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AT THE CROSSROADS OF GRAMMATICAL AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE? – ACADEMIC WRITING AT THE C2 LEVEL (CEFR)

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Academic writing at the C2 level, according to the Common European Framework of Reference, experiences a fundamental change of focus from the lower-order concerns in writing, to the notion of communicative aspect of discourse and towards the higher-order concerns in writing. This study explores the degree of communicative competence in L2 writing that these students exhibit.

Key words*: academic writing, communicative competence, grammatical competence, higher-order concerns, lower-order concerns*

Introduction

It is not infrequent to speak of crossroads, marginal or overlapping areas in research. Theories, approaches and methods of applications vary to an extent that we frequently question ourselves in terms of perspectives and positions we hold in teaching. Likewise the field of second language acquisition is a fruitful premise for reconsidering the approaches to teaching L2 writing and the aim of this study is to discern elements of communicative competence in the writing of the undergraduate students.

According to Weigle (2002:35), experts in the field (Cumming, 1989; Kroll, 1990; Krapels, 1990) indicate that "over the past several years a consensus has emerged among researchers that second-language proficiency – defined as control over the linguistic elements of a second language – and expertise in writing are different, although not unrelated abilities."

This claim clearly illustrates, and even calls for the collaboration between two competences that are by no means related in L2 writing – *the grammatical competence* and *the communicative competence*. Writing, being a skill that by nature poses great demands even for

the L1 writers, may be considered a complex ground, a battlefield where the second-language writers combat both with language and with themselves in the role of writers.

1. Cognitive demands in L2 writing

It is commonly believed that the productive skill of writing is among the most difficult skills to master when learning a second language. Weigle (2002: 35) illustrates "…writing in a second language may be hampered because of the need to focus on language rather than content" and all due to the great cognitive demand that this skill presupposes of second-language writers.

Therefore, a number of studies reflected on the difference between the L1 and L2 writers, noting the indisputable gap between the writing ability among the novice and expert writers (Hayes & Flower, 1986; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987; Hyland, 2002). They primarily aimed at illuminating the different approaches these writers take and the various composing stages they go through. Hayes and Flower (1986) indicate that skilled writers spend more time revising when writing than do unskilled writers and pay more attention to *higher-level aspects* of composing process such as coherence and argumentation. Eysenck and Keane (2005) cite evidence that skilled writers are much more concerned with revision that involves changes to meaning than are unskilled writers. (Shaw & Weir, 2007:42)

As illustrated, writing involves engagement at many levels and all at the same time which indeed is that additional cognitive demand when writing in a second language. At the undergraduate level, writing in a second language becomes even more demanding as the students are expected to demonstrate language proficiency, as well as discourse fluency at the academic level.

2. Academic writing at C2 level (Common European Framework of Reference)

Academic writing at the undergraduate level represents the context within which *higher-order elements* of writing should be attended to. At this level L2 students have already been exposed to a myriad of language items and have had years of experience in mastering the microlinguistic elements of writing. They have engaged in a number of classes that integrate language skills and confront language issues from many different angles in terms of grammaticality. However, Academic writing classes place a greater emphasis on the communicative elements of language that can be found in the *higher-order issues* of writing.

Although a great deal of research on the *communicative competence* has focused on oral skills, researchers have begun to consider it in the field of L2 writing as well. As Reid (1993:

39) indicates "communicative approaches stress the *purpose* of a piece of writing and the *audience* for it". According to Hyland, the purpose for writing in this new paradigm is communication rather than accuracy (Shaw & Weir, 2007:9). Alongside, the Common European Framework of Reference, aimed at testing language skills in the acquisition of the second language, has proposed descriptors in mastering each level of language acquisition. Therefore, for the C2 (proficiency) level of the writing skill the following descriptors have been assigned:

Overall Written Production	Overall Written Interaction
Can write clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points.	Can express him/herself with clarity and precision, relating to the addressee flexibly and effectively.

Table. 1 CEFR C2 Proficiency

Based on Council of Europe 2001: 61, 83 in Shaw & Weir (2007: 13)

These descriptors clearly involve both the logical structure of the text, with the aim to 'guide' the readers and help in interpretation, and the interaction aspect of the text where the writer addresses and engages the reader more directly. *Communicative competence* (*higher-order concerns*) is evidently the expectation in academic writing at this level, while the *grammatical competence* (*lower-order concerns*) simply underlies these superior aims of writing.

