

Considerations in Developing Materials for the Teaching of Writing at the Pro-University Level

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Introduction

English teachers are often confronted with the dilemma of choosing suitable teaching techniques to teach writing to their students. The problem is even more crucial in an English as a Second Language (ESL) context where the students have to cope not only with the difficulties of writing but also the additional problems of language acquisition. Should teachers provide rules for the students to adhere to, present models of writing for them to imitate, or give the students topics and let them express themselves freely? Is grammar the most fundamental aspect of a composition as some teachers seem to imply from their negative reactions to compositions with grammatical errors as compared to those with fewer or no such errors?

Researchers on composing in English as a First Language classes have come to various conclusions. Some researchers believe that students should be given a solid grounding in language while others feel that the fluent flow of ideas and the ability to manipulate written language are the two most important aspects of writing.

Unfortunately, as Zamel (1976) reports, there has been almost no research investigating such approaches in the teaching of composition to ESL learners. For this reason she~ and others like Freedman, Pringle and Yalden (1983) and Raimes (1985) suggest that teachers of ESL should rely on the results of experimentation in English as a First Language composition classes for these studies also undermine many of the assumptions made by ESL teachers. Although there may be idiosyncrasies, the pedagogies called for in a first language situation can still be profitable in a second language context, at least in guiding the learners through the process of writing itself. Thus, this paper will first look at the characteristics of writing and then review research in first language and ESL classes on approaches to writing and their relationship with the development of writing ability. Finally, it will draw conclusions on the factors to be considered in the preparation of materials and the teaching of writing which may be useful especially for pre-university level ESL classes.

The Nature of Writing

Writing is generally regarded as a difficult skill. This is often attributed to its inherently complex characteristics which according to Wall (1981:53) "range from mechanical control to creativity, with good grammar, knowledge of subject matter, awareness of stylistic conventions and various mysterious factors in between."

Among the salient features of writing that cause difficulties are:

Writing generates its own context with the reader physically absent and sometimes not known to the writer. The writer is deprived of certain privileges such as making direct references, interacting and receiving immediate feedback from the reader, getting reliable information on the reader's background knowledge and understanding through gestures, facial expressions and other paralinguistic features. To compensate for the lack of such benefits, the writer has to be very explicit in his writing by depending entirely on linguistic elements. To help him do this, a writer has to play the role of both a writer and a reader. Widdowson (1983) asserts that by continuously shifting his role back and forth from a writer to a reader, the writer is engaged in an imaginary discourse between the two participants. From this discourse, he will be able to anticipate the reader's reaction, to his product, for instance, whether the reader will object to his ideas, become doubtful of his evidence, question his statements or become confused because of not having prior knowledge of the subject discussed. By being aware of these possibilities, the writer will be able to overcome the problems in advance before they actually arise.

Writing is "a continuing and sustained act of communication" (Peacock, 1986:13). So, spoken devices such as hesitation, digression and repetition are not acceptable although few graphological devices like punctuation, capitalisation etc. may sometimes fulfill their functions. A writer is expected to maintain an extended, possibly uninterrupted flow of language. He is to ensure, through linguistic resources such as the choice of sentences, that he produces an organised and what may be called a "coherent" text.

The permanence of writing accounts for the need for accuracy. As a recorded piece of communication, linguistic errors, for instance spelling mistakes, deviant sentence structures, wrong choice of lexis and such like may not go undetected. Apart from that, a writer also needs - while paying attention to the content - to be aware of the kind of presentation acceptable in writing so that unless he deliberately flouts convention for good reasons, he should make sure that his writing is acceptable in terms of language, style, punctuation etc.

Even though its permanent feature is an advantage to the writer as he is able to reread and revise his work until he is satisfied that he has conveyed his message explicitly; that slow and demanding process of writing can be a painstaking job to poor writers.

Writing is an activity of the minority, mostly done as part of professional obligation except for a few who occasionally produce personal writing. Therefore, "the motives for writing are more abstract, more intellectualised, further removed from immediate needs". (Vygotsky, 1962: 99)

The fact that writing is a one-sided communication with all the burden of interaction relying mostly on linguistic elements indicates that writing is indeed a deliberate and demanding activity. It requires conscious work on the part of the writer who, besides having to accommodate his own thought, has to be competent in all the written aspects of a language; from mechanics to discourse. He also needs to have the ability to use more complex and varied vocabulary and conform to the less flexible conventions. In other words, a writer needs not only language competence but also other communicative skills which include sociolinguistic and strategic factors.

