

An Amalgamation of the Process and Genre Approaches to Teaching Writing

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Abstract

Teaching writing is of special importance and of increasing interest at high schools in recent years. There are several approaches to teaching writing used by teachers and educators since many years to remember. And yet, despite of the fact that learners might have reached an advanced level of language communication, one of the major concerns voiced by language teachers is that their level of writing competency seems to be lower than expected. Cumming and Matsuda [3, 23] state that L2 practitioners are still in search of a coherent, comprehensive theory. Therefore, this paper aims at proposing a coherent theory of teaching writing by integrating the two major approaches: the process approach and the genre approach. It will serve as a direction for future research that may improve the instruction pedagogy in second language writing settings.

Keywords: Writing Skills; Process-Genre Approach; Pre-University Writing Development.

1. Introduction

The ESL writing instruction has seen tremendous changes in the last two decades that have led to paradigm shifts in the field. Numerous approaches to the teaching of writing have circulated over time. However, in recent years, emphasis and debate has been on the differences between three major approaches: the product-based approach, the process-based approach, and the genre-based approach. As such debate very often offers and generates various ideas and sometimes conflicting views of teaching writing, this paper, in light of this, will offer some discussion about these approaches and proposes a synthesis, integrating two of the major approaches: the process approach and the genre approach.

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2. The Product Approach

Often, especially during the audiolingualism era, the role of writing was downplayed in language classes, as writing was seen as only some kind of supporting skill in ESL classes. The main focus was put on sentence structures as a support for the grammar class. The product approach as used in order to highlight form and syntax and the emphasis was on rhetorical drills [28]. Using the product approach students are normally told to write an essay imitating a given pattern. The objective and the focus of such writing approach is on the written product rather than on how the student should approach or see the process of writing. Writing itself is viewed as mainly concerned with the knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development is mainly the result of the imitation input, in the form of texts provided by the teacher [25]. The approach is considered as teacher-centred, as he/she becomes the arbiter of the models used [22]. Proponents of the product approach argue that it enhances students' writing proficiency. Badger and White [25] state that writing involves linguistic knowledge of texts that learners can learn partly through imitation. Arndt [1: 257-67] argues that the importance of models used in such an approach not only for imitation but also for exploration and analysis. If students are not exposed to native-like models of written texts, their errors in writing are more likely to persist [12].

This approach, often referred to as the current-traditional rhetoric [24, 14], 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. It devalues the learners' potential, both linguistic and personal [17]. The result of the re-evaluation is the writing-as-process movement, which, as said earlier, has led the field towards a paradigm shift, in this way revolutionizing the teaching of writing.

3. The Process Approach

This approach focuses on how a text is written instead of the final outcome (product). Hyland [15] mentions that the process approaches do have a major impact on understanding the nature of writing and the way writing is taught. Research shows that the writing processes are as complex and recursive, not linear. Therefore, the process approach emphasises the importance of a recursive procedure of pre-writing, drafting, evaluating and revising. The first procedure, the pre-writing activity usually involves introducing techniques that help the students discover and get into the topic. Rather than focusing on a finished product, students are asked for multiple drafts of a written work. Discussion and feedback from readers would help the learners revise the drafts. Rewriting and revision are integral to writing, and editing is an ongoing multi-level process. The draft process thus comprises of: generating ideas (pr-writing); writing the first draft with an emphasis on content (discovering meaning); second, third and so on drafts to revise ideas and communication of those ideas. The writer, the content and the purpose, and the multiple drafts are the central elements of a writing class. The instructor or the teacher in a process-based approach has the role of a facilitator. It is important to say that in such writing classes, writing is essentially learnt, not taught. The teacher's task is only to facilitate the exercise of writing skills and draw out the learners' potential, so providing input or stimulus for learners is considered as unimportant. The process approach is characterized as learner-centred approach.

The following diagram illustrates the recursive and unpredictable process of writing.

