A Descriptive Investigation of Theories and Approaches to Writing Skill: a Contribution to Teaching Methodology

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Abstract

Being able to write well is not an option for all adolescents but a necessity. Chastain (1988) viewed writing skill as a basic communication skill and a unique asset in the process of learning a second language. Writing is a very important academic skill. In spite of this crucial role of Writing, many students still have problems concerning writing. Harris (1969, p. 68) defines writing as "silent skill as it is done in silence." Writing as a complex skill involves the simultaneous practice of a number of very different abilities, some of which are never fully achieved by many students even in their native language. In this study, an attempt is made to investigate current theories of writing. The current literature showed that there are different number of theories that can help teachers and researchers to find out the best way to deal with writing methodology in EFL classes.

Keywords: writing skill, strategies, native language, components of writing

1. Theories and Approaches on writing skill

  The evaluation of writing is done on the usage of correct grammar, a range of vocabularies (specified in some cases), meaningful punctuation and accurate spelling. He stated that traditional research viewed writing not more than a classroom-based activity with no creation; however recent researchers launched their lenses toward "Contextual" factors in which incorporate the learner to a dynamic and supportive environment that enables them to take risks, and also to be encouraged in creating meaning.

First Approach: Cognitive Approach

Flower and Hayes (1980) were figures who gathered the findings from the many studies of composing practices with varied populations. They also suggested that:

> There are essentially three cognitive writing processes: planning (deciding what to say and how to say it), text generation (turning plans into written text), and revision (improving existing text) and as these processes are recursive, with sub-processes such as planning and editing, hence they often interrupt each other. So there was an important shift in understanding the writing process approach (pp. 31-50).

A key premise of the model is that writing is hierarchically organized and that it is, above all, a goal-directed, problem-solving process.

Second Approach: Product or Process Approaches to Writing

Process Approach: Today, writing has been viewed as a process rather than product. This means that strategies are taught to enable the students to discover, and also it considers the context of writing. Process approach emphasizes writing to increase general intellectual fluency. It also emphasizes that writing develops thinking and learning, so students are allowed to make some mistakes. "Process Writing Approach" stresses activities that emphasize extended opportunities for writing, writing for real audiences, self-reflection, personalized instruction and goals, and cycles of planning, translating, and reviewing. Methods that are used for writing scoring pay more attention on form and less on the way in which the ideas get explored through writing and the teachers fail to teach the students that writing is nothing but a process of discovery.

Wang (2003) stated that

> The high proficiency participants mostly switched to their L1 to plan and organize the context of their composition in consideration of how they could organize their texts as discourse. Their attention to switching to their L1 considered the specificity of the topic, the intended reader, and their background knowledge (pp. 347-375).

In contrast, seldom did the L1 participants switch to their L1 for global contextual considerations. Instruction was viewed as "product-centered" or in other words it was prescriptive. Recently researchers found that product-centered approaches do not consider the act of writing itself, hence they tried to investigate the writing in a process view. They also found that the traditional approaches to teaching writing that were product centered than process centered should be revised.

Kroll (2001) defined the process approach as follows:

The "process approach" serves today as an umbrella term for many types of writing courses …. What the term captures is the fact that student writers engage in their writing tasks through a cyclical approach rather than a single-shot approach. They are not expected to produce and submit complete and polished responses to their writing assignments without going through stages of drafting and receiving feedback on their drafts, be it from peers and/or from the teacher, followed by revision of their evolving texts. Hence a process approach tends to focus more on varied classroom activities which promote the development of language use: brainstorming, group discussion and rewriting (pp. 220-221).

Steele (2004) identified eight stages for Process Approach Model as the follow:

Stage one (Brainstorming): This is generating ideas by brainstorming and discussion.   Students could be discussing the qualities needed to do a certain job.

Stage two (Planning/Structuring): Students exchange ideas into note form and judge quality and usefulness of the ideas.

Stage three (Mind mapping): Students organize ideas into a mind map, spider gram, or linear form. This stage helps to make the hierarchical relationship of ideas which helps students with the structure of their texts.

