Clear Writing as a Problem of Russian Learners of English

Alexander Terenin

Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University

Abstract: The article reports the outcome of the research conducted in several groups of Russian learners of English and aimed at improving the rhetoric of their writing. It highlights some issues of flawed style with the focus on unclear expression. Treating unclearness as a typical drawback of students’ compositions, the author singles out the main kinds of unclear sentences and makes an attempt to find their causes. As follows from the observation unclear writing shows itself in three major manifestations: excessive writing, implicit writing and ambiguous writing. All these types of unclear sentences are caused by several reasons, which include: mother tongue interference; interference of style, genre or register; conventional nature of classroom communication; factors reducing students’ capacity to work. The obtained data and the students’ feedback enable the author to speak about certain improvement in the students’ writing at the end of each round of the research. This fact is also confirmed by comparative study of students’ papers at the end of each year: the participants in the research showed better performance than the students who were out of the experiments. The article is completed with the author’s views on how to improve the English writing of Russian students.

Key words: Excessive writing · Implicit writing · Ambiguous writing · Flawed rhetoric · Language interference · Conventionalism of classroom communication

INTRODUCTION

For many of the EFL students writing seem to be the most difficult communicative skill. This simple truth, alluded to in many research in the sphere of contrastive rhetoric, [1-3] can be confirmed by any Russian university teacher, who takes interest in his or her graduates’ career. Thus, many of my former students showing most favorable results in grammar or vocabulary often fail the written tasks of different proficiency tests and examinations. Partly it may be explained by cultural interference and the national approach to rhetoric and partly by the nature of written communication itself. Strict and regular as it is, the written language imposes on the writer rigid rules of composition, grammar, vocabulary and style.

Working as a teacher of English in a Russian University I had ample opportunities to observe the EFL students’ writing and by now I have collected and classified a good number of samples that enable me to sum up the typical drawbacks of the Russian students in their use of written English.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study was carried out in Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University (Russia) within the framework of the English syllabus adopted at the English Department. The participants were final-year students who had been actively learning English for 4 years. I started my observations in 2008 and have never stopped observing students’ writing since that. First I took my observations for a hobby of collecting amusing utterances of flawed writing. I never gave them a professional thought nor did I process them statistically. But as the time passed I came to understand that individual as it is, flawed rhetoric displays much similarity and sustainability with regard to the writing habits of different students. This idea arose my interest and starting from 2010 I subjected this phenomenon to professional treatment and statistic processing.

Each year made a separate round of the research with new participants and with currently renewed language material. Each round of the research was made of four successive and sometimes overlapping stages.

Corresponding Author: Alexander Terenin, Elabuga Institute of Kazan Federal University.
The first stage involved the study of students’ writing with my attempt to diagnose the cause of flawed rhetoric. Following the English syllabus the students wrote papers of different types: expositions, interpretations, compositions and translations from the Russian language. When grading the students’ papers I took a special notice of poor style samples and classified them in accordance with the nature of the rhetorical error.

As the ground for the classification I chose A. Hill’s conception of good style, which was popular at the beginning of the 20th century, but which has not lost its relevance up to nowadays [4]. I chose this theory because of two reasons. Firstly, as opposed to the classical rhetoric, A. Hill’s theory lays emphasis on “proper use” of English rather than on speech ornamentation, which for the EFL students seems to be more important. Secondly, the samples of bad writing, common to the participants of the present study, show much similarity to those, featured in Hill’s Foundations of Rhetoric. A. Hill’s conception centres on the idea that the notion of good style is determined by five qualities: correctness, clearness, ease, unity and force. It should be noted that one of the listed properties, namely correctness was out of the present study. There were two reasons for that. On the one hand, correctness is a self evident quality of good writing. On the other hand, incorrect writing in all its grammatical and vocabulary manifestations is impossible to describe in a single research. Thus, when classifying the rhetorical errors I placed those under four headings: Lack of Clearness, Lack of Unity, Lack of Ease and Lame Attempts to Reinforce a Sentence.