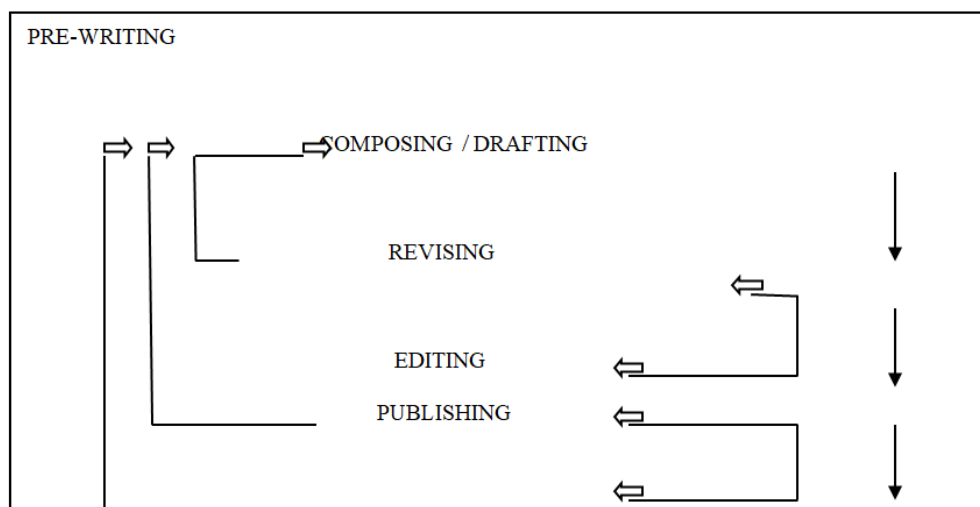


Figure 1: Recursive and unpredictable model of process writing [35].

The process approach as a recursive model focuses on revision, in response to feedback obtained from readers. Feedback is seen as essential, functioning as an input prompting the revision of texts. Keh [7] states that what pushes the writer through the writing process onto the eventual end-product is reader feedback on the various drafts. Major kinds of feedback that lead to revision include: peer-feedback, feedback from conferences, and the teacher's comments as feedback. Peer review or peer feedback provides students with authentic audiences, discussion that leads to discovery, and necessary peer feedback [31]. On the other hand, conferences 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 [29]. As for teacher's comments as feedback, research indicates that learners, generally, do expect and value such feedback on their writing [11]. As the process approach has a somewhat monolithic view of writing, in recent years, however, it has come under serious scrutiny [25]. Writing is seen as involving the same process regardless of the target audience and the content of the text. The narrow focus of the process approach seems to be 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 [8]. This approach is strongly objected by Johns [5], with her views against The Process Movement:

'The emphasis of this movement 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 minimizing understandings of role, audience and community have put our diverse students at a distinct disadvantage.' [5]

4. The Genre Approach

Badger and White [25] noted that 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. The genre approach like the product approach considers writing as predominantly linguistic. However, the genre approach places a greater emphasis on the social context in which writing is produced. This approach considers that writing pedagogies should offer students explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts [15]. Swales [13] describes genre as a class of communicative events. Using the genre approach means employment of a range of methods in a classroom. Paltridge [6] suggests a framework involving 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. According to Vygotsky [18], the underpinning theory of such a pedagogical approach, as reported in Hyland [15], 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. Doing the scaffolding activity, students are usually given models to observe, and are asked to discuss and analyse their language and structure. This element will gradually lighten as the learners independently produce a text parallel to the model. Then, the teacher's role is transformed from explicit instructor to facilitator and the students are expected to gain the targeted autonomy.

The genre approach could not escape the criticism like the other approaches. Caudery [33:11-13] states that by attempting explicit teaching of a particular genre, teachers are actually not helping the students, as it may not require students to express their own ideas or may be too dependent on the teacher providing suitable material as models. Counter-productivity is then expected to occur.

5. Process-Genre Approach

All three approaches have received quite a number of criticisms, and the field is open to many, often conflicting views [35]. Caudery [32] notes that TESL has a habit of embracing teaching methodologies with fervor, and then, as a few cracks begin to show, it will become clear that the new teaching approach will not solve every classroom problem.

