

## **THE BEST OF TWO APPROACHES: PROCESS/ GENRE-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING WRITING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Writing instruction has become a field of increasing interest at higher learning institutions in recent years. There have been numerous approaches to the teaching of writing in the history of language teaching and these have led to several paradigm shifts in the field. One of the major concerns voiced by content course instructors is that, even though learners have reached an advanced level in their institutions, their level of writing competency seems to be lower than expected. Researchers like Cumming (1998) and Matsuda (1999) note that L2 practitioners are still in search of a coherent, comprehensive theory. The purpose of this paper therefore is to propose a coherent theory of teaching writing by integrating two major approaches, i.e. the process approach and the genre approach. This paper will provide a direction for future research that may improve the pedagogy in second language writing classrooms.

### **Introduction**

The teaching of writing in ESL has seen dramatic changes in the last 20 years that have led to paradigm shifts in the field. There have, over time, been numerous approaches to the teaching of writing. In recent years however, there has been emphasis and debate on the differences between three major approaches - the product-based approach, the process-based approach and the genre-based approach. Such debate very often generates conflicting views of teaching writing. Hence, as noted by researchers like Cumming (1998) and Matsuda (1999), L2 practitioners are still in search of a coherent, comprehensive theory of the teaching of writing. This paper offers some discussion of these approaches and proposes a synthesis, integrating two of the major approaches: the process approach and the genre approach.

### **The Product Approach**

During the audiolingualism era, language classes downplayed the role of writing since writing was seen as only a supporting skill. ESL writing classes thus only focused on sentence structures as a support for the grammar class. The product

approach was used in order to highlight form and syntax and the emphasis was on rhetorical drills (Silva, 1990).

Students using the product approach are normally told to write an essay imitating a given pattern. Generally the focus of such writing is on the written product rather than on how the learner should approach the process of writing. Writing is viewed as mainly concerned with the knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development is mainly the result of the imitation of input, in the form of texts provided by the teacher<sup>f</sup> (Badger and White 2000:154). It is therefore teacher-centred, as the teacher becomes the arbiter of the models used (see Brakus, 2003).

Proponents of the product approach argue that it enhances students' writing proficiency. Badger and White (2000:157), for example, state that writing involves linguistic knowledge of texts that learners can learn partly through imitation. Arndt (1987: 257-67) argues the importance of models used in such an approach not only for imitation but also for exploration and analysis. Myles (2002) further argues that, if students are not exposed to native-like models of written texts, their errors in writing are more likely to persist<sup>f</sup>. Pincas (1982 cited in Badger and White, 2000:157) focused on the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax and cohesive devices.

The product approach, often referred to as the current-traditional rhetoric<sup>f</sup> (see e.g. Matsuda, 2003, Pullman, 1999), however, suffers from a number of strong criticisms that have led teachers and researchers to reassess the nature of writing and the ways writing is taught. Prodromou (1995: 21) for example, argues that it devalues the learners' potential, both linguistic and personal.<sup>f</sup> The outcome of the re-assessment is the writing-as-process movement, which has led the field toward a paradigm shift, revolutionising the teaching of writing.

### **The Process Approach**

The process approaches focus on how a text is written instead of the final outcome. As noted in Hyland (2003), the process approaches have a major impact on understanding the nature of writing and the way writing is taught. Research on writing processes has led to viewing writing as complex and recursive ~ not linear. The process approach therefore emphasises the importance of a recursive procedure of prewriting, drafting, evaluating and revising.

The pre-writing activity would involve introducing techniques that help the students discover and engage a topic. Instead of turning in a finished product right away, students are asked for multiple drafts of a work. After discussion and feedback from readers, the learners would revise the drafts. Rewriting and revision are

integral to writing, and editing is an on-going multi-level process. The multiple-draft process thus consists of: generating ideas (pre-writing); writing a first draft with an emphasis on content (to discover meaning/ author s ideas); second and third (an possibly more) drafts to revise ideas and communication of those ideas. In writing classrooms that follow such process model, the central elements are the writer, the content and the purpose, and multiple drafts.

The teacher in a process-approach classroom becomes the facilitator. In such classrooms, writing is essentially learnt, not taught. Providing input or stimulus for learners is perceived as unimportant, since the teacher s task is only to facilitate the exercise of writing skills and draw out the learners potential. The process approach is thus learner-centred.