Approaches to the Teaching of Writing - The Process and Product Approaches

Research on English composition can be seen in the light of two general trends. Traditionally, studies on composition were commonly product - oriented; that is, most of the studies looked at writing instructions and their effects on writing ability in terms of the end product. On the contrary, the more current studies seek to discover the process of writing itself. In other words, researchers are interested in finding out what a writer actually does in the process of writing.

The question now is which approach is more beneficial for our students? At tertiary level, where most of the writing done is academically based, with rigid conventions of organisation and expression, it seems reasonable to adopt both approaches. The product orientation familiarises the students with set instructions and conventions which serve as guidelines as to how a text should be written, while the process approach gives them the opportunity to experience applying their knowledge and manipulating their ideas.

The Product Orientation Research and Writing Quality

There are a number of product-oriented approaches to the teaching of writing that are frequently associated with writing quality. Among the major ones are:

(a) Grammar and the manipulation of syntax

Exponents of the grammatical approach assert that students must master the language forms before aiming at "precision of expression, fluency" and "style". For them, knowledge of language constitutes basically knowledge of syntactic structures. A number of studies have been carried out to find the effect of grammar on writing. Gale (1968) and Morgan (1971) compared the performance of students from the structural generative grammar and traditional grammar classes. Although they found some gains for the students studying structural generative grammar in terms of syntactic complexity used in essays, other studies, for example, Elley et. al. (1976), Whitehead (1966), seem to show no positive results. Meanwhile, Shaughnessy, (1977) who agrees with the idea of encouraging students to write syntactically mature sentences, focuses specifically on the inability of writers to improve their existing sentences by subordination or coordination. Her studies on the effect of teaching sentence combining and sentence construction on essay writing show that students benefit from the two methods as they are able to write more mature sentences. However, Shaughnessy is skeptical of the assumption that increased syntactic maturity means increased writing quality. Many others such as Mavrogenes share the same view. Mavrogenes believes that while increased syntactic maturity

"was a concomitant of increased quality, it is not in itself a major determinant of the rater's judgement of quality.

(Hillocks, 1986: 149)

A study by Grobe (1981) indicates that the correlation between syntactic maturity and writing ability is in fact very low. Meanwhile, linguists like Williams (1979), are more interested in encouraging students to use clear and direct sentences. Though the theoretical details of what he meant by direct

sentences may be debatable, the concepts of clarity and readability are worth noting in an ESL context as some second language learners, such as Malay students in Malaysia, often use complicated sentences that obscure meaning. This is probably due to the preferable practice of using extensively elaborated sentences when writing in the Malay language and fear of being penalised if they do not do the same in English. Thus, according to William's approach, such students need to be given practice in rewriting hard to read sentences into more readable sentences.

From the discussion on grammar it can be concluded that syntactic knowledge is not actually the central element in determining writing quality.

(b) Rhetorical Structure of Discourse (The Use of Models)

Opposed to the view of grammatical control at the sentential level are those who deal with the control of organisation and the rhetorical structure of discourse. The impetus of development of these approaches has come from the concern for students' inability to use the language acquired appropriately and fluently in communicative activities. As Widdowson (1979:118) puts it,

... the ability to compose sentences is not the only ability we need for communication. Communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essentially social nature...

Because of this, it is proposed that students should be explicitly taught how to cope with language in performing the various communicative acts such as defining, classifying, generalising and so on.

The use of models has become a popular way of teaching rhetoric (see among others Paulston's, 1972). A model serves as an initial basis for students to elicit the framework of theoretical structures and stylistic characteristics of a particular discourse or even language forms, or content for that matter, and later for producing a parallel piece of writing.

Models can make a significant contribution to the teaching of rhetorics to second language learners. Some learners have considerable difficulty coping with English rhetorics due to the cultural differences in the nature of rhetorics. Familiarisation with the different types of rhetorical structures will form a *schemata or framework of expectation* in the students' mind that enables them to understand and interpret English rhetoric.

Despite its usefulness, the model based approach has been criticised for several reasons. Watson (1982) and Escholz (1980) feel that models are often too long and remote from the students' real problems. In addition, Escholz views the mimicking of models as inhibiting the writer's freedom of expression. Such concern, which coincides with the advent of communicative language learning approach, has assigned the role of models to a secondary position by giving priority to the learners liberation of expression. With this new role, models are there not "... to be mimicked ... but ... to be drawn upon as a resource" (White 1988: 7).

