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## ***Developing Writing Skills For Professional Purposes: An Overview***

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This paper is an attempt to reiterate some of the broad policy decisions that are mentioned in Roe's article (this volume) and to elaborate some of their corollaries for the professional strand of the project. The paper is intended as a kind of credo, a statement about where the Project members' theoretical alliances lie pledged, in what direction the Project lies poised to move and what global beliefs will inform and regulate the future activities of the project team. The paper will also attempt to provide the perspectives necessary to see how the Project relates to national aspirations and needs since a central thesis of this research enterprise is that 'language is an instrument of social process', that it is a tool for getting things done and that any meaningful yardstick devised for evaluating language outcomes must necessarily include the context within which the language tasks are to be performed.

Several papers in this volume report on work done by individuals in the professional writing team. A secondary purpose of this paper is to provide a holistic framework against which the significance of each contribution to the research enterprise as whole can be better appreciated.

### **GENERAL OBJECTIVE OF THE PROJECT**

The main objective of this Project is to identify which transactions in which sectors of the economy are crucial in the achievement of the economic aspirations of the country and then to investigate a heuristic for developing a training programme to enable people involved in these transactions or hope to be involved in these transactions, to acquire the type and level of written

competence they themselves feel is essential for success in these transactions.

As the Project is constrained by shortage of time and personnel, delimitation of specific goals has been deemed not only expedient but also necessary. In developing a heuristic for investigating written communication and developing a training model we have, therefore, concentrated our preliminary efforts on transactions within the manufacturing sector since there is documentary evidence that it is the most important area of growth. According to the *Second Outline Perspective Plan (OPP2)*:

'The share of manufacturing in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is projected to increase from 27 per cent to 37 per cent by the year 2000, making Malaysia an industrial-oriented economy, increasingly dependent on manufacturing exports for growth of incomes and employment in the country. Manufacturing exports are projected to account for about 81 per cent of total exports by the year 2000'.

(●OPP2 p 21)

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

As indicated in Roe's article, this Project has taken a systems view of 'communicative competence' where a system is considered to be 'a unity of mutually relevant elements whose functions are determined by their respective contributions to the workings of the whole' (de Beaugrande, 1980). Some of the corollary notions that this view of communication would entail include the following:

1. That writing cannot be studied as a purely linguistic phenomenon but needs to be looked at with reference to the activities of which it is a part i.e. that writing is a vehicle of social process and economic function
2. That this view of language as behaviour, as a macro speech act, necessitates the study of the context that shapes and is shaped by these verbal actions.
3. That study of this context implicates the study of at least the following:
  - 3.1 the participants and their interrelations,
  - 3.2 the rules by which success/acceptability etc are measured in the target social system,

- 3.3 the conventions and belief systems that govern this system and form the presuppositional pools that operate in the production and comprehension of communications.
- 3.4 how these conventions etc manifest themselves in the verbal domain (the special structuring of the code, the rhetorical devices used, the communicative strategies used to accommodate the special demands of situation and function etc).

### INVESTIGATIVE STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN OPERATIONALIZING PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The Project has attempted to use a four-fold investigative strategy in trying to achieve its objectives

#### 1. Ethnographic Studies

The social constructionist view of language adopted by this project has profoundly influenced the research directions that the professional team has had to take. As no member of the team is a *bona fide* member of the discourse community into which potential students would seek entry, a major part of the field work for this strand of the Project has been focussed on getting an ethnographic profile of the manufacturing sector—its norms of operation (See Le Vasan, this volume); the terms in which the contract between it (the customer) and us (the suppliers) can/should be articulated (See Sargunan, this volume); the way its norms and expectations constrain the generic forms that serve its ends (Chitravelu & Sitravelu, 1992, Nair, this volume, Suad, this volume, Tam-Chelliah, this volume).

National policy documents such as *Vision 2020* and *The Second Outline Perspective Plan (OPP2)* have been studied to establish

- (a) which national economic objectives require written communication in English,
- (b) which sectors of the economy are central in the achievement of these objectives.

