GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS: ISSUES IN CROSS-CULTURAL WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

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Abstract : The aim of this paper is to present the ways in which written communication (for academic purposes) is influenced by the author's cultural background. However it is not only the author's educational background that we should have in view here, but also the fact that he / she is a user of English as a foreign language. Therefore the English language is most likely to follow the pattern of the author's native language. Readers belonging to different cultural backgrounds may have difficulties in getting the message of such texts right. Also, the larger general context in which the text is produced may also affect the language and the message the author wants to transmit. Thus factors such as the audience, the time, the place or the purpose for which a written text is produced have to be taken into account. In order to get their message across, authors have to pay attention to all these details that may have an impact upon their written texts.

Keywords: academic writing, cultural background, target audience, language use, context.

Writing a text for academic purposes in English (as a foreign language) is definitely a challenge. There are several steps that the writer has to take into account in order to be sure his / her text will be successful. First of all, there are different academic genres, each of them with its distinctive purposes, therefore the author has to be sure he / she knows the appropriate language, structure and style he / she will have to use. The aim of this paper is to discuss some issues related to the way in which written communication is influenced by its author's *cultural background*. However it is not only the author's *cultural and / or educational background* that will definitely influence the written text, but also some other elements. Since the writing process is a complex one, requiring long preparation, the author has to pay attention to many details, starting from ideas, the way in which he / she will develop his / her research into a subject, how he / she will begin to write the text, starting to develop the text from the paragraph up to an extended form. Another difficulty comes from the fact that the author uses English as a foreign language. Undoubtedly the pattern of the author's mother tongue will influence the English language the author will use. This thing may lead to difficulties in reading these texts. Likewise, as we have already mentioned, the author's educational background also influences the way we write. By and large people have different expectations from teaching and learning, expectations that are based on the educational background. Speaking about writing for academic purposes, we mainly have in view written texts that are produced at the academic level (essays, dissertations). An essay or a dissertation is usually written under the supervision of a professor, member of the academic staff. The type of relationship the author establishes with his / her supervisor will also affect the shape the written text will have. Moreover, the whole context in which the text is produced influences the author's style. Elements such as the audience, the subject, the purpose of the written text, the time and the place in which the written text is produced also have an influence in the writing process. Therefore, in order to get their message across, authors have

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to pay attention to all these details. As Jill Burton put it, "few of us could deny that writing is both a means of voice and identity construction or that university students and faculty succeed or fail largely through what and how they write. In doing so, they gain or lose voice and identity (Burton, 2011).

We believe that the first possible barriers that have to be overpassed are those related to the *author's cultural and educational background*. An international student having to complete some written assignments may expect to encounter different writing expectations at the institution / university he studies. The way in which authors use methodologies, analyze theories, develop arguments, and choose to present or discuss data may also differ. Sometimes even the terminology used may be different, therefore the author needs to step aside for a while. The best solution in such cases is to talk to the supervisor, ask him / her to provide some samples of the specific type of writing they need to do. This will enable authors to see the exact style, structure and language they will need to use in order to produce similar writings. Analyzing all these details in the beginning will help the authors to become familiar with all the technical matters. Specialists also recommend that international students become familiar with these details before they actually begin to write their dissertations, as doing all these things in the end is very difficult and time consuming. The author's relationship with the supervisor may also be culturally determined. If the author comes from a culture where the supervisor is regarded as the supreme authority, he / she will definitely expect the supervisor to guide all his / her steps throughout the whole research and writing process. However most of the Western universities have a more self-directed policy, and visiting scholars are given more independence. On the contrary, if the author comes from a position where he / she already has a position of authority, he / she may be inclined to ignore the supervisor. If authors think they might have different expectations from the relationships with their supervisors, they should consider all these things in the beginning, along with the forms of addressing (these may also differ from culture to culture, i.e. using first names or academic degrees). Before writing their assignments, authors need to be able to understand everything that refers to data, numbers, percentages, the use of facts, foreign words, the ways in which bibliographies are written and so on. Authors need to check the institution's requirements and follow them to the letter. Proofreading the text also requires special attention, as author should not rely only on computer programs (they can only check spelling, not the meaning of the sentences). The flow of the text should also be checked. From this point of view we may say that the written communication has more advantages than spoken communication as a written text may be reviewed several times, until its author is satisfied. Authors may ask some of their colleagues (preferably an English native speaker) to proofread the text. In academic texts clarity is very important, therefore the recommendation is to write as clearly as possible, avoiding overcomplicated sentences. The scientific text should impress with the data of the research and not with the length of the sentences. Punctuation is also very important. The complexity of the sentences will dictate punctuation, so the use of simple coherent sentences will make it easier for authors to deal with punctuation. Voice and tone in academic texts should be also analyzed by authors. The use of the third person singular (the impersonal style) may sound more objective as compared to the first person singular (the personal style). Nowadays, however, the first person singular seems to be favored more even in scientific texts, as a proof for the fact that the author is responsible for his / her ideas and research.

