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Rethinking the Teaching Approaches of ESL/EFL Writing Skills

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Abstract

English is among the international languages that is used in many domains across the globe. Mastering the language is essential to get better chances at being employed especially if one acquires excellent writing skills since the world has become so text-oriented. However, students' performance is reported as low for English as second language (ESL) or English as foreign language (EFL) writing skills. There has been a long debate on which approach is the most ideal to teach writing skills to ESL/EFL students. So, this paper will explore the trend of approaches used in teaching writing skills to ESL/EFL students. First, it will describe the common approaches used (i.e. product-based, process-based, genre-based and multimodal approaches) and their strengths as well as weaknesses. This paper will then go on to attempt to account for the essential factors to be considered in teaching ESL/EFL writing for the lesson to be effective beyond just the approaches.

Keywords: Writing Skills, Product-Based Approach, Process-Based Approach, Genre-Based Approach, Multimodal Approach

Introduction

Known as one of the most spoken languages worldwide, English has definitely been given serious attention as second language (ESL) or foreign language (EFL) learning in many educational institutions around the globe (Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Ugun & Aziz, 2020). This is because English is used in many domains such as for international interaction, education, business and trade. One is deemed proficient in the language if they could master all four skills, namely reading, listening, speaking and writing. However, writing skill is perceived as the most difficult one among those four (e.g. Alabere & Shapii, 2019; Chandran et al., 2019; Rashtchi et al., 2019; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Suryana & Iskandar, 2015; Ugun & Aziz, 2020). Thus, educators have always been looking for the 'best' approach to help students master the skill.

This paper aims to explore among the most studied teaching approaches to teach writing, specifically product-based, process-based, genre-based and multimodal writing approaches. The strengths and weaknesses of each approach will also be described. Then, it will delve into integration of two or more combination of those four approaches while making suggestions for educators on which approach will suit their classrooms better. Finally, this paper will also prove to the readers that we have been asking the wrong question about how to teach the writing skills to ESL/EFL students for a long time. It's not about which is the best

approach or combination of approaches, but it is about how teachers should strategise the chosen teaching approach to make it effective. So, this is the time for us to look at our teaching practice again and ask ourselves this question, “What strategies or techniques are actually more effective for my students so that they can fully benefit from this approach that I’ve chosen?”

Writing Skills in an ESL/EFL Context

Producing a piece of writing is a daunting task even when it is attempted in one’s mother tongue (Mastan et al., 2017). The challenge of writing skills is due to the fact that a writer does not only need to understand the subject matter, purpose of writing and intended audience, but the writer is also required to have a command of the language, organisational skills, mechanics and the awareness of the writing process (Mastan et al., 2017). Suryana and Iskandar (2015); Syafi’i (2017) also shared the same view that having required to demonstrate control over a series of variables at the same time really makes writing an awfully complex cognitive activity. This explains why writing is indisputably a critical and challenging skill for students to master, especially among ESL /EFL students (Chandran et al., 2019) as they have to produce the writing in the language that is different than their mother tongue.

The biggest challenge for ESL students to compose writing tasks is lack of proficiency in English language. They are described as “lack of certain skill such as proper use of grammar, conventions, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling” (Ramasamy & Aziz, 2018, as cited in Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019, p. 457). They need wide vocabulary, good mastery of grammar and writing conventions to produce a coherent writing. However, many students do not have those skills and this worsens when they have low interest in learning the language (Cole & Feng, 2015; Syafi’i, 2017). This chain of demotivation contributes to students feeling lost as they are just unsure about how to apply what they know into writing as what they really know is insufficient. Thus, they just stop trying to write after losing their interest in the vicious circle of frustration and confusion. This strong feeling among ESL students is illustrated by Normazidah et al (2012, as cited in Selvaraj 2019, p. 452) as a situation which “all ESL students face more complicated problems, which may be either cultural or linguistic ones”.

