

USING THE PROBLEM SOLVING APPROACH TO TEACH WRITING TO EFL LEARNERS

Hawanum Hussein

Universiti Tenaga Malaysia

Samsilah Roslan, Nooreen Noordin, Maria Chong Abdullah

Universiti Putra Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Teaching adult EFL learners how to write in English can be a challenging task as teachers have to consider the students' learning needs and expectations. This paper discusses past and present writing approaches highlighting some concerns of both teachers and academicians. The paper also provides a description of a trial run of the problem solving approach (PSA) that was used in a writing class for EFL students. This approach combines elements of two current approaches – task-based learning and problem-based learning- in an attempt to find an approach that helps EFL students write better essays. Findings and recommendation of the trial run of the PSA are given at the end of the paper.

Keywords : adult EFL learners, problem-based learning, task-based learning, language learning, writing skills

Introduction

Teaching writing skills is a challenging task. It becomes more difficult if the students come from various academic backgrounds and have different learning needs. Teachers teaching writing skills have many approaches and strategies to choose from to design their writing class. The communicative process approach is by far the most widely used approach in many Malaysian classrooms. However, many teachers in Malaysia find that the process approach in its entirety cannot be implemented due to many reasons. These would include time constraints, large classes and students who are too teacher dependent. Of late, there have also been calls for accuracy in writing classes after decades of focus on meaning. In addition to this, the English teacher hears about new approaches and strategies such as problem-based learning and using blogs to teach language. The writing teacher is sometimes left wondering how to devise a suitable lesson plan that incorporates both old and new knowledge about writing. This paper discusses a three-week trial run of a quasi experimental treatment. The

proposed treatment uses a writing approach that combines elements of two current approaches – task-based learning (TBL) and problem-based learning (PBL) - in an attempt to find an approach that helps students write better essays. The trial run was conducted to see the effectiveness of this approach and to identify possible problems before the actual research treatment is carried out. The paper begins with a discussion of how writing pedagogy has changed over the decades and describes the initial findings on the use of a problem solving approach (PSA) in a writing class for International students learning English as a foreign language.

Past and Current Approaches in Teaching Writing

The approach to teaching writing to adult nonnative speakers of English at secondary and higher education has changed a number of times. In 1940s and 1950s, the audio-lingual method was widely used in the writing classroom. Writing served to reinforce oral patterns of the English language. Thus, the writer spent a lot of time doing sentence drills which included fill-ins, substitutions, transformations and completions. Students were also asked to manipulate linguistic forms within the texts (Byrd & Galligane, 1990; Paulston & Dykstra, 1973). These writing tasks were called controlled composition tasks and the focus was on grammatical structures that students had to learn. Content was usually given and the writing exercises were a means to reinforce or test the accuracy of grammar use.

More advanced learners were taught techniques adapted from writing classes for native speakers which emphasized the use of outline with headings and subheadings (Kelly, 1984). Writing classes stressed imitation of paragraph or essay forms (Kaplan & Shaw, 1983; Reid & Lindstrom, 1985). This was called the models approach to writing. However, students found the approach dull as they were given topics of no interest to them. They also found it frustrating as their products were not as good as the essays they were supposed to model (Kelly, 1984). Meade and Ellis (1970) criticized this approach as they found no relationship between the models approach to writing and the method used in actual writing. Raimes (1983) agreed with this and saw the model approach as one that inhibits creativity.

The 1970s saw a new direction in teaching writing. Due to influences from research on L1 and a reaction against the form-dominated writing approach, teachers began adopting the process approach. In this approach, the attention is on the writer as a learner and creator of a written text. There is less focus on accuracy and grammatical forms and more on process, meaning making, inventions and multiple drafts. Zamel (1983) claimed that accuracy could be dealt with during the last stage (editing stage), giving fairly advanced students

the confidence to write. Taylor (1976) supported this notion and went on to state that even ESL students with low proficiency could compose written texts and that emphasis on accuracy would inhibit the writing process. In this approach, students often choose their own topics and use their personal experience to guide their writing. Other writing assignments could include responding to a shared experience or to literature pieces such as a poem or a short story (Spack, 1985). Writing essays is very communicative in nature, and is seen as process from brainstorming ideas, outlining or rough notes, drafting, second drafting and editing (Kelly, 1984).

