

Developing Students' Communicative Effectiveness Through Correct Choice of EFL Textbooks

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Abstract—The paper is dedicated to a topical issue of modern methodology of teaching English. It deals with selecting correct instructional media to use in developing students' effective communication skills, one of the foundations of which is the written component. Despite the needs of the society for professionals who can write in a foreign language, most school graduates are not ready for written cross-cultural communication. It is necessary to change the strategy of developing written communication skills and consider them as a goal, not a means of teaching/ learning. The paradigm shift should be reflected in instructional media which should be selected properly in accordance with the goal. To be effective, the choice of educational material is supposed to be based on appropriate criteria. Our research aimed to determine criteria for selecting training materials for effective developing students' written communication skills. The proposed criteria were verified in the analysis of a modern English language textbook series.

Keywords—communication, written interaction, instructional media, appropriate criteria

I. INTRODUCTION

In the context of intensive globalization of modern society, the role of written interaction as the basis of cross-cultural communication is steadily increasing and becoming more complex which implies new opportunities for development due to the introduction of information technologies in all spheres of life that support written fixation of information. In addition, recently, in connection with the pandemic, a powerful incentive has been given (both abroad and in Russia) to the development of distance learning, which uses, basically, a written form of interaction between teachers and students. This phenomenon "has great prospects, since it allows you to use the world's cultural and educational values accumulated in the global Internet, and opportunities to study under the guidance of the best teachers ..." [1, p. 92-93]. Thus, written language acts today, on the one hand, as an important tool for intercultural communication and social adaptation of the individual in the global world, the main feature of which is the prevalence of telecommunication technologies in the system

of interaction between people. On the other hand, it is an activity that contributes to the intellectual development of the individual. Written communication is necessary for the functioning of the most important spheres of human activity: mass media, state and public organizations, literary and artistic associations, science, education, etc. Writing skills are also necessary for each person to implement their individual intentions: write a letter, a statement, a greeting, a plan, theses, an abstract, an essay, etc. In this way, written speech appears as an integrative, complex phenomenon that cannot be recognized as a secondary system in relation to oral speech.

Mastering writing in any language is a laborious and lengthy process and can not proceed spontaneously and on impulse; it involves specially organized training on the basis of science-based technologies. At the same time, according to statistical studies and observations [2, 3], for those who are well-versed in the written form of self-expression in their native language and especially in a foreign language, the rate is low. For example, only one in four students of language departments of universities successfully cope with written tasks of a productive nature. Obviously, this is a delayed result of the fact that for a long time in Russian education there was no public demand for mastering this type of language activity, which, in turn, hindered research and development in this area. The history of Russia (most especially, the period of the "iron curtain" characterized by the undeveloped samples of document flow for professional and business communication, by textophobia as a consequence of fear for the word spoken and especially the word written, and by many other things) did not stimulate the development of methodological issues of writing. Besides, much of the current situation of teaching written communication is due, among other things, to the fact that Russian culture, in contrast to West-European, was originally formed as colloquial. Therefore, for a long time, writing in foreign language education was assigned the role of an auxiliary tool, a "universal consolidation mechanism" of language knowledge and skills. Writing was considered as "unprofitable", "time-consuming" type of learning activity.

Changes in socio-economic, political and cultural life of Russia in the late XX century led to the reassessment of goals, objectives, content and organization of the educational process. Today, researchers [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9,10] consider the model of teaching writing as an independent language skill and consider written language to be no less important than oral speech, since "writing is a new and powerful tool of thinking, which often has much greater capabilities than oral speech" [11]. The content of teaching a non-native language now involves mastering the basics of foreign language culture. In this context, teaching writing to foreigners implies mastering writing as a means of adaptation of the individual in the global world, a way of understanding the foreign language culture of written communication, as well as a tool of intellectual development of the individual, the formation of his/her competence in the field of intercultural communication. At the same time, writing is a complex analytical process. It does not imply transfer of oral speech skills to written form, but implicates selecting specific means of written communication and structural-semantic organization of text. In this regard, it is not justified to consider written statements as a fixation of oral ones. From a psychological point of view, writing is complex and diverse, therefore, it is necessary to teach writing taking into account psycho-physiological and psycholinguistic processes inherent in this type of language activities. The process of mastering written speech includes mechanisms of comprehension, memorization, design, etc., as well as the ability to reproduce and transform statements, synthesize them with others, generate new speech units based on and similar to the learned ones. To date, the new status of the writing skill is confirmed by the fact that the Federal State Educational Standard of the Russian Federation defines the development of written competence of students not only as a means, but also as a goal of teaching a foreign language at school, and the section "Writing" has become a mandatory part of the unified state exam.