These complexities have resulted in low performance among ESL/EFL students when they have to produce written texts (Alabere & Shapii, 2019; Zhang, 2018). It might be overwhelming for younger students but the stake is greater at tertiary level. They have to deal with academic writing that requires more language skills from them and producing these written tasks is mandatory to graduate (Alabere & Shapii, 2019; Zhang, 2018). Due to the challenges, some students may feel demotivated (Chandran et al., 2019; Syafi’i, 2017; Zhang, 2018), thus, making the already difficult task, even tougher to master. In contrast, researchers like Zhang (2018) and Alabere and Shapii (2019) believe that teachers’ competency in applying the suitable empirical-evidence pedagogical approaches to teach writing skills also contributes to students’ mastery of writing skills. Adding on to this perspective, Alabere and Shapii, as well as Yunus and Chan (2016) also believe that ESL teachers’ inadequate knowledge of ESL writing pedagogy and their failure to choose the proper strategy to teach writing contribute to low writing competency among ESL students.

With all these issues discussed, the burden of producing good ESL student writers falls on ESL educators’ shoulders. They have set on the quest to find better approaches to teaching writing skills. This pursuit is crucial as mastering writing skills has become a must have characteristic of an employee in this era of time (Zhu, 2004 as cited in Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019), especially when the world has turned out to be so text-oriented (Cole & Feng, 2015). To meet

this requirement, there were various studies in multiple disciplines, like education, linguistics and psycholinguistics were conducted to help educators crafting their lessons more effectively (Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019). This application of empirical-knowledge is driven by series of rigorous testing by practitioners involving a lot of theories, hypotheses, and strategies that resulted in frequently adopted teaching writing approaches from the oldest one, product-based writing approach to the latest one, multimodal writing approach. The literature provides suggestions for teachers on which approach suits which student (Rashtchi et al., 2019) and teachers are taking the advice in their practice. However, we are haunted with this old running debate on why students' writing performance is still low. This situation calls for a different discussion that will help us rethink what is missing from our practices. Similarly, this paper is dedicated to the same aim of exploration.

Product-Based Approach and its Characteristics

Product-based or also known as rule-based and model-based was among the oldest approach to teaching ESL/EFL writing (Palpanadan et al., 2015). It is seen as the conventional teaching approach which students are presented to the model of a writing and drawn to the features that it has, then, are expected to compose the same writing features in a new task individually (Alabere & Shapii, 2019; Rashtchi et al., 2019; Suryana & Iskandar, 2015). In this type of instruction, students are expected to follow a sample and produce a new writing (Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Ugun & Aziz, 2020). Rashtchi et al (2019) focused on Kroll's (1990) four steps to write within product-based classroom. This approach is classified as simple linear model of writing process (Tribble, 2003 as cited in Suryana & Iskandar, 2015) which makes students experience lack motivation in learning. This is because as much as students learn how to systematically write compositions according to English rhetorical patterns such as narration, and their vocabulary and syntax needs, students are also pressured in producing the works as teachers only focus on the language accuracy. Despite this criticism, Alabere's (2019) research still proved that this approach improved students' performance in writing even not at the same rate as genre-based.

Starting 1990's, more researchers are not interested to investigate about product-based alone or integrated it with another approach (Palpanadan et al., 2015). This situation is explained in three reviews of past studies analysis in teaching writing approach which the trend showed that the other three approaches are getting more attention than product-based approach even when it is called for integration of approaches (Nash, 2018; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Ugun & Aziz, 2020). However, teachers who adhere to this approach feel that it suits the time constraints issue better than the other approaches (Palpanadan et al., 2015). In fact, pedagogically, product-based approach is the most ideal approach to teach very weak ESL/EFL writers (e.g. Nash, 2019; Palpanadan et al., 2015; Suryana & Iskandar, 2015; Ugun & Aziz, 2020). The approach accommodates their limited vocabulary, morphology, syntax and writing conventions. With limited linguistics knowledge, weak ESL/EFL students might not be able to carry out a writing task if they are not provided with samples for reference. This means teachers who deal with younger students and beginner ESL/EFL writers should not follow the trend of neglecting this approach even though it is being studied lesser right now.

