Managing the Emotive Impact of Argumentative Public Communication in Written English – A Linguistic-Didactic Approach

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Abstract: - The article presents a range of strategies and techniques meant to acquaint advanced users of English with the linguistic means of enhancing the emotive impact of argumentative texts which state an opinion. The methods illustrated concern both intensive reading activities, consisting in examining good models of effective written communication, and writing activities proper, aimed at guiding students through the gradual stages of the writing process. The reading and writing tasks presented draw the learners’ attention to the structural and lexical devices which good communicators employ so as to efficiently convey a variety of stances, attitudes, standpoints and moods. The proposed activities are aimed at raising the students’ awareness of the importance of the context and purpose of writing for the linguistic choices a writer makes in order to get his/her message across. These tasks also emphasize the need for a clear sense of audience, in view of which the writer can gauge and control the emotive effect he/she seeks to create. The communicative approach employed in these strategies for developing written communication skills relies on interactive and collaborative activities such as pair- or group-work, on integrated skills sequences where the collaborative reading or writing tasks also involve discussion, debate and peer-cooperation.

Key-Words: - writing, communication, emotive impact, structural choice, lexical choice, opinion, stance, communicative efficiency

1 Introduction
Letters of opinion or other forms of published argumentative texts, such as editorials or articles, constitute a special type of written communication, aimed at making a point or a case in favour or against a particular issue of public interest. Such a letter or text usually comes as a response or contestation to another text on a controversial issue (in a newspaper article, a controversial topic in the media and in the public forum). The writer’s purpose is a pressing one, in that he/she is keen on having a say in a certain matter or on taking an attitude towards the issue in question, usually as a reaction to someone else’s point of view. One overriding factor underlying this kind of writing is the strength of
feeling which compels the writer to put pen to paper. In tackling such writing tasks the teacher should expose learners to awareness-raising activities focusing on means of maximizing the emotive impact and communicative efficiency of texts intended to state and argue an opinion. The range of activities illustrated here is meant to highlight the main aspects to be dealt with when training advanced students of English to assess the constitutive features of effective written communication and manage the effectiveness of their own writing.

2 Detecting the writer’s reasons and attitude

This is a sensitizing activity, meant to familiarize students with this type of writing and its linguistic and organizational particularities. The class is asked to suggest various reasons why people write letters to newspapers – to complain, thank, correct, set the record straight, contradict, show opposition, agree, disagree, advance an alternative viewpoint, persuade, dissuade, and so on. The students are given a set of sample letters, and asked to focus their attention and subsequent discussion on aspects such as purpose, attitude, linguistic means used to best convey the writer’s attitude and emphasize his/her point. The sophistication of the analysis will vary in accordance with the students’ level and linguistic ability. However, a list of relevant questions will help guide their discussion:

- What point is the writer trying to make?
- Is this point clear? Give reasons.
- Is the writer’s attitude clear? Give reasons.
- What special linguistic devices did the writer use to convey his/her message? A checklist of features to identify would be helpful – for example, emotive words; emphatic or moderating expressions; modal verbs; juxtaposition of words, concepts or ideas; emphatic fronting or inversion; rhetorical questions; irony; sarcasm.
- How effective is the letter? (very much so /moderately /not very /not at all).

The analysis can also be done with the help of a chart, where students note their observations under appropriate headings. The activity can end with a ranking exercise, where the various letters and texts analysed are ranked according to the degree of success the writer had in achieving his/her purpose. Having been sensitized about these issues involved in writing letters or articles of opinion, the students can be guided towards a practical follow up, in which are asked to write their own letter, starting from a given stimulus text or from a text of their own choice – the “Letter to the Editor” pages can be an excellent source for letters to respond to.

3 Assessing communicative impact

The teacher had to raise the students’ awareness of the fact that in order to express one’s opinions and feelings efficiently, one has to make the most appropriate choices of words and structures. Lexical and structural appropriacy is essential not only for getting their message across to the best effect, but also for obtaining the expected response from the reader. Efficient self-expression and argumentation implies judging the impact of one’s language upon the hearts and minds of the readers.