This paper suggests an eclectic approach to the teaching of writing, by synthesizing the strength of the process and genre approaches for implementation in the classroom. Such an approach offers a range of advantages including more focused use of text models without having to exclude elements of other approaches. The paper is based on a model put forward by Badger and White [25:159].

The following figure explains how the model works in the context of a technical writing classroom. The application of this synthesis means that the students will first be made aware that writing occurs in a social context and situation, and that a piece of writing is to achieve a certain objective. The example given here is of a clerk writing a recommendation report concerning the purchase of a new computer program for the company. The students' task, then, is to relate the purpose of writing to the subject matter, the writer-audience relationship, and the organization mode of the text. By using this approach the students are allowed to see how texts are

written differently, according to their purpose, audience and message [19]. After the students have been exposed to the text organization, structure and language used, they will go through a process of multiple drafts instead of turning in a finished product right away. As the process approach suggests, rewriting and revision are integral parts of writing, and editing is an ongoing multi-level process consisting of: planning, drafting, and the publishing the end product, the report.

Learners should be offered a range of feedback types: peer-feedback and teacher's written feedback, throughout the writing process. According to Keh [7], feedback can be defined as input from the readers to the writer, which often gives rise to further revision.

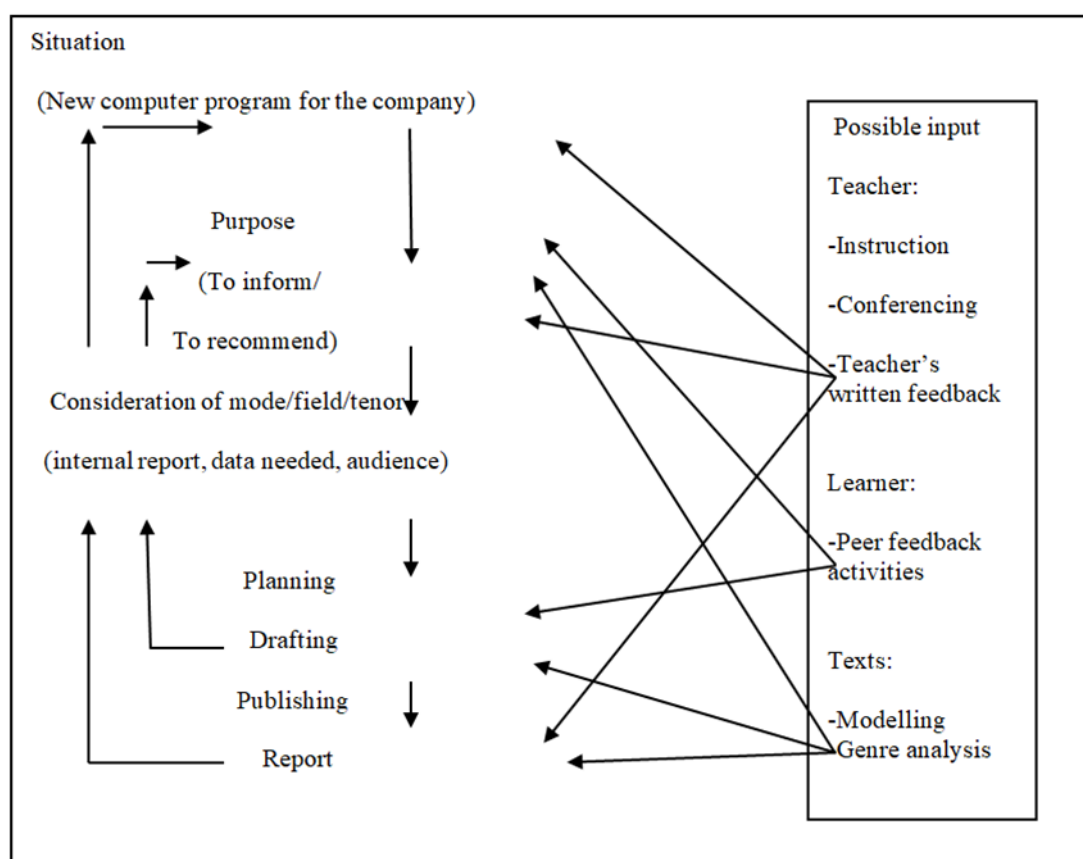


Figure 2: Amalgamated Process-Genre Approach [25:159].

