

Process Approach to Teaching Writing: Theoretical Assumptions versus Practical Constraints

مقاربة العملية الذهنية لتعليم الكتابة، إفتراضات نظرية مقابل معيقات تطبيقية

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Abstract:

This paper aims to trace the debate around product and process approaches to teaching writing in English as foreign language context. It attempts to highlight the theoretical facets developed by proponents of the process approach in order to advance it as an alternative to the traditional approach. The paper overviews the historical background then investigates the teachers' awareness of this debate as it sheds light on the constraints to the implementation of the process approach in the classroom. Thus, a questionnaire was administered to the teachers of first year at the English department of Ouargla University. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The study revealed some obstacles hindering the adoption of the process approach to teaching writing in foreign language contexts. Some recommendations, therefore, have been put forward to help teachers benefit from the advantages of this process.

Keywords: Teaching, writing, teaching skills, process approach, product approach

ملخص البحث

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تتبع النقاش حول المقاربة المعتمدة على النص المنتج، والمقاربة المعتمدة على العملية الذهنية، لتدريس الكتابة في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. يحاول البحث إبراز الجوانب النظرية التي طورها مؤيدو مقاربة العملية الذهنية بغرض تقديمها كبديل لمقاربة النص التقليدية، إذ يبدأ بنظرة عامة على الخلفية التاريخية، ثم يبحث في وعي الأساتذة بهذا النقاش في ممارستهم اليومية لإلقاء الضوء على القيود الحائلة دون تنفيذ نهج العملية في الفصل. ولأجل ذلك تم تقديم استبيان لأساتذة السنة الأولى بقسم الإنجليزية جامعة ورقلة ليتم تحليل البيانات عن طريق الإحصاء الوصفي. وقد كشفت الدراسة عن بعض

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العقبات التي تحول دون تبني مقاربة العملية الذهنية في تدريس مهارة الكتابة في سياق اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، لذلك تم تقديم بعض التوصيات لمساعدة الأساتذة على الاستفادة من مزايا هاته المقاربة. الكلمات المفتاح: التدريس، الكتابة، مهارات التدريس، نهج العملية، نهج المنتج.



Introduction

From the early days of the last century, the field of language teaching was very active and rich. Many disciplines were interested in answering the question about how people learn and use a second and even a first language. Several studies show that research in linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and other related disciplines have come together to confirm the complex nature of the language issue. Teaching language skills in general and writing in particular has been, by consequence, influenced by the implications of this complexity. Teachers of languages generally face the challenge of making the choice among a big number of teaching methods. Although these methods are the result of a historical interconnection between different schools, they can be grouped into two categories depending on whether they focused on the product or the process of learning. The debate around using product or process approach to teaching writing in particular is not new and seems to last more time in the future.

This paper attempts to inspect the practical constraints affecting the implementation of process approach in teaching writing in an EFL context?

I. Approach to Teaching English as a Foreign Language

Even with the best training, second language teachers of English usually face difficulties to reach their teaching objectives. This is may be related to the nature of learning English which, as stated by Dean (2004), "is not a straightforward business; it is not smooth, staged and linear, but 'messy', context-based and requires frequent recursive experiences." (p. 2)

During a whole century from 1880 to 1980, language teaching professionals were involved, according to Brown (2002), in a "search for a single ideal method generalizable across widely varying audience that would successfully teach students of foreign language in the classroom." (p. 9)

Interestingly, this search ended up with a number of competing theoretical methods. However, Celce Murcria (2001) believes that "until fairly recently, very few language teachers have a sense of history about their profession and are thus unaware of the historical basis of the many methodological options they have at their disposal. (p. 3)

The domain of teaching English as a second language has been an interdisciplinary field where many sciences have contributed like Linguistics, psycholinguistics, cognitive psychology, sociolinguistics, and even neurolinguistics. All have had worked through different studies whether individually or in combination to explore a domain that always fascinates the researchers. The richness in terms of research contributors in this domain oblige language teachers to enlarge their scope of interest and training to those disciplines in order to make their decisions and practices more relevant and appropriate to the expanding field of second language teaching.

In order to simplify the task for teachers and to introduce different approaches to teaching, Richards & Rodgers (1986) proposed a framework based on two important theories:

The first one is related to 'the nature of language proficiency' and how language is viewed by different schools. For the structural view, language is a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning. The functional school view language as a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning. The last subcategory is represented by the 'interactional' view that sees language as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals. Later, Richards & Rodgers (2014) developed this framework to add other subcategories such as the cognitive, the genre, the lexical, and the socio-cultural models.

