THE DIFFERENT APPROACHES OF TEACHING WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

A writing teacher follows various methods of teaching. This article will expose the different approaches of teaching writing by highlighting its origins and how it has developed. It aims to enlighten writing teachers of the core methods they follow to teach writing. It limits its scope to four approaches; local knowledge, general knowledge, product, and process approaches of writing. This introduction of writing will give writing teachers the necessary experience to choose the appropriate method for teaching their students, as well as evaluating the current methods of teaching writing.

Key words: *writing, general knowledge, local knowledge, process approach, product approach*

INTRODUCTION

In general, writing skills are difficult to master because they combine thought, feeling, and social interactions (Perin, 2013). Therefore, writing in English can be conceptualized in different ways. For example, it can be viewed as general versus local knowledge (Carter 1990). Moreover, writing can be taught through the process writing approach or product writing approach.

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE VS. GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

There is debate among researchers of English composition about whether to concentrate on general knowledge or local knowledge while teaching students different writing strategies. The cognitivists, or those who follow the inner-directed approach, believe that the writing process is universal and hence it is general knowledge rather than local knowledge. On the other hand, the social theorists, or the outer-directed theorists, reject the idea that learners obtain writing skills along with language as an inner process and claim that it is an outer process. They believe it is related to the discourse of the community but that the cognitivists are unaware of it (Bizzell, 2003). More importantly, Carter (1990) highlighted a clear distinction between the two approaches by attributing local knowledge to discourse community, where a writer becomes an expert when he has the sufficient knowledge to write as a member of a discourse community. Therefore, the socialists asserted that novel writers should be limited to discourse community first. They suggested that the first step in the writing process is that beginner-level writers should master writing in their community of discourse and study all the conventions of that field. The local knowledge approach criticizes the general or universal approach's argument that community does not influence writers' ability (Carter, 1990).

Conversely, advocators of the general knowledge approach claim that general strategies are doable for all individuals, regardless of their background in different situations. They believe that writing has universal principals that include language in general and writing language in particular (Carter, 1990). The general approach stands on three assumptions: experts have more effective general strategies in writing than novices; general knowledge is more powerful than local knowledge; and, unlike what Thorndike has stated, the general strategies are transferable from one domain to another (Carter, 1990). Though some research has revealed that thinking is a specific domain-context bound-and cannot be generalized to other domains, as local knowledge advocators would suggest. Perkins and Salomon (1989) explain that different domains are not separate from each other and have some common structures of argument. Accordingly, the cognitive skill is general but it is bound by context (Perkins & Salomon, 1987 as cited in Perkins & Salomon, 1989). Therefore, general knowledge is very crucial for the full theory of expertise; in fact even experts sometimes turn to general strategies when they encounter novice problems in their field (Perkins & Salomon, 1987 as cited in Perkins & Salomon, 1989). This indicates that general knowledge is complementary to local knowledge; they are

not conflicting approaches. In an interesting way to point out their position on this matter, Perkins and Salomon (1989) use the following story: a leader of a country has a problem with a neighboring country that has aggressive intentions towards his country. Knowing that his country's army is not strong enough to defend against the aggressor, he is sure invasion would be inevitable. Therefore, he plans to defeat his enemy through thinking and politics, not military action. The only card that he has to play is the most intelligent person in a chess game. The chess master knows how to solve problems on the chessboard and knows how to perform the moves that will make him win. The leader thinks that this highly cognitive ability needs only some lessons in politics to find a political strategy out of this problem. The crucial question is whether this highly intelligent chess player can defeat the enemy or not. In other words, can highly cognitive ability or general knowledge transfer itself to other domains or does it only exist in a specific domain, such as a professional in a chess game?

Perkins and Salmon (1989) concluded that there is not a clear answer for such questions, or about which of the two approaches, general or local knowledge, is correct. Accordingly, before deciding what will happen, we need to consider some important variables. For example, are the strategies that the chess master has acquired related specifically to chess games and consequently he will not be able to transfer them? Does the chess player gain success through applying different strategies related to solving problems or is he merely an intuitive player of chess? Answering these questions could give us a hint about his chances to succeed in his mission. Therefore, Perkins & Salomon (1989), argue that using general or specific study is decided by the nature of the class and subject and one approach should not be generalized to classes.

To merge both approaches into one scale to dissimilate contradictions, Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986, as cited in Carter, 1990) established a scale with general knowledge at one end and local knowledge at the other. General knowledge is a conscious, context-free process and focuses on general strategies. The more experience a learner gains, the more the scale moves toward local knowledge, and the more the strategies become specified and limited with a context-based approach. This indicates that general knowledge in writing can be used with novice writers and local knowledge can be used with advanced writers. This point of view is compatible with Perkin & Salomon (1989) that we should not generalize one approach and neglect the other. Instead, both types of knowledge are used according to the nature of the class and the capability of the learners.

