

INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO IMPROVE STUDENTS WRITING SKILLS FOR ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS

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Abstract

Writing is considered as the most difficult skill for language learners because they need to have a certain amount of L2 background knowledge about the rhetorical organizations, appropriate language use or specific lexicon with which they want to communicate to their readers. To assist language instructors to improve learners' writing competence and produce good writing, this article aims to present the combination of genre, product, and process approaches in a writing class. To better understand the topic, this paper will be divided into two main parts. The first section of this paper provides a brief literature review of each traditional writing approach including the strengths and drawbacks as well as an adapted use of each. The second part includes the importance of using the integrated approaches for English major learners in the tertiary level.

INTRODUCTION

When compared with other fundamental skills such as listening, speaking and reading, writing is the most difficult skill because it requires writers to have a great deal of lexical and syntactic knowledge as well as principles of organization in L2 to produce a good writing. Although a variety of writing methods are available to encourage learners' writing, the main discussion of this paper will focus on the product, process, and genre-based approaches. This paper will

attempt to answer the following questions:

- What does each writing approach look like?
- What are the advantages and the disadvantages of using each approach in teaching English major students?
- Why does the combination of the three approaches play an important role in developing Thai students' writing skills?
- How can writing teachers apply an integrated approach to improve Thai university students' writing competence in the classroom?

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The paper is organized into two main parts. In the first part, I will provide a literature review on each particular type of writing approach and point out not only the benefits but also the drawbacks as well as an adaptation for use in the integrated approach. The second part of the paper will focus on the importance of using an integrated approach to improve English major undergraduate students' writing competence in the class.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EACH WRITING APPROACH

Product-Based Approaches

Product-based writing approaches have been called by several names: the controlled-to-free approach, the text-based approach, and the guided composition (Raimes, 1983; Silva, 1990). Basically, writing in product-based approaches has served to reinforce L2 writing in terms of grammatical and syntactical forms. There are a variety of activities in product-based writing which can raise students' awareness in second language writing from the lower

level of language proficiency to advance like English major students such as the use of model paragraphs, sentence-combining, and rhetorical pattern exercises. Examples of each exercise are provided below:

Model 1

I am Mr. Baroni. My first name is Robert. I am twenty-five years old. I am a student. I am in the classroom now. I am at my desk. Mr. Peter is my teacher. He is in the classroom now. He is at the blackboard. He is busy now. The Classroom is on the tenth floor. It is a small room. The classroom is in an old building. The building is near the river. It is in the busy city of Detroit.

Instructions:

Write one paragraph about yourself and your school. Follow the model 1, but change all information that is not correct for you. For example: you write down your information and take as many structures and words from the model as you can use in your paragraph.

Figure 1: An example of model paragraph in product-base writing

(Blanton, 1979: 7-8 in Chapter 2: Overview pp.26-28)

Instructions:

Combine the following sentences as logically as possible.

1. The writer is young.
2. The writer is developing.
3. The writer works with options.

Possible "transformations" or combinations:

- Options are worked with by the young, developing writer.
- The writer who is young and developing works with options.
- The young, developing writer works with options.
- The young writer who is developing works with options.

Figure 2: An example of sentence-combination in product-based writing

(Strong, 1973: 4 in Chapter 2: Overview pp.26-8)

Instructions:

Using cause-effect development, write a composition in which you describe the effect- negative or positive- that a teacher has had on your personality, your feelings about school, or your approach to life in general. Be specific:

1. Mention at least three real effects
2. Explain each one, using examples, details, or anecdotes

Figure 3: An example of a particular type of rhetorical pattern in product-based writing (Arnaudet and Barret, 1984: 111 in Chapter 2: Overview pp.26-8)

The first two examples are suitable for lower English proficiency level students because they require learners to work on the given exercises strictly in order to avoid grammatical errors. However, the rhetorical patterns in the product-based writing, which provide a certain amount of freedom for English major students to create their compositions. In this case, learners have the knowledge of appropriate second language use and can apply their knowledge to write in the rhetorical patterns, comparison/contrast, cause-effect, classification, and definition (Harris, 1993). Writing in the product-based approach is viewed as a simple linear model of the writing process which proceeds systematically from prewriting to composing and to correcting (Tribble, 1990). Besides, instructors and learners believe that planning stage of writing in text-based approaches begins and finishes in the primary period of composition. However, Hairston (1982) and Raimes (1983) found that product-based writing can in no way be described as linear or as neat as is generally believed:

Contrary to what many textbooks advise, writers do not follow a neat sequence of planning, organizing, writing

and then revising. For while a writer's product - the finished essay, story or novel - is presented in lines, the process that produces it is not linear at all. Instead, it is recursive.

(Raimes, 1985: 229)

Nevertheless, the pattern-product writing approach is widely accepted among writing teachers because they have found several advantages in it for the writing classroom. Firstly, learners learn how to write in English composition systematically from using the pattern-product techniques, namely the logic of English rhetorical patterns such as narration, description, and persuasion. They also learn how to use vocabulary and sentence structures for each type of rhetorical pattern appropriately. Finally, product-based writing helps instructors raise learners' L2 writing awareness, especially in grammatical structures.