It should also be noted that the old and modern theories of good style offer a longer list of speech properties, which enlarge the given enumeration with such names as order, logic, coherence, rhythm, simplicity, naturalness, grace, wit, movement. However, as mentioned by J. Barzun and H. Graff, they are not distinct things, they can overlap and they can reinforce or obscure one another [5]. Besides, to ensure all the possible speech properties in a single composition might turn into an unsolvable problem for an FFL student. And this seems to be another argument in favour of the limited number of qualities indicated by A. Hill.

The second stage of the study was experimental. As mentioned above, the analysis of rhetorical errors involved the attempts to find out their roots. First I resorted to purely speculative reasoning and in order to check my assumptions I turned to classroom experiments, trying to aggravate the reasons of flawed rhetoric by special assignments.

These assignments included the following types:

- Choice of a language unit out of several synonyms, different in their stylistic value, connotations or shades of lexical meaning;
- Writing an essay with the use of a given set of linguistic units, different in their stylistic colouring;
- Reproducing dialogue of fiction, with the shift from colloquial idiom to the written discourse;
- Reproducing poetry with the shift to prose;
- Translating knowingly difficult texts with specifically Russian syntax.

The third stage was the stage of instructions. During the second half of the academic year I lectured students on the properties of the written language as distinguished from the spoken one. While instructing the students I focused on the rhetorical aspects of writing beginning with the idea of a good sentence and proceeding to types of cohesion in a paragraph and in a longer composition. A good part of the instruction was devoted to the typical rhetorical errors and their analysis.

The final stage comprised the study of the participants’ feedback. The students were involved in individual and group work that enabled the teacher to see whether and in what degree they comprehended the lectured material and whether they were developing their skills of writing.

Here are some types of such assignments:

- Recognizing rhetorical errors in separate utterances, their analysis, discussion and correction;
- Editing the compositions of the other students;
- Editing Russian texts with the consequent rendering them in English;
- Writing reproductions of fiction with a shift of narrator, point of view or style.

Causes of Errors: The flaws of rhetoric in students’ compositions are deeply rooted in the old approaches to teaching foreign languages in Russia. For many years these approaches have laid emphasis on developing skills
of speaking, hearing and reading. Teaching writing has been reduced to training students on spelling and writing itself has been viewed upon as a supporting skill in teaching grammar and vocabulary. As a consequence language pedagogy has slowed down developing methods of teaching writing; school and university curricula have not allotted time to writing classrooms; textbook writers have not come out with new guides of written English.

The need for change came to be understood at the end of the twentieth century when Russia removed the “iron curtain” and got wider opportunities for all kinds of cooperation with the English speaking world. Still, teaching English in Russia does not seem to have taken a critical turn for new approaches, partly because of natural resistance for change, partly because of great diversity of opinions on the perspectives of Russian education. Nevertheless, the improvement of English writing in Russian schools and Universities is now a burning issue and even the old fashioned approaches leave room for teachers and education managers to consider the reasons of flawed rhetoric and to take preventive measures against them.

The first among these reasons is the interference of the mother tongue. This is the most evident reason, common to all EFL students and alluded to in many modern researches [6-9]. Limited knowledge of English, lack of communicative experience and lack of language intuition make the students apply for the support to the mother tongue. They transfer specifically Russian patterns to the target language. As a result the utterance, clear and easy as it may sound in the original often acquires somewhat awkward expression in a student’s attempt to put it in English.

Another reason of rhetorical errors is variety interference. What I mean is the impact of a style, register or genre that is appropriate in one domain on communication in another one. A person with much experience of communicating in different domains can easily control several varieties of language. But the EFL students have a limited repertoire of language varieties. Their most common language behavior is the one appropriate to everyday situations, where they use spoken English of informal style. Therefore, it is only natural that their written papers abound in colloquial syntax, informal vocabulary and sometimes even in substandard patterns and vulgarisms.

One more reason comes from conventionalism of classroom communication. Unlike a class of natural science, a class of English implies the language not only as the means of communication, but also as its aim. The student is up against the challenge to demonstrate his or her knowledge to the teacher. Rather often this task obscures the common sense and makes the student, as Dave and Jane Willises put it [10], display rather than use the language. As a result the students’ writings include many obscure, clumsy or disjoint sentences.