Setting new goals means revising the requirements for the system of teaching a foreign language. With the change of the system, the main components of the educational process are supposed to change, one of which being the English language textbook. The role of the textbook in teaching a foreign language can be hardly overestimated. It is not just a tool, it is the cornerstone of the educational process. It is the textbook that defines both the strategy and tactics of training, thus determining the effectiveness of the process. Therefore, it is extremely important for the teacher to choose the right textbook for the classroom. However, choosing a textbook today is becoming a difficult task for many reasons. To begin with, it is connected with the fact that there is a huge number of different textbooks in the book market. The ill - equipped teacher is lost in such abundance and does not know what to give preference to. He/she needs to be armed with clear selection criteria. We discuss in detail the issue of choosing a textbook in the article "English-language textbooks in the Russian EFL classroom" [12]. In this paper our task is to determine the effectiveness of the textbook in terms of developing writing skills, for which it is necessary to develop appropriate criteria and verify their validity in practice. Our research is devoted to these issues.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our study was done in several directions. To start with, we analyzed basic provisions of the EFL theory in order to build a foundation of our research. Besides, to clarify the practical situation, we conducted on-line teachers' questionnaires followed by interviews. The survey involved school teachers from different cities of Russia (Kazan, Syktyvkar, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Samara, Yekaterinburg) aged from 34 to 58. The respondents were asked questions about the role and the place of writing in the teaching process, about the merits and drawbacks of the popular English language textbooks in this context, as well as about the teaching materials they consider to be the best.

The study of the theoretical and practical aspects of the problem made it possible to develop criteria for effective EFL language textbooks in the context of developing writing skills and verify them in the analysis of Spotlight series of textbooks created by V. Evans, J. Dooley, O. Podolyako, Yu. Vaulina [13].

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained in the theoretical study can be summarized as follows. Due to the global changes in society, the goal of teaching a foreign language is to develop students' communicative competence, one of the foundations of which is the written component. However, despite the needs of society for professionals who can write in a foreign language, most school graduates are not ready for written cross-cultural communication. This is due to the peculiarities and difficulties that arise in the process of forming written communicative competence. First of all, there exist different approaches to defining the essence of the concept of "writing". However, our analysis reveals the basic trends and shared visions. In many foreign and domestic publications, the term "writing" is used to refer to any teaching activity related to the graphic code. This includes the techniques of writing, performing writing exercises, and generating written statements for communication purposes. The role and place of writing in teaching foreign languages are determined by specific conditions and target settings of training. It should be noted that in the Russian methodology, the term "writing" is often used only in its narrow meaning of "writing technique" (mechanics of writing), that is, the use of graphic and spelling systems of the language. Teaching writing techniques includes mastering the alphabet, graphics, spelling, and punctuation. In this meaning writing (writing technique) is a means of teaching foreign language, the initial stage in the development of productive writing. As for writing as a learning goal, there are two levels of productive writing termed as "training writing" and "communicative writing". Training writing refers to the performance in writing of a variety of exercises and tasks aimed at mastering productive lexical and grammatical skills as the basis of communicative writing. Communicative writing is an expressive type of speech activity aimed at generating a message in the written form. The development of the ability to express thoughts in writing is based on training writing, which in turn relies on writing mechanics, well-formed graphic and spelling skills. The aim of teaching communicative writing is to develop the ability to

create different types/ genres of texts that may be needed by students in their academic or professional activities, as well as for personal purposes. In foreign methodological theory and practice, there are also concepts for designating types of writing, depending on the degree of independence of students when creating a written message: guided writing and free writing [14, 15, 16,17]. The concept of free writing implies the independence of students in determining the content and language form of a written message. The concept of guided writing relates to the training writing which is largely focused on content and language supports. The purpose of supports is to help students in the process of generating written statements, as well as in the perception of texts when reading and listening. In the case of speech generation, support-incentives create conditions for managing the content of the utterance and indirectly determine the choice of language tools.