3. Lower-order issues vs. higher-order issues in L2 writing

There is an obvious detachment from the grammatical accuracy as the primary parameter of a successful and satisfactory composition. As Reid (1993:29) cites "McKay (1979a, 1979b, 1981) argued in both her research and her textbooks that grammatical accuracy in writing classes was a secondary concern." According to Bean (1993:226), in writing we make a distinction between:

Lower-order concerns	Higher-order concerns

style of writing, grammar and mechanics (spelling, punctuation)	ideas, organization, development and clarity of discourse

Table 2. A distinction between the lower/higher-order concerns in writing (Bean, 1993:226)

However, *lower-order concerns* should not be disregarded in writing and Bean (1996:227) clarifies that "(they) are lower not because they are unimportant but because they cannot be efficiently attended to until the *higher-order concerns* have been resolved. Therefore, we are emphasizing the communicative aspect of writing which should at C2 level extend beyond the grammaticality of the discourse towards the awareness of the *purpose* of writing and the *audience* with which the writer experiences genuine communication.

4. Research

The aim of this pilot study was to analyze the written production at the C2 level of writing of the 3rd year students at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, Department of English. This pilot study was conducted on 21 student essays (10 with lower grades and 11 with higher grades) within the course of Academic writing. The course itself realizes teaching of different essay types and crucial elements of composition, the style of formal academic expression with the emphasis on precision and clarity, as well as the exposure to up-to-date articles. However, apart from brief instruction on cohesive devices, students were not explicitly taught the *reader-based approach* to writing that focuses on text connectivity and the interactive writer-reader relationship. It is our belief that without this explicit instruction and greater emphasis on *higher-order concerns* in writing, the students are not truly motivated to engage in genuine 'dialogue' with their readers.

Therefore, their essays have been considered in terms of the presence/absence of *higher-order elements* in writing with essays of both higher and lower grades. According to the combined descriptors previously noted in Table 1 and Table 2, and having considered both the demands of the C2 level (CEFR) and the results that we encounter with the students that should adhere to these expectations, we have come up with a slightly modified instrument (Table 3) that has been used in the analysis.

HIGHER-ORDER CONCERNS IN WRITING
1) (Mostly) writes clear, smoothly flowing texts (clarity of discourse, presence of cohesion/coherence in the text; only slight or no microlinguistic constraints)
2) Precision & clarity in expression (vocabulary, phrases, expressions)
3) Academic style of writing (adequate formal essay writing)
4) Logical structure of the essay - that 'guides' the reader through significant points in the text (full audience awareness)
5) Interacts and engages with the reader –use of attention grabbers; appeals; questions, thus engaging in a dialogue with the reader (full audience awareness)

Table 3. Characteristics of *higher-order concerns* in academic writing at the C2 level

The questions posed in our study were:

1) How are these *higher-order elements* of writing distributed among the essays with lower grades?
2) How are these *higher-order elements* of writing distributed among the essays with higher grades?
3) Do L2 undergraduate students employ *higher-order elements* in writing and therefore exhibit *communicative competence*?

Since the proficiency level of English as the second language at the 3rd year of undergraduate studies realizes mastery of all microlinguistic structures and grammar in general, it was expected that students devoted more time and effort to the *communicative aspects* of composing. They were expected to organize and develop their ideas at a higher level, to use cohesive devices and connect the text appropriately, to use a formal academic style of writing and to address their readers with a genuine *purpose* and *audience awareness*. The research aimed at identifying whether the students had awareness of the *communicative competence* in writing or only opted to satisfy the *grammatical competence* in composition.

5. Results

Evaluation of essays is an inevitable parameter that should be considered in close relation to teaching instruction and practice, as Hyland himself (2003: 207) notes "feedback is central to

learning to write in a second language". Therefore, the results achieved in student essay writing were our primary source in the study.

5.1 *Higher-order concerns* within essays of lower grades

Although it is expected that less skilled writers that commonly earn lower grades exhibit certain microlinguistic constraints in writing, our research did not focus on the analysis of those elements. We were interested in determining the extent to which they display the tendency to communicate with the intended readers by taking into consideration their use of *higher-order elements* in writing. We applied the Table 3 instrument to determine the presence/absence of these communicative features in ten student essays that received lower grades and the findings were illustrated in Table 4.

student essays / **comm. elements**	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	**Total (%)**
1.clear, smoothly flowing texts (cohesion/coherence)					+	+		+			**30%**
2. precision and clarity in expression			+		+	+	+	+			**50%**
3. academic style of writing (formal)											**0%**
4. logical structure of the essay –'guiding' readers through the text (full audience awareness)									+		**10%**

5. Interacting and engaging with the reader (full audience awareness)		+	+		+		+			+	**50%**

Table 4. *Higher-order concerns* within essays of lower grades

Communication in writing, accomplished through the use of *higher-order elements*, evidently is not greatly displayed among the students with lower grades.