Finally the flawed rhetoric may also be caused by learners’ carelessness, distress, time constraints or any other reason affecting the student’s ability to work.

Of course, this list can hardly be viewed as exhaustive. But, though inconsiderable in number, the above mentioned reasons give rise to a lot of rhetorical errors of different types. It should be noted that the attempt to establish the relations between the type of the error and its root brought mixed results. As a matter of fact, these relations diverse only in proportions, though most types of rhetorical errors may be caused by each of the reasons from the list above.

**RESULTS**

The results of the present research may be briefly verbalized in two statements.

- The rhetorical errors in students’ writing bear a sustainable character.
- Systematic work on the rhetorical aspects of writing can sufficiently contribute to improvement of the students’ compositions.

The first statement is proved by the figures, which are presented in Table 1. On the one hand, they show the proportion between the whole amount of students’ writing and flawed sentences. On the other hand, the data obtained in different years are approximately the same.

The second statement is confirmed by comparisons. One of the comparisons correlates the quantity of unclear sentences in the student’s works at the beginning and at the end of each round of the research. The other is based on the data obtained from the works of the participants and students of non-experimental groups.

As the statistics shows (Table 2), most samples of flawed rhetoric are presented by unclear sentences. It is for this reason that in the following discussion I’ll dwell on unclear writing leaving the other types of errors for upcoming articles.
Table 1: The percentage of flawed sentences in the total volume of students writing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic year</th>
<th>Lack of clearness</th>
<th>Lack of ease</th>
<th>Lack of Unity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009/2010</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/2011</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011/2012</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: The average quantity of unclear sentences in students’ writing per hundred sentences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic year</th>
<th>September – October</th>
<th>Experimental groups</th>
<th>Non-experimental groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009/2010</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>2010/2011</td>
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<td>2011/2012</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
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DISCUSSION

Different as students may be in respects of writing, their compositions often display a striking similarity in their tendency to fall into two opposite errors. On the one hand, in order to exhibit their knowledge, the learners of English burden their sentences with excessive details. On the other hand, they tend to be implicative and do not always realize that what is implied by the writer may seem obscure to the reader. Both habits give way to flawed rhetoric. In the effort to display their knowledge of the English idiom the students run the risk of becoming vague and if they are too implicative they often produce undeveloped or incomplete sentences. In addition the students’ papers are utterly notable for ambiguous expression.

Excessive Writing: Describing the Russian approaches to academic writing J. Flaitz wrote in one of his works about deliberate complexity of the Russian discourse [11]. This is really a true statement and it is also true in respect of many other types of writing. Most probably, the tendency comes from Russian approaches to teaching compositions at school where long and complicated grammatical structure of the utterance. On acquiring knowledge of English the Russian students transfer this practice to the target language, though the outcome may be most dissatisfactory. The attempts to build a long and informative sentence often result in awkward and fuzzy utterances.

It may sound like a paradox, but errors of this kind are found mostly in the compositions of assiduous students. However, the paradox resolves once we take into account the natural tendency of hard working students to exhibit their knowledge to the teacher. And though the drawbacks of excessive writing are the least frequent in the whole bulk of unclear writing, they deserve mentioning and considering.

Example 1: From a student’s composition

Vague:
A genuine writer is an artist creating a true-to-life picture of the society, who reveals the beauty and expressive potentialities of the language to the reader, a subtle connoisseur of human nature possessing the capability of penetrating into the inside of human character.

The sentence is wordy, cumbersome and therefore not quite clear. It has several drawbacks and all of them proceed from the lame sentence structure and irrational choice of words.

- The homogeneous parts artist and connoisseur are separated by a prolonged context and the reader is sure to have certain problems in comprehending the grammatical structure of the utterance.
- The parallel ideas creating... and who reveals... are expressed by heterogeneous grammatical patterns. This also makes the comprehension of the sentence somewhat difficult.
- The speech pattern possessing the capability of penetrating appears too wordy for the denoted quality.
- The two phrases human nature and human character denote the same object, thus, admitting undesired tautology into the utterance.
Following the given arguments the students were involved into a group correction work and after their discussion the idea acquired the following expression.

