
On SLA Writing: Perspectives from Grammar, Genre, Cognition and Process

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Abstract: In China, English is not the native language of the students. They lack the opportunity to access the naturalistic manner to acquire the grammatical system of English through hearing it used and through speaking it. At the genre level, students in China lack exposure to different genres of writing with different discourse structures, tones and styles. At the cognitive level, there is the need to develop students' thinking skills. Students traditionally read for information, and they don't read a text critically to evaluate the validity of claims made or read the text for organization to see how different parts of a text cohere to form a unified whole. Being unable to read critically also leads to being unable to write effectively, manifested by students having problems with selecting, sorting, processing, linking, and organizing ideas purposefully. Revision and incubation are provided as means to help students to clarify, explore, and extend their meaning in writing. In the teaching of English as a foreign language, writing instruction emphasizes four dimensions, namely, grammar, genre, cognition and process. This paper discusses it from four dimensions. The focus of this paper is more on the need to develop students' thinking skills. The research methods of this paper are ones of experience, literature review on writing approaches, critical perspectives, and analytical solutions. The conclusion of this paper is the understanding of SLA writing instruction in aspects of grammar, genre, cognition and process.

Keywords: Writing, Grammar, Genre, Cognition, Process

1. Introduction

In the teaching of English as a foreign language, the main focus in traditional writing instruction has been on the teaching of grammar, especially but not exclusively, at the sentence level. Afterwards, wide attention has also been given to teaching English at the discourse level, including, for example, in teaching English for specific purposes, teaching the use of appropriate language and tones in different situations, teaching the structure of different genres of writing. Later on, note has also taken of the importance of teaching thinking in students at the cognitive level and writing is a way to help them to clarify and develop their thinking. In the mid-1980s, the process approach emerged emphasizing every link of the writing process from conception, draft, group discussion, repeated revision, finalizing to publication. Writing is not seen as sth that could be polished at the very first try. The process approach states that writing is a very complex psychological cognitive and verbal communication process; it is a "process of discovering meaning and creating

meaning" and of improving cognitive ability through a series of cognitive activities in the writing process [15]. This process includes prewriting activities, creation, brewing, drafting, revising, etc. Thus, writing instruction emphasizes four different dimensions, namely, grammar, genre, cognition and process. This paper discusses writing instruction from these dimensions.

2. Literature Review on Writing Approaches

With the rise of EFL, various approaches of teaching writing were introduced. They are the product focused approach, the free writing approach, the paragraph pattern approach, the grammar syntax organization approach, the communicative approach, the process approach, and the genre approach. See below.

2.1. The Product Focused Approach

In the 1950s and 60s, the audio-lingual method of second language teaching was prevalent, along the lines of which the product focused approach was developed. The focus of the approach was on the production of correct text [13]. Good writing is absence of grammatical errors [9]. After reaching a high level of proficiency in the language, learners were allowed to write freely on topics of choice to express ideas [13].

2.2. The Free Writing Approach

In this approach, the stress is on stating ideas or content clearly and gracefully rather than grammar rules, spelling and punctuation. Students are asked to put down ideas on paper with audience in mind without worrying about grammatical accuracy and organization for some time. So are teachers reading and commenting on ideas instead of correcting the drafts [13].

2.3. The Paragraph Pattern Approach

This approach stresses on the organization of the paragraph stating the main topic sentence with the supporting evidences [13].

2.4. The Grammar Syntax Organization Approach

In this approach, the concerns are about looking at organization and working on grammar and syntax at the same time. During the preparation stage, teachers teach students language features such as words to show temporal conjunctive relations, the grammar and organization used in the genre for students to follow in their own writing. This approach links the purpose and forms needed to convey the message.

2.5. The Communicative Approach

This approach states that writing has a purpose and an audience that is done in a context with an audience in mind instead of in a vacuum [13]. Students think of the purpose to write a piece of writing. Teachers give students a context for them to write in which they could select appropriate content, language and levels of formality.

2.6. The Process Approach

This approach views writing as a process and writing goes through multiple draft processes. In composing, students lay down ideas, outline the ideas into some sort of organization, doing a draft again concentrating on content, revising and redrafting to ensure that organization, vocabulary, sequencing and grammar are dealt with in steps for a good piece of writing to be achieved, during which students discover new language forms and ideas, try out ideas and feedback on the content of what is written [5].

2.7. The Genre Approach

Writing is considered written in a context instead of in a vacuum although writing is solitary. Genre approach states

that texts vary according to whom one is addressing and how distant that individual is and how to structure the text to achieve their purpose. Genre provides students with clear knowledge about the availability of language resources [13]. Students choose language forms developing their own texts better.