Stage four (Writing the first draft): Students write the first draft. This is done in the class frequently in pairs or groups.

Stage five **(**Peer feedback**):** Drafts are exchanged, so that students become the readers of each other's work. By responding as readers students develop awareness of the fact that a writer is producing something to be read by someone else and thus they can improve their own drafts.

Stage six **(**Editing**):** Drafts are returned and improvements are made based upon peer feedback.

Stage seven **(**Final draft**):** A final draft is written.

Stage eight **(**Evaluation and teachers' feedback**):** Students' writings are evaluated and teachers provide a feedback on it.

Product Approach: A product approach is "a traditional approach in which students are encouraged to mimic a model text, usually is presented and analyzed at an early stage" (Gabrielatos, 2002, p.5).

Steele (2004) claimed that in order to be able to construct a new piece of writing students are equipped with a standard sample of text and they are asked to follow the model. He also stated that Product Approach Model comprises of four stages as follow:

Stage one**:** Students study model texts and then the features of the genre are highlighted. For example, if studying a formal letter, students' attention may be drawn to the importance of paragraphing and the language used to make formal requests. If a student reads a story, the focus may be on the techniques used to make the story interesting, and students focus on where and how the writer employs these techniques.

Stage two**:** This stage consists of controlled practice of the highlighted features, usually in isolation. So if students are studying a formal letter, they may be asked to practice the language used to make formal requests, for example, practicing the 'I would be grateful if you would...' structure.

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Stage three**:** This is the most important stage where the ideas are organized. Those who favor this approach believe that the organization of ideas is more important than the ideas themselves and as important as the control of language.

Stage four**:** This is the end product of the learning process. Students choose from the choice of comparable writing tasks. To show what they can be as fluent and competent users of the language, students individually use the skills, structures and vocabulary they have been taught to produce the product.

Third Approach: Strategic Writing

Strategies are means that give the learner power to solve the problems he will encounter during communication to reach to his end. It can be more useful when the learner tries to make use of his background to expand his learning strategies. Strategy instruction approaches empower the learner to be self-centered and also separate good learners from poor ones. Graham (2006) maintained that:

Teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing has shown a dramatic effect on the quality of students' writing especially for lower achieving writers than more proficient writers. The ultimate goal is to teach students to use these strategies independently (pp.187-207).

Troia and Graham (2002) stated that "Strategy instruction may involve teaching more generic processes, such as brainstorming" (pp. 290-305). Politzer (1983) stated that there is a relationship between strategies used by learners and demographic factors such as sex, age, and the like.

Graham and Perin (2007) found the following on writing instruction:

Aims of Writing Instruction

Recently it has been found that students need to write clearly and for a wide variety of real-life purposes. Thus, *flexibility* plays the most praised role of writing instruction because the fully proficient writer can adapt to different contexts, formats, and purposes for writing.

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A Note about Grammar Instruction

According to the meta-analysis, teaching grammar explicitly does not work for students of all levels of proficiency but it's more appropriate for those who are more proficient than low level ones. As the impact of traditional grammar instruction has also been negative, strategies such as planning, reading, and rehearsing have been found crucial to coherence. Writers of high-rated essays spent more time planning a semantic structure for the essay before writing began; besides, they depended significantly less on explicit cohesive ties and more on implicit ties to build the semantic relationship in a discourse. Writers of low rated essays were more likely to proceed without a planned structure. They resorted to the "what next" strategy to generate sentences.

We can interpret that strategic competence is ability that enables learner to compensate break downs in communication in the result of his/her malfunction. Many research confirm and support the necessity of strategy instruction. As Graham (2006) says "Writing Strategy instruction involves explicitly and systematically teaching steps necessary for planning, revising, and/or editing text" (pp.187-207).

Fourth Approach: Self-Regulated Strategy Development (SRSD)

To De La Paz and Graham (2002), Harris and Graham (1996) students are also taught a number of self-regulation skills (including goal setting, self-monitoring, self-instruction, and self-reinforcement) designed to help them manage writing strategies, the writing process, and their behavior. Mnemonics are introduced to help students remember strategies to increase writing performance. Two such strategies are PLAN and WRITE".

