TEACHING WRITING:
A LOOK AT PURPOSES, WRITING TASKS, AND IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

In teaching students to become better writers, we often select and use writing tasks from language textbooks as one of the main teaching resources. Textbook writers are influenced by theoretical developments in writing pedagogy when developing writing tasks. Therefore, in selecting writing tasks for our students, we need to understand their pedagogical assumptions so that we will be able to evaluate the different purposes and limitations of these writing tasks. In discussing some of the limitations of writing practices and tasks which focus on language, rhetorical forms, and communicative competence, the writer hopes to convince teachers to teach writing as a discovery and thinking process by adopting tasks which stress students' personal growth and cognitive development.

Introduction

As language teachers, we often select writing tasks from language textbooks to help students improve their writing ability. Writing approaches in language textbooks could be influenced by behaviourist, communicative, cognitive, and discourse theories. Each theoretical framework has provided us with a better understanding of the multiple dimensions and purposes of teaching writing. A review of the developments in writing pedagogy leads us to conclude that we could teach writing as a means to improve linguistic, rhetorical and communicative competence or as a discovery and cognitive process. The writing tasks that we select from language textbooks and assign to students could reflect one or some of these pedagogical purposes. As teachers, we need to question and understand the pedagogical assumptions of textbook writing tasks so that we can select tasks that will help our students become confident writers and independent thinkers.

This paper will discuss and evaluate the multiple purposes of teaching writing that are reflected in the writing tasks of some English textbooks published for secondary schools. In discussing some of the limitations of these writing tasks, this paper will also argue for teaching writing as a discovery and thinking process and will conclude with some pedagogical guidelines.

Purposes For Teaching Writing

Writing for Language Practice

Writing can be taught primarily for practising language forms to develop accuracy and correctness. With the influence of behaviourist theory in the audio-lingual approach to teaching language, writing was mainly for reinforcement, training, and imitation of language forms. The behaviourists believed that humans could learn through stimulus and response. This was applied to language learning in which accurate use of the language was learned through reinforcement, constant practice and imitation. In such language-based writing tasks, students would be given writing exercises that would reinforce language structures that they have learned through the manipulation of grammatical patterns. Examples of such writing tasks found in a lower secondary English textbook are shown below. These are controlled compositions in which students would be given a paragraph and asked to perform substitutions, transformations, expansions, or completion exercises.

> Writing Skills
> Sentence Connectors
> Look at the table and the example sentence. Write out nine sentences using the information in the table. Use connecting words such as
>
>   a. because, since, as
>   b. therefore, so, as a result
>   (Table Given)
>
> Example: His car wouldn't start because the battery was flat. He *therefore* had to take a taxi.
>
>   (*Interlink 3*, 1987:41)

> Writing Skills
> Sequencing the Steps in a Process
> Below is a conversation between yourself and a stranger to Singapore who does not know how to use the telephone here. Look at the pictures and then complete your part of the dialogue, selecting your sentences from the choices given. Rewrite the complete dialogue on a separate paper.
>
>   (*Interlink 3*, 1987:11)

If the teaching of writing focuses mainly on such language-based writing tasks, the danger is that students may perceive writing as a mechanical practice and nothing more than producing correct sentences. We assume that such highly controlled writing tasks ~could help our students develop accuracy and correctness by doing the exercises. However, when we ask students to compose using their own sentences, we can observe that students would still make the same errors even though they have done numerous practices on such writing tasks. Unfortunately, these students are often categorised as slow or remedial learners. Maybe what we should be questioning is the effectiveness of such mechanistic writing tasks as well as our own unrealistic expectations of students' performances, particularly for second language learners. As a result of such emphasis on accuracy, students may be afraid of making errors and taking risks in the process of creating a text using their

own words and sentences to express their ideas. However, if we believe that learning can take place through making errors, allowing students to express their thoughts using their own language can improve their fluency and competency over time. By over-emphasising accuracy, we inhibit students' own construction of language and meaning in composing their texts.