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When writing for academic purposes authors are required to have a good command of the English grammar. The use of verb tenses becomes very important in academic texts. The English language may be said to be quite rigid from this perspective in the sense that the author is not allowed to use verb tenses randomly. Passive constructions are usually avoided, the most recommended verb tenses being Present Tense Simple and Present Perfect Simple. Both these tenses may be used (*Taylor discusses the problem…* or *Taylor has discussed the problem…*). However, if the reference is to something that happened in the past, Past Tense Simple should be used (*Taylor discussed the theory in 1996*). Proper use of tenses derives from scientific ethics. Depending upon the chapter the author is writing, he / she will probably have to use past tense in the abstract as the abstract will refer to results. Likewise, most of the introduction material should equally contain verbs in the past tense as this is a section which also deals with previous results. Obviously, generalizations, references to stable conditions and general truths should be given in the present tense. The use of the past is also required when the author has to mention some results that cannot be generalized. In scientific writing it is recommended to use the active voice rather than the passive voice in sentences. The active voice will help you to make up shorter sentences that are easier to be understood. The passive voice consists of the verb *to be* plus the *past participle* of an action verb. When the agent performing the action is unknown or irrelevant, the use of *passive voice* is appropriate (*e.g. Michael Chabon's novel,* ***Wonder Boys****, was published in…*). The passive voice may also be used to emphasize something or someone other than the agent that performed the action (*e.g. A brand new idea was emphasized by Johnson*). The use of the passive voice in this sentence is required by the need to emphasize *"the new idea"*. Generally speaking, though, the use of the active voice is more effective than the use of the passive voice. It is the natural voice in which most people speak and write. The passive voice often obscures the meaning and may lead to the creation of sophisticated sentences. Correct use of grammar is an essential part of the written text, not only because it helps to avoid misunderstandings, but also because by means of correct grammar, the author manages to communicate effectively. Besides, the importance of grammatical correctness in scientific writing springs from the precision that science itself requires.

Though delivering a presentation in an international conference apparently has nothing to do with the idea of written communication, it does bring about some cross-cultural issues. Being able to present a paper in an international conference means that a paper has been accepted for publication so we may speak about the existence of a written text. There are some well-determined rules for the publication of these papers, and authors may easily find them on the conference website. Besides, authors may also check online abstracts from previous editions. Nonetheless, each participant comes with his / her own cultural identity. English is the *lingua franca* of such scientific events. However most of the times we do not speak about the use of Standard English, but rather of a broken language, a sort of a standardized English, which is the result of globalization. In international conferences even the notion of time is considered a cultural thing. Depending upon the participant's cultural background, the morning may begin at 8 o'clock, while for some others this may be considered quite an early start. However the standard time in international conferences is divided as follows: the morning from the start time to 12 o'clock, the afternoon from 12.01 PM to 17.00 PM or even 18.00 PM, and the evening from either 17.00 PM or 18.00 PM to

