

Activity 4: The skeleton paragraph: The teacher will simply propose the skeleton, i.e. the basic framework of the paragraph constituting elements. Learners will use the suggested ideas to develop a full paragraph.

Activity 5: Full paragraph building: It is time for the learners to build paragraphs on their own as they have acquired the necessary skills to be autonomous writers. The teacher can provide standard topics (like Bac Exam topics format), raising different positions. Students will build paragraphs on the basis of each position raised by the topic. For instance, a topic dealing with causes, consequences and solutions will require the production of a three-paragraph essay.

VII. CONCLUSION

The approach is advantageous in many ways. Its implementation has always been helpful to learners, and this success is the founding reason of this paper which is nothing but a search for ways to better address the teaching and learning of argumentative writing in EFL/ESL contexts. The first positive dimension of the approach is that learner motivation is gained through the bridging of the gap between the oral and the written productions. Motivation is a crucial aspect in Communicative Language Teaching including the teaching of writing. That is what Savignon means when he pens: "The most successful teaching programs are those that take into account the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of language learning. They seek to involve learners psychologically as well as intellectually." (2002: 5) There is no denying that writing is a fearsome and uncomfortable task to many learners who perceive it as too challenging and difficult. This negative impression is the logical outcome of some negative conceptions that present writing as "the hardest skill for our students to develop." (Cuena and Carmona, 47) Learners need to be motivated in order to gain psychological and intellectual courage. Many theoreticians hold the belief that a successful learning enterprise will always emerge from a psychological acceptance and a certain interest (motivation) on the part

of the learning agent (the student). Birane Faye goes with the stream when he argues:

...en apprentissage, l'intérêt et la motivation constituent des facteurs déterminants pour l'engagement dans les activités, la réalisation de performances, la progression régulière, l'atteinte des objectifs d'apprentissage et des fins assignées à l'éducation et à la formation et, au bout du compte, la réussite. (Faye, 2015: 21)

The demystification of the writing task, through the recognition of the kinship between daily real-life oral communication and written production, acts as an effective psychological impulse and helps increase learner motivation and confidence. The weight of the task is dramatically cut down in the mind of the learners as writing turns into an ordinary and exciting activity that is within the reach of each and every student who is endowed with the natural ability to produce oral argumentation, i.e. to formulate and defend opinions.

On top of the psychological advantage, there are practical positive aspects intrinsic to the approach. Its implementation helps students work out the challenge related to the required length of the written product. In Senegalese Bac exam topics, the candidates are generally required to produce pieces of writing of a fixed length. Unfortunately, the general remark made by ESL/EFL examiners is the quantitative poverty of written productions. Candidates tend to submit too short written productions which end up creating a negative impression on the part of the examiner. Worse still, some candidates simply set aside the writing part. Sensitizing about the functioning proximities between oral and written argumentative patterns is a successful remedial means to solve this problem faced by students, in general, and candidates, in particular. What I have excitedly noticed, after carrying out this method, is learners' automatic change in behavior which is perceived throughout the important increase in quantity production. Finally, I have come to the conclusion that the problem of candidates failing to meet the required length is a product of their ignorance or misunderstanding of argumentative procedure and functioning. The approach helps students become fluent and prolific writers. That's why I suggest teachers to ask their students to produce a piece of writing about a given topic before implementing this approach. This pre-approach written production will be an efficient evaluation tool as it can be compared to the post-approach production with reference to the length and the process. Last but not least, learners build knowledge about the functioning of argumentation in general which helps them indulge successfully in argumentative writing exercises such as giving opinions, defending viewpoints in contradictory dialogs and through letters, etc.

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