In 1986, some teachers and theorists began moving away from the process approach as they believed that this approach was inappropriate for academic demands. Thus, a content-based approach was adopted. In this approach, the writing class became part of an adjunct course attached to other disciplines. Writing topics are often assigned based on a particular discipline or course that the language course is linked to (Snow & Brinton, 1988).

At around the same period in time, another academically oriented approach, English for academic purposes (EAP), was introduced into the ESL classroom. This approach uses a theme-based syllabus which is not necessarily linked to a content course. EAP focuses on the reader as a representative of an academic discourse community. The writer is exposed to forms of academic writing as characterized by their academic demands and expected discourse. This approach is similar to the form-dominated approach. However, the emphasis is not on grammatical forms but on rhetorical forms. Thus, the writing course is perceived as one that will prepare the student for other academic writing assignments they will encounter in their courses (Shih, 1986).

In the past two decades, a number of researchers have highlighted the significant differences between learning to write in L1 and L2. This new information casts doubts on the efficacy of past writing approaches and methods that were primarily based on L1 learners. Frodesen (2001) believes that wholesale adoption of L1 writing theories and practices are misguided in L2 composition classes due to the differences in learning needs. Silva (1993) also pointed out that there are significant differences between the learning needs of L1 and L2 writers. L2 writers require a special and systematic approach that takes into account the differences in culture, rhetoric and linguistics. These differences in learning how to write are again highlighted by Hinkel (2003) through his large scale empirical study which analyzed differences between L1 and L2 writers' texts. Hinkel discovered that advanced L2 writers could only write simple texts with severely

limited lexical and syntactic repertoire even after years of ESL and composition training.

Thus, researchers such as Frodesen (2001) and Hinkel (2003) recommend that current L2 writing pedagogy include both form and meaning. L2 writers require explicit pedagogy in grammar and lexis to write meaningfully and appropriately (Hinkel, 2006). L2 experts also maintain that a lack of grammatical and lexical instruction disadvantage L2 learners in their vocational, academic and professional careers. Language quality should be emphasized as grammar and lexis affect meaning in written discourse. L2 writers are also often judged by their language control and writing ability (Celce-Murcia, 2001; Christie, 1998; Martin, 1992). Experts also suggest that reading be integrated into the writing class to help students write better prose. To help students notice how grammar and lexical items are used, reading passages from different genres can be used as a springboard for instruction on grammar and contextualized vocabulary (Hinkel, 2006).

Current Approaches in Pedagogy and SLA

While most Malaysian teachers are using the Communicative approach in their language classes, many teachers are beginning to adopt a new approach due to the paradigm shift from teaching to learning. Cross (1999) suggests that this paradigm shift is based on relatively new knowledge that academicians now know about how students learn. Students learn best through making cognitive connections, social connections and experiential connections. This new understanding of how students learn has resulted in a change in teaching focus, from teaching to a new focus on learning (Bar & Tagg, 1995; Tan, 2007). One of the more prominent tools of this new focus on learning is problem-based learning (PBL).

PBL originated in the medical field and works very well with courses that are content based. Essentially the teacher is the guide while students themselves decide what they wish to learn through the resolution of ill-defined and complex problems related to their field of study (Torp & Sage, 2002). There is robust empirical data to indicate the effectiveness of PBL over traditional classrooms. Research done mostly in the medical field, sciences and gifted education shows that students who were given PBL instruction were able to seek and collaboratively construct extensive, flexible knowledge that transfers to other settings (Albenese & Mitchell, 1993; Jonassen, 1997; Hmelo-Silver, 2000; Derry et al., 2002;). PBL students also develop better problem-solving skills compared to students in a traditional curriculum (Patel, Groen, & Norman, 1993; Jonassen, 1997). Research also indicates that PBL help students develop better self-directed learning skills (Dolman & Schmidt, 2000; Hmelo & Lin, 2000). There is

nominal research to show that PBL increases intrinsic motivation and good collaborative skills. Although PBL has become increasingly more popular as a tool for instruction, there is not much research or empirical data to support its use in a language proficiency course.