By means of relevant tasks based on the close examination suitable letters or other texts displaying a certain mood, attitude or strong feeling (letter, article, essay, literary excerpt), students are helped to identify the linguistic means employed by effective writers to ensure the desired impact on the reader. The three important areas of language upon which writers can draw upon to this effect are:

- Lexical choice – words (especially adverbs and adjectives) which have to requisite associations and implications, to nuance assertions and suggest stances;
- Structural choice – modal verbs indicating a sense of doubt, uncertainty, obligation, necessity, possibility etc;
- Cohesive devices – connective expressions signalling attitude, a sense of relief, doubt, reservation, conviction etc.

A mere knowledge of these facts does not, of course, ensure one’s immediate capacity of manipulating language successfully, but it is a first step in sensitizing students of English to the emotional value of appropriate words and structures, and their potential to add various shades of meaning and thus enhance the expressivity of one’s written language.

4 Changing the communicative impact

The students are given short articles or excerpts from published texts, suitable for their level and interests. The excerpts should contain a range of highlighted words, which could be replaced by other lexical items, to the effect that the basic meaning is preserved, but the affective impact is changed. This is a suitable opportunity to introduce the thesaurus as a useful aid when it comes to finding the right word, along with a
monolingual dictionary for checking meanings and usage.

The teacher and students discuss the various connotations and associations of some of the alternatives suggested in the thesaurus. In groups, students are invited to consider and choose substitutes for the highlighted words. At the end, they are asked to compare the choices they have made and discuss how using a new word has changed the original feeling or impression the writer wanted to convey.

The task demonstrates how, through the use of attitudinal signals, a writer conveys a feeling or mood to the reader, and how, should these signals be omitted, more than one interpretation is possible.

5. Creating moods
Students receive a copy of a text with blanked-out words originally intended to signal attitude and stance. Through answering a set of adequate guiding questions, they are likely to discover that the omission of the respective items has left them largely unable to understand the viewpoint or attitude of the writer. The students start by discussing what kind of attitude they would consider appropriate, given the subject of the text. They are encouraged to come up with a range of suggestions, since there is not necessarily only one “correct” viewpoint or right answer.

After having revised their knowledge of the linguistic areas mentioned earlier, on which writers draw upon so as to convey attitude and feeling, students can fill in the gaps with items appropriate to the attitude or feeling they wish to develop. They then compare their different versions and discuss what attitude each of these reflects.

Finally, all the attitudes highlighted in their versions are compared to the stance and impact of the original text.

6. Using language to signal attitude
Students work on their own draft texts in which they have tried to express a certain feeling, attitude or mood concerning a particular topic. In pairs, students swap drafts and read each other’s texts, trying to decide what mood and stance they have attempted to convey. They discuss and negotiate their interpretations of the other’s text, and assess the measure in which their use of language has succeeded in highlighting their attitude.

They then collaborate on finding ways of improving the articulation and poignancy of their viewpoint, with the help of the thesaurus and dictionary. In doing this, they can be guided by aiding questions such as these:
- Can you find adjectives and adverbs which express more precisely the feeling or mood intended?
- Would you add adjectives or adverbs anywhere?
- Can you find any places where you could add a connective word or phrase, thus qualifying or reinforcing certain points which would help make your attitude clearer?
- Are there any places where you could add modal verbs or phrases to indicate certainty, uncertainty, firmness, indecision, etc?

White and Arndt warn that ‘building up an adequate range of vocabulary and knowledge of the associations and aura of words is a long, slow process ... a lifelong preoccupation’, and that such activities are ‘but a very small step along a dauntingly long road’ (White and Arndt, 102). However, it is well worthwhile setting students thinking about ways of expanding their vocabulary, and about the ways in which lexical and structural appropriacy and an informed choice of language can influence the impact of their self-expression in both written and spoken English.

7. Signalling an opinion
The activity is aimed at demonstrating how effective writing is conditioned by its thought-provoking nature, bound to trigger a variety of emotive reactions from the reader. However, the strength with which we put forward an opinion, as well as the directness with which we present it, depends on the writing context. The following activity focuses on some of the linguistic resources of English for putting across an opinion more or less forcefully and directly.

