

Approaches to teaching English writing: A research note

This research note is an outcome of my participation in the CEGLOC English Section Faculty Development Workshop held on January 19, 2016. In the workshop, themed “exchanging teaching methods for academic writing,” I had the opportunity to share my experiences of teaching English writing classes. I also presented a preliminary literature review of current approaches to teaching English writing. Thus, this research note first presents a brief theoretical discussion on the major features of the three main approaches to teaching English writing (product, process, and genre) and then showcases the main strengths and weaknesses of those approaches. Finally, it recommends an integrated approach called the process-genre approach (PGA), which, in my experience, is the most effective approach.

1. Introduction

Among the four basic skills of teaching/learning a second language, writing is considered the most important yet difficult skill for both teachers and learners. In the context of English as a Second Language/English as a Foreign Language (ESL/EFL), students face difficulties primarily with structural aspects such as selection of appropriate vocabulary, use of correct grammar, and creation and development of ideas and thoughts around particular themes or topics. It is more difficult for students to develop functional language skills, considering the different social contexts of creativity (Kim & Kim, 2005). Thus, this research note discusses the different approaches to teaching ESL/EFL writing while addressing their strengths and weaknesses in a theoretical sense as well as based on classroom experience and signposts the evolution of these approaches to fulfilling the wider learning needs of the second-/foreign-language learner (S/FLL).

2. Approaches to teaching writing

2.1 The product approach

The product approach is one of the traditional approaches that emphasize the outcome of writing. In this approach, teacher-supplied materials are imitated, copied, and transformed by the learner (Nunan, 1991). Writing is seen as being mainly about linguistic knowledge with the proper use of syntax, words, and the unified strategies (Pincas, 1982). Therefore, the primary goal of product writing is an error-free, coherent text (Sun & Feng, 2009). It is a teacher-centered approach that does not offer students opportunities to interact, discuss, or receive feedback from the teacher or peers (Mourssi, 2013). There is no room for

students to be innovative in their writing because the product is more important than the process of learning to write.

According to Steele (1992), there are four stages of teaching in the product approach: familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing. In the familiarization stage, the teacher provides model texts to students to highlight certain features of a particular text. In the controlled writing stage, the teacher gives students controlled exercises that focus on grammatical features and related vocabulary. In the third stage, guided writing, the student writes a text that is similar to the model text. In the final stage, students free-write a similar text on their own.

Since this approach encourages the learner to use model texts and produce similar writing, it hinders learner creativity (Murray, 1980). The model texts inspire students to use the same structure in different settings and apply the same format even if the content impedes the writers rather than empowers them.

2.2 The process approach

Process writing emphasizes linguistic skills and the steps involved in writing, such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing rather than linguistic knowledge (Badger & White, 2000; Zeng, 2005). Process writing emphasizes both the writing process together with the writer's individual, independent creation. The teacher's role in the process writing classroom is that of a facilitator who draws out the learner's potential. As the name suggests, the process of writing is more important than its social context. This approach posits that writing requires linguistic skills rather than linguistic knowledge. Therefore, skills such as planning, drafting, and revising are emphasized.

Nunan (1991) states that no text can be perfect, but a writer gets closer to perfection by producing, reflecting on, discussing, and reworking successive drafts of a text. Feedback through peer reviewing and teacher-student conferences are important aspects in this approach that help students make improvements in their writing. Myles (2002) argues that the process approach to writing works best when learners can receive feedback, take time to revise, and then seek input when they revise their writing. Compared to the product approach, the process approach is more effective because it encourages students to follow their own personal approach to writing in accordance with their needs. Tribble (1996, p.39 as quoted in Badger & White 2000, p.154) divides process-based writing into four stages: prewriting, composing/drafting, revising, and editing. However, others provide more detailed stages that number as many as 13 (White & Arndt, 1991; Hedge, 2005; Steele, 1992). The stages in this approach are cyclical; this means the writer may go back to previous stages of writing when necessary.