Task based learning is the most popular and widely used method in the Communicative Approach. In the past few years, there has been a tremendous amount of research on task-based learning as 'task' is perceived as an important construct in language learning. 'Task' is a powerful construct because it is the primary means to implement the experiential learning strategy in language learning and to ensure learners are given opportunities to learn the language through communication (Ellis, 2003). Although widely used in many ESL classes today, task-based learning has come under criticism. There is no empirical evidence to show that it is more effective than the traditional teaching approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Seedhouse, 1999; Swan, 2005). Some critics also point out that task-based learning is inappropriate for ESL and EFL classes that meet for only one to three hours per week as learners need more time to develop proficiency (Lightbown, 2000; Lightbown & Spada, 1990). As task based learning focuses on language fluency and less on accuracy, some critics also maintain that it has limited use for academic preparation (Richard & Rogers, 2001; Widdowson, 1990, 2003).

Thus, while PBL seems to be the most effective tool that is in line with the paradigm shift, using it in a language proficiency class is problematic. PBL does not seem to work well within the ESL or EFL (ESOL) classroom as PBL was never meant to be an approach to teach language. Task based learning is widely used but is deemed by some critics as being inappropriate for academic purposes. There is also no empirical data to indicate that it is more effective than traditional approaches. In addition, accuracy is secondary in the Communicative approach while research in writing pedagogy recommends the inclusion of both form and meaning. The PSA was designed in an attempt to reconcile all these new findings to create a language learning approach that is effective for EFL learners at university.

The Problem-Solving Approach

The PSA is designed based on two major assumptions. Firstly, through task based learning, language learning happens through meaningful interactions in authentic language situations. Secondly, PBL works on the assumption that learning happens through shared ideas and knowledge construction through collaborative problem-solving group work. Ng (2008) supports both these assumptions in his study involving 200 second-year EFL engineering students

from the School of Materials Engineering in Nanyang Technological University who were enrolled in a technical writing class. In his research, the majority of the students reported that collaborative learning through problem solving enabled them to learn the material better and to improve their formal report writing. The PSA's theoretical framework is primarily based on the Social Cognitive learning theory. This theory states that learning happens through social learning, cognitive exploration, scaffolding through the Zone of Proximal Development as well as peer learning. In short, the PSA creates a learning environment where the teacher is able to scaffold language learning by giving grammar and vocabulary task based activities. The collaborative group problem solving and active teacher monitoring of discussions create the PBL learning environment that fosters knowledge construction. The diagram below illustrates the main components of the PSA.