The following is a diagram taken from Tribble (1996), illustrating the recursive and unpredictable process of writing.

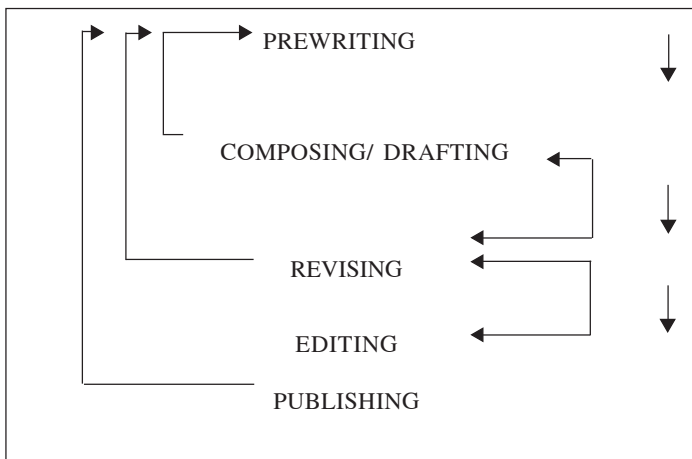


Figure 1: Dynamic and unpredictable model of process writing

As a recursive model, the process approach focuses on revision, in response to feedback that is obtained from readers. Feedback is seen as essential, functioning as an input that prompts the revision of texts. As mentioned by Keh (1990), what pushes the writer through the writing process onto the eventual end-product is reader feedback on the various drafts. Among the major kinds of feedback leading to revision are: peer-feedback; feedback from conferences; and teachers comments as feedback.

It is claimed that peer review provides students with authentic audiences, discussion that leads to discovery, and necessary peer feedback (Reid, 1992). Conferences, on the other hand, are between the writer and the reader or the learner and the teacher. Many students, teachers and researchers believe that conferences are beneficial as they allow students to control the interaction, clarify their teachers responses, and negotiate meaning (Shin, 2003). As for teachers comments as feedback, research indicates that learners, generally, do expect and value such feedback on their writing (see Muncie, 2000:50).

In recent years, however, the process approach has come under serious scrutiny. The approach has a somewhat monolithic view of writing (Badger and White 2000). Writing is seen as involving the same process regardless of the target audience and the content of the text. The process approach seems to narrowly focus on the skills and processes of writing in the classroom itself and as a result fails to take into account the social and cultural aspects that have an impact on different kinds of writing (Atkinson, 2003). Johns (1995), for instance, strongly expresses her view against The Process Movement:

*This movement's emphasis on developing students as authors when they are not yet ready to be second language writers, in developing student voice while ignoring issues of register and careful argumentation, and in promoting the author's purposes while minimising understandings of role, audience and community have put our diverse students at a distinct disadvantage...*

(Johns, 1995)

As a result, opponents of the process approach are beginning to gather under a new banner ~ the genre approach.

### **The Genre Approach**

As noted by Badger and White (2000:155), there are similarities between the product approach and the genre approach, which, in some ways, can be seen as an extension of the product approach. Like the product approach, the genre approach views writing as predominantly linguistic. The genre approach, however, places a greater emphasis on the social context in which writing is produced.

At the heart of the approach therefore is the view that writing pedagogies should offer students explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts (Hyland, 2003). Swales (1990), describes genre as a class of communicative events. He further explains that the members of the communicative events share some set of communicative purposes which are recognised by the expert members.

A range of methods is employed in a classroom using the genre approach. For instance, Paltridge (2001) proposes a framework that involves investigating the texts and contexts of students target situations, encouraging reflection on writing practices, exploiting texts from different types of genre and creating mixed genre portfolios. The underpinning theory of such a pedagogical approach, according to Vyotsky (1978), as reported in Hyland (2003), is an emphasis on the interactive collaboration between teacher and student, with the teacher taking an authoritative role to scaffold or support learners as they move towards their potential level of performance. In the *scaffolding* activity, students are provided with models, and are asked to discuss and analyse their language and structure. The scaffolding element gradually lightens as the learners independently produce a text parallel to the model. The role of the teachers thus moves from explicit instructor to facilitator and eventually the learners gain autonomy.