PLAN: *P*ay attention to the prompt, *L*ist the main ideas, *A*dd supporting ideas, *N*umber your ideas);

WRITE: *W*ork from your plan to develop your thesis statement, *R*emember your goals, *I*nclude transition words for each paragraph, *Tr*y to use different kinds of sentences, and *Ex*citing, interesting words. Graham and Harris (2003) suggested "SRSD" that stands for Self-Regulated Strategy Development study is known as the best approach for teaching strategies as it helps students to plan, draft, and revise their writing.

Graham and Perin (2007, pp.15-20) identified eleven effective instructional practices for students in grades 4–12 as follow:

1. Writing Strategies;

2. Summarization;

3. Collaborative Writing;

4. Specific Product Goals;

5. Word Processing;

6. Sentence-Combining;

7. Prewriting;

8. Inquiry Activities;

9. Process Writing Approach;

10. Study of Models;

11. Writing for Content Learning.

Writing Strategies

De La Paz and Graham(2002) found six steps of writing strategies as follow:

1. Develop Background Knowledge: Students are taught any back-ground knowledge needed to use the strategy successfully;

2. Describe It: The strategy as well as its purpose and benefits is described and discussed;

3. Model It: The teacher models how to use the strategy;

4. Memorize It: The student memorizes the steps of the strategy and any accompanying mnemonic;

5. Support It: The teacher supports or scaffolds student mastery of the strategy;

6. Independent Use: Students use the strategy with few or no supports (pp. 291-304).

Summarization

Teaching students how to summarize texts in a systematic way is a start point for writing. Introducing fading models of a good summary is an explicit teaching summarization strategy that enhances

summarization by the learner. Overall, teaching adolescents to summarize text had a consistent, strong, positive effect on their ability to write good summaries.

Collaborative writing

Yarrow and Topping (2001) found that:

> Collaborative writing involves peers writing as a team. In one approach, a higher achieving student is assigned to be the Helper (tutor) and a lower achieving student is assigned to be the Writer (tutee). The students are instructed to work as partners on a writing task. The Helper student assists the Writer student with meaning, organization, spelling, punctuation, generating ideas, creating a draft, rereading essays, editing essays, choosing the best copy, and evaluating the final product. Throughout the intervention, the teacher's role is to monitor, prompt, and praise the students, and address their concerns. (pp. 261-282)

Setting Specific Product Goals

Ferretti, Arthur, & Dowdy (2000) found that:

> Setting Specific Product Goals strategy provides students with objectives to focus on particular aspects of their writing. For example, students may be instructed to take a position and write a persuasive letter designed to lead an audience to agree with them. In addition to this general goal, teachers provide explicit sub-goals on argumentative discourse, including a statement of belief, two or three reasons for that belief, examples or supporting information for each reason, two or three reasons why others might disagree, and why those reasons are incorrect" (pp. 694-702).

Word Processing

Drowns (1993) found the following:

> The use of word-processing equipment can be particularly helpful for low-achieving writers. In this type of instruction, students might work collaboratively on writing assignments using personal laptop computers, or they might learn to word-process a composition under teacher

guidance. Typing text on the computer with word-processing software produces a neat and legible script. It allows the writer to add, delete, and move text easily. Word-processing software, especially in more recent studies, includes spell checkers as well (pp. 69-93).

Compared with composing by hand, the effect of word-processing instruction in most of the studies was positive, suggesting that word processing has a consistently positive impact on writing quality. The average effect on writing quality was moderate for students in general (effect size = 0.51), but for low-achieving writers it was larger (effect size = 0.70). Thus, word processing appears to be an effective instructional support for students in grades 4 to 12 and may be especially effective in enhancing the quality of text produced by low-achieving writers.