Writing for Rhetorical Practice

Research in contrastive rhetoric (Kaplan, 1966; Purves, 1988; Connors, 1996) has hypothesised that the rhetorical patterns could differ between languages and cultures. Students learning a second language may organise their essays using a pattern that could violate native readers' expectations. As a result, the teaching of rhetorical forms and conventions began to have its influence on language textbooks and teaching practices. In writing tasks that teach rhetorical forms, teachers would provide the content and use model essays as stimuli for writing. Students will imitate the rhetorical and syntactic forms by following the chosen model passage. Examples of such tasks are writing guided compositions in which the content and organisation are given by the teacher, reading a passage and writing a composition with parallel organisation, and reading an essay and analysing its organisational pattern and writing a similar essay on a related topic. The following are examples of guided writing tasks that are both language and product based.

<u>Write On</u>
Guided Composition: A Description of a Place
Read the following passage about the Jurong Bird Park.
Using the reading passage as a model, write a similar description
and tram-car commentary on the Singapore Zoological Gardens.
Use these notes. Wherever possible, use the pattern If + present tense + will.

(*Interlink 3*, 1987:13-14)

<u>Functional Writing 1</u>
A. You can describe an event, for example, a festival, using a systematic format. Read the following account that Keiko has written.

(Model Essay: The Japanese New Year)

B. Write about an important festival that your family celebrates using the given format.
(*New Clue2A*, 1994:100)

Too much emphasis on rhetorical structures and modelling will inhibit students in exploring ideas and creating meaningful and authentic texts on their own. Even though models could be helpful in providing examples and support in producing a text, Raimes (1987) argues that models used by teachers are often not authentic texts written for real communicative purposes for real readers, but tend to be simplified and contrived models written for textbooks for the purpose of demonstrating form. When students are always dependent on the teacher to provide the ideas or models, the process of composing and creating a text on their own would become a difficult task mainly because they lack the experience and not because they do not have the ability to do so. Therefore, it is not

surprising to find students saying that they do not know what to write when models or ideas are not given to them by the teacher. This will result in students suffering from writers' block, that is a feeling of anxiety and inability to think of ideas to write because the teacher has become the supplier of content for students in addition to instructing them on how to format their ideas.

Writing for Communication

With the emphasis of communicative competence as a goal in language learning (Widdowson, 1978; Brumfit & Johnson, 1979), teaching of writing began to shift its emphasis on accuracy and patterns to the ability to understand and convey information content. Completing a communicative writing task would require greater awareness of writer's purpose, audience, and the context of writing. Here writing has a social function. Such communicative writing tasks would simulate real life situations where a writer would write to convey some information to a reader. Below are examples of such writing tasks taken from a secondary English texthook

Composition Writing
Imagine you work for a travel company and it is your job to write a leaflet giving advice to customers going on long journeys. You have made some notes but unfortunately you have dropped them and they have become rather jumbled:

(Jumbled Notes given)

Compose a text of the leaflet using the ideas in the notes by arranging them in a sensible order. You will need to develop bare instructions in the notes by explaining why they are important.

(*Forté Workbook 2*, 1992:48)

Look at the set of photographs below. Imagine you are a housing agent and have to sell the house in the photographs. Using the photographs to help you, write <u>an advertisement to be put in the newspaper</u>. Make use of what you have learnt in the comprehension section of this unit to help you.

(CLUE Express 3, 1985:54)

In these writing tasks, students are given fictional roles which they have no experience in and usually the content is again provided by the teacher. Similar to the writing tasks for the development of language skills, there is little room for students to become inventive and be really involved in text creation using their own thoughts and ideas. Here, we see that such communicative writing tasks view writing as a means for conveying information, not as a means for thinking and formulating ideas. Another disadvantage is that the audience here is usually a fictional one. There is no real need for meaningful communication to real readers. In reality, the writing is for the teacher who is the grader of the assignment. If students were always asked to write with the functional purpose of

transmitting information rather than to write to explore and construct their own meaning, they might not view writing as means of discovering their "true self" and projecting their "voice" as authors in their texts.

Writing as a Discovery and Cognitive Process

In response to the limitations in both the language-based, product-based, and communicative approaches to teaching writing, writing tasks in the classrooms began to shift their focus to the process of writing which was influenced by the humanistic and cognitive approaches. The process approach has two main schools of thought: the expressive and the cognitive.