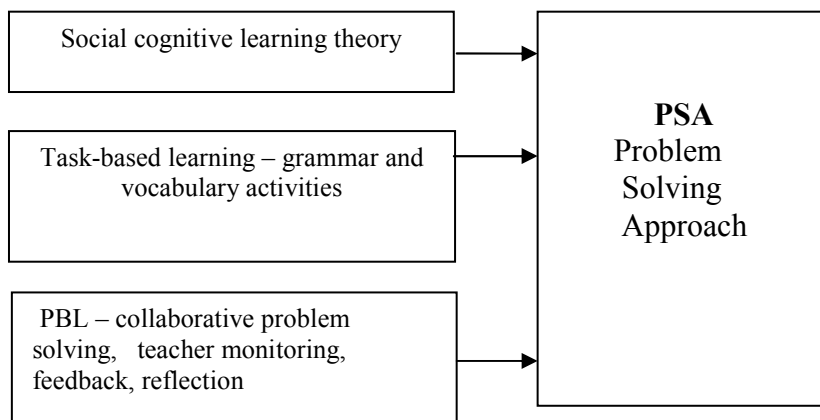


Figure 1: Components of the PSA

The PSA writing class followed the basic flow of the PBL class with a few changes. First, in stage 1 the ill-structured problem was introduced through language activities which were primarily task based in nature. An ill-structured problem is one where no ready solution or answer is available. The teacher used task based activities to pre teach useful vocabulary items and grammatical structures the students would need during their group work and essay writing. This language scaffolding was required as these students had limited vocabulary and knowledge of syntax. In PBL, minimal input is given by the teacher as the students are expected to learn what content they need through group discussions. After the language scaffolding activities, the class was divided into small groups to discuss how to solve the given problem. This is stage two in PBL. The teacher monitored the discussion and guided the students as necessary while

questioning their ideas and suggestions. The PSA skipped stage 3 (research and re-grouping to share ideas and information) as the EFL students were not proficient enough to process articles written for L1 learners and also due to time constraints. In stage 4 students were asked to present their solution(s) and received feedback from both their classmates and the teacher. Next, instead of a group project or report, the students wrote an outline and later an essay individually based on the outline that the teacher had corrected. Stage 5 (reflection) happened at the end of the PSA class where the teachers asked the students to reflect and describe their perceptions of the PSA class.

The objective of the trial run was to see if the proposed approach could improve writing in terms of content, grammar and organization of ideas. It was also carried out to identify possible problems that may occur later during the actual research.

Methodology

The subjects

The participants in this study were 24 International students whose mother tongue is either Arabic or Persian. These students had low to mid intermediate language proficiency and were enrolled in a 10 week (7 hours per week) Intensive Academic English writing course. Their ages range from early twenties to late forties as they were a mixture of both undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The writing class

The writing class was based loosely on the IELTS as it has its beginnings as a preparatory class for the IELTS. The first one third of the class syllabus was devoted to teaching Academic Task 1 while the remaining weeks focused on Academic Task 2 – the opinion essay. The writing class took Task 2 further by integrating the academic essay format into the required answer. The first essay the students wrote in class was an individual effort with the following argumentative question: “Some people say, a man cannot be a good nurse. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?” The PSA approach was later incorporated into the writing class to introduce group problem solving. This approach used problem solving to provide opportunities for language practice and knowledge construction. The next two essay questions were presented as problems they must solve in groups. The first introduced the problem of International students cheating during the exam and the second introduced the problem of students smoking on a non-smoking campus. Then the students were divided into groups of four people to solve the problem. To motivate group

discussion, the teacher announced to the class that the grade they would get for the two essays would depend on the quality of their discussion. Since the class had never done any collaborative problem solving activity in their writing class, the teacher provided scaffolding by discussing the texts and elicited common solutions that did not work well. For example, putting up more ‘no smoking signs’ around the campus would not solve the smoking problem as these signs do not stop students from smoking on campus. As the groups discussed possible new solutions to the given problems, the teacher monitored their discussion and provided guidance as necessary. After the discussion period, the students were told to write an outline and an essay individually based on the ideas they had discussed during group work. The trial run was carried out for a period of three weeks.

Data collection and analysis

Students submitted both outlines and essays which were then graded for content, organization and language. The essays were scored according to the guidelines set by IELTS. Each essay carried 10% of the coursework marks. The scores of essay 1 (individual work) and essay 3 (group discussion & individual writing) of each student were compared and analyzed using the paired sample t test.

The class was also given a reflection worksheet the last week of the course to obtain their perceptions to the PSA essay writing lesson. This qualitative data was collected to describe the student’s experiences and reactions to the PSA in their writing class.

Results and Discussion of the Trial Run

In order to assess the effect of the PSA on writing, the scores of essay 1 (individual) and essay 3 (group problem solving) were compared. The table below describes the paired sample t test.