The difference between spoken and written language should be taken into account. Written language is distant, planned in advance, essentially monologic , designed for visual perception and repeated reading of what is written. Besides, writing is a slower process, since it involves fixing the text on paper and mastering writing skills, requires the inclusion of a larger number of psychological analyzers, etc. In addition, the role of writing in teaching foreign languages is defined by specific training conditions and targets. Its place is determined by the stage of work on the language material. Each stage of teaching writing is characterized by specific writing skills, abilities, and competencies. Each of the training stages is a complete whole in its content and form, and in the process of training, it is necessary to observe the principle of level-by-level formation of the writing competence. Each level should correspond to its own types of exercises and tasks, depending on the goals. Our analysis of the literature on the problem reveals three types of written exercises and tasks depending on the level of training : mechanical, meaningful and communicative.

Mechanical exercises are aimed at the formation of graphic and spelling skills: writing letters, letter combinations, words and their printed equivalents; writing words based on their grouping by a selected graphic or spelling feature, etc. Meaningful exercises are based on writing as a means of learning : written performance of lexical and grammatical training exercises (substitution, completion of sentences); posing questions using certain lexical and grammatical material, coping tasks, etc. Communicative exercises and tasks include guided and free writing. Guided writing exercises are based on using various aids and clues, while in free writing students are independent in choosing the content and language form of a written message.

To be effective, the exercises and tasks should be of a systematic nature. An effective system of exercises has the following characteristics:

- scientific validity and communicative orientation (otherwise it will be a chaotic set of exercises);
- interdependence of exercises (each exercise prepares the next one and takes into account the already worked-out material);

- evolution from the simple to the complex, from particulars to generals;
- repetitiveness of tasks and language material.

It should be noted that the work is supposed to have three stages: presentation, practice and production.

The English language teachers' survey conducted as part of our research confirmed and enriched the results of our theoretical study. The respondents were asked about the role and place of writing in the teaching process, about the merits and drawbacks of popular English language textbooks in this context, as well as about the teaching materials they consider to be the best. The survey showed that about 40% (!) of teachers still consider writing a means rather than a goal of teaching. 77% of participants believe that the methodology for developing students' written communication skills has not been developed enough so far. 91% of teachers believe that the students' level of proficiency in these skills is significantly lower than the level of development of other language skills. 66% admit that they do not work on writing communication skills in the classroom systematically, and 17% of them give written tasks only as homework. Subsequent clarifying interviews showed that most teachers work mainly on calligraphy and spelling, develop coping skills, but leave aside creative writing tasks. Thus, not all school teachers are ready to develop the written competence of students, they do not realize its role and place in the educational process. This is primarily due to the lack of elaboration of the issue in the teaching methodology. Thus, not all school teachers are ready to develop the written competence of students, do not realize its role and place in the educational process. This is primarily due to the lack of elaboration of the problem in the teaching methodology . In addition, not all modern textbooks present writing tasks fully and variously enough.

The majority of our respondents identified the Spotlight series of textbooks as the most relevant to modern requirements. Therefore, we decided to use it in order to verify the criteria determined in the course of the theoretical study. The Spotlight complex is one of the first international projects launched by Russian and British Publishing Houses. It is based both on the provisions of Federal State Educational Standard (FSES) of Russia and requirements of the Council of Europe in the field of foreign language teaching. Analyzing the entire series both "horizontally" (Student's Book, Work Book, Teacher's Book, etc) and "vertically" (including all its levels) is a very large-scale task that requires a huge amount of time and effort. Therefore, for this study, we chose one of the components of the series - Spotlight 9 , intended for grade 9. Both Student's and Work Books consist of 8 modules, each including 9 lessons. It should be noted that each module has "Writing skills" section. The teaching materials presented in the Student's Book are supplemented and expanded in Work Book. Grade 9 completes the stage of basic school where the following requirements are made for developing written communication of students. At the end of it, schoolchildren are supposed to be able to make extracts from texts, to fill out forms, to write a CV, a personal letter using the required formulas and to prepare written supports for oral