Sentence-Combining

Saddler and Graham (2005) indicated that:

> The effects of sentence combining on low achieving writers were moderate. The effect was 0.46. It showed that this kind of instruction has a moderate impact on improving the quality of the writing of adolescents in general. Sentence-combiningis an alternative approach to more traditional grammar instruction. Sentence-combining instruction involves teaching students to construct more complex and sophisticated sentences through exercises in which two or more basic sentences are combined into a single sentence. In one approach, students at higher and lower writing levels are paired to receive six lessons that teach (a) combining smaller related sentences into a compound sentence using the connectors *and*, *but*, and *because*; (b) embedding an adjective or adverb from one sentence into another; (c) creating complex sentences by embedding an adverbial and adjectival clause from one sentence into another; and (d) making multiple embeddings involving adjectives, adverbs, adverbial clauses, and adjectival clauses. The instructor provides support and modeling and the student pairs work collaboratively to apply the skills taught (pp. 43-54).

Pre-writing

Pre-writing is a process in which some helpful activities are designed to engage students for generating ideas for their composition. Having students to read or develop a visual representation of their ideas before sitting down to write is considered as a warm up step that pushes the learner ahead. Encouraging

group and individual planning before writing, organizing pre-writing ideas, prompting students to plan after providing a brief demonstration of how to do so, or assigning reading material pertinent to a topic and then encouraging students to plan their work in advance are pre-writing activities that enhance writing. Pre-writing activities seem to have a positive effect on improving student's writing.

Inquiry Activities

Hillocks (1982) found the following:

> Students examine and infer the qualities of a number of objects in order to describe them in writing. The students touch objects while wearing blindfolds, examine seashells, listen to sounds, do physical exercise, become aware of bodily sensations, examine pictures, pantomime brief scenarios, act out dialogues, and examine model compositions. Students' responses to these objects are elicited. Students list more and more precise details, and respond to each other's descriptions in small groups or whole classes under teacher guidance in order to become increasingly aware of the writing task and possible audience reactions to the written product. The students write and revise several compositions. The teacher makes comments on each draft of the composition with the intention of increasing specificity, focus, and impact of the writing (pp. 261-278).

The process writing

As Pritchard and Honeycutt (2006) contend "the emphasis is on the extended opportunities for writing, writing for real audiences, self-reflection, personalized instruction and goals, and cycles of planning, translating, and reviewing" (pp. 275-290).

Study of Models

Knudson (1991) found that:

> An example of Study of Modelsinvolves presenting students with two models of excellent writing, such as a well-written essay that sets out to persuade the reader that UFOs exist and another well-written persuasive essay claiming that there is no such thing as a UFO. The teacher discusses the essays with the students. The next day, students are given the essay that claimed

that UFOs do not exist and are asked to write a persuasive essay arguing for or against the position that girls are not better in math than are boys (pp.141-152).

Writing for Content Area Learning

Writing has been shown to be an effective tool for enhancing students' learning of content material. Although the impact of writing activity on content learning is small, it is consistent enough to predict some enhancement in learning as a result of writing-to-learn activities.

And also, a number of these writing practices, such as teaching writing processes or how to construct more complex sentences, have had a positive impact on students' reading skills, too. About 75% of the writing-to-learn studies which were analyzed had positive effects. The average effect was small but significant. Unfortunately, it was not possible to draw separate conclusions for low-achieving writers, as none of the studies examined the impact of writing-to-learn activities specifically with the process writing approachstresses activities that emphasize extended opportunities for writing, writing for real audiences, self-reflection, personalized instruction and goals, and cycles of planning, translating, and reviewing. In a science class, the students study the human circulatory system.

Boscolo and Mason (2001) found the followings:

> The teacher's goal is to help students develop alternative conceptualizations of the role of the heart, blood, and circulation. The science teacher asks the students to write summaries and answer questions in writing to increase their ability to explain information, elaborate knowledge leading to deeper understanding of the topic, comment on and interpret information in the written science text, communicate what has not been understood, and describe a change of belief they might be experiencing. Note that in the writing-to-learn approach, the teacher assigns writing tasks but does not provide explicit instruction in writing skills. Thus, writing is a tool of learning content material rather than an end in itself (pp. 83-104).