Process-Based Approach and its Characteristics

As the name suggests, the importance of writing is shifted from creating the accurate product to the process of writing the product. Badger and White (2001 as cited in Rashtchi et al., 2019) explains that this approach applies different skills and tasks like collaborative

discussions and planning, and pays little attention to students' mastery of grammar. Kroll explains "drafting and receiving feedback on their drafts, be it from peers and/or from the teacher, followed by revision of their evolving texts is one of the crucial steps in the process-based approach" (1990, p.221). The collaborative discussions seem to be the strength of this approach. Even though this is seemed to be the plus value that is lacking in product-approach, a comparative experiment done by (Rashtchi et al., 2019) found that both process and product based approaches were both equally good. No one is above the other. Nonetheless, process-based approach is usually paired with genre-based approach to heighten the pedagogical impact (Chandran et al., 2019; Suryana & Iskandar, 2015; Syafi'i, 2017; Zhang, 2018).

In an action research conducted by Syafi'i (2017), he could terminate the research in second cycle after he made revision of his first cycle through the strength of process-based which is collaborative discussion. He found that his first cycle approach offered less collaboration and scaffolding that could help students getting meaning from the activities. The results were just like he desired when he made the media viewing session more meaningful and collaborative by having structured questions that focused on vocabulary, grammar and plot of the story. He employed play and pause technique to divide the work shorter and doable. The revised strategy helped enhance the use of cartoon in process-based approach classrooms as it covered language and features of the narrative writing. In his questionnaire and interviews, students admitted that watching cartoon taught them vocabulary not in isolation, but meaningful and interactive situation made them motivated. Increased interaction and collaboration is seen by Williams and Beam, 2018 as "by-product" (p. 36) of using the technology. The interactive collaboration was further facilitated when he also set a few rounds of the planning, revising and editing process that were done in groups and pairs before students actually had to compose the writing individually.

The amount of time invested for writing in process-based and process-genre approaches have always been a critique (Alabere & Shapii, 2019a; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Syafi'i, 2017; Ugun & Aziz, 2020). Consequently, Chandran et al. (2019) used technology to pair it with process-genre approach to address the time constraint problem. They believed that students' poor performance in writing is led by limited time to practise the skills needed in writing (Yunus & Chan, 2016). Thus, they utilised the unlimited access to social media (i.e. powtoon and Facebook) to bring the classroom outside anytime, anywhere. This strategy gave enough time for the students to get feedbacks from teachers and peers for every paragraph. As expected, the result was mind-blowing as students felt motivated and their writing performance has improved. The two studies done by Syafi'i (2017) and Chandran et al. (2019) showed us that, the way the lessons were strategised was really important to make use of the benefits offered by those two approaches. Pedagogically, teachers should pay attention to this highlight as employing the right approach alone does not guarantee positive impacts to the students unless teachers pair it with a set of strategies or techniques to gain real advantages out of the approach used. This is what usually missing in many of teachers' practices (Alabere & Shapii, 2019; Chandran et al., 2019; Yunus & Chan, 2016).

Even though process-based approach is more desired than product-based approach (Graham & Sandmel, 2011 as cited in Jalaluddin, 2019), this approach still has its weaknesses. The most notable challenges are the implementation procedure is time consuming and it is not suitable for weak students as it requires ideas generating activity to be conducted at the preliminary stage of writing (Singh et al., 2020). This task of developing ideas to be incorporated in their writing is really difficult for weak ESL/EFL students. They will take longer

time to express their ideas since they lack the required working vocabulary. To work against these odds, Singh et al. (2020) gave four writing modules which used process-based writing to two different ESL teachers in separate schools. The teachers were reminded to teach their students who were really weak at English using the modules with the emphasis of scaffolding strategies to support those students throughout the sessions. The teachers were observed on a few sessions and the researchers even analysed their lesson plans to note the kind of scaffolding strategies employed by the teachers.