5.1 Process-Genre Based Approach: Possible Input

It is well known that learners vary according to their knowledge level of a particular genre. Furthermore, those who know a lot, will need little or no input at all. Those who lack knowledge of the text organization and of the language used conventionally for a particular audience, they will need some assistance and some input. This is in fact in line with Krashen's notion of the Input Hypothesis [30], Long's interactional modifications, and Swain's negotiation of meaning [20]. Therefore, input and interaction through feedback play important roles in the writing process [12]. Input can be obtained from teachers, other students as peers, or the model text itself.

The input provided by teachers may occur at the beginning of the lesson, when a text of a particular genre is being introduced. This way, for example, teachers may explain the differences between the external and internal proposals. (Internal proposal is meant for recipients inside the writer's company, while the external proposal is directed to clients outside the company – so, the audience and the purpose of writing determines the structure, organization, the tone and the word choice).

Conferencing (verbal student-teacher interaction) provides input in the form of feedback enabling students to learn where they have not given sufficient information or if there exists illogical organization or failure to develop ideas fluently and adequately. Teacher's written feedback (comments) constitute another technique by which a teacher can provide feedback to students in the drafts submitted to the teacher.

Input can be obtained from other learners. Peer feedback known also as peer-response, peer editing, or peer evaluation, provides learners with authentic audiences and discussion that leads to discovery [27, 31]. It is recommended that learners should receive constant peer feedback to their writing throughout the writing process. Peer feedback has been found to investigate further revision [34, 21], which indicates that students do value their peers' comments when revising their drafts. Drafting, revising and editing based on feedback from peers and instructors are very essential components of the process approach to teaching writing.

On the other hand, models of a particular genre can provide students with important and specific information about the forms and functions of syntactical and lexical features required by that particular genre. It would be helpful if students could be exposed to good apprentice generic exemplars, which can provide a realistic model of writing performance for undergraduate students [16]. Then, those models can 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) [25].

To conclude, the process/genre approach integrates the strength of the process approach and the genre approach. Elements as planning, drafting, conferencing, editing and peer review are components of the process approach. Considering and understanding the purpose, audience and contexts, on the other hand, are components of the genre approach.

5.2 The Integrated Approach: The Teacher's Role

This paper suggests four basic roles for instructors teaching writing through the process/genre approach: audience, assistants, evaluators and examiners. Teachers as audience, play the role of readers providing response to the ideas or feelings that students are trying to express through writing. Kehl [9] states that teachers need to communicate in a distinctly human voice, with sincere respect for the writer as a person and a sincere interest in their improvement as a writer. Teachers as assistants, assist learners by making their writing more effective in terms of choosing the correct genre, determining the purpose and using adequate language. As evaluators, teachers give their comments on the learners' strength, weaknesses and overall performance, in order to assist

them write efficiently in the future. The primary objectives should be long-term improvement that leads to cognitive change [10] as evidenced by revisions of students' writing [31]. Playing the role of examiners, instructors perform evaluation of the learners' proficiency.

6. Conclusion

Implementing an integrated approach of process/genre approach in English writing classes ensures that the usefulness and power of process writing pedagogy (pre-writing, drafting, feedback and revising) are not replaced entirely by using only the genre approach. These two integrated approaches can be seen as complementing each other throughout the whole writing process. Nevertheless, further research is recommended to investigate the effects of the process/genre-based approach from different perspectives as an instructional technique in ESL writing classes.

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