BUILDING UP WRITING CONFIDENCE

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1   INTRODUCTION

This writing project came from both observing student's frustration and investigating the factors that may contribute and influence student's written production when trying to express their own thoughts in a second language. Based on our own classroom experiences and supported by studies on the writing process we have decided to come up with some questions that would allow us to understand students' perception on certain issues related to writing and through their answers start to outline/design a writing project that would help students deconstruct, organize and reconstruct their ideas in order to put them onto paper.

By observing a group of 14 intermediate students at Yázigi 13 de Julho and their resistance to absorb and benefit from the material they were being exposed to, and listening to their most common complaints we have decided to trace back their writing history and realized that had they been properly exposed to writing techniques they would have been more receptive and better prepared to write more confidently in English.

Our first decision making was related to diagnosing and outlining the group's profile. In order to indulge into that, some questions were prepared as an attempt to better understand their perceptions, expectations and difficulties concerning writing both in their mother tongue, Portuguese, and in the second language, English. Students were asked to answer a questionnaire whose primary aim was to understand to what extent their writing assumptions in L1 composing had an influence in their writing process in L2. As well as verifying whether they were aware of the mental processes they undergo whenever writing.

After reading their replies we realized that the most common difficulty students seemed to share was regarding their ideas organization, lack of vocabulary and inappropriate language structure. As a result the project's tasks were designed aiming at meeting students' needs. Based on the assumption that organizing their ideas, accounted

for students' prime concern. We have adopted the Labovian model in order to pursue their goal on sequencing, and orient their texts chronogically.

According to Archibald (1994) the term 'writing' refers both to an act and the result of that act. This immediately sets up two possible perspectives on acquiring writing: learning the process of composing and learning the form and organization of the product. Archibald (1994) goes on saying that there is an assumption that instruction in writing does have an effect and that the knowledge required of a writer is learnable and the skills trainable.

Teachers' main concern should lie on how to approach students' needs and help them overcome their individual difficulties by developing strategies and building up confidence while guiding them into pursuing new horizons in order to increase their chances to succeed. We must bear in mind that students' needs depend on the level they are at. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers take into account that their students need to be integrated/engaged into the writing process so that they'll be able to produce and evaluate their own drafts as many times as possible.

By being aware of the concepts and the composition steps that underlie the writing process students engage in "a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and continuously developing text" (BEREITER & SCARDAMALIA, 1987, p.12) thus teachers help students create/develop an accurate sense of responsibility towards the proper functionality of their writing. Yázigi books offer an array of opportunities for students to express themselves through writing. It is worthwhile noting, however, that students often complain that they feel powerless when it comes to writing in English as they do not have enough aptitude to do so in their own language.

As Brown (1994) stated "writing is indeed a thinking process" not only it involves students' thinking but also leads teachers into reflecting upon their practice and guide students into mastering the writing process. Aiming at helping students reach writing confidence we have agreed on focusing primarily on the narrative gender by using Labov's model (1972) which is based on the recognition of six main narrative components: Abstract; orientation; complicating action; evaluation; resolution and coda. Then move on to other writing styles suitable to their levels.

2   FINDING OR MAPPING OUT THEIR OWN PATH?

Over the past three decades, several studies on the mental processes that underlie the production of a written task has helped us not only understand the processes our students undergo, when writing, but also provide us with the theoretical basis that will support and orient our decisions.

As Richards &Lockhart (1999) assert our classrooms provide us with daily events that we could benefit from and develop a deeper understanding of teaching. They go on saying that those events can serve as the basis for critical reflection and lead us into developing strategies for intervention and promoting change in order to meet our students' needs.

Our teaching routine drives us onto coping with diverse groups, on a regular basis, which implies dealing with different learning styles, assumptions and attitudes towards writing in L2. This scenery poses challenges teachers must handle, such as students' learning pace, purposes, motivation, feelings towards the language, as well as their needs. The issue that emerges from that scenery is how to approach teaching, focusing on addressing, if not all, a wide range of variables that can influence their writing process?

Nunan (1999) argues that one of the most controversial aspects of teaching writing skills lies in the tension between process and product approaches. The first one focuses on the final product. The second one, on the other hand, values the steps involved in drafting and redrafting one's written production. Our project, however will seek a balance between those approaches in order to build up students' confidence.

The project was divided into four distinct phases: diagnostic; theoretical; practical and accountability. Although they are different in terms of focus and outcomes, they are interconnected and serve to and pursue the same purpose: build up students' writing confidence.

By having a better understanding of the group's perceptions, towards writing, would enable us to succeed in our decision making. Our first action was to diagnose and in order to accomplish that we applied a questionnaire and based on their responses we would orchestrate the following phases.

The second phase consisted of providing them with theoretical support in order to organize their ideas. Therefore, the Labovian model (1972) was chosen and applied with them and its primary goal was to provide guidance concerning elements' organization and events narration. Along with other tasks specially designed to provide them practice, at first, in recognizing the elements then move on to practice by writing an anecdote using that mode of structure.