(c) Coherence and Cohesion

Two features indispensable to the discussion of text are coherence and cohesion. A notable study by Halliday and Hassan (1976) on the two features has given a new perspective to these terminologies and this has had major implications on the way coherence is taught. They assert,

A text is a passage of discourse which is coherent in these two regards: it is coherent with respect to the context of situation, and therefore consistent in register; and it is coherent with respect to itself, and therefore cohesive.

(Halliday and Hassan, 1976:23).

The work of Halliday and Hassan (1976) has stirred controversies and interest in the field. The strongest criticism was from Morgan and Sellner (1980) who based their view on the Schema theory of text processing. According to this theory, understanding and processing a text is an interactive and interpretative process. Thus, a text should be written in relation to a text processor or a reader.

Specifically speaking about coherence, Morgan and Sellner argue that a text is coherent if the "*intended meaning*" and "*underlying structures*" match the background knowledge of the reader and not because of the reader's knowledge of language properties as Halliday and Hassan seem to imply. In other words, the cohesive devices used in text are not the ultimate "source" but the "effect" of coherence.

Johns (1986), when discussing coherence, reiterates the need of a writer to continuously take the reader into account and constantly guide him or her through the text by providing cohesive devices.

From the above, it can be said that coherence is a significant but complex concept that is governed by a number of factors either in the text or in relation to other elements outside the text such as the readers and context. Cohesive devices are only one of the properties and not the main or only element of coherence. Consequently, focusing solely on cohesion composition classes cannot completely remedy the problem of coherence.

(d) Writing Frequency

The approaches considered so far are predominantly concerned with guidance and control in order to attain a high writing quality. There are also linguists and teachers who believe that the greater the frequency of writing practice, the greater the chance for the students to improve their writing skill. However, a study by Arnold (1984) found no significant differences between a group of tenth graders who wrote at least once a week and those who wrote three times a semester. Critical reviews by Krashen (1984) and Zamel (1976) on writing and writing frequency also concluded that practice in writing per se without proper instruction will not increase writing proficiency.

(e) Reading and Writing

Using reading as a method of developing writing ability is not a new notion. Numerous researchers who investigated the effect of reading on writing have found optimistic results. One of them is Krashen (1984) who hypothesizes that writing can be acquired via extensive reading. He claims that extensive reading provides sufficient input of grammatical and discourse structures in a low anxiety condition because the reader focuses completely on the meaning rather than on the forms. Therefore, extensive reading is one of the supportive environments of learning to write.

The Process Oriented Research and Writing Quality

The unsatisfactory results of and conflicting views on the product orientation research have led researchers to switch their attention from product based research to the exploration of cognitive

processes on composing as it is hoped that the understanding of what is going on in a writer's mind will help gain useful strategies for teaching writing.

In this kind of approach, emphasis is placed on "how" to write. Writers are guided through the journey of writing from planning, rescanning to revising his text. These stages are not definite as a writer may revise, rescan or even replan his writing at any stage so that in the process new ideas and new language forms are discovered. That is why writing is often referred to as a process of discovery.

From the studies on native speakers for example, Pianko (1979) as well as non-native speakers as in the work of Zamel (1983b), it is clear that good writers plan, rescan and revise more than poor writers. Good writers seem to understand the recursive nature of the writing process for they tend to be more flexible with their original plans and goals and are ready to review the overall plan at any point of writing for clarification of meaning. Poor writers, on the other hand, seem to look at writing as a linear flow of ideas. For them, revision entails correcting grammatical forms and mechanics rather than the clarification of meaning.

This new way of looking at writing proposes new techniques of teaching writing. Contrary to the traditional practice of expecting the students to have a clear view of the form and content before beginning to write a composition by providing an outline of their work and sticking to it throughout the writing process, the process approach emphasises revising and redrafting of their work. Revision is seen not as mere editing but a chance to polish and improve their work. At the initial stage, students are encouraged to write without much concern for grammatical accuracy. If they face difficulties starting the writing task, the teacher has to help them by providing writing strategies such as brainstorming, group discussion, pairwork, using diagrams, etc. The students are also given ample time to revise, redraft and produce several drafts if necessary. The teacher may offer feedback to the ungraded draft. As time is often a constraint, feedback from peers may be helpful in discovering the problems that exist in writing. The cooperation between peers and the teacher will create an awareness among the students to take the reader into consideration during the process of writing. The proponents of this approach believe that it is only by putting the students through the process of writing that they appreciate the problems of writing.

