



NōS

Oposicións

TOPIC 6

Written communication. Kinds of written texts. Structure and formal elements. Norms ruling written texts. Routines and formulae.

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Inglés
Secundaria

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1. INTRODUCTION

(See introduction to TOPIC 5 for differences between speech and writing)

Societies use language, both in its written and oral form, not only to transmit knowledge, but also to communicate and to establish social relationships.

Therefore, the concept of COMMUNICATION was initially understood by Canale and Swain as the exchange and negotiation of meanings between individuals through a common system of symbols. Nowadays, definitions go further and define communication as the situation in which one mind is influenced by another mind by acting upon its environment.

Anyway, far from such formal definitions, it seems obvious that COMMUNICATION is a form of social interaction which involves a high degree of unpredictability and creativity.

As a form of social interaction, communication can be understood as oral or written. The following lines will focus the attention on the written mode; on the elements strategies and rules governing this form, as well as on the way this communicative mode is understood in the teaching-learning processes of languages.

2. WRITTEN COMMUNICATION: MAIN FEATURES

As opposed to the oral, written communication has always been regarded as a quite difficult task. The problem seems to be rooted in psychological, linguistic and cognitive reasons.

From the psychological point of view, we are required to write on our own, since the interlocutor isn't present. Therefore, we don't have the interaction or feedback usually provided by the addressee in oral communication; and, on the other hand, this absence of the addressee leads us to be extremely explicit and clear in our writings.

From the linguistic perspective, we should use certain linguistic elements to ensure the correct interpretation of our message and the continuity of the process of communication.

Unlike oral skills, written communication requires a process of instruction to master not only the written forms but also certain structures that help us organise our ideas.

However, we shouldn't conclude that all the advantages are on the side of speech, since the written mode has certain devices that let us rewrite and revise our work, and take as much time as necessary to understand it and come to a conclusion.

In addition, there are other features that define this mode more in detail.

2.1. Linguistic perspective

Any writing system is expected to have the following basic requirements:

- A) To provide a codified expression for the majority of elements in the language, i.e., each idea must have a written representation, since written communication basically relies on the language itself.
- B) To provide the means of creating expressions for elements that aren't codified yet [neologisms, mistakes, borrowings, etc]

This implies that a language must have a spelling system which can be adapted to any new situation and, at the same time, a fixed system which is recognised by the majority of speakers and writers of a specific language.

2.2. Syntactic perspective

From the syntactic perspective, we can say written language is characterised by:

- A) A wide range of meta-lingual markers and connectors which indicate the relationships existing between clauses [BESIDES, MOREOVER, IN SPITE OF, etc].
- B) New topic-comment structures are also required to compensate the lack of feedback, provided by the listener in the oral form. [I WOULD ALSO LIKE TO ... // WITH REFERENCE TO ... // IN CONCLUSION ... // etc].
- C) Heavily pre-modified noun phrases, which hardly occurs in the spoken mode because the speaker doesn't have much time to think in advance. The tendency is to use verbs that are post-modified by one complement or other elements with just one or two modifiers.

- D) The order of elements tends to be quite fixed [S+V+O].
- E) Frequent use of passive constructions, so that information can be focused on the topic being discussed.
- F) Wide range of subordinated clauses which help the writer clarify and organise his thoughts.
- G) Emphasis is marked by means of different devices [italics, cleft-sentences, etc].

2.3. Lexical perspective

Accuracy in the use of vocabulary. - the writer will try to use a wide range of lexical items/vocabulary to avoid redundancy, while keeping the idea clear.

Lexical Density: High use of nominalised forms. -display of a high rate of lexical words -as compared to the grammatical ones-, because both the writer and the reader have time enough to think about the information introduced in the text. On the contrary, oral texts seem to have a lower proportion of lexical items because the elements are presented only once and, therefore, the hearer has to give some time to process the information.

- * The mechanisms of sex determination vary in different organisms [high lexical density]
- * Different creatures have their sex decided in different ways [low lexical density]

The meaning of both sentences is basically the same. It's the style, the vocabulary and the lexical density that make each of them appropriate for a specific type of text and context.

2.4. Other features

Apart from purely linguistic features, written texts are also characterised by the use of certain graphological resources, as well as rhetoric devices.

As for the Graphological resources, we can use different orthographic and punctuation markers that help both the writer and reader organise the text, highlight important information, thus making the message clearer. Likewise, we are expected to adapt the text format to the function pursued [email, report, etc.].

Within graphological resources, special attention should be given to paragraph organisation, stating the main idea at the beginning and filling the paragraphs with additional ideas that are relevant for the main thesis.

With regards to rhetorical resources, texts are expected to convey coherence and cohesion, which is achieved by means of logical relationships within the text, as well as by certain devices such as reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction or lexical items. (TOPIC 29)

3. TYPES OF WRITTEN TEXTS. RULES & ROUTINES

Texts are usually classified following functional criteria into: narrative, descriptive, argumentative, explicative and procedural (sometimes also called scientific and didactic) (Following Beaugrande and Dressler)

3.1. Narrative texts (topic 32)

Narrative texts are considered the most universal genre because all cultures have storytelling traditions. In narrative discourses, the author aims at telling a story, verbally expressing events which have taken place at a particular time, in a particular setting and under particular circumstances. So any narrative text necessarily requires a narrator, time and place orientation and a reference to the characters and their roles.