The investigations so far seem to indicate a very strong ancillary role for English in the economy as a whole. In a working paper presented by the Prime Minister of Malaysia at the Inaugural Meeting of the Malaysian Business Council on 28 February 1991, a document more popularly known as *Vision 2020*, the Prime

**Minister made the following statement:**

In our drive to move vigorously ahead nothing is more important than the development of human resources. the most important resource of any nation must be the talents, skills, creativity and will of its people. What we have between our ears, at our elbow and in our hearts is much more important than what we have below our feet and around us. Our people is our ultimate resource. In the 1990s and beyond, Malaysia must give the fullest emphasis possible to the development of this resource.

*(Vision 2020 para 63-64, p. 23)*

One of the main areas identified by this and other documents that outline Malaysia's future development as especially deserving of attention in meeting the strategic challenges Malaysia would have to face in achieving its objectives is the development of communication skills in a second language

With increasing globalization and internationalization of the world economy, the country will face more and more competition in trade and investment. In view of the challenges ahead, Malaysians should be well equipped with a strong base in education and training, including the ability to communicate in a second language, for example, English which is an international language of commerce.

*(The Second Outline Perspective Plan 1991-2000)*

*Vision 2020* mentions a number of possible areas of development that seem to presuppose an important ancillary role for an international language:

(a) export-led growth

'We must persist with export-led growth... We simply have no choice but to be more lean, more resourceful, more productive and generally more competitive, more able to take on the world' (para 55, pp 20-21)

(b) the development of 'a competitive, robust and resilient' economy

'Entry into the world market pits our companies against all comers and subjects them to the full force of international competition. This is a challenge we must accept not only

because the domestic market is too small but because in the long run it will actually enrich our domestic market and reduce our dependence on export' (para 54, p. 20).

(c) **Maintaining economic sovereignty and influence**

'In international relations, the emphasis should be less on politics and ideology and more on economic imperatives. Small though we may be we must strive to influence the course of international trade. To grow we have to export. Our domestic market is far too small. It is important to us that free trade is maintained... A country without adequate economic defense capabilities and the ability to marshal influence and create coalitions in the international economic arena is an economically powerless state. This Malaysia cannot afford to be' (para 81-82, pp 28-29).

(d) **Diversification of export and penetrating new markets**

'Just as we must diversify the products we export so must we diversify the markets we export to. Malaysian exporters must look also at the non-traditional markets. It will require new knowledge, new networks, new contacts and new approaches... Alone they may be small but cumulatively the markets of the developing Asian, African and Latin American countries are big' (para 53, p 20)

In addition to document study, the Project team is also conducting a number of structured interviews with key personnel – management consultants, chief executives etc – in target manufacturing institutions. This is to identify:

- (c) which of the various subsystems within the institution use written English communication to interface with one another, in what transactions, to achieve what goals and which outside system(s) interface with the institution in performing what transactions, using what written genres, with what outcomes;
- (d) the relevant parameters in the text environment: the discourse communities that produce and receive written communication in English, the goals they set out to achieve; norms of acceptability and expectation currently held by the community; the knowledge of the substructure of unspoken reference

that distinguishes the *bona fide* member of a discourse community from all others etc.

This investigation is not complete. No paper in this volume, therefore, reports on the data obtained to date. Some indication of the general mode and content of investigation can be obtained from Le Vasan (this volume) whose case study reports on the investigations she undertook in one manufacturing company, Sapura Berhad.

## **2. Genre-analysis**

Again, the fact that no member of the team is a *bona fide* writer/reader of the target genres has made text analysis a mandatory part of the preparation of the "teacher". The *modus operandi* in this investigation has been to analyze tokens (exponents of a particular genre) to establish properties of the type (the genre). We have used discourse analysis procedures to identify institutionalized regularities at various systemic levels. at the level of global or macrostructure organization, at the level of rhetorical moves, at the level of sustaining local coherence etc. So far we have analyzed proposals and feasibility studies. Nair's article reports her findings on proposals.

Computer corpora involving target genres have been created (and still being added to) both for purposes of pedagogy and for linguistic analysis, especially at the level of the formal code, the surface realization of different rhetorical moves etc. Suad's and Tam-Chelliah's articles report their tentative conclusions from a preliminary analysis of proposals.

## **3. Psycholinguistic Analysis**

It has been agreed that a number of psycholinguistic studies will be undertaken to obtain

- (a) a profile of the cognitive, metacognitive, rhetorical and linguistic strategies expert members of the target discourse community use in text production. Investigations will be grounded on introspections of expert informants and study of strategies manifest in the work (completed documents) and work in progress (plans, outlines, drafts, editing notes etc) of people recognized as experts by the discourse community,

- (b) a profile of the processing strategies employed by the population that seeks membership in the target discourse community. This will be obtained using the same means employed in arriving at the profile of expert users.
- (c) A comparison of a and b to establish the extent and area of deviation of b from a.

Owing to constraints of time and shortage of research staff this limb of the investigation has not got off the ground as yet.

#### 4. Pedagogic Investigation

This consists of a number of 'in situ' experiments to gather the empirical warrants necessary for developing a viable pedagogic model. A pilot study was undertaken in May, 1994 for this purpose. The preliminary insights that were obtained from this pilot, however, need to be worked on and fine-tuned with each successive application of the pedagogic model. As what is aimed at in this line of investigation is a heuristic for teacher preparation and student guidance, the focus is on the research process itself and not on arrival at a "final" product.

#### PEDAGOGIC STANCE

Much of the pedagogic theory that underpins the model adopted by the Project has already been enunciated in Roe's paper. Besides, the evidence from the pilot is too flimsy to infer any pedagogically-relevant certainties from it or to make any *ex cathedra* pronouncements based on it. What this section will outline, therefore, would be the initial orientations, the intuitions borne of experience, that inform and guide the selection of centres of attention likely to be of pragmatic relevance in the ultimate design of the training model for the professional sector.

As explained in Roe's paper, all current expectation and practice notwithstanding, our central intuition is to build a learning package and not a teaching package. This intuition is grounded on two premises. One, that we cannot teach language; we can only create conditions under which it can be learned. Two, that course designers and trainers are not *bona fide* members of the target discourse community and therefore would not have the 'authority' and wisdom of personal experience to be 'instructors'

This commitment to a learner-centred pedagogic orientation has several implications for pedagogy:

1. Goals and target outcomes will have to be learner-led. One corollary of this is that predetermination of which standard – British, American, Malaysian etc – we should aim at would no longer be necessary or even desirable. The learner will determine what level of attainment he would target for himself.
2. There can be no fixed lock-stepped course, since each student would chart his own trajectory of learning and be accountable for his own pace and level of learning.
3. Given the heterogeneity of learners and their goals and the outcomes they desire, traditional concepts of materials-driven course design must give way to a fresh approach that questions every traditional practice and establishes from first principles what is the optimum combination of the factors in the educational mix that would provide maximum profit. Among other things this will involve investigating:
  - (a) the locale in which learning takes place (telephone, classroom, home etc);
  - (b) the optimum role of the teacher: when, in what way, how frequently and how long a ‘teacher’ should be used and for what purposes;
  - (c) what software and what hardware should be used, in what way, for whom, at what stage of learning;
  - (d) the intensity and frequency of ‘treatment’ Given the fact that writing is a gradually acquired habit that requires long periods of apprenticeship and learning by osmosis, one strategy worth investigating is the possibility of one or more intensive periods with ‘drip’ over an extended period. What period of gestation and assimilation should be given between ‘treatments’ also needs investigation.

Our current focus is to investigate these elements in the educational mix as possible items on a menu from which an individualized diet can be produced to meet the dietary needs of each individual learner

4. A concomitant of the learner-driven, individualized course is a reorientation in teacher role, and consequently, in teacher



preparation. The teacher now no longer has the assurance of a predetermined sequence of activities comprising known content with student indigestions and their possible origins traceable to the reassuringly circumscribed area of learning sliced up for that day's serving. The teacher of the kind of ESP situation envisaged here would no longer have the secure knowledge of the content of learning he once had. The content here is ephemeral and inaccessible to the teacher. A student could seek help at any level in the hierarchy of decision nodes that a writer of any genre faces at different points in the process of writing. The teacher's expertise would be called for in areas that the teacher has no experiential wisdom in. Under these circumstances, teacher preparation would involve the abnegation of the traditional role of the teacher as 'authority' and the assumption of the humbler and more manageable role as expert analyst of genre features, expectations and norms. Four kinds of preparation are anticipated:

- (a) a preparation in terms of general understanding of the generic, more universal properties of text types and discourse community characteristics and norms found in the socio-rhetorical situation within which the teacher proposes to work,
- (h) the preparation of a corpus comprising several exponents of the target genre to identify regularities in lexis, syntax, discourse structure etc that distinguish the genre from all others;
- (c) doing a comparative study of learner corpus and competent user corpus to identify what skills and strategies the learner needs to acquire to bridge the gap between his entry point capabilities and his hoped for exit point competence;
- (d) a carefully worked out set of pedagogic principles to govern the *ad hoc* procedural choices that a learner-driven course necessarily entails.