The Practical phase is the longest one and also the one that accounts for more different features, focuses and purposes. Due to its own nature, it would provide students with the opportunity to talk about their product with others reflect upon suitable changes and rewrite their texts. This was their momentum with themselves and their piece of work.

Since there was no moment within the project where students would quiet, keeping their doubts and anxiety for themselves. Every single step taken, tasks applied, assignment given they would have the chance to express their feelings towards both the task and their own improvement, so that would promote possible changes and feel if they were ready to climb up towards finding their own path. That's what the accountability phase is all about.

Bearing in mind that there is still a lot to be done and learnt throughout this project (since it is still being carried out), students are currently embracing the argumentative paragraph structure and we will certainly need learn and experience different strategies and approaches. We must not lose track of our goals and responsibilities inherent to the process itself and students' success.

3 MEETING TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' RESPONSIBILITIES

As Celce-Murcia (2001) states human communication serves to different purposes at the personal and social levels. Our daily life offers an array of contexts in which we have to not only express ideas, beliefs, and emotions, but also convey information. Needless to point out, that this range of information must be provided in a clear suitable manner, so that the understanding of the intended idea will be successful.

Due to their own nature, social interactions consist of spoken texts with a speaker and listener exchanging roles, taking turns, and reacting to what is being said what at times, inevitably, allows misunderstandings to take place. On the other hand, the fact that both sides involved in a given communicative context can interact provides the means to doubt clarification whenever communication of ideas fails.

From both linguistic and sociocultural perspectives we engage in a constant negotiation of meaning regardless the communication circumstances. Our social interactions provide us with the means to negotiate meaning more interactively due to its own dynamics, and disguise any sort of misunderstanding at once. Writing, on the other hand, presupposes a distance between the one who is conveying information, the writer, and the other one who is expected to fully comprehend the message conveyed-the reader. This immediately shapes and leads to two different roles as well as responsibilities towards the written communication.

Archibald (1994) states that there is an assumption that instruction in writing does have an effect and that the knowledge required of a writer is learnable and the skills trainable. Myles (2006) reinforces that idea and claims that the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill, and in order to acquire such competence, one must practice and learn it through experience. Based on that assumption, teachers' prime responsibility lies in delving into the theoretical contributions on the writing process in order to fully comprehend what is implied in writing a text, and also learn the mental processes students undergo whenever composing in English.

By understanding the implications of the writing process teachers' next move should be towards investigating the factors that may contribute to students' anxiety, and at times, resistance when they have to express their own ideas through a written text. And then, learn their students' perceptions and difficulties regarding their own written production.

As teachers, our main concern should lie on how to approach students' needs and help them overcome their individual difficulties by developing strategies and building up confidence while guiding them into pursuing new horizons in order to increase their chances to succeed.

Celce-Murcia (2001) summarizes really well teachers' responsibility within the writing process when she asserts that "It is the responsibility of the writing teacher to

help novice writers develop into experienced writers." She goes on saying that teaching writing does not consist of a teacher teaching a person how to write but rather, it is about providing "the best context and the most suitable conditions to encourage a person to write." Thus our main responsibility as teachers goes beyond highlighting students' errors or misguided thoughts. It is in our hands to diminish the void that there is between students' writing awareness and their written production.

According to Archibald (1994) the term 'writing' refers both to an act and the result of that act. This immediately sets up two possible perspectives on acquiring writing: learning the process of composing and learning the form and organization of the product. In other words, the author is pointing out to some central core issues regarding students' written production: bridging the gap that there is between the producer (writer) and the receiver (reader) and promoting the connection between the meaning conveyed and the readers' full and effective comprehension.

Celce-Murcia (idem) goes further and states that "an experienced writer has the responsibility to compose a written text that will be understood by an intended reader who is distant in time and place from the writing process, but who nevertheless will be able to comprehend the text." In order to meet such a requirement a skilled writer must engage into learning what the writing process is all about as well as be aware of which strategies he has developed so far and which ones are yet to be either developed or improved.

By being aware of the concepts and the composition steps that underlie the writing process students engage in "a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and continuously developing text" (BEREITER & SCARDAMALIA, 1987, p.12) thus teachers help students create/develop an accurate sense of responsibility towards the proper functionality of their writing.

When both teachers and students are aware of their responsibilities towards the writing process it is much easier for them to make decisions and outline the set of actions that will be necessary to interlineate the writing process. Likewise they both benefit from the same process: teachers will manage to help their students develop strategies and improve their writing skills and students will get to build up their confidence and write well organized and structured texts.