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midnight. This may help participants when using the right greeting forms, good morning, good afternoon or good evening. Usually, when giving a presentation, it is a time limit. There countries, however, where this budget time is frequently overpassed and nobody really cares about that. In international conferences presenters should pay attention to this detail, prepare their speeches so that they allow time for questions in the end. Presenters usually fill in jokes throughout their presentations. The use of jokes is indeed, very effective. Nonetheless, if a person chooses to introduce some jokes in such international events, he / she should make sure that the joke will be understood and is appropriate in a multi-cultural context.

> As we have said in the beginning of the paper the whole context in which and for which the written text is produced affects its final shape and content. Thus factors such as the audience, the subject, the time and place, and the purpose for which a specific text is produced will determine the form and content of that text. In an academic text we may assume that *the audience* will be formed by readers who know about the topic and are also interested in it. The *subject* the author chooses has to be in accordance with the needs of the readers. This will constantly determine the author to choose a specific vocabulary. In the context of using English as a foreign language (both for the author and some of his / her readers), the author will have to establish how precisely he / she will have to use the language (avoiding constructions his / her readers might have difficulty in understanding). Figuring out who will form his / her audience, the author will be able to establish how much background information he / she needs to provide. It is obvious that a too technical text will exclude some readers that will not be able to understand. If the author does not want to lose this category of readers, he / she has the option to explain some of these terms at the end of the paper in the form of a glossary.

By context we also understand the *time* and *place*. Up to a certain extent we may say that these elements affect more verbal communication. Nonetheless, we have seen how relationships among academic staff are dictated by the context in which they develop. We have also seen how important it is, when writing a text for academic purposes, to follow the institution's requirements. Though this thing is more evident in case of application forms (they have a standard format and, as you fill them in, you have to write exactly what you are required, they decide what kind of information you put on, but also the structure of your writing), essays and dissertations also follow a special format that is dictated by the institution. Speaking about the *purpose* of written communication, we may say that academic texts have the purpose to inform, record, influence or persuade. Depending upon the author's purpose, the text will have a certain format and its structure will observe some specific rules. If its purpose is to inform a certain audience about something, we are likely to expect a more straightforward style. When we research on a certain topic, we have to use a lot of information. This means authors have to master the ability to gather information and ask questions. In order to persuade, authors need to be able to build up arguments, which is not an easy task. Whatever the purpose, the author will have to adopt that tone that is suitable in the whole context.

Eventually we may say that the authors need to know how to use the language and vocabulary. The use of words will determine the way in which the message will be conveyed to the audience. English has many versions and dialects. As we have already pointed out, the advantage of the written text is that it can be revised until the author is satisfied with the form

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of his / her text. It is true that nowadays we should concentrate more on how English is used by real people, and not on how English should be used. This will make our effort to get our message across much easier. Therefore specialists recommend for authors who use English as a foreign language to write their papers directly in the English language. Translating a paper from the native language into English may bring along frequent mistakes and the meaning of the sentences may be easily lost. The English topic (i.e. word order) is likely to be different. Writing directly in English, making up short sentences is a way to avoid the complications of a sophisticated style. Attention should also be paid to another possible problem, that of making your writing sound more like spoken English. Academic English requires a more formal style.

> We have seen how the act of writing is influenced by so many factors. The solution for authors is to practice all these in context, that is in those circumstances in which they are really required to develop interpersonal relationships with members of the academic staff, to overpass the boundaries established by their native languages or cultural background. This is definitely a long term process "during which writers first learn to understand and then mimic writing in English before branching out as confident writers who draw as appropriate on their bi / multicultural and linguistic backgrounds to contribute to development of their academic fields" (Burton, 2011). In other words, as the author manages to overcome all these boundaries, he / she will manage to acquire that independence that will help them to get their message across.

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