Table 1: Essay 1 and essay 3: scores and results of t-test.

	Mean	df	t	p
Essay 1	5.1250	23	-4.218	0.000
Essay 3	6.2708			

Table 1 shows a p value = .000 ($p < .05$) indicating a significant difference between essay 1 and essay 3 scores. The paired sample t-test run revealed a significant gain in mean scores. ($t = -4.218$, $df = 23$, $p < .05$, 2-tailed). The result suggests that the difference in scores has a less than 5% probability of

being due to random chance. Therefore, the treatment can be considered to be the source of the significant increase in the mean scores.

Excerpts from the Reflection Worksheet

In the last week of class, the EFL learners were given a reflection worksheet to gauge their reactions to the two problem solving activities carried out in the writing class. The answers obtained from the worksheet would provide useful information to improve the proposed PSA. Generally, the students gave positive feedback about working in groups to solve the given problems. Below are some excerpts:

Excerpt 1:

“I like working in groups because we can find a lot of idea when we share with other people in groups. More brains are better than one.” (S2)

Excerpt 2 :

“Yes, I like group work because it assisted us to reduce the difficult of this class.” (S8)

Excerpt 3:

“Group work produce efficient result. For example, produce many idea and save our time.”(4)

Excerpt 4:

“Group give me more ideas, learn from students who have experience.” (S5)

When the students were asked to reflect on whether group work helped them write better assignments, feedback was also generally positive.

Excerpt 1:

“Yes, help me because we discuss much before we use the ideas in my own essay.” (S13)

Excerpt 2:

“Working in groups help me to know my mistakes in grammar and how to correct them. Working in groups help me to know more ideas and to give more support. Also, it helped me to organize what I am going to write” (S1)

Excerpt 3:

“The students can correct other people when they make wrongs. It is better if you choose someone who is better than you in the group to get some benefits from him” (S3)

Excerpt 4:

“Yes, because sometime I have problem in grammar or spelling so I can ask them to help me.” (S6)

The worksheet also asked the students if they like to solve problems in their English class. Two students did not enjoy the activities as illustrated by the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1:

“Sometimes, no because stressed.” (S7)

Excerpt 2:

“No, because I will be very stress.” (S4)

However, the majority of the students gave favorable responses and would like to have more problem-solving group work in the English class. The next two excerpts are examples of the students’ positive reactions.

Excerpt 1:

“I give my ideas. Also, I can write about students’ experience. Not only that it helps me to know how other people think.” (S1)

Excerpt 2:

“ Yes, I like that because the English class related to our life problems.” (S8)

Discussion of Group Problem Solving

The group discussion seemed to have a positive effect on the 1st stage of writing – getting ideas. Students often complained that they were unable to generate good ideas by themselves when writing the 1st essay. Some had problems expressing their ideas in English while some had difficulty finding the right vocabulary items. While class discussion for the 1st essay was lively, many of the ideas generated by the class were rather sexist in nature depending on which side of the gender fence the student decided to be on. Some of these responses included men getting angry very quickly while women were emotionally volatile. A few indicated that women make better nurses because they are mothers and therefore automatically more able to nurture. Even after discussion on the weaknesses of these ideas, the students persisted on including them in their writing.

Group discussion on the next two essays provided opportunities for students to express and agree on ideas collaboratively. One group was observed to list enthusiastically, possible ideas in Arabic and then translating them into English using a dictionary. Another group went off topic and presented ideas on how to help a smoker quit. This included ideas like giving out leaflets about nicotine patches and herbal remedies. The teacher pointed out that the problem was about preventing students from smoking on a non-smoking campus. When they looked lost, the teacher suggested they asked a group nearby which had managed to generate a few interesting ideas. While the discussion was going on for the first problem, the teacher had to remind the students that they were looking for possible solutions to the given problem. The outline and essay were to be written individually based on ideas generated by the group. This was necessary as the teacher observed that some groups had elected the most proficient student to write the outline while the rest were happy ‘passengers.’ The second group problem solving discussion went better as the students realized that each student was responsible for his own writing and that there were no ‘free rides.’ Students were also more involved and managed to generate better ideas the second time around. This observation was in line with previous research which suggests group discussion of ill-structured problems enhances students’ problem solving, critical thinking skills and encourages shared knowledge construction (Blumenfeld et al., 1996; Brown, 1995; Vye et al., 1997).