Once the story is set up, an objective is established, and the whole story progressively develops until such aim is achieved. So, in this type of writing, temporal clauses play a very important role. Most narrative texts finish with a morale which summarises the story.

3.2. Descriptive texts (topic 33)

Descriptive texts try to give a mental image of an object, scene, person or emotion, presenting information linearly, i.e., there is neither central nor secondary information.

The most common elements that we may find in descriptive texts are: copula sentences, presentative elements [there is/are], relative clauses, prepositional and adverbial phrases, descriptive adjectives [of shape, colour, size...], connectors and figures of speech [mainly simile, metaphor and personification].

Depending on the perspective chosen by the writer, we may find different types of descriptions: Psychological Perspective [objective & subjective description], Functional [rhythmic, Connotative, Symbolic, etc.], Object being described [Portrait, Topography, etc.]

- A) Objective description. - It's a factual and impersonal description which tries to give the reader a clear vision of the object described.
- B) Subjective description. - This type of description includes the writer's feelings and reactions towards what he's describing.

To conclude, we should say that descriptive texts frequently lack the illocutionary force of showing what a thing is like, they just inform or debate. This fact explains why descriptions are never the core element of a text; they always play a secondary role.

3.3. Argumentative texts (topic 34)

Argumentation aims at persuading or convincing the audience, so it can't be an indefinite number of disorderly arguments; it requires previous organisation to achieve all its objectives.

The language choice of argumentative texts is closely dependant on the mood/style transmitted: neutral, formal, informal, technical, etc.

According to the Classical tradition, argumentative texts are made up of three main elements [THESIS-ARGUMENTS-CONCLUSION], and depending on the way they're organised we may find different structures: climatic, denotative, connotative, dialectical, etc.

3.4.Explicative/procedural texts (topic 35)

Depending on the illocutionary force they possess, procedural texts may explain, define, clarify, etc.

Expository texts are usually organised into paragraphs, a unit of organisation of written language which help the reader/listener recognise the main ideas contained in a text. Regarding their inner organisation, different parts are identified:

- A) Introduction.- It is a paragraph which introduces the topic to be developed, as well as the spatial or temporal setting, bibliography, objectives of the text, etc.
- B) Development.- The topic is developed, as mentioned above, in different paragraphs, which are linked with conjunctives and may deal with the same topic or introduce new subtopics related to the main subject.
- C) Conclusion.- This part is very useful to summarise the information dealt with in the text and also to introduce a conclusion derived from the previous writing.

Though this is the general structure that identifies descriptive texts, certain variations are introduced, depending on the type of descriptive text we are dealing with: definition, classification, example, comparison, process analysis, etc.

4. ROUTINES AND FORMULAE

When analysing language from the pragmatic point of view, D. HYMES proposes that “a vast proportion of verbal behaviour consists of recurrent patterns” and these utterances “acquire conventional significance for an individual, group or a whole culture”. We are here analysing only written language, but acquiring a good communicative competence requires a good command of these routines and formulae, closely related to the sociocultural and pragmatic competences as well.

Routines, formulae or formulaic language are segments of language made up of several morphemes or words which are learned together and are used as if they were a single item, without paying attention to its component parts, which function as a whole. Routines are very idiomatic and learners of a foreign language usually find them difficult to memorise for this reason. Routines used in conversation are called conversational routines: How are you doing? Nice to meet you, excuse me... Routines used to show politeness are sometimes called politeness formulae: Thank you very much, we regret to tell you...

In written texts, one of the most common and fixed formulae are those used in letters:

- Salutations: Dear Sir or Madam, Dear Sirs, Dear Mr Smith, My dearest Emily, etc.
- Closing salutations: Yours faithfully, Yours sincerely, Yours truly, Best regards, Best wishes, Kisses, XXX, etc.)
- Concluding a letter: Looking forward to hearing from you
- Making a request: I wonder if you could, I would appreciate, etc.
Replying to an enquire: Thank you for your enquire, We are pleased to have your enquire about, In reply to your enquiry...
- Apologising: We were sorry to receive your complaint about, Please accept our apologies for, etc.
- Beginning a cover letter: With reference to your advertisement in, I'm writing in reply to, I would like to be considered for the post, etc.
- Concluding a cover letter: Please do not hesitate to contact me, I would be available for an interview, etc.

5. CONCLUSION

Texts do not contain meaning, rather they have a potential for meaning. This potential is realised only in the interaction between text and reader. Meaning is created in the course of reading as the reader draws both on existing linguistic and schematic knowledge and the input provided by the printed or written text.

As we progress through a text, our choices of what to select are constrained, both by features within the text itself and those external to it, to do, for instance, with schematic knowledge. So, reading strategies such as predicting, sampling or selecting information are implied in understanding any written text and these strategies are key when we try to learn/teach a foreign language.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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