The second theory that shaped many approaches to teaching language is related to the psycholinguistic processes involved in language learning and the conditions needed for these processes to be activated? Richards & Rodgers (2014) included many factors like behaviorism, cognitive code learning, skill learning, interactional theory, constructivism, socio-cultural learning theory as well as the role of individual factors in language learning.

The ideologies cited earlier were reflected, among others, on the ways methods' proponents designed their courses and opted to teach the four skills of reading, listening; writing, and speaking.

This paper will first overview the development of teaching writing skill through the different approaches of teaching second language over the last century. It adopts, with Richards (2017) grouping this development under two categories: product approaches and process approaches.

The focus on writing is based on its importance and difficulty. Writing is important given the fact that it "provides a student with physical evidence of his achievements and becomes a Source whereby he can measure his

improvement” Paulston, Bruder, & Newton, 1976, p. 203). Writing is also difficult to acquire because it needs more cognitive processes.

II. Product Approaches to Teaching the Writing Skill

This labeling is possibly linked to the bases on which aspects learners are assessed namely to what extent the end product fits the formal conventions of the language. The learner in this approach tries to satisfy the reader who will usually focus on the adherence to the rules. Thus, the role of the teacher is to prepare students to construct an error free written product.

In practical words, writing is almost seen as “an arrangement of words, clauses, and sentences, and those who use it in the classroom believe that students can be taught to say exactly what they mean by learning how to put these together effectively” (Hyland, 2008). Many approaches could be enumerated under this category.

II-1- Grammar Translation Method

Using the students’ first language as its name suggests, Grammar Translation Method (GMT) was among the first methods that inherited the ways in which Latin was taught. It focused on reading and writing to the expense of the two other skills because at that time “the goal of foreign language study is to learn a language in order to read its literature” (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

The sentence was the basic unit of teaching and accuracy was emphasized in language practice by presentation and study of grammar rules. Freeman (2000) illustrated one of the learners’ practices where the student is asked to write about a topic which is based on a reading passage from a previous lesson.

II-2- Reform Methods

Later, the direct method based on the rejection of the previous one focused on speaking rather than reading and writing. It avoided analytical procedures and grammar explanations trying instead to use the language directly and ‘actively’ in the classroom.

The Direct Method was mostly criticized by being difficult to implement in public schools as it required teachers who were native speakers or at least who have had high level fluency.

The writing assignments, as reported by Freeman and others, were done from what students have memorized from reading passages in the classroom because they have been presented as a model to follow.

In the audio-lingual method developed during the first half of the last century and similar to the direct method, writing is the last skill to focus on

but it drills students, as stated by Freeman, in the use of grammatical sentence patterns using different techniques. In one of them selected words are erased from a dialogue students have learned. Students complete the dialogue by filling the blanks with the missing words.

These methods will not be further detailed as they did not focus on writing but they shared with GMT the general concept of teaching language focusing on the accuracy of the end product. This one even if well written will show the adherence of someone else writing used as a model. The model will not show how the original writer or the student started and arrived at the final draft. In other words there is no suggestion about the process involved in this production.

II-3- Communicative Methods

In the 1970's, educators started to notice that in addition to the linguistic structure, students need to perform some functions to communicate such as promising, inviting, and others. Such observations contributed to a shift in the field in the late 1970s and early 1980s from a linguistic structure - centered approach to a Communicative one.

During the communicative era and in the 1980's, the paragraph pattern approach was developed with a focus on different functional or organizational patterns such as narration, description comparison contrast and exposition. In this pattern approach, the focus was on the concept of thesis statement and topic sentences (Richards, 2017).

One of the techniques used in teaching writing was the 'Scrambled sentences' where students are given a passage in which the sentences are in a scrambled order. They are told to unscramble the sentences so that they are restored to their original order which will teach students about the cohesion and coherence properties of the language.

Under the communicative umbrella, many methods were grouped. Content-based and Task-based approaches could serve as examples to illustrate the shift in focus of the teaching enterprise. In these approaches rather than 'learning to use English, students use English to learn it. Freeman (2000) assumes that they give priority to process over predetermined linguistic content.