5.1.1. The most alarming issue concerns the *academic formal style of writing* (0%). Although present in the teaching instruction and prevailing in the academic texts, these students refrain from applying the rules of formal composition. This could be explained by the fact that *grammatical competence* is their primary concern, along with the successful topic development. A writing task for them presents a great cognitive demand, especially at the C2 level. Harris and Graham (1996:195) note that "as the cognitive processes required by the task become more numerous and complex, task difficulty increases and greater cognitive capacity is needed". Therefore, they tend to 'play safe' and place more attention on the grammaticality of their sentences, rather than introducing additional parameters that may impair their writing.

5.1.2. Another questionable aspect of writing that we need to consider is the text connectivity, accomplished through the use of cohesive devices (question number 1 - 30%) and frame markers (question number 4 - 10%) with the intention to 'guide' the readers through the text. The unskilled writers at this level obviously do not experience writing as communicating with the anticipated reader. They are unaware that discourse is both what a text producer means by the text and what a text means to the receiver. (Widdowson, 2007: 7)

5.1.3. Precision and clarity are issues addressed from the 1st year of their undergraduate studies and therefore it is not a surprise that they reflect on the lexis and expressions that they use, avoiding vague language in general (question number 2 - 50%).

5.1.4. Interaction and engagement is also very much present in their essays (question number 5 - 50%). It primarily reflects the use of questions within the essay, as well as occasional comments of the writer with the need to subjectively reflect on an issue. Questions are a useful rhetoric strategy that may be used as attention grabbers, as a way to engage the readers in communicating with them. However, this issue should be regarded more closely together with their use/overuse in L2 writing. With the unskilled writers, there may be an indictment that these writers are unable to express their ideas in the form of claims, arguments and supporting statements and so their essays are filled with questions, rather than 'answers' to the topic. Frequently suchlike essay do not fully address the topic and the writing task and

therefore receive a low mark. The issue of questions in general and specific type of questions is a writing strategy that may be a completely new area of research, but it is not the subject of further research at the moment.

5.2. *Higher-order concerns* within essays of higher grades

Communicative features with the more skilled writers at C2 level were expected to be encountered in the research findings. These higher aspects of academic writing should be an indictment of the mastery of the productive skill of writing, and also an indictment of an inherent need to communicate through writing. These students are expected to be more fluent in grammatical expression and therefore to be ready to tackle additional communicative aspects of writing. They are not cognitively overloaded as the unskilled writers and are likely to be more creative in writing and to use writing as a tool for thinking and discovering ideas. The findings of the study are illustrated in Table 5.

student essays / **comm. elements**	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	**Total (%)**
1.clear, smoothly flowing texts (cohesion/coherence)	+	+						+	+	+	+	**54.5%**
2. precision and clarity in expression	+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	**91%**
3. academic style of writing (formal)		+	+	+			+	+		+		**54.5%**
4. logical structure of the essay –'guiding' readers through the text (full audience awareness)	+							+			+	**27%**

5. Interacting and engaging with the reader (full audience awareness)	+	+	+		+	+	+	+				**63.6%**										

Table 5. *Higher-order concerns* within essays of higher grades

5.2.1. We will primarily highlight such a low percentage of frame markers used to compose a logical structure of the essay because it statistically is the least common higher-order feature found in the essays of the more skilled writers (question number 4 - 27%). Although these students have had years of experience in composing essays they have obviously not mastered or not understood the significance of 'guiding' the readers through the text. Comparatively, as the unskilled writers, they do not recognize the need to communicate well through writing and assist their readers in interpreting their ideas.

5.2.2. The findings have encouraged us to believe that, although not fully adopted formal style of writing, there is a tendency of the improving expression and awareness of sophistication they should strive for in academic writing (question number 3 - 54.5%). Enriching one's vocabulary and expression is a never-ending process, supported by extensive reading and constantly being exposed to the second language.

5.2.3. Precise and clear language for the more skilled writers has reached its highest point in writing and these essays display a firm understanding that vague expression is not a feature of academic writing at C2 level (question number 2 - 91%).

5.2.4. Finally, we will consider the communicative aspects of coherence/cohesion (discourse clarity) (question number 1 - 54.5%) and the interaction/engagement with the readers (question number 5 – 63.6%). Both of the questions can be regarded as the students' ability to imagine a virtual intended reader. Some of the essays have illustrated a high degree of connectivity, varying cohesive devices and at times even playing with language. Others have only attempted occasionally to consider 'guiding' the reader through the text. Nevertheless, the comparison with the unskilled writers illuminates a promising tendency in improving this strategy. Interaction and engagement are even more present, with a slight difference in comparison to the unskilled writers, as these students use a combination of attention grabbers, questions, comments but also appeals to engage the audience in the discussion.