Although the process approach was developed in reaction to the restrictions of the product approach, it has also been criticized for its several drawbacks. Badger & White (2000) argue that it ignores the social context variations of the

process of writing. Although the writer and the written content are different, this approach focuses on the common process of writing for everyone. Similarly, the lack of a good model is another serious drawback of this approach.

2.3 The genre approach

The genre approach to teaching writing was developed to overcome the deficits of the process approach and represents the merging of some of the techniques of both product and process approaches. Therefore, “like the product approach, the genre approach regards writing as a linguistic activity, but unlike the product approach, it emphasizes that writing varies with the social context in which it is produced” (Badger & White, 2000, p.155). Paltridge (2004) considers writing as a socio-cultural exercise. Accordingly, the genre approach emphasizes successful communication while teaching a specific genre. In this approach, Reppen (2002, p.322) argued that “with the direct instruction of particular text features, students can better understand how to make a piece of writing more effective and appropriate to the communicative purpose.” The genre approach pays more attention to the reader than to learner expectations. It is further influenced by subject matter and the writer-audience relationship.

According to Badger & White (2000), there are three stages of writing. The first stage is called “modeling the target.” In this stage in the class, a model of a specific genre is introduced and examined. In the second stage, teachers and learners construct the text. Then, through doing exercises and manipulating the text, learners develop relevant language forms. Finally, in the third stage, learners construct an independent text as a complete product.

To sum up, the genre-based approach “acknowledge that writing takes place in a social situation, and is a reflection of a particular purpose, and understand that learning can happen consciously through imitation and analysis” (Badger & White, 2000, p.157). However, the approach has its critics. Both textual and socio-cultural knowledge belong to genre knowledge; therefore, it is difficult to identify the exact knowledge that teachers need to impart to the students (Paltridge, 2004). It is also possible that non-native teachers might not understand certain genres. Table 1 shows a comparison of various aspects of writing in process and genre approaches.

Table 1: Process approach versus genre approach

Attribute	Process approach	Genre approach
Main Idea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing is a thinking process • Concerned with the act of writing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Writing is a social activity • Concerned with the final product
Teaching Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on creative writer • How to produce and link ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasis on reader expectations and product • How to express social purposes effectively
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes processes of writing transparent • Provides basis for teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes textual conventions transparent • Contextualizes writing for audience and purpose
Disadvantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumes writing in first language (L1) and second language (L2) is similar • Overlooks L2 language difficulties • Insufficient attention to product • Assumes all writing uses the same processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires rhetorical understanding of texts • Can result in prescriptive teaching of texts • Can lead to over-attention to written products • Undervalues skills needed to produce texts

Source: Hyland, 2003, p.24 as quoted in Hasan & Akhand, 2010, p.81

3. Limitations of the teaching approaches

All three approaches to teaching writing discussed above have some limitations. For example, the product approach emphasizes the production of writing via imitation and focuses on linguistic knowledge and accuracy rather than on necessary skills. Over-concentrating on the final product, it sometimes ignores the context and the audience. On the other hand, the process approach assumes all writing processes are similar, thereby overlooking L2 students' specific difficulties. It also does not provide sufficient attention to the final product; rather, it focuses on the process of writing from planning through evaluation. Similarly, the genre approach "can lead to over-attention to written products" (Hyland, 2003, p.24) and "learners may be too dependent on teachers" (Nordin & Mohammad, 2006, p.79). Moreover, the genre approach over-focuses on the reader and gives minimal attention to the learner's viewpoint.

4. Overcoming the limitations: The process-genre approach (PGA)

Many researchers and educationists have argued that it is not necessary to stick with just one approach all the time. All three approaches discussed in

the previous sections have received various criticisms for their limitations with regard to teaching second-language writing. The incorporation of several approaches can overcome the limitations so that students can develop clear and coherent writing skills. This note suggests using one of the synthetic approaches to teaching writing that draw on the strengths of more than one approach. One of the recommended approaches is the process-genre approach (PGA), which is briefly described below.