**Example 2:** After correction work

**Better:**
A genuine writer is an artist who creates a true-to-life picture of the society and who reveals the beauty and expressive potentialities of the language to the reader. He is also a subtle psychologist discovering to the reader the inner world of human character.

It should be noted that a long and complicated sentence is not a drawback by itself. However, such sentences are beyond the ability of an L2 student who has little experience in the language use. That is why the guide books in elementary rhetoric advise the beginner to guard his or her utterance against wordiness and excessive details [12,13]. Yet, long sentences do appear in the Russian students’ writings, especially in the translations of the Russian texts.

**Implicit Writing:** A student won’t write his composition to its best advantage unless he keeps in mind the one for whom it is intended. This principle (or the principle of the other person) is treated by TESOL researchers as reader-based writing [14]. It is also ranked among the basic fundamentals of rhetoric [15-18]. To follow this principle means to communicate ideas that meet the interests of the reader. What is the reader’s age? What views does he hold? How much does he know? What are his hobbies or avocations? These are only a few questions which should be considered by the writer. To follow this principle also means to guard the text against misunderstanding on the part of the reader. However this simple truth often escapes the students’ notice. The message that the student wants to convey is so clear in his own mind that he is inclined to think that a carelessly built utterance will make it equally clear in the mind of the reader.

**Example 3:** From a student’s composition

**Incomplete:**
He had found a good job before he graduated from the University and it gave him lots of problems in passing his exams.

The utterance is made of two clauses with a rather vague connection between them. And indeed, what may be in common between one’s finding a job and his academic problems? The assumptions may be listed in a rather long enumeration and each of the items could fill the connection gap between the clauses. The most probable explanation is, perhaps, that the job took all the character’s time and made him lag behind in his studies. However, this connection should be expressed explicitly, so that the reader could understand the utterance with little of his mental effort.

**Example 4:** After correction work

**Clear:**
He found a good job, which didn’t leave time for his studies. That is why he had lots of problems in passing his exams.

Implicit writing often marks the students’ papers of the reproductive type. Deep in his mind the student holds the idea that the teacher is well acquainted with the original. That is, probably, why he or she doesn’t go into particulars, which seem to the student unimportant. Checking up such papers I often found myself thinking that if I didn’t know the original I would have many difficulties in comprehending the communicated ideas.

**Ambiguous Writing:** Ambiguity often comes from careless placing of words. At first glance this shouldn’t present many difficulties, for no word seems out of its place if the student strictly observes the rules of grammar. However, even grammar cannot ensure Swift’s principle “proper words in proper places”.

**Example 5:** From a student’s essay

**Ambiguous:**
Eating fast food frequently spoils one’s stomach.

Though short and plain, the sentence tends to be ambiguous because of lame placing of the adverb frequently. Wandering between the left and the right parts of the utterance this adverb lets the sentence realize two meanings.

- Eating fast food can often spoil one’s stomach.
- Frequent eating fast food spoils one’s stomach.
Similar phenomenon may be observed in the following example where the speech pattern for the first time in his life also reveals its “wandering” nature.

**Example 6:** From a student’s reproduction

**Ambiguous:**
When he fell in love for the first time in his life he felt subdued and utterly humble.

This problem, however, could be solved by the use of coma placed after love or after life, but, as a matter of fact, the question of the coma use does not arise in the student’s mind for he is not aware of the ambiguity of his own sentence.

A large number of unclear sentences in students’ compositions are caused by a careless use of the pronouns.

**Example 7:** From a student’s composition

**Illogical:**
When Philip came to the dentist’s he said that the tooth was too bad to cure.

A logically built sentence holds one’s attention over its entire length. Otherwise the reader would stumble at the irrational component which would make him go back to the beginning in order to reconsider the utterance. That is precisely what happens when the reader comes across the above sentence. The logic of grammar involves correlating the pronoun he with the noun Philip as the noun of the same form (Nomina tive Case) and of the same syntactic function (Subject). However, the author of the utterance is grammatically irrational taking dentist’s as the antecedent of the pronoun.