Principles for Material Development and The Teaching of Writing

Based on the overview of the nature of and research on writing, a number of conclusions can be deduced. These can serve as general guidelines in the development of writing materials and the teaching of writing at pre-university level ESL classes.

(a) Writing as communication

The most important principle is that a writing course should emphasize the communicative aspects of a language (linguistic, sociolinguistic and strategic). The linguistic aspect will supply the students with the tools needed for writing so that they are able to use the correct forms of words, accurate vocabulary and good grammar. The sociolinguistic component raises the students' awareness of the type of writing activity they are involved in so that they are able to write in different rhetorical modes appropriate for different audiences and purposes. The strategic component raises consciousness of the covert interaction that exists between a reader and a writer.

(b) Grammar and Writing

Even though the acquisition of basic grammar is undeniably necessary in writing, teachers should not be obsessed with the idea that syntactic complexity is the fundamental aspect of a composition. Instead, students should be made aware of the need to produce clear and readable texts.

(c) Models as teaching aids

Models of essays can be used successfully if they are appropriately integrated into the sequence of activities in a writing class. For this matter, both good and bad models may be used for analysis.

(d) Coherence and cohesion - the two important entities

In writing, students need to be trained in how to think and write logically and coherently. All features associated with coherence and cohesion must be explicitly taught to the students both in isolation and in context. This is because teaching cohesive devices in isolation only, such as at sentence level, neglects the crucial aspect of text construction. Students sometimes produce cohesive but incoherent texts. For this purpose, models of coherent and incoherent texts can be analysed in class to expose the students to the concepts of coherence and cohesion.

(e) Learning is performing

In order to learn writing, students have to experience performing the writing themselves. Instead of delaying the practice of essay writing, students should be given plenty of opportunities to write provided they are accompanied by proper instruction.

(f) Integrating reading and writing

Because extensive reading is necessary in developing writing competence, efforts should be made to integrate extensive reading with writing. Students may be asked to produce written assignments based on reading sources or they may be given set texts to read for the writing lessons.

(g) The need for a conducive environment

As writing often places intricate demands on the learner, teachers should try to provide a conducive atmosphere with interesting lessons to increase motivation and to enhance the learning process. This means that teachers should, as far as possible, prepare aids for writing lessons and guide the students towards producing essays of their own.

(h) Promoting Self Evaluation

Self-monitoring needs to be encouraged. Students need to be critical of their own work and be trained to make judgements on whether they have successfully communicated their ideas or not. In other words, students should proofread their essays. To ensure that students do revise their work, teachers can ask students to submit drafts to be corrected. Teachers can pinpoint the errors made and give comments on how to improve the essays. Essays are returned to the students for corrections before they can hand in the essays for grading.

(i) Peer marking

Peer marking is another strategy which can help improve students' writing. By being critical of others, the students will get a wider experience of the learning process. Students should be advised not to be sensitive to the criticisms made by others on their work. Feedback from their colleagues will help them realize the weaknesses that they are unable to detect themselves.

(j) Pair and Group work

Working together in groups during a writing lesson is a beneficial way of engendering discussion that can broaden their viewpoints through the exchange of opinions. Besides, this will enhance the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing apart from encouraging them to think.

(k) Prewriting Activities

Teachers need to initiate the writing process by providing induction that stimulates writing activities. Activities conducted should be geared towards the performing of certain rhetoric being taught to the students.

(l) The need for a context

As writing in schools is an academic requirement with abstract needs which are removed from the students' real life, context becomes very essential in a writing lesson. By providing a situation to the students, the task developed becomes more authentic, enabling students to relate better to the writing assignment.

(m) Integrated Skill

The integration of skills is inevitable in communicative acts as real communication involves a number of different skills. By analogy, language skills should not be taught in isolation. While focusing on a particular skill, practice in other skills must also be provided. Although the integration of skills does happen in a language class, it is often incidental and teachers may not be aware of it. Therefore, conscious effort should be made to ensure full opportunity for integration.

Conclusion

The above principles have hopefully highlighted areas that need to be taken into account in the preparation of materials for writing and in teaching writing at pre-university level ESL classes. However, these are in no way absolute. As teachers, we have to be flexible in selecting teaching techniques as adhering rigidly to one approach will not solve all the problems of our students. Teachers, have to be creative and sensitive to other variables such as the learners' needs, the situation of learning etc. and try to modify our teaching methods according to the needs of the learners. Similarly, materials for writing need to be tailored to suit the learners.

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