As Oas, Schumaker& Deshler (1995) determined two phases for learning the strategies: a learning phase and an applying phase. During the first phase, the student learns and practices the strategy and

by using it in both easy and difficult situations. In the applying phase, the student uses the strategy to succeed in classroom and other situations.

As a whole, strategies are tools that students can use to approach tasks in classes or other learning situations. They are helpful tools for learning and solving problems. A good language learner is one who finds his own way, taking charge of his learning, organizes information about language, uses contextual cues, and learns how to make intelligent guesses**.**

To Corder (1983) both the learner's knowledge of the language and his assessment of his interlocutor's mastery of language as well as familiarity of the topic of discourse affect the selection of strategies on the part of the learner. Communicative competence of the learner is the complex of linguistic, sociolinguistic, and strategic competences altogether. Aside from this, there are some evidences that show by mixing two skills as Writing and Reading, the learner will gain a mastery of his/her learning.

Fifth Approach: Writing and Reading, the Chain

Writing is sometimes seen as the "flip side" of Reading. Almost all writers try to put themselves in the shoes of the reader by reading the text in order to be able to find their mistakes from the view of the reader. Some research show that reading and writing are highly integrated; therefore, by reinforcing one of them, one can make improvement in the other. It is often assumed that adolescents who are proficient readers must be proficient writers, too. If this were the case, then helping students learn to read better would naturally lead to the same students writing well.

To Fitzgerald and Shanahan (2000) "While writing and Reading are not identical skills, both rely on common processes and knowledge. Consequently, some educators believe that writing instruction improves reading skill" (pp. 39-50).

Madsen (1983), defines writing components as "mechanics, vocabulary, grammar, content, dictation, different rhetorical matters, e.g., organization, cohesion, unity, appropriateness to the audience, topic, and sophisticated concerns of logic and style" (P.101).

By a brief glance to the above information we can find that writing is a communicative activity. To Zamel (1983) "composing is considered as a non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (pp. 165-187).

For writing one needs knowledge of linguistic rules, knowledge of the world of facts, and knowledge of social conventions. The writer in order to meet standards of social acceptability should observe accuracy as well as fluency. So tidiness, correctness and making the text well-formed are the characteristics that guide the writer to achieve his end. Community colleges have always attempted to meet the needs of students with reading and writing difficulties, and many would argue that doing so is a core part of their mission.

Sixth Approach: Free Writing

Free writing or "flow'' writing is useful technique especially when you have something in mind and are able to compose long sentences as the words, worthiness of the content. Hence speedy writing as doing any other jobs causes some or many mistakes. Being free to choose a topic to write about is preferred when you're going to follow the assignment. It means that having a framework in hand makes your mind organized and also causes not to waste your time on deciding on the topic. Brainstorming ideas is one another technique in which the student tries to generate his ideas. In other words, it shapes your thought.

2. Conclusion

In this descriptive study, an attempt was made to investigate current theories of writing which exists in the literature of second language. It was revealed that there are different theories of writing each of which targets specific methodology and layout. It is suggested that teachers use an eclectic approach to writing to target different needs of learners in the class. Also, some approaches to writing are beneficial for specific students. For instance, for young adults, it is better to avoid logical writing and for those grownups, it is suggested to use cognitive approach to writing since their needs and characteristics allow teachers to use more advanced methods of writing.

According to Glynn, Briton, Muth, &Dogan, (1982) students who were free to write outperformed those who were asked to write a complete draft in order in grammatical sentences. Aside from this, some advocated an approach to writing in which both the reliance on inherent linguistic abilities and personal sociological contexts are taken into consideration. Chastain, as cited in Mansouri, Bijami, Ahmadi, (2012) says that writing is the distinctive ability of educated people and also its unique features contribute to overall language learning. Writing free is preferred as it gives the students a chance to express their ideas using their vocabulary and style. It also motivates the students to write.

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