As the name suggests, PGA is a synthesis of process and genre approaches. Process and genre approaches to teaching writing can be complementary rather than contradictory. Particularly, their steps are mutually complementary. Badger and White termed this synthetic approach as the process-genre approach; it is concerned with language knowledge (product and genre approaches), the context and the purpose of the writing (genre approach), and the skills required for language use (process approach). Exploring the potential of learners in the process of writing and providing feedback to produce optimal output is required to develop students' writing skills (Badger & White, 2000). In PGA, the purpose of writing, the subject or topic of writing, and the writer-audience relationship are all made clear at the preliminary stage of teaching writing, which helps students realize how texts are written according to their purpose, audience, and message (Macken-Horarik, 2002). Once the students become familiar with the text organization, structure, and language used for the particular type of writing, they repeatedly practice writing processes such as prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing in this approach. Learners are provided with continued feedback during the writing process. The forms of feedback could be peer review and feedback, teacher-written feedback, or feedback in student-teacher face-to-face seminars.

5. Lessons learned from the classroom

The English Writing course for sophomore undergraduate students is designed to be a bridge between writing for general purposes and for a specific academic purpose. The course objective is to teach the basic knowledge and skills that students will need to write academic papers. Therefore, the syllabus introduces the basics of academic writing and gives students the opportunity to practice the skills they have learned in the classroom. The students in the writing class learn the processes and steps of clear and cohesive writing and practice those skills in and out of the classroom.

If we chose one of the approaches discussed in Section 3 to describe the classroom activities, "process approach" would best sum things up. Although students are introduced to a model, whether a sample paragraph or an essay, they do not imitate it as in the product approach. Linguistic knowledge and accuracy are important in academic writing. However, they are not the only focus. Moreover, since this course is designed to introduce academic writing, students are introduced to one genre: academic writing/essay writing (with expectations of

journal writing as homework). Moreover, students are made aware of the social context of their writing by identifying the audience and purpose of their writing.

Thus, the course is designed mainly based on PGA but with certain improvements. The students practice various classroom activities that enhance the capacity of using language effectively, such as brainstorming, discussion, and rewriting. Students start with a brainstorming session, then structure and organize their ideas, prepare their first draft, exchange their writing for peer feedback, do the necessary editing, revise their essay, sit for a student-teacher face-to-face conference, do the final revision, and submit the assignment. Students practice some of the steps above recursively until they get the expected result. These are the steps of the process approach. However, this is actually an improved process approach, because students do multiple revisions and always try to improve the quality of their writing so that the final product turns out to be a good quality paper. This is unlike the conventional process approach in that the class activities reinforce not only the process of writing but also the importance of the final product. Moreover, students are constantly evaluated during the writing process and not only at the final stage of writing. Therefore, this improved process approach of teaching writing worked better in this writer's classroom and, arguably, would work better in others as well.

Although the process approach is more appropriate under these circumstances than other approaches to teaching writing, there are still some drawbacks to this approach. One of the problems faced is the effectiveness of peer feedback. Often times, students cannot recognize the errors or they do not want to point out the mistakes of their peers, even if they do recognize them. Moreover, their feedback is rarely aimed at the content and meaning of writing; rather, it is highly focused on grammatical errors. Thus, it is a big challenge for instructors to utilize peers as a valuable resource for learning. Another concern is the number of students in the class. In a large classroom with more than 40 students, it is challenging to have a face-to-face conference with each student due to time constraints. In this case, the instructor should take every chance to interact with the students using alternative means, such as emailing or collaborative work.

6. Conclusion

Teaching writing to ESL/EFL learners can be significantly more effective and enjoyable if the instructor is able to make the best use of the advantages of different teaching approaches with flexibility to meet the students' needs. This requires the careful planning and implementation of various approaches, methods, and techniques in the classroom and beyond. The emergence of new approaches and their development in the field of teaching English writing reflect the fact that the field is constantly developing. Furthermore, new approaches are on the way due to the increasing demand for quality pedagogy of L2 teachers and learners.

In my classroom, I follow PGA with some modifications depending on the students' needs in the specific class. However, in the final analysis, I am not arguing that one or the other approach is right or wrong. I believe it is the teacher's responsibility to discover the most suitable approach based on students' background and interest, their level of language skill, class size, and other factors of the learning environment.

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