The word process used by Freeman describing these methods is still used within the same framework that focuses, at least in the assessment stage, on accuracy but using different ways to go about it. In other words the difference between the communicative and the preceding methods is only a matter of

focus whereas the starting and the final points to reach are seemingly the same, namely the end product.

III. Process Approach to Teaching the Writing Skill

The main principle is to teach language learners what good writers do when they write. Accuracy is not ignored but is not the primary concern. This approach came after rejecting the old practices as stated by Myhill (2001):

In summary, teachers have – at different times – overemphasised correctness, overemphasised personal response, and overemphasised form. Although there has been much valuable work on how to mark and assess children's writing, there has been almost no attention given to how to intervene during writing and how to be active in teaching writing. Put simply, we set up writing tasks and we mark writing, but we do little to help writers understand how to write better. (Dean, 2004, p. 103)

Myhill was trying to attract researchers' attention to accompany children and new writers in general on their way during different steps of the writing process by ignoring or at least minimizing the focus on form, correctness, and Grammar. The underlying assumptions of the process approach are found within the domain of psychology. In this field, the relation between the mind and language is further investigated and established.

III-1- Phase Model

In Karmiloff-Smith's phase model, reported by Williams (2003), the learning development involves three phases: during the Data collection, information is gathered from the environment so as to develop internal representations of reality. Then, a phase of attention called reflection followed by a phase of reconciliation where the internal representation created is matched with the external data. This phase model, according to Williams, has several advantages over the preceding stage models. The one related to our topic is that they propose a kind of interaction between cognition and language.

To study this interaction, the developing fields of psychology and cognitive psychology have provided answers to many questions about the nature of the human mind and its functions. The concept of mental representation is one of the most famous one in which the human mind keep an internal form of any external information. This concept has important implications in education, including how to improve reading, writing, and other skills.

The model's emphasis on reflective thoughts, as reported by Hyland, stresses the need for students to participate in a variety of writing tasks to develop their skills. This can be achieved through activities that aim to generate ideas like brainstorming and outlining, encouraging peer feedback and revision. The error correction is delaying until the final editing.

Seemingly, an empirical study, aiming to determine the effect of process writing activities on the writing skills of prospective Turkish teachers, involved students in some activities like prewriting, planning, organizing, revising, and editing. The study recommended that prospective teachers "should be exposed to activities that will help them understand how this process works and then be able to apply it to their students during their teaching experience." (Dilidüzgün, 2013)

It should be noted, however, that many forces and factors guiding the writer's choice are outside the individual writer which means that the psychological factors are far from providing a complete picture of the writing process.

Because this paper is about writing, it's better to give a definition from a cognitive point of view. Gollins and Gentner cognitive framework theory define writing "as the process of generating and editing text within a variety of constraints. (Forrester, 1996, p. 172)

By constraints, the authors referred to three forms: Structural, content, and purpose. The existence of these constraints is one of the characteristics that make writing difficult comparing to the other skills. Teaching methods, thus, should be designed to allow the beginner writer to practice fewer tasks at a given time.

III-2-Writing as Discovery Process

Odell (1980) recognizes that what has been called a writing crisis is, in fact, a teaching crisis. Despite the importance of mastering the conventions of standard written English, teaching writing is not simply a matter of correcting spelling, and improving syntax. Instead, by teaching writing he suggests to teach students some basic processes and engage them in frequent writing assignments. In other words, Odell asks to think of writing as a process of discovery, a process of exploring, and a process of creating, testing, and refining hypotheses (pp. 175-176).

This discovery process may go on in many ways to consider in teaching:

- a) The act of writing itself can serve one to discover what he/ she wishes to say.

- b) Audiences' values, may lead to abandoning or at least revising original point of view.
- c) Discovery also occur through two cognitive processes or 'games' in Elbow's words:
 - A believing game is to think of reasonable justifications of the writers' claims.
 - A doubting game entails looking for alternative explanations.

In other words, writing is seen as a process through which writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to create meaning. It is more of a problem solving activity than an act of communication.

III-3- Flower and R. Hayes' Theory

In the 80's, Flower and Hayes tried to study and investigate the writing process through a new cognitive framework which they introduce by these words:

There is a venerable tradition in rhetoric and composition which sees the composing process as a series of decisions and choices. However, it is no longer easy simply to assert this position, unless you are prepared to answer a number of questions, the most pressing of which probably is: "What then are the criteria which govern that choice?" Or we could put it another way: "What guides the decisions writers make as they write? (1981, p. 365)

To answer this question, they worked during five years on this topic using the thinking aloud protocols. In this activity, they gave participants a problem and ask them to compose out loud near a tape recorder and to verbalize everything that goes through their minds as they write. Thus, they presumed to bring evidences to support their hypothesis to account for all thinking processes in writing.