Like the other approaches, the genre approach has been criticised by its opponents. Caudery (1998:11-13), for example, notes that by attempting explicit teaching of a particular genre, teachers are in actual fact not helping the learners. The approach may not require students to express their own ideas or may be too dependent on the teacher finding suitable materials as models. It could thus become counter-productive.

### **Process/Genre-Based Approach to Teaching Writing**

All three approaches have received quite a number of criticisms, and so the field is open to many, often conflicting, views (Tribble, 1996). As noted by Caudery (1995), TESL (teaching English as a Second Language) has a habit of embracing teaching methodologies with fervor, and then, as a few cracks begin to show and it seems that the new teaching approach will not solve every classroom problem, of rejecting them with equal vigor.

This paper therefore proposes an eclectic approach to the teaching of writing, by synthesising the strength of the process and genre approaches for implementation in the classroom. Such an eclectic approach offers advantages such as a more focused use of texts as models without sacrificing the flexibility to acknowledge elements of other approaches. This paper draws upon the model put forward by Badger and White (2000:159). Figure 2, adapted from their model, illustrates the main features involved in the teaching of a written recommendation report.

The following explains how the model works in the context of a technical writing classroom. In the application of this synthesis, learners will first be made aware that writing occurs in a social context and situation, and that a piece of writing has

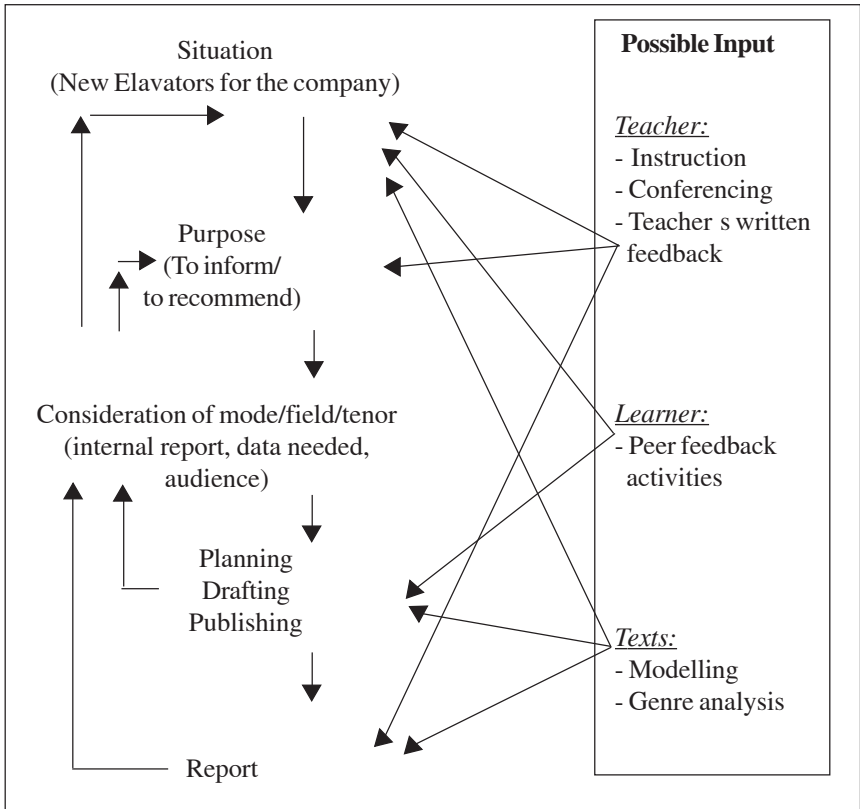


Figure 2: A Process Genre-Approach to Teaching Writing  
(adapted from Badger and White, 2000:159)

to achieve a certain purpose. The example given here is of an engineer writing a recommendation report concerning the purchase of new elevators for the company. Learners will then have to relate the purpose of writing to the subject matter, the writer/audience relationship, and the mode or organisation of the text. This approach allows learners to see how texts are written differently, according to their purpose, audience and message (Macken-Horarik, 2002). After the learners have been exposed to the organisation, structure and language used in the texts, they will go through a process of multiple drafts instead of turning in a finished product right away. As proposed by the process approach, rewriting and revision are inte-

gral to writing, and editing is an on-going multi-level process, which consists of: planning, drafting and finally publishing the end product ~ the report.