Students are shown some samples of newspapers, letters, especially those found in columns particularly designed for readers to voice their opinion and points of view. The letters should display varying degrees of directness and forcefulness.

The students are asked to highlight those places in the texts where they feel the language and presentation to be markedly direct (strong) or indirect (tentative), forceful or restrained, and make notes of the phrases used to that effect under the right heading of a chart. They should provide evidence of their judgments by making a note of the lines referred to and by including specific examples of words and structures which support their decisions.

By pooling together their findings, the students can try, with the teacher’s help, to draw up a checklist of linguistic features writers use to make their presentation of opinion forceful and direct or, conversely, more tentative or understated. This checklist could include:
- Using personal/impersonal forms
- Using active/ passive verb forms
- Choice of words (Anglo-Saxon based: often colloquial and emotive; Latin/Greek based: often academic and
- Associations of chosen words (emotive/neutral)
- Associations of references used
- Choice of grammar structures (simple/complex sentences; direct/indirect forms)
- Using modal verbs
- Variations of normal word order (emphatic inversion, fronting)
- Using understatement, irony, juxtaposition, rhetorical questions, exclamatory statements
- Using qualifying or modifying expressions

The next step could be matching these features with different types of presentation. Finally, each group is asked to choose four or five sentences/short sections from the texts, and to reformulate them so that the opinion will come across more/less directly/forcefully, as compared to the original text.

In a subsequent session we might get students to examine their own drafts presenting an opinion, and, in pairs, to discuss and improve each other’s work according to how direct or forceful the presentation is intended to be.

8. Highlighting the focal idea

Even though writers might think they know what they are writing about, they are frequently surprised by new angles and slants on their ideas, which emerge as they write. This activity aims to develop flexibility in approaching a subject which permits different new perspectives or interpretations. When arguing and emphasizing an idea from a predominant point of view, we should, at the same time, take into account the linguistic changes which might have to be made.

In groups, students read copies of draft texts. They are asked to suggest possible themes for these texts (apart from the one apparent from the text as it stands). Each group chooses one of the themes suggested and redrafts the text with this idea as the focal point of the text. They should be instructed to pay particular attention to:
- Expanding and elaborating upon the ideas which gave them the clue to their new theme;
- Means of reorganizing and perhaps changing the arrangement of the information to fit the new angle under focus.

In a subsequent session, students can work in pairs on draft texts or their own. They exchange and read one another’s drafts, the reader trying to identify the writer’s focal idea and suggesting ways of making the respective idea more prominent, by means of such strategies as:

- Choosing stronger and more emphatic vocabulary and structures
- Adding attitudinal connective expressions
- Expanding certain points in the text
- Rearranging the order in which the ideas are presented

9. Conclusions

Introducing letters of opinion and other types of argumentative texts, especially at the appropriate levels of sophistication and attainment, can constitute a beneficial challenge for our students. Since civic consciousness is built upon the free exchange of opinions, training our students to express their opinions, attitudes and viewpoints through the medium of argumentative writing means opening their eyes to their responsibility as reflective, opinionated citizens, alert to their social environment. Not to mention that being able to write an effective letter of opinion is a stepping stone towards more ambitious forms of argumentative writing – the reflective essay, for instance.

To demonstrate this idea, we can bring to class letters by famous people (writers, philosophers, artists), which would show them that, beyond maintaining personal contact and communication, letter writing has served more elevated purposes, such as formulating and sharing one’s aesthetic creed or philosophical doctrine, stating one’s ideals and overcoming times of creative turmoil or crisis. We can point out that such letters, besides their documentary value for the history of world culture and ideas, have often reached the status of an artistic genre in its own right – epistolary literature.

Writing is communication. This is usually harder to achieve than in face to face communicating, since it lacks the additional clarification ensured by non-verbal communication – face expression, gestures, body language or posture. That is why, in written expression, language should be used more precisely, clearly and unambiguously, if it is to convey the intended message. It always seeks to establish a relationship, and, in order to communicate and relate effectively, both writer and reader need to be alive to the power of language. It is the writer’s task to keep his reader alive. And it is the teacher’s task to bring the writer to life.

References: