Faulkner (1981) as a Resource for a Writing Course at Majma’ah University

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The book under consideration is entitled “Writing Good Sentences”, (third edition, 1981) by Professor Claude Faulkner. It was first published in 1957 by Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York. The book has been organized into seventeen chapters, followed by exercises, one appendix with five sections and an index. The book gives a detailed description of the sentence and sentence components both formally and functionally on all levels: lexical, phrasal and clausal; it also presents an extended explanation of the sentence types and patterns. As its title indicates, the book intends to improve the students’ writing competence at the sentence level and ultimately at the composition level though nothing has been mentioned about composing competence beyond the sentence level.

The rationale for selecting this book for review is educational in nature. In other words, this book has been prescribed by a number of English Departments at Majma’ah University as the basic resource for the first level course Eng. 111: Basic language Skills, which is conceived to be central to the subsequent writing courses offered by the Departments. It seems, then, that the syllabus designers take the statements made by the author about the purpose of the book for granted. This review, then, is an attempt to question the relevance of the book to the specific course objectives.

The first edition of this book was contemporary with the transition from the Bloomfieldian linguistics to the Chomskyan linguistics, so to speak. Viz. in that same year Chomsky (1957) was published. It was believed to have revolutionized the linguistic theory in North America which was once dominated by American structuralist linguistics as led by Leonard Bloomfield (Harsh, 1982). Once more the year 1981 witnessed a striking coincidence of Faulkner’s third edition and Chomsky (1981); the latter has come to be known in the literature as Government and Binding model (GB) or
the extended standard theory of the theory of transformational grammar. This series of coincidences alongside the content and objectives of Faulkner (1981) reinforce the argument that the author tends to believe in the transformational view that “competence” is superior to “performance” and that “once competence has been acquired, performance will take care of itself” (Widdowson, p. 1979:49). Support for this claim is given by the author’s very statement that “[A] study of sentence structure is necessary part of any basic course in composition” (Faulkner, 1981, p. vii). Such an approach to composition writing is over-simplistic in that the sentence and composition are two different writing categories. Thus, the skills needed to write a good sentence are different from those needed to write a composition.

All sociolinguistic approaches that relate to Hymes’ model of “communicative competence” have been of the view that mere acquisition of linguistic competence does not necessarily produce good communicators (Allwright, 1979; Widdowson, 1979; McDonough and Show, 1993; Couture, 1986; Brandt, 1986). These linguists differentiate between two facts that should be integrated so that effective communication can take place: knowledge of language structure and awareness of socio-cultural rules governing the communicative use of language. This is clearly formulated by Brandt (1986, p. 93) as: “since the text grows out of a given situation, it reflects that situation in its lexical and linguistic structures”.

More elaborately, it is widely reported in the relevant literature that in the 1970s the linguistic interest shifted from approaches that centred upon “linguistic competence” to those advocating “communicative competence”. Such scholars as Hymes (1968), Van Dijk (1972) and Halliday (1979) seriously questioned the structural and transformational concern with the sentence-based description of language. As a result language came to be conceived as “meaning potential” (Halliday, 1979, p. 27), and that language use to negotiate meaning exceeds its well-formedness to include its acceptability (Hymes, 1979). Van Dijk (1972, p. 3) argues that sentence-based description of the structures underlying utterances is inadequate. Therefore, he maintains, the concept of the “text” has been introduced to function “as the basic linguistic unit, manifesting itself as discourse …”. Couture (1986, p.1) acknowledges the influence of Halliday’s “systemic linguistics” on writing pedagogy, maintaining that the systemic view of language as a
social and semiotic phenomenon has three “dramatic consequences for scholarly investigation of written discourse”. First, it enables theorists to reconsider the explanation of language as lexical and syntactic components and approach it as a textual system instead. Second, it requires writing theorists to conceive of the text as a communicative event rather than something that illustrates a theoretical point. Third, it helps “develop an adequate functional theory that unites speakers, listeners and situation” (p. 2)

These developments have enormously revolutionized writing pedagogy in different parts of the world (Couture, 1986). Yet, they seem to have fallen on a deaf ear in many English departments in the Arab world “since writing course designers still believe in the acquisition of grammar as a key to the mastery of writing skills” (Ezza, 2010, p. 36). Moreover, Ezza argues that grammar-based approach to writing is defective in three respects. First, all things being equal, such a grammatical process as generating a deep structure from a surface structure “is of no practical use for the students’ writing needs”. Second, grammar comes in different theories that cannot be compromised in a specific writing program. Third, focusing on grammar “overshadows the nature of writing as a communication skill where grammar is one of many resources that writers resort to in order to enrich their communicative intent” (ibid)

Of course, the textbook under consideration did not allow for these developments in the linguistic theory, and, therefore, writing pedagogy, despite that fact that it was contemporary with their earlier beginnings. It assumes a bottom-up approach to writing. Viz. since writing good sentences is central to composition writing, the students should be sufficiently taught the sentence structure before they can proceed to compose at paragraph and essay levels. However, such an approach to writing is less than satisfactory since acquisition of correct structures is open-ended. It is well-known in the transformational literature that grammatical rules are finite but can generate infinite grammatical structures both in terms of the number of sentences in a language or sentence length produced by a given grammar rule (cf. Radford 1986). So it would take the student a lifetime to acquire enough grammar to write correctly.

It is clear, then, that this textbook is hardly relevant to the specific course objective which has been clearly set as: “since the study of sentence structure is inseparable from
any basic composition course, such study must be profound rather than shallow, preparing the student for the next writing course in level two”. It is unfortunate that experience does not seem to support this intention. To date no teacher’s report has indicated that the students did benefit from this book in improving their composing skills. In fact, there are many dissenting voices concerning the textbook’s relevance among the teachers. The subsequent writing course concentrates more on composing processes and paragraph development in ways that hardly remind of the “basic skills” acquired from Faulkner (1981). Dr. Maisaa Tubail, an Eng. 111 Professor at King Saud University, concludes, in a correspondence with the author in 2009, that “[B]eing a grammar-oriented book with intense focus on sentence writing, the content of the book does not help students transfer that knowledge to writing lengthier structure, e.g. paragraphs and essays”. Thus, it can be argued that the book falls short of achieving its own objectives, let alone the course objectives that serve as an antecedent for more advanced writing courses in a post-discourse era.

To conclude, the need to write this review has been given impetus by the fact that many teachers voiced critical comments on what they felt to be an acute mismatch between the writing course objectives and its basic resource. Viz. while the course sets out to provide a preliminary training in writing, the textbook focuses on the acquisition of grammar.

References
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