However, there are also disadvantages associated with the use of the product-based writing. Writing with this approach gives little attention to audience and the writing purpose since learners and instructors tend to overemphasize on the importance of grammar, syntax, and mechanics. Learners will lack motivation in learning and have high

pressure in creating their writing tasks, as their instructors mostly focus on the accuracy of the language structures.

In order to teach writing for English major undergraduate students, teachers should keep the strengths of the product-based writing approach for use as a part of the integrated approach because the rhetorical patterns in this approach will help learners who have a certain amount of L2 background knowledge in writing to write the organizational conventions appropriately. Besides, learning pattern-product will help to shape students' writing competence and allow them to create their written product in academic settings effectively in terms of language use. Writing instructors should include not only a sense of audience but also the

concept of writing purpose and idea generation techniques in the writing class so as to make learners successful in L2 writing.

Process-Based Approaches

Process-based writing is viewed as the way writers actually work on their writing tasks from the beginning stage to the end of the written product. O'Brien (2004) defines the concept of this approach as an activity in which teachers encourage learners to see writing not as grammar exercises, but as the discovery of meaning and ideas. During the writing process, teachers can enable learners to explore their thoughts and develop their own writing by using the five-step writing process model of Herwins.

- 1. Prewriting**

Teachers will provide a writing task and help them to generate vocabulary and ideas by applying a number of strategies in class namely brainstorming, clustering, and discussion, without concern for correctness or appropriateness in the first stage of writing.

- 2. First draft composing**

Learners will use vocabulary and ideas which they have got from the previous stage to express what they want to convey in their writing.

- 3. Feedback**

In this writing stage, learners will receive comment from real audiences which can be a writing teacher or their peers and move on to new ideas in another draft.

- 4. Second draft writing**

Based on the comment of teachers and peers, learners will modify their previous draft by revising, adding, and rearranging ideas.

- 5. Proofreading**

In the final stage, student writers will not only discover new ideas and language forms to express their ideas in writing but also focus on the appropriate use of vocabulary, layout, grammar, and mechanics.

Figure 4: The model of writing process (1986: 223, adapted from Scott, 1996)

Through the writing process, professional writers or even students hardly follow the fixed sequence of writing stages linearly because they have to move back and forth among different writing steps in order to come up with better ideas. This idea is supported by Flower and Hayes.

Writing processes may be viewed as the writer's tool kit. In using the tools, the writer is not constrained to use them in a fixed order or in stages. And using any tool may create the need to use another. Generating ideas may require evaluation, as may writing sentences. And evaluation may force the writer to think up new ideas.

(1981: 376, quoted in Scott, 1996)

Writing in the process approach can thus be seen as a dynamic and unpredictable process (Tribble, 1990) while writers try to reformulate their ideas and approximate the meaning of what they want to express in their work.

Process-based approaches are well-known tools for writing instructors to teach L2 writing since they have a number of benefits. Learners are able to learn how to compose writing in L2 with little or no when process-based writing is compared to other writing approaches. They can improve their writing step by step since instructors will guide them through the whole process of their writing tasks by giving them feedback and enough time and opportunity through peer and teacher review to develop a sense of audience (Bouhey, 1997), which allows them not only to reflect upon their previous writing but also to consider the possible existence of other viewpoints.

In spite of being widely used in ESL / EFL composition, process-based writing still

has some limitations. Learners have to spend quite a long time to complete one particular piece of writing in the classroom. Badger and White (2000) also point out that learners have no clear understanding about the characteristics of writing and are provided insufficient linguistic input to write in L2 successfully in a certain text type.

In order to alleviate the weaknesses in the integrated approach, the typical process writing model should be modified in the following ways. Instructors should provide learners with some examples of the text type that they have to write so as to allow them to have a clear understanding about the aim and the framework of a particular writing type. Teachers should not spend too much time on one piece of writing in the class because this may decrease students' learning motivation and impede them from learning other types of writing. They should train English major students to develop a concept of audience by taking turns giving comment on their classmates' writing. The process-writing activity in the class is able to help students develop their critical thinking and learn not to depend only on the teacher's feedback.

Genre-Based Approach

Hammond and Derewianka (2001) define the genre-based approach as the way to language and literacy education that combines an understanding of genre and genre teaching together in the writing class. The genre-based approach can be called differently such as the "English for Academic Purposes approach" (Silva, 1990: 16-17) or the "English for Specific Purposes approach" (Dudley-Evans, 1997: 151-152),

they stress the importance of various types of writing which are tied closely to social purposes (Maley, 1996). According to Badger and White (2000), writing in the genre-based approach is regarded as an extension of the product-oriented approach since learners have an opportunity to study a wide variety of writing patterns, for instance, the business letter, the academic report, and the research paper. Like other writing approaches, the genre-based approach is increasingly used in the L2 writing classroom due to having certain strengths. The focus of writing in this approach aims to integrate the knowledge of a particular genre and its communicative purpose, these help learners to produce their written products to communicate to others in the same discourse community successfully.