A similar inaccuracy is observed in the next example where the pronoun he does not agree with its antecedent (the police cop) in the syntactic function.

**Example 8:** From a student’s composition

**Illogical:**
The witness said that the driver didn’t obey the traffic cop and that he had waved his rod.

The syntactic parallelism of the subordinate clauses makes the reader correlate the pronoun he with the subject of the previous clause (driver), though the writer uses he for the traffic cop which is non-grammatical.

Examples & and 8 may be viewed upon as cases of ambiguity, but only by convention, as the grammatically relevant understanding is absurd in itself: a patient cannot diagnose his case; a driver cannot signal with a traffic rod. The absurdity of the examples is exactly what allows the reader to reveal the irrational arrangement of the utterance. But the example below is a case of ambiguity where both alternatives of understanding are equally likely.

**Example 9:** From a student’s reproduction

**Ambiguous:**
Jane said to her sister that she must visit their sick mother.

A wider context of the story shows that the pronoun she stands for Jane in this utterance. Yet, to guard the idea from misunderstanding a more assiduous student applied for another pattern.

**Example 10:** From another student’s reproduction

**Clear:**
Jane told her sister to visit their sick mother.

Due to a widest range of meanings that the pronouns can convey in a composition they may become a matter of misunderstanding more frequently than any other words. And this is true not only of personal pronouns, but of other types of pronouns as well. Therefore, it is only natural that ambiguity is quite common within the subordinate clauses which are introduced by relative pronouns, such as which, who, that.

**Example 11:** From a student’s story

**Ambiguous:**
There were some teachers in the hall apart from students, who have come to listen to the deputy and to ask him a question or two.

As intended:
Apart from students there were some teachers in the hall, who have come to listen to the deputy and to ask him a question or two.

In a number of cases errors of this type result in misleading sentences (example 12). Or they can bring an undeliberate humorous effect due to the absurdity of the utterance (example 13).
Example 12: From a student’s story

Misleading:
He decided to stay in Kazan on his way to Moscow which was his native city.
As intended:
On his way to Moscow he decided to stay in Kazan which was his native city.

Example 13: From a student’s story

Absurd:
He had grey hair and rich moustache under his nose which was dyed black.
As intended:
He had grey hair and rich, black moustache.

In many cases the ambiguous use of relatives in the works of Russian students may be accounted for by the interference of the mother tongue. The Russian equivalents of which, who and that agree with the associated noun in number, case and gender. The grammatical agreement in the Russian language guards the sentence from misunderstanding even if the noun and the relative are separated by a long context. In other cases, however, ambiguous and misleading sentences come from the students’ carelessness.

It should be noted that the subtypes considered within each of the above headings represent only common errors. However, the overall picture of unclear writing may appear more varied, as the flawed rhetoric is to a great extent individual.

CONCLUSION

Clearness is one of the most essential properties of writing. However, it is this property that creates a serious problem for the learners of English. Their failure to ensure clearness downgrades the quality of writing. It is only natural that improvement of the current situation requires subduing the roots of unclear expression as well as of the other rhetorical errors. The development of the improvement program will definitely involve new research and new analysis, yet some specific steps in this direction may be offered and discussed right now.

Many of these steps are evident enough and are not introduced into the practice of teaching in Russia only because of inborn resistance to change either from the teachers or from the authorities.

These are some of the undertakings that might be helpful in subduing the cause of flawed writing.

- Enrollment of experienced teachers from English speaking countries.
- Widening the sphere of government funded academic exchange by teachers and students.
- Stimulating students’ participation in academic grand programs.
- A wider use of authentic materials in the process of teaching (original texts, audio and visual materials, internet resources, etc.).
- Stimulating students’ reading the original fiction, newspapers and scientific prose.
- Reconsidering the current curricula and syllabi with regard of increasing time allotted to English and other linguistic subjects.

It should be noted, that nowadays with Russia’s participation in the Bologna process some of the listed items has begun their development, while others are still in a deadlock.

REFERENCES