The students’ responses as captured by the reflection worksheet also indicated a favourable response to the group problem-solving activities. The two negative responses were probably due to the kind of problem selected by the teacher as PBL requires that the problem be relevant to the learners. A few students were noticeably uncomfortable during the no-smoking on campus discussion. When approached by the teacher, the other group members laughed and announced that the ‘stressed out’ students often smoked on campus during break time.

Discussion of Essay Writings

In short, the group discussions indicated that collaborative work had a positive effect on content and vocabulary. Generally, anxiety was lower and some of the younger undergraduate students were observed to benefit from learning with the older postgraduate students, especially with content. Students were also able to write a better outline with ideas generated by their group members. No evidence of plagiarism was evident in their essay and students followed their outline quite closely. Organization and content of the essays improved significantly. While grammatical accuracy also improved slightly, it was still a problem as the essays

were written individually. Common errors such as subject verb agreement and missing articles were still evident in the students' writings.

Although PBL has been documented to encourage self-directed learning in previous research, there was no decrease in teacher dependence during the trial run of the PSA. During the individual drafting exercise in class for all three essays, students would repeatedly approach the teacher to check and correct their grammatical mistakes. One student even attempted to give the teacher his pencil instead of correcting the mistakes himself. While this was not an objective of the trial run, the teacher dependence on grammar accuracy was a worrying trend. Efforts to promote peer editing through the use of peer review sheets did not work well as students were unable or unwilling to point mistakes in the outline. Thus, the use of peer review sheets as suggested by Tan et al. (2006) in their article on Writing Centre Approach (WCA) did not work with these EFL students. The frequent and repeated teacher corrections seem to have a positive effect on the students' writing at sentence level, though. This was more obvious on the postgraduate students' writing. One PhD candidate entered the class with barely legible writing in terms of spelling, punctuation and coherence. This mature student did quite well in his last test as he was able to express his many ideas and thoughts in almost grammatically accurate albeit simple sentences through his own effort, much to the surprise and delight of his writing teacher.

The observations on group discussions and drafting essays would seem to indicate that although the PSA helped students' writings in terms of content and organization of ideas, they still relied on the teacher for grammar accuracy as they perceived themselves to be inadequate in that area. Thus, the teacher was still seen as an 'expert' that they needed to obtain language accuracy. In the case of the postgraduate students, teacher reliance for grammar accuracy seemed to be a quick and effective method towards language proficiency.

Conclusion

This study reports the findings of a trial run of a quasi experimental treatment called the problem solving approach (PSA) in a writing class for EFL learners enrolled in an intensive English writing course. This approach emphasizes language learning and knowledge construction through collaborative group problem solving activities. While still very preliminarily, results indicate that this approach can be a viable option to use as a supplement to a traditional writing class for EFL learners. The paired sample t test indicates a significant difference between essay scores 1 and essay scores 3. Thus, the objective of the trial run to see if the approach was a viable approach to improve writing in terms of content, grammar and organization of ideas would appear to have been achieved. A few possible weaknesses were identified during the trial run of the

proposed treatment. First, teacher observations of group discussions indicate that while group work was beneficial, guidance and close monitoring must be carried out to keep students on track. Peer correction and peer learning was also observed to occur informally during the group discussions. Individual writings must also be emphasized to prevent ‘passengers’ and to ensure students collaborate and take part in the discussions. Further research on the use of the PSA would provide greater insights and add additional knowledge to writing pedagogy as well as the use of collaborative problem solving for classroom instruction.

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