While responsibility for learning would lie with the learner, accountability for arranging the conditions for learning to take place successfully must still remain with the trained educationist. This would involve investigation of the most beneficial use of

each of the educational resources mentioned in 3 above. It would also involve the following

5. the establishment of a criterion-referenced banding system to serve as a rough and ready yardstick for establishing entry characteristics, monitoring progress, and as a basis for making formative as well as summative evaluations. For construct validity, these bands need to be worked out in consultation with *bona fide* members of the discourse community
6. the grading of all possible target genres, from the simplest to the most difficult, using empirically worked out criteria such as complexity of rhetorical moves, sophistication of linguistic manipulation, the degree of individual creativity expected, the proportion of text that is formulaic and imitable etc.
7. the planning and sequencing of learning experiences to ensure maximum benefit at each stage of the learning process. A number of possibilities need investigation
  - (a) using only authentic tasks but sequencing the tasks in such a way that simple tasks precede more difficult ones, providing the skills and confidence to deal with succeeding tasks. This notion of grading and sequencing is based on the notion that success breeds success and the provision of fail-safe tasks at the outset of learning is a necessary pedagogic device for confidence building and sustaining the creative engagement of the learner in the learning task,
  - (b) breaking up the single authentic task of using a particular genre to achieve a specific goal in a specific transaction into a number of smaller tasks each with its own specific objectives and specified goal, emphasizing and increasing the visibility of significant rhetorical problems to be solved in accomplishing each task. The staging of these tasks could follow the natural order in which an expert writer would perform these tasks, starting from global decisions on genre, level of formality, etc and progressing downwards to decisions regarding local coherence, surface realizations and specificities of language (See Kintsch and van Dijk's model of text production),

- (c) starting with unauthentic simulation tasks which provide controlled practice in target operations before the student takes on a full-fledged authentic task,
- (d) One anticipated handicap of the second language learner in this environment is the possible absence of apprenticeship-through-reading which it is hypothesized is a prerequisite for those intuitions and habits of thinking and saying which cannot be taught but must be caught. One possible pedagogic strategy that may compensate for this serious lack of reading experience may be as follows.

Exposure to exponents of target genre



Simulation of target genre through a series of controlled tasks (See 7b and 7c above)



Doing an Authentic task



Re-exposure to target genre at higher level of sophistication, motivation and awareness



Familiarization with the kind of information about a genre that a computer corpus can give and how to access this information for self instruction



Return to authentic task

Finally, the possibility of creating templates for the more conventionalized aspects of target genres should be explored. This investigative stance is based on three pedagogically important beliefs. One, that the scientific analysis of a target genre and the provision of templates for student imitation provides some kind of ideational scaffolding or rhetorical crutch on which the learner may lean while still tottering on the climb to communicative efficiency. Two, that following conventional modes and institutionally agreed formats of production frees the individual writer from the burden of responsibility that comes with individual choice and gives him the confidence that he is using a format that has the

weight of authority of the institution or community whose collective wisdom evolved that format. Three, that imitation makes a craftsman of the learner- writer and provides him with opportunities to perfect his technical skills. Given the fact that training periods generally tend to be short, pragmatically perhaps all we can hope to achieve is the level of the craftsman. Perhaps we should leave time and the confident understanding and manipulation of technical skills in stipulated ways to achieve limited objectives to effect the quantum leap in self confidence and skill that the learner-writer needs in order to achieve the performance levels of the creative artist with the confident freedom to manipulate conventions to achieve the distinctive winning edge.

### CONCLUSION

The Project to which this volume of *Jurnal Bahasa Modern* is dedicated is seen as only a beginning, a necessary step in the creation of an interest group, an awareness-raising activity that would sensitize team members to potentially rewarding locales of investigation. This paper, therefore, has largely been a statement of intent, a report of work in progress. An intimation of directions of investigation rather than a report of achievement.

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