The theory was based on four key points and assumptions about the process of writing:

- 1) The writer uses distinctive thinking processes in the act of composing.
- 2) These processes are organized in 'hierarchy'.
- 3) The writer follows a set of goals during the process.
- 4) These goals are updated at every step of the process.

The authors made the difference between the traditional linear stage model where the most important unit is the steps that the written product takes in its growing journey, and the process product where the focus is on the mental processes that take place during this journey.

In more details they explained the three major elements of the writing 'act' which are reflected in the three units of the model: the task environment, the writer's long-term memory, and the writing processes.

The task environment is defined as "all of those things outside the writer's skin, starting with the rhetorical problem or assignment and eventually including the growing text itself."

The writer's long-term memory is where the writer has stored knowledge. The problem with long-term memory is, first of all, finding the cue to retrieve a network of useful knowledge. Then, writers need to adapt that information to fit the demands of the rhetorical problem.

Finally, they explained with some details the writing processes of Planning, Translating, and Reviewing, which are under the control of a Monitor. These processes did not occur in a linear stage but are recursive and embedded in each other.

III-4- Dual Coding Theory

Sadoski and Paivio (2001) examined the theoretical assumptions in the Flower & Hayes theory and tried to reinterpret it according to "a cognitive theory specific to the writing process in terms of a larger, general theory of cognition that provides a simpler, more direct, and more empirically testable account of the writing process." (p. 142)

Tracing it in history from the ancient Greek, Sadoski & Paivio developed their Dual Coding Theory (DCT) to account for both verbal and nonverbal mental representation. The basic assumption behind (DCT) is that there are two separate coding systems of mental representation in our memories. One is for verbal language and the other represents the nonverbal objects and events. The founders of the DCT believe in strong relation between perception and memory. In other words if what we perceive through the stimulation of our different senses is concrete, the stored form of this perception in our memories should also keep some concrete qualities and are not abstract as people used to think.

In order to explain and illustrate this point, they provided an example for the visual verbal encoding in the mental representation of a visual letter form such as C or visual word form such as cup. A nonverbal visual encoding might be a mental representation of an object or scene such as a coffee cup or

a table setting with a cup and saucer. The same reasoning goes for the auditory modality. An auditory verbal encoding might be a phoneme such as k. A nonverbal auditory encoding might be the sound of coffee pouring into a cup.

Although DCT opponents believe that its effects on comprehension are obvious when using concrete text material, they also think that applying the DCT to writing using concrete language and materials in teaching writing will have better effect on writing quality.

IV. Methodology

To carry out our study a questionnaire was designed and sent to the six teachers who are teaching written expression module for 1st year LMD English students at Ouargla University; this module is taught with an average of three sessions weekly, One hour and a half for each session. The questionnaire aims to explore three main aspects:

1. The teachers and their experience in teaching writing strategies
2. The students' level and the program of teaching sessions
3. The teaching practices and their relation with process approach.

Data Analysis

Four teachers replied and answered the questionnaire. They all have more than six years experience in teaching, but only two of them have had formal instruction in teaching writing practices. For the others, teaching writing was a part of their personal interest and research.

Table (1): The Sample of the Experiment

English department at Ouargla University	Population: Written expression teachers of 1 st year LMD	participants	%
	6	4	66,66

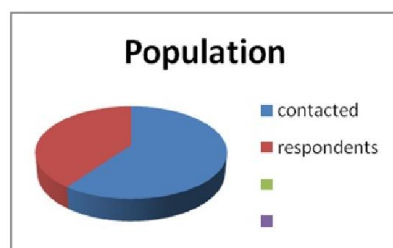


Figure (1) Population of the study approaches



Figure (2) teachers' training in writing

As for the syllabus: three teachers followed a syllabus designed by a scientific committee and responsible teacher. One teacher developed his own design for the writing class.

In terms of students' level in writing all respondents but one evaluated their students as beginners.