The post test results from both schools showed significant improvement. Most of the students who used to score single digit, managed to get double digit marks. Singh et al. (2020) concluded that the effectiveness of using process writing among weak ESL students was seen in the strategies used by the teachers. The series of observation and lesson plan analysis revealed that those teachers used a lot of scaffolding strategies throughout their lessons. So, what was once seen impossible for weak students to benefit from process-based approach is twisted with extensive and varied scaffolding strategies from the teachers (Jalaluddin, 2019; Singh et al., 2020). This finding echoes the discovery of Jalaluddin's (2019) research which she found that teacher's assistance in different stages of process writing gave positive impact to rural ESL students. In short, no reported weaknesses of this approach that cannot be overcome by the efforts of teachers implementing the right strategies in the writing classrooms.

Genre-Based Approach and its Characteristics

Genre-based approach focuses on what linguistic features are needed when communicating ideas to different groups of audience which suits different kinds of text (Hyland, 2018). Therefore, students who are trained using this approach are exposed to various types of text types or genre as opposed to product-based approach which only covers limited writing genre. In addition, genre-approach can benefit beginner writers in reducing their anxiety as model text is provided to assist learning. This advantage is seen as scaffold writing by Selvaraj and Aziz (2019). Among weaknesses of this approach are students have limited knowledge of language syntax and rules for specific audience and they are more interested in final written piece rather than the process. On top of that, it underestimates the student's ability to express themselves creatively and critically. That is why Badger and White (2000) see this approach as "an extension of the product-based approach" (as cited in Suryana & Iskandar, 2017, p. 167).

Despite this criticism, it is proven that genre-based approach outperformed both product and process approaches in a simultaneous comparative study among the three approaches (Rashtchi et al., 2019). The students even took the shortest time to compose the writing during post-test, yet they still showed better accuracy than the other two comparative experimental groups. In other words, this approach is similar to product-based but is more applicable to older students even though they are beginner writers. This is among the reasons why genre-based approach is also known as English for Academic Purpose (EAP) or English for Specific Purpose (ESP) and widely used at tertiary level (Hyland, 2018). It accommodates beginning writers with the presentation of model compositions and at the same it complements other writers with wide range of different text types which are needed in academic writing. This approach is usually paired with process-based approach which is called as process-genre based approach (Suryana & Iskandar, 2015). The combination practice is not surprising as Dirgeyasa (2016) elaborated in her conceptual paper about what and how to teach genre-based writing illustrated different ways of integrating this approach in a writing

classroom. Apparently, genre-based approach can be positioned as product-based writing as well as process-based writing. It is really up to the teachers to use their creativity to manipulate the effective instructions during classes.

Multimodal Writing Approach and its Characteristics

According to Kress (2009), theoretically, multimodality accentuates the interconnection among representation, meaning making, and communication as separate but interrelated processes. Cazden et al (1996) describe multimodality as the process of blending different semiotic resources such like written or verbal text, images, and sounds to produce and signify meaning. On the other hand, Finnegan (2002 as cited in Dzekoe, 2017) sees language is one of few modes that individuals bring together in a multimodal ensemble. Some argue that language and other non-linguistic modes are just as vital in meaning making, representation, and communication. Multimodality pursues to emphasise the interaction between language and other modes and how they sustain each other in communication (Shipka, 2005 as cited in Dzekoe). Given how conceptualising multimodality is far from uniform, literacy scholars are still working on what is considered as writing in English classes and research (Nash, 2020).