PROCESS VS. PRODUCT WRITING APPROACHES

The traditional, or product approach, focuses on the final writing product which views the teaching of writing as a process of assigning and evaluating writing pieces (Badger & White, 2000). It does not concentrate on the cognitive process that is behind producing the final product, as seen in the process writing approach. Instead, the teacher's main mission is correcting and grading students' papers. The teacher, however, can analyze students' papers and classify patterns of errors in what is known as the error analysis approach (Ellis & Barkhuizen 2005). In practice, the teacher usually instructs students to read novels, plays, essays, and poetry, and then analyzes them in written composition. Another form of product approach strategies is that the teacher asks students to imitate a form of writing and produce a similar template, and afterwards the teacher evaluates the product before giving the student a similar task of producing a comparable piece of written material (Ferries & Hedgcock, 2004). Therefore, in the product approach, the focus is on the product and very little attention is paid to strategies of writing or the cognitive process through which students develop their text. The instructions in this approach concentrate on conventions such as "introductions, thesis statement, and predictable paragraph structures" (Williams, 2003).

This approach is widely used in Saudi Arabia in English departments, (Al-Hazmi, & Schofield, 2007; Ezza, 2010; Grami, 2010) as well as in the English Malaysian school system because it is not as time-consuming as the process approach (Rahim, Salam, & Ismail, 2014). In this author's experience of the educational system in Saudi Arabia, the teaching of writing follows the same teaching style. A recent study by Bakry & Alsamadani, (2015), found that the product-oriented model is the dominant approach to teaching writing in the Arabic language. In the product approach, the teacher usually

prefers to spend more time analyzing students' papers instead of construing cognitive activities for students. This approach aims to provide students with linguistic knowledge and therefore students are supposed to imitate models of writing with different topics (Steele, 2004). Moreover, the product approach pays attention to the appropriate use of vocabulary and syntax (Badger & White, 2000). Students, according to this approach, copy the model and try to match the model of writing provided by the instructor. The role of the instructor in this model is essential because he provides feedback and makes sure the students provide the appropriate follow-up response. Pincas (1982 as cited by Badger & White, 2000) categorized four stages for product writing: familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing. For example, a teacher makes one of his objectives to teach students how to describe a house. First, he provides students with a model of writing, which represents the appropriate prepositions, and the names of the rooms used in the description of a house. In the second stage, students produce simple sentences derived from sentences that are used in the model provided to them. The teacher can physically color parts of the sentence so that students know how to substitute certain words. In the third stage, students might use a picture of a house to produce a paragraph of guided writing. Finally, students can write about any house, or write about their own houses, and this is the free writing stage. According to Pincas (1982) the first stage of learning is imitation, until the learner masters the skill, and after that he can write freely. This approach is hugely influenced by the behavioristic theory where the teacher provides the stimulus and the learner produces the response. The behaviorists see learning as an imitation process and learners are affected by outer variables rather than by inner variables (Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2013). In other words, the behaviorists believe that learning mainly takes place when learners receive stimulus from environmental exposure. Moreover, Watson (1977) argued that if he took a random child and raised the child by himself, that child would become any kind of specialist Watson wanted (Watson, 1977).

Gomez et al. (1996) notes two different types of the product writing approach. The first is the kind conducted in the ESL classroom where the focus is on drill-and-practice exercises. The second type emerges in the non-ESL classroom where four features are found: "(a) the topic and purpose of the writing assignment is controlled or assigned; (b) student writing is judged for syntactic and lexical accuracy as well as "ideational content"; (c) students receive prompt error feedback and corrections on a limited number of targeted skills; and (d) students may be asked to make corrections in these prioritized skills." Gomez et al (1996) see the difference between ESL and non-ESL classrooms as temporary. The ESL students will have the same writing instructions as the native speakers when their proficiency in language develops; therefore the differences in instructions are related to priority only.

The rise of the process-oriented approach in the 1970s resulted in models that depend on the cognitive process to explain how students compose writing in school (Ferries & Hedgcock, 2004; Deqi, 2005). Mastuda (2003) holds that the process movement was not the only attempt to reform writing, however, it achieved unprecedented success in comparison to previous reform attempts. Britton's (1975) and Moffett's (1968) models were the best examples of the general approach that was famous during that period. This school of thought attributes writing to a mental process and has been the strongest proponent to the process of writing as opposed to the traditional approach that focuses on the product (Berlin, 1988). In the process writing approach the focus is on the development of writing in the writer's mind before he produces the final product. There are several stages during which writing is gradually developed. Flower & Hayes (1981) developed their model on that basis and support the process approach. They categorize three mental processes that include what is happening in a writer's mind while composing: planning, translating, and reviewing. The planning category is further divided into subcategories, such as planning, generating ideas, organizing, and revising. However, Flower & Hayes (1981) explain that the process approach is not a linear relationship but a circular approach. Students move back and forth through these stages while writing. Steele (2004) made another categorization for the process approach and divided the process of writing into eight stages: brainstorming, planning, mind mapping, first draft, peer feedback, editing, final draft, and evaluation. It should be mentioned that the process approach is presented as an umbrella over many kinds of writing models, such as Britton (1975), Moffett (1968), Flower & Hayes (1981), and Steele (2004). The common features between these models are that they focus on the cognitive ability of learners. The relationship between their components are circular, not linear, and students should not submit

their final product until they experience the different stages of writing beginning with brainstorming to receiving feedback from a teacher and/or their peers (Kroll, 1990 as cited in Hasan & Akhand, 2010).