The expressive school of thought stresses the importance of self-development. Writing is viewed as an expressive mode through which student writers use writing as a means to explore and discover meaning for themselves and develop their own voice (Elbow, 1973; Graves, 1983; Murray, 1985). The act of composing is "a creative act in which the process:- the discovery of the true self - is as important as the product" (Berlin, 1988:484) and should be "the result of a genuine need to express one's personal feeling, experience, or reactions" (Zamel, 1980:74).

Students are encouraged to generate their own ideas by writing freely so that they can put down their ideas without interruptions. Elbow (1973) believes that freewriting is able to develop fluency and the writer's unique and authentic "voice". The teacher acts as a facilitator whose task is to promote a supportive learning environment which provides learners with opportunities to write about their own ideas and discover their voices rather than act as a judge whose task is to identify students' errors. Writing tasks that subscribe to such a view of writing would include journal writing and expressive essays that encourage self-discovery and self realisation.

With the influence of cognitive psychology, writing researchers (Flowers & Hayes, 1980) began to study the mental processes during the act of composing. From the studies of composing processes using protocol analysis, researchers found that good writers do "not only have a large repertoire of strategies, but they have sufficient self-awareness of their own process to draw on these alternative techniques as they need them. In other words, they guide their own creative process" (Flower, 1985:370). In composing, experienced writers were found to employ more effective writing strategies such as planning, writing multiple drafts and making more content and global revisions, while novice writers would focus on surface features such as rhetorical and linguistic forms.

Research in the composing process has contributed to our understanding that writing is not a linear but a recursive process of constructing meaning. Here, writing is viewed as a process of "forming concepts, and forging new structure of ideas, while at the same time trying to juggle all the constraints imposed by his or her purpose, audience, and language itself" (Flower & Hayes, 1988:92). It is through the process of drafting, rethinking, and revising that new insights and ideas are created. As a result of the work done by cognitive writing researchers, the teaching of writing as a process has influenced texthook writers. Process writing tasks would involve the use of prewriting, drafting, peer-reviewing, revising and editing strategies.

Some Pedagogical Guidelines

Besides the teaching of writing strategies, the following classroom practices and supportive learning environment are recommended for teaching writing as a discovery and thinking process (for good references, see Graves, 1983; Hansen, 1987; Tompkins, 1990).

- Allow students to generate their own ideas through pre-writing strategies and by writing about topics that are related to the students' world experience for writing to be meaningful. The purpose of writing is for personal development, both socially and cognitively.
- Create opportunities for students to make decisions on the purpose and the form of the essay rather than have them do what the teacher tells them all the time. Allow students to select their own topics and write about what is meaningful to them. Independent thinking is a result of making choices and decisions. On the other hand, it is important for teachers to accept students' writing and view their work according to what interests them and what is important to them.
- Provide feedback on drafts that stimulates and encourages students to rethink and revise ideas instead of merely focusing on form and accuracy as this could inhibit students and discourage them from trying to develop and formulate their ideas using their own words and sentences. The acquisition of a language is not a systematic, but a creative act acquired through experimenting with language and learning from the errors made. This is a natural phenomenon in the process of learning any language. Accuracy can be focused during the process of editing and students can be taught and encouraged to do self-editing.
- Conference with students to help them gain insights and understanding of their writing process and to provide them with support. Talking to students is a wonderful way to know students' concerns and feelings about their writing. Such interactions could provide them emotional support to students who lack confidence in their writing. For large classes, group conferencing could be conducted in which students can share their experiences and problems in the process of writing their essays.
- Promote collaborative rather than competitive learning in the class by encouraging students to share the ideas that they have written in groups. Besides the teacher, students too can act as readers in responding to compositions written by their peers. For students unfamiliar with this practice, guidance may be given in the form of peer-review questions and with the teacher acting as the reader demonstrating to students how to respond to their classmates' essays. It is important to note that the role of the reader is to provide feedback to help students develop as writers.

Conclusion

Writing tasks in some English textbooks appear to emphasise writing for development of linguistic forms, rhetorical structures, and communicative competence. Selecting writing tasks that reflect these purposes are inadequate in developing students' writing confidence and thinking abilities. As language teachers, we constantly need to ask ourselves the purpose of teaching writing. By using writing tasks that view writing as a discovery and thinking process, we will give students considerable say in constructing meaning and making decisions in their writing. It is important to ensure that classroom learning and writing experiences help our students become confident writers and independent thinkers.

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