Even though multimodality has been emphasised a lot, it does not make the task to conceptualise writing modally easier for composition theorists (Prior, 2017), since the traditional definitions of writing are never about modes beyond alphabetic reproduction (Kress, 2009). Nonetheless, multimodality has been integrated in ESL/EFL writing classes a few decades ago (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) as the omnipresence of technologies and shifting social practices influence the uses of literacy in the twenty-first century (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011). Based on analysis review of 26 articles on multimodal composition in secondary English classrooms, Nash, (2020) revealed that teachers used varied forms of multimodal writing that led to diverse directions on how multimodality could alter writing classrooms. The situation is similar to ESL/EFL classrooms.

Translating multimodality as a mixing of semiotic resources based on existing dominant theoretical definitions (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009), many studies combined words with visuals, audio, or gesture in one text to present multimodal compositions in classrooms. Some teachers mixed print and non-print compositions like asking students to work on digital storytelling projects, recording rap albums and comic books. Other teachers chose to use both print and multimodal compositions in their writing instructions. For instance, Howell et al. (2017) worked on a lesson unit of multimodal argument that led to a print-based argumentative essay, while some chose to flip the arrangement flow of instruction.

One take home message from Jiang's (2018) research is we should consider our students' learning styles, beliefs, cultures and experiences when constructing our writing instruction. In Jiang's case study, one participant did not feel how multimodality can enrich his writing skills. What value more to him is teaching instruction that directly helps and prepares him for the examinations. This kind of thought was also expressed by one participant in Shin et al.'s (2020) study. However, majority of the participants in these two studies and the other two case studies carried out by Chen (2020); Dzekoe (2017) showed positive acceptance towards having multimodality as part of teaching writing approach.

Regardless of the strategy used to include this approach into ESL/EFL writing instructions, majority of the studies repeatedly showed positive shifting understandings of communication among students, increased students' engagement towards the task, highly collaborative writing process and product and more significant value of students' interests,

experiences and identities (e.g. Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Smith et al., 2020) These are the strongest points of multimodal writing approach that offer different communication modals to compensate students' linguistic ability and cultural identity to bring meaning in their compositions (Chen, 2020; Dzekoe, 2017). Thus, teachers have to take this opportunity by incorporating multimodal approach into their writing classrooms as it helps students to express themselves creatively. Simultaneously, students are also prepared to the real world which demands multiliteracy skills more than ever (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011).

The Effective Strategies Matter in Integration or Separation of Teaching Writing Approaches

Since all the approaches come with strengths and weaknesses, naturally, it is more beneficial to students if two or more approaches are combined as complementary integration that compensates one another's weaknesses (e.g. Rashtchi et al., 2019; Suryana & Iskandar, 2015). The first discussed integration is of product-based and process-based approaches which aims to enhance students' experience in developing their writing skills by going through process-based approach after mastering product-based approach (Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Suryana & Iskandar, 2015). Established as process-product approach, this integrated approach allows students to grasp the mechanics of writing and familiarise with model essays. Then, students are expected to apply this knowledge while composing their writing in process writing stages namely pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing and publishing. This approach balances between cognitive and linguistics theories of writing skills. However, the disadvantages weigh the advantages down. The time-consuming nature and the process-driven activity that somehow neglect the structure and grammar production are attributed as non-appealing to the teachers (Palpanadan, 2015).

Alabere and Shapii (2019); and Zhang (2018) have explored the impacts of the process-genre approach but Zhang went extra miles by further investigating the students' self-efficacy towards this approach. Within the same line of process-genre approach research, Chandran et al (2019); Syafi'i (2017) tried to integrate the use of technology and social media to enhance students' experiences by making the writing process more scaffolded and collaborative. On the other hand, Suryana and Iskandar (2015) chose to integrate process-based, product-based and genre-based approaches in the hope to utilise all the strengths of each approach in improving ESL/EFL students' writing skills. They called the trio-combination as process-product hybrid. This kind of integration is something that Rashtchi et al (2019) suggested for future studies after they had carried out a comparative research of those three approaches in their single research. Their quest to find which approach was the best has seen genre-based outperformed the other two approaches, but they still could observe improvement among students who were getting product and process-based approaches as intervention plans. Thus, it is wiser for teachers not to neglect one approach over the other just based on their empirical strengths and weaknesses as this study showed that all three approaches used displayed some improvement in students' writing performance. This simply means teachers need to know what approach suits their class goals and students' level.