There are two types of the process-oriented approach: expressivist and cognitivist (Ferries & Hedgcock, 2004). The expressivist bases its notion that writing is a creative act and a teacher's instruction, therefore, should be personal and nondirective. The expressivists also pay great attention to personal voice (Zamel, 1982). Peter Elbow is considered one of the sincerest advocators of this approach and he supports giving students the freedom to write without restrictions in an effort to raise their fluency and voice (He, 2009). He argues that journal writing and personal essays are crucial to improve students writing because they are less formal writing that frees novice writers from restrictions of teachers, audience, and language (Ferries & Hedgcock, 2004). In addition, the expressivists believe that the teacher's mission in the classroom is to facilitate activities that support fluency and power over the writing act and to encourage self-discovery (He, 2009). Concentrating on less formal writing as a means to improve students writing is an attitude supported by Britton (1975) and Moffett (1968) as we will learn shortly.

The second type of process-oriented approach is the cognitivism approach. Though the cognitivism and expressivism approaches have several features in common, the former has two distinctive features that distinguish it from expressivism. First, the cognitivism approach has influenced L1 and L2 pedagogical writing (Ferries & Hedgcock, 2004). For example, Flower and Hayes (1981) characterize nonlinear and recursive mental processes of writing as planning, formulation, and revision. In other words, cognitivism focuses on intellectual analytical operations in writing instead of voice and fluency as the expressivism approach does. Second, the congnitivism approach focuses on high-order operations, which includes sub-processes like the aforementioned process in Flower and Hayes's (1981) model and the eight processes in Steele's (2004). Eventually, the cognitivism view has become more influential on L2 writing (He, 2009)

In the process-oriented approach, expert writers use the cognitive process automatically, therefore, they do not need support or instruction in this process. Whereas, a novice writer would need support and/or instruction in the cognitive processes because they have not yet become automatic in the writing process (De Stem, 2014). Moreover, in the case of the novice writer, the alternation between cognitive stages puts a heavy load on the working memory of the learner. To know how the learner can have more experiences and free working memory load in regard to some aspects of language acquisition, we need to shed some light on Anderson's (1983) theory of acquisition. Anderson's (1983) theory of acquisition has three stages and second language learners are supposed to follow these stages while they are exposed to new language aspects. The first stage is the cognitive stage in which learners are exposed to explicit instruction. In this stage, learning is a conscious process and the learner can verbally describe the declarative knowledge that he has acquired. Representations of this knowledge are temporarily activated in working memory. The second stage is the associative stage, and it is in the unconscious stage where learners are unable to describe the knowledge that has been acquired. In this stage, the errors that have been detected in the declarative stage will be eliminated, and the declarative knowledge is transferred into procedural form. Errors in this stage still occur and the learning process is slower than the declarative stage. Moreover, the performance in this stage resembles the professional use of language more than the declarative stage. The final stage of the acquisition process is the autonomous stage where reaction time, errors, and attention decrease. This stage needs more practice and the skill can be executed effortlessly.

Therefore, to have learners become professional writers, extensive practice is required so that the representations of the mental process are no longer considered dependent on the working memory and the writer can reach the autonomous stage. Another important aspect of process writing is that writing strategies facilitate learning for novice writers. The writing strategies divide the mental process into subcategories, which allow learners to focus their effort on a single subtask at a time. (DeSmet, 2014). In general, the process-oriented approach argues that writing is a skill that is learned, not taught, and the teacher's role is nondirective; where he facilitates writers to generate meanings and organize them on papers (Ferries & Hedgcock, 2004). This organization includes writing influence (De La Luz, 1991) and generating ideas (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Finally, the process writing approach is now

considered the dominant approach of writing in middle and high school in the United States (Applebee & Langer, 2009).

CONCLUSION

General knowledge, along with the process approach, is the best method for teaching writing for novice L2 as well as L1 learners. The product approach has a narrow influence; it focuses on the final product, ignoring how the students produce their writing in the first place. Finally, extensive practice is the key for perfection in writing and it is the tool for improving students' skills in writing (Anderson, 1983). More work and research should be done to support shifting teaching writing from the product approach to the process approach, particularly in countries that English is taught in a foreign context, like Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries.

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