Instead of relying on only one technique, teachers should offer learners a range of feedback types, e.g. peer-feedback and teacher's written feedback, throughout the writing process. Feedback, according to Keh (1990), can be defined as *input* from the readers to the writer, which often gives rise to further revision

### **Process/ Genre-Based Approach: Possible Input**

Learners vary in terms of their knowledge of a particular genre. Learners who know a lot will need little or no input at all. In the case of learners who lack knowledge of the organisation of the text and the language conventionally used for a particular audience, would need some assistance and input. This is in line with Krashen's notion of the Input Hypotheses (1985), Long's interactional modifications (1989) and Swain's (1995) negotiation of meaning. Hence, input and interaction through feedback play important roles in the writing process (Myles, 2002). The input may be obtained from the teachers, other learners as peers, or the model text itself.

Teachers may provide input at the beginning of the lesson when a text of a particular genre is being introduced. For example teachers may explain the differences between the external and internal proposals. (Internal proposal is meant for recipients inside the writer's organisation while the external proposal is directed to clients outside the organisation - the audience and the purpose of writing determines the structure, the organisation, the tone and the choice of words).

*Conferencing* (verbal student-teacher conferencing) between the teachers and learners provides input in the form of feedback that enables learners to learn where they have not given enough information or if there is an illogical organisation or a failure to develop ideas adequately. *Teacher's written comments* constitute another technique by which a teacher can provide feedback to learners in the drafts submitted to the teacher.

Another potential source of input is the other learners. *Peer feedback* also known as peer-response, peer editing or peer evaluation, provides learners with authentic audiences and discussion that leads to discovery (Freedman, 1992, Reid, 1992). Learners should receive constant peer feedback regarding their writing throughout the writing process. Peer feedback has been found to instigate further revision (Paulus, 1999; Villamil and de Guerrero, 1998) which indicates that learners do value their peers' comments when revising their drafts. Drafting throughout the writing process and revising and editing based on feedback obtained from peers and teachers, are all essential components of the process approach to teaching writing.

Models of a particular genre can provide learners with highly specific information about the forms and functions of syntactical and lexical features required by that genre. It would be helpful if learners could be exposed to good apprentice generic exemplars, which can provide a realistic model of writing performance for undergraduate students (Flower & Dewey, 2000). The models can then be used to analyse the similarities of texts in the same genre. Such language awareness activities would require the teachers to prepare sets of the kinds of texts that the learners are learning to write [such activities would be close to the product approach; as mentioned earlier, there are similarities between the product approach and the genre approach in that the genre approach can be seen in some ways as an extension of the product approach (Badger and White 2000)].

The process/genre-based approach thus integrates the strength of the process approach and the genre-based approach. Planning, drafting, conferencing, editing and peer review are components of the process approach to teaching writing. Understanding and considering the purpose, audience and context on the other hand, are elements in the genre approach.

### **Process/ Genre-based Approach: The Teachers' Role**

Echoing Tribble (1996), this paper proposes four basic roles for writing teachers using the process/ genre approach: audience, assistants, evaluators and examiners. As audience, teachers play the role of readers providing responses to the ideas or feelings that learners are trying to convey through writing. As urged by Kehl (1970), teachers need to communicate "in a distinctly human voice, with sincere respect for the writer as a person and a sincere interest in his improvement as a writer." As assistants, teachers assist learners by making their writing more effective in relation to selecting the correct genre, determining the purpose and using appropriate language. As evaluators, teachers give their comments on the learners' strength, weaknesses and the overall performance, in order to help them write effectively in the future. The primary objectives should be long-term improvement that leads to cognitive change (Leki 1992) as evidenced by revisions of students' writing (Reid, 1993). By taking up the role of examiners, teachers carry out assessments of the learners' writing proficiency.

### **Conclusion**

The proposal to implement a process/ genre-based approach in ESL writing classrooms ensures that the usefulness and power of process writing pedagogy (pre-writing, drafting, feedback, and revising) are not replaced in a entirely by the



genre approach. The two approaches can instead be seen as complementing rather than opposing each other. However, further studies employing a variety of research methods are suggested to investigate the impact of the process/genre-based approach as an instructional tool in ESL writing classrooms.

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