statements (abstracts, reports). To develop the above skills a textbook should provide meaningful and communicative (guided and free) exercises and tasks. Mechanical drills are not necessary here, they are more suitable at the earlier stages. Besides, the work should have three phases: presentation of the material, its practicing and production (PPP).

These requirements are satisfied in the textbook under analyses. For instance, in Module 2 of the Student's Book the "Writing skills" section is devoted to informal letters and e-mails. It starts with basic information about informal letters and emails, explains to whom and in what cases these letters are written, and describes in detail the structure of the letter (greeting, reason for writing, main part, conclusion and farewell). Then it presents useful vocabulary. After that, come exercises to drill the structure of the letter and the corresponding lexical units and grammar models. Finally, students are asked to answer a friend's letter. The same tasks are presented in Module 2 of the Writing section in the Work Book. More detailed results of our research can be presented as follows. The instructional media contain a sufficient number and variety of written exercises to meet the above criteria. They include meaningful writing drilling: vocabulary and grammar exercises (sentence completion, gap filling, questions, verb forms, prepositions, words grouping, writing abstracts, finding synonyms/ antonyms, odd-word exercises, doing crosswords, etc.), composition exercises (dividing texts into composition parts, putting text parts into the right order, giving headings to text parts, etc). Besides, there are communicative writing tasks: guided writing (writing a passage/ a letter/ an abstract in accordance with a pattern, writing a passage/ a letter/ an abstract using key words, schemes, tables, plans, pictures, etc) and free writing tasks (expressing one's own opinion in the written form, pros-and-cons essays, abstracts, reviews, short articles, etc).

The writing exercises presented in Spotlight 9 can be considered to comprise a system since they demonstrate all the necessary characteristics we discussed above. Firstly, they are based on a single scientific concept which is the communicative approach. On the one hand the authors declare this fact in the Teacher's Book, on the other hand, they follow its basic principles in the structure and the content of the instructional media. Secondly, all the exercises are communicative in nature since they are aimed at solving various communicative tasks. Thirdly, the exercises are interdependent, each exercise prepares the next one and takes into account the already worked-out material. Fourthly, the tasks are sequenced from the simple to the complex, from particulars to generals. Finally, tasks and language material are systematically repeated.

Thus, we may say that the writing exercises in Spotlight 9 comprise a system which is supposed to increase their effectiveness. This system comprises various types and subtypes of tasks which are in accordance with the teaching goals of this learning stage.

IV. CONCLUSION

Nowadays the role of written interaction as one of the basics of international communication keeps steadily

growing. It is not only a means of intercultural collaboration and exchange but also an important tool of the individual adaptation in the global world. Therefore, developing productive writing skills becomes one of the most important teaching goal today. It is a complicated process that implies specially organized training based on effective instructional media. However, our analysis of school practice indicates that many English language teachers neglect developing students' writing skills, sacrifice them for other language aspects. There several reasons for this. On the one hand, they do not realize yet that developing written communication skills has become one of the most important goals of teaching a foreign language. On the other hand, contemporary methodology has not equipped them with the necessary knowledge and tools in this area. First of all, we need appropriate instructional media that take into account new realities and requirements and teachers should know the criteria for selecting the necessary textbooks. Theoretical and practical research of the problem allowed us to propose such criteria, and then verify their validity in practice. The textbook complex under analysis (Spotlight 9) can be said to satisfy the necessary criteria since it presents a sufficient number and variety of written exercises, including various types of meaningful drills (vocabulary and grammar exercises, as well as composition exercises) and communicative writing tasks (guided and free writing assignments).

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