Learning to write is part of becoming socialized to academic community - finding out what is expected and trying to approximate it... The reader is a seasoned member of the hosting academic community who has well-developed schemata for academic discourse and clear and stable views of what is appropriate. The text is a more or less conventional response to a particular task type that falls into a recognizable genre.

(Silva, 1990: 16)

Thus, learning specific genre construction can be considered as a way to help learners come up with appropriate actual writing in their real life outside the classroom. It also increases learners' awareness of such writing conventions as organization, arrangement, form, and genre. Through the

composing process (Miller, 1997; Candlin, 1999), genre-based writing reflects a particular purpose of a social situation and allows students to acquire writing skills consciously by imitation and analysis of each writing genre (Badger and White, 2000).

The negative side of the genre-based approach is that learners may not have enough knowledge of appropriate language or vocabulary to express what they intend to communicate to a specific audience. Another weakness, as Badger and White (2000) point out, is that the genre approach undervalues the writing skills which learners need to produce a written product and ignores the writing abilities learners have in other areas.

In order to combine and use the genre-based approach effectively as a part of the integrated approach in the writing class, its weaknesses should be modified in the following ways. Instructors should describe clearly the genres which students have to learn at the beginning of the writing class so as to allow learners to prepare and have ideas about the language use for each genre. Furthermore, teachers should help learners to produce their written products step by step. For example, teachers may use a brainstorming technique to help students generate their ideas and come up with the appropriate language use or specific vocabulary for what they want to communicate to people in a particular discourse community. Finally, instructors should pay attention to the skills that will help learners develop their writing competence through the writing process.

THE IMPORTANCE OF USING THE INTEGRATED APPROACH IN THE WRITING CLASS

The strengths and weaknesses of each writing approach described in the previous section show that the three approaches complement each other. Therefore, writing teachers should use the combination of genre, product, and process approaches which can be called 'a process-product hybrid' (Dyer, 1996: 316) as a model to teach and improve Thai students' L2 writing at the tertiary level for undergraduate English major students. To integrate each approach in the writing class, teachers may follow the following steps. Teachers should start teaching writing with one approach and then adapt it by combining the strengths of other approaches in the writing classroom. As Brookes et al. (1990) point out, teaching the writing approaches separately very often results in unbalanced L2 writing performance. Therefore, using the integrated approach in the classroom has the main purpose of enabling Thai learners to transfer the skills they have gained from each approach naturally from one mode to another and thus to produce their writing tasks efficiently. For example, writing teachers may start teaching English major students by using the rhetorical patterns or the so-called 'rhetorical organizations' in the product-based approach in order to teach them how to write according to a variety of organizational conventions of academic prose. Instructors should combine the strengths of process-based writing such as readers' guidance and interaction in the process of meaning discovery as a part of producing the written product. As Donato says:

in social interaction a knowledgeable participant can create, by means of speech, supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in, and extend, current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence.

(1994: 40, quoted in Cotterall et al., 2003)

By working in groups or pairs, learners will improve their writing from their partners' and instructors' comment and also develop their critical thinking skills. Through the process of writing, teachers should help students realize the importance of each writing stage equally and provide them with a chance to self-correct their own writing mistakes to raise their awareness in L2 writing. Doing so will help teachers draw out learners' writing potential and allow students to see their writing development from the beginning to the end. Next, teachers may use the genre-based approach to teach actual writing for learners when they realize that their students' linguistic knowledge and writing competence are developed enough to create a written product that serves a social purpose. To teach a particular genre effectively, instructors should integrate the strengths of product-based writing, which its primary concern is about the appropriate use of the language for each genre, and the linguistic skills in the process-based approach, such as prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing in the writing class. These are likely to help students to come up with appropriate language use and writing purpose for a specific audience through interaction in the class while students are learning to produce their work. Even though writing in different genres requires different kinds of learner knowledge and different sets of writing skills, teachers still need to com-

bine the strengths of product, process, and genre approaches together and use the following steps to help students write in certain genre successfully. Teachers need to provide a clear model which allows students to identify the purpose of the social context in the first stage of teaching, Then, instructors should use the techniques of generating ideas, namely brainstorming, mind-mapping, and free-writing, to help learners think about the appropriate vocabulary, grammar, and organization for writing in a specific genre. After the stage of generating ideas, students will be allowed to work in groups because collaborative learning will not only lessen students' stress but also promote the skills which are involved in writing development. Another step which will make students' writing effective is redrafting and proof-reading, as they will help learners develop what they lack in their written products and a sense of audience. By learning through the integrated approach, students will have less difficulty in L2 writing since they have enough input to create their writing tasks.

CONCLUSION

Teaching writing skills to non-native students is a very challenging task for teachers because developing this skill takes a long time to see the improvement. In addition, teaching separate writing approaches in the writing class may not fit in the Thai context since the weaknesses of each writing approach tend to impede students' writing development. Therefore, writing teachers need to incorporate the insights of the three approaches, product, process, and genre into the writing class for teaching Thai students.

The strengths of each approach can complement each other and help teachers to develop learners' writing competence by providing appropriate input of knowledge and skills in the writing procedure.

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