3   APPROACHING STUDENTS' ERRORS

Error correction still remains a dilemma that both teachers and learners have to cope with in language classrooms. A great deal of institutions applies error correction as a punishment tool. My own experience as a student embodies that old belief. Most of the time, the day before our tasks were supposed to be given back to us, we used to undergo a feeling of anxiety as to see how much of the red ink would be there, how much of thought/ideas flagellation would come out from our teachers' corrections. At times it was a real massacre. In addition, we were given no explanation on what criteria were applied, or on our very own improvement.

As Richards & Lockhart (1999) observe learners and teachers often have different preferences when it comes to error correction. However, teachers are the ones who should decide on which errors to be corrected; the most suitable moment to do so, and which techniques/approaches should be used in order to address students' errors.

Myles (2002) observes that students' texts may contain varying degrees of grammatical and rhetorical errors. However, the way we perceive error whether from behaviorist and mentalist perspectives -focusing on the product itself- or conversely from a more constructivist perspective, targeting the process itself, will influence and determine our choices regarding both the moment and the suitable approach for error correction.

There are a number of issues involved regarding the process or moment of error correction. For instance, the way teachers perceive and treat errors throughout their learners' writing experience may have a huge impact on their motivation, confidence and willingness to take risks, as well as, affect students' response to what is being or is yet to be taught. Bearing that in mind, both teachers and students/writers should treat error as an opportunity for them to enrich writing skills and reflect upon their own product continuously.

Aiming at providing guidance and improve students' writing performance we have decided upon correction strategies ranging from peer revision, students' self-monitoring their texts, errors underlined by the teacher, symbols for correction, to students drafting, editing and reediting their texts. Furthermore, such an approach would

allow us to promote interaction and mainly lead students to reckon with their difficulties throughout their writing process and pursue their capital goal: organizing their ideas and put them onto paper.

In order to carry out this project we have adopted some correction procedures which were deeply connected to the main goal of the writing phase learners were undergoing. The first writing phase students went through was based on the recognition of the six elements of Labov's model. It was taken as a reference so that students would start organizing their own ideas and putting them onto paper. Therefore, there was no room for grammar, punctuation or spelling correction at this moment.

As soon as they were ready to move on to the next moment of the phase they were provided with opportunities to write their own texts and their classmates would be the ones to proofread them in order to identify the six narrative elements Labov (1972) proposes: Abstract; Orientation; Complicating action; Evaluation; Resolution and Coda. As well as suggesting suitable changes.

At this point, students would talk their problems over, it is more of a talking phase where students would share their knowledge and/or doubts with others and realize if they were on the right track. The teacher reads their texts and points out what needs to be revised so that students can think about their drafts and promote the appropriate changes.

Based on the assumption that writing error correction should not be treated or faced solely as students' inability or failure to produce language correctly rather, it should lie in their ability to learn and improve from their own errors. Therefore, teachers should be very careful about the timing to address errors and most importantly, how they are supposed to provide feedback on learners' errors so that they will not cause any sort of embarrassment or feeling of frustration.

Rather than simply pointing out students' errors teachers should engage into raising students' awareness on how much they have learnt and improved so far. As much as possible, teachers should stress how important the act of revisiting and editing their own drafts account for building up the profile of a successful writer.

Students' previous texts were entirely disorganized and seemed as though they were solely a number of sentences totally disconnected from one another with no trace of cohesion and coherence. By using the Labovian model they were able not only to

produce well structured texts but also orient their ideas taking into account the six narratives elements.

5 FINAL COMMENTS: PARTIAL CONCLUSIONS

Due to its dynamic nature writing is a process that consists of a continuous process which results in well structured and organized ideas on paper. A process means that you start at the beginning (organizing your ideas) and go through several steps in a specific order (text form/structure).

Writing in a second language may not be a comfortable position for most second language learners. The way students perceive their writing abilities in their own language will play a very important role regarding their attitude and beliefs in writing in a foreign language. Leading them into deconstructing their own assumptions and views towards writing and assuming a totally different attitude towards writing in English enabled them to reconstruct a whole new writing profile.

Raising students' awareness concerning their own writing abilities was one of the most difficult tasks indulged throughout this entire project. Our preliminary assessment of BUILDING UP WRITING CONFIDENCE so far is that it has had a positive impact on students' ability to pay attention to the content and organization of their writing; also that talking to their classmates and sharing their ideas or doubts was crucial to lower their anxiety negative load of stress they undergo when writing in a second language; that using the Labovian model has greatly contributed to the organization of their ideas as well as provided improvement of their writing quality even in Portuguese.

We realize of course, that there is still a lot be learnt and done in terms of writing improvement. We are convinced though, that there is no telling how far students/writers can go when they manage to organize their ideas and gradually embrace new ways to experience writing and build up their own confidence as successful writers.

Even though, at first, none of the students who have been taking part in this project have shown any confidence to write in English, their will to learn, to apply new

techniques and develop strategies as well as reflecting upon their own writing process allowed us to carry out this project successfully.

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NOTES

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