Another perspective that is seen popular is integrating multimodality in the teaching of ESL/EFL writing skills. This trend is also seen in three reviews of past studies (Lotherington & Jenson, 2011; Nash, 2018; Williams & Beam, 2018). It is understood that integration of technology has received extensive attention on its effectiveness in research field. Shin et al. (2020) investigated on what was happening to one student's metalanguage development when multimodality was presented as process, product and genre-based approaches in teaching writing skills. Instead of focusing on a few approaches like Shin et al.'s, Dzekoe (2017)

and Jiang (2018) explored on how integrating multimodal during writing process changed students' behavior in writing skills. Jiang focused more on the changes of students' roles in learning while Dzekoe sought to understand whether this approach facilitates students to practise self-noticing in their learning or not. Another gap was addressed by Chen (2020) who studied on students' reasoning for choosing modes and media in constructing meaning when composing printed and multimodal texts by asking students to write printed essay in process-based and then a multimodal text in product-based.

Overall, it is observed that multimodality manages to help students write better. Chandran et al (2019) proved that the use of powtoon that provided multimodal sources assist students to understand stages in process writing better. Likewise, Syafi'i (2017) used a multimodal source (i.e. cartoon) to introduce narrative writing plot and grammar items. The latter study emphasised the idea of adopting effective teaching strategies/techniques is the key to successful ESL/EFL writing rather than just presenting good writing approach to students. This can be observed as he changed the techniques used to play the cartoon. He split the cartoon into segments and stop at each interval for some structural work based on the clip watched before. He paused, played and replayed the cartoon twice for each part to enable students to have discussions with their friends. All these different strategies/techniques applied came into light after his first cycle of action research which he used the same process writing approach and multimodal source failed. This really reiterates the importance of pairing the effective strategies/techniques with the suitable approach that suits students and class' goals as pedagogical implication among ESL teachers.

Conclusion

Bazerman et al (2017) emphasised that whatever the processes that influence one's growth as a writer, one's development in writing is unpredictable, certainly not one single path or end juncture. It is far from uniform because students are better at some writing tasks but not at others (Graham, et al., 2016 as cited in Graham, 2019). Since every student is different and individually defined by their experience, belief and culture, their writing development varies from one student to another (Graham, 2019). Thus, employing a suitable writing approach for accommodating students' needs is crucial to achieve the goals of the lesson (Scott, 1996). Similarly, the absence of a suitable approach will leave the writing classroom in divergent directions making it hard to achieve the goals set for that particular lesson. This means teachers need to know their students' needs as there is no one size fits all approach to teaching ESL writing skills. There are times that only one approach is what the students need for that particular writing class, but at other times, all the teacher has to do is just invest some time on the integrated approach and wait for the magic to work. For instance, product-based approach is more ideal for younger or beginner writers while students at tertiary level is best exposed to process-genre based approach. Above all, students can only fully benefit from these approaches if teachers know how to manipulate the approaches in their classrooms through suitable strategies or techniques. Besides, teachers should also consider of integrating multimodal writing approach in any part of their lesson as multiliteracy is the end game now.

In a nutshell, each writing approach caters to specific students' learning needs to write competently. However, each approach, either implemented individually or in combination can be fruitful only when the teacher is fully equipped with the knowledge of all the teaching writing pedagogies, the students and their needs. This knowledge helps teachers to be creative in improvising the methodologies while achieving the learning goals and outcomes

in an ESL/EFL writing class, so that the selected teaching writing approach/es can be holistically and efficaciously implemented. Without the appropriate methodologies, even the best writing approach will lose its magic.

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