5.3. *Higher-order concerns* and the accomplished results in essay writing

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	Total
student essays	LOWER GRADES										HIGHER GRADES											(%)

1.clear, smoothly flowing texts - cohesion/coherence					+	+		+			+	+						+	+	+	+	**43%**
2. precision and clarity in expression			+		+	+	+	+			+	+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+	+	**71%**
3. academic style of writing (formal)												+	+	+			+	+		+		**28.6%**
4. logical structure of the essay – 'guiding' readers through the text (full audience awareness)									+		+							+			+	**19%**
5. Interacting and engaging with the reader (full audience awareness)		+	+		+		+			+	+	+	+		+	+	+	+				**57%**

Table 6. *Higher-order concerns* and the accomplished results in essay writing

The overall results of the research present us with an overview of one group of students at the C2 level with a varying second language proficiency. It is important to consider the results in these terms as every class is heterogeneous and therefore the teaching instruction and evaluation should be based on the overall accomplishments of the entire class.

5.3.1. Evidently, the formal expression that is a prerequisite of academic expression is a ground difficult to master and therefore should be attended to more seriously in the teaching instruction (question number 3 – 28.6%). Thinking about the intended reader, in this case the academic reader, needs to be regarded more and the students should be supplied with sufficient exposure to formal texts that employ this style of writing.

5.3.2. It is alarming to note that the entire group scored the least with the feature that directly supposes awareness of the act of communication through writing (question number 4 - 19%). As only 19% of students displayed the need to organize their essay structure with the purpose of interpretation on the part of the readers, this draws our attention to their lack of motivation to establish a writer-reader relationship. The greatest reward in writing is reaching the readership and transmitting the message. Unfortunately, we may claim that these students write essays only to satisfy the requirements of the course or only to express their ideas, without considering the feedback of their strenuous process of composing.

5.3.3. Precision and clarity of expression are the higher-order features that we may say these students have mastered to a great extent (question number 2 - 71%). As they master the language more and become more fluent and proficient they will maintain this tendency to express themselves precisely, as this is a strategy that has been firmly acquired.

5.3.4. Finally, both skilled and unskilled writers only occasionally apply text connectivity in writing (question number 1 – 43%), and direct interaction/engagement with the readers (question number 5 – 57%). This can be explained by the fact that they have not been explicitly taught cohesion and coherence, nor the discourse markers that imply interaction with the reader. Additional practice in pair writing with a true production-interpretation relationship might motivate them more in considering the reader and their comprehension.

Conclusion

Our primary research has been administered on one common, heterogeneous group of undergraduate students, entailing both the unskilled and skilled writers. Research has illuminated that essays of the unskilled writers generate the following outcomes.

- They focus primarily on the grammaticality of their written texts because additional parameters (higher-order parameters of writing in this case) may pose an obstacle and impair their writing products.
- They are not reader-sensitive and are unaware of the communicative imperative of written discourse, primarily in terms of 'guiding' their readers and ensuring full understanding of the text.
- Their engagement with the audience is present most frequently in the use/overuse of questions, which is an interesting aspect of research. This may not be a reflection of creativity and genuine need to connect with the readership, but the inability or avoidance to express their ideas as claims, arguments, supporting statements or appeals. Further research may reveal the purpose of questions in student writing.

On the other hand, the skilled writers do exhibit a more sophisticated academic expression and a keen sense of precision and clarity in writing. Analysis of their essays in terms of use of communicative elements has yielded the following results.

- Although they slightly statistically supersede the unskilled student writers, they have obviously not mastered or been sufficiently exposed to the linguistic features such as frame markers that ensure full reader guidance.
- There is a promising tendency in improving text connectivity, varying cohesive devices to the extent of using language as a tool – writing in order to learn, explore and express inner beliefs.

- They engage their readers at a significantly higher level with a myriad of genuine attention grabbers, questions, writer's comments, as well as appeals to motivate the imaginary reader in joining the communicative ordeal with the writer.

Therefore, we may conclude that these skilled and unskilled student writers would enjoy writing more and therefore give better results if exposed more to the essence of communicating through written discourse. Motivation is a significant factor that can improve or impair one's attempts in mastering a specific skill. Being additionally motivated to reach the anticipated reader they would improve their text connectivity and attend to attracting their attention, persuading them or moving them into action by their writing. Teacher instruction and assessment greatly influence students' written production and we must conclude that the aforementioned communicative elements of writing must be taught firsthand in order to be expected in student writing and ultimately applied in assessment rubrics. We should not overlook the fact that the greatest reward in fact is reaching the anticipated audience and fulfilling the purpose of writing.

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