Table (2): Syllabus design authority

Syllabus design	Scientific committee	%	Own syllabus	%
Answers	3	75	1	25

Table (3): Students' level according to teachers' evaluation

Students' level	Beginners	%	Intermediate	%
Answers	3	75	1	25

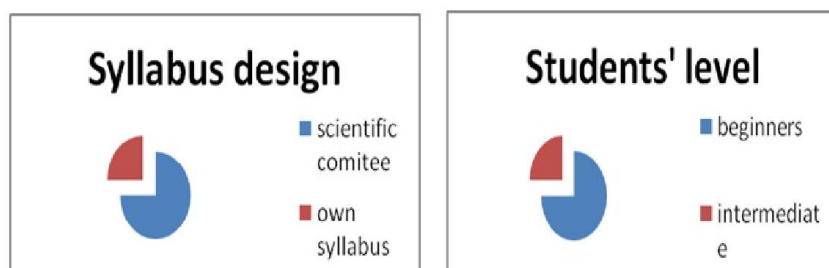


Figure (3) Teaching syllabus design Figure (4) teachers' evaluation of students

A weekly writing assignment is given by three teachers. These assignments are evaluated using a classroom discussion. Two teachers only provided their students with written feedbacks.

Table (4): Written assignment frequency

assignment frequency	Once a week	%	Twice a week	%	Once a month	%
Answers	3	75	0	0	1	25

Table (5): teachers' written feedbacks

Written feedbacks	Yes	%	No	%
Answers	2	50	2	50

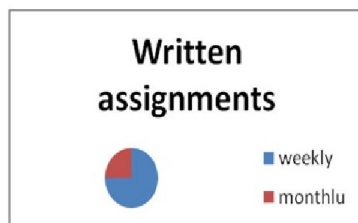


Figure (5) Frequency of writing assignments



Figure (6) teachers' feedbacks

All teachers agree that accuracy should be emphasized in the 1st year LMD, but two teachers added that cognitive processes should also be considered.

Despite the fact that the main theory of the process approach (Flower and Hays) is not fully studied, process activities mentioned in the questionnaire are used in our participants' classrooms.

Table (6): Teachers' familiarity with Flower and Hays' theory

Familiar and studied	Yes	%	No	%
Answers	2	50	2	50

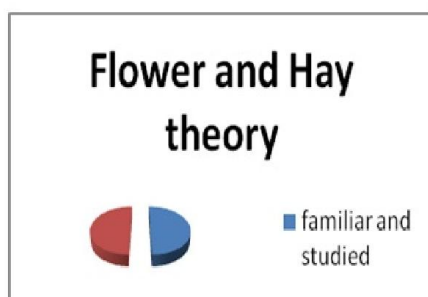


Figure (7) Flower & Hay theory



Figure (8) Use of process activities

One limitation should be noted about this study, is that it does not provide an accurate evaluation of the student's performances which gives more idea about the efficiency of the process approach teachers claim to be using in their classrooms.

V. Pedagogical Recommendations

The present study shows that effective teaching writing approach could not be monolithic excluding any of the two competing methods. The final written text itself is only the physical product of a long internal process that should be taken into consideration.

Students should be exposed to multiple writing assignments(at least one weekly assignment) that activate their mental abilities in a challenging manner whether by brainstorming as prewriting drafts or by encouraging peer feedbacks that will improve the critical thinking towards others' and self writing products.

Teachers should also consider the accuracy issue because the students' level will be judged by their mastery of the standard linguistic conventions. The correction of potential errors, however, should be delayed to allow students' focus on higher mental processes.

The study also recommends that raising teachers' awareness about this debate is important not to prioritise one method in expense of the other but to rationalise teaching practices according to the students' levels and needs. The different approaches should be introduced in the curriculum of the trained teachers as a way to explore and to deal with the complex reality of the writing skill and its teaching.

Conclusion

The history of teaching writing has been linked to the emergence of competing methods and approaches to teach second language in general. Some of them emphasized the fitness of the learners' written product to the linguistic conventions. These are grouped within the product approaches that present models of 'good written' texts to students in order to analyze then to produce their own texts similar in form to them. Others are grouped within the process approach which focuses, by contrast, on the writer and how to improve his cognitive abilities to face the different constraints of the composing process. The process approach to teaching writing is not yet fully developed into common and widespread practical designs and techniques as we have seen with product approach. Yet, raising teachers' awareness about the process approach may have an important effect on the improvement of the learners' writing qualities, abilities and even products.

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