The formalism and structuralism language views emphasize the structure and form of the language while Halliday's functional approach believes that the language functions differently by the purpose of its service. Language learning is not only mastering a set of language rules, but also understanding the inherent relationship between the form and function of the text in specific contexts [8]. This view of Halliday contributes to the theoretical framework of genre analysis.

A functional approach to language provides information about the development of effective texts for purposes. Such teaching will be carried out over sessions of picking the topic, selecting the appropriate genre (form), engaging in a few activities [9].

3. Implications of Various Approaches of Writing Instruction

3.1. Grammar

Although emphasis is put on expressing personal views freely in the field of English language teaching, one of the development goals of written expression ability set in the College English Curriculum Requirements for English Instruction to Non-English Major Students in China [14], the teaching of grammar is vitally important in a situation like China where English is not the native language of the students. They therefore lack the opportunity to access the naturalistic manner to acquire the grammatical system of English through hearing it used and through speaking it [10] although it is realistic to expect them to acquire it through reading because they are known to be avid readers [2]. What's more, the colloquial variety of English differs grammatically from educated English to a large extent [7]. Of course, teachers could undertake the task of teaching grammar. The writer concerns about the importance of revision as an important tool in writing and applying the rules of grammar in writing.

Students at the tertiary level in China have grammar knowledge or rules, but they have problems in applying the rules of grammar to their writing. The reason is that in their writing, they are faced with the need to perform a lot of tasks simultaneously: they have to think about ideas, the order of ideas, and how to string words together to form sentences and paragraphs to express their ideas. Although they practice each grammatical rule respectively, they apply all grammatical rules simultaneously in the process of writing. In other words, when students are required to express themselves, they handle many aspects of writing at the same time. The possible solution is to simplify the task by staging out different aspects of writing generating ideas, processing ideas, composing paragraphs and sentences. This can be done through revision,

that is, the writing of multiple drafts in composing. In writing the earlier drafts, attention is focused as far as possible, on the generation and processing of ideas, on further developing and reorganizing the ideas in the subsequent drafts, on languages at the final stage, including on seeing the language features to be used including vocabulary available in English for this genre as they add sth to writing, after a student has completed his earlier drafts so that he is happy with his ideas and the organization of ideas, during which he should go over his writing several times, focusing on each task or on points of grammar. Thus, the complex writing task is divided into several stages by writing different drafts, with each focusing on one aspect of the writing, if possible, also focusing on fluency and content. Doing it in this way, a student learns the rules of grammar, not in the abstract, but in the context of the students' own writing. Explicit teaching of grammar in context can benefit learners by adapting the grammar for writing materials [12]. In this way, he learns the application of rules instead of rules in a vacuum. About composing paragraphs and sentences, students could be asked to brainstorm on words, phrases as quickly as possible, just as they occur, without concern for appropriateness, order or accuracy.

About the weaknesses of students' grammar. A teacher can help a student know his problem with grammar points or identify his own areas of special difficulty. In this case, the students can multiple-revise his writing with attention especially paid to the grammar points. One alternative writing technique besides this procedure of self-revision is peer-evaluation. In peer-evaluation, students identify errors or problems in other students' writing which they find easier than in their own, for which two students work together to discuss the relevant grammar rules, for example, the use of subjunctive mood and modal verbs like "can (could), may (might), must, need", etc., in persuasive articles. As a result, they grow sensitive to errors which they themselves tend to make, but which they may not readily identify in their own writing. Both the self-revision process and the peer-evaluation process are aimed at raising consciousness gradually leading toward the internalization of grammar rules. However, due to the influence of traditional Chinese teacher authority and students' habitual obedience and other factors, this technique should be applied according to the actual situation, so as to achieve better results.

3.2. Genre

In language teaching, teachers must state there are different genres of writing and each has its structure. Students at the advanced level must adopt the appropriate genre, style and tone for writing for particular purposes as they have gone beyond the fundamentals of writing. Students often lack contact and sufficient experience in writing in different genres of writing with their different discourse structures, tones, and styles. Teachers need to teach students to learn discourse structures in specific genres particular to special disciplines or fields by special disciplines or on the job, or in English for special purpose classes. EFL instructors need to incorporate

the process genre approach into their teaching of EFL writing skills. More emphasis should be given to develop students' reflective practices and enhance their knowledge of text genres [1]. But, importantly, in language teaching, teachers must teach critical reading and train them to develop awareness of differences in tone and style and consequently to develop in them the ability to write in different tones and styles depending on the context of writing. To practice the control of tone, a valuable exercise would be to assign different students in the class to write letters about the same subject but in different tone. For example, a student may write to the mayor trying to convince him of his view that the Public Department is not responsible for the main street maintenance. Or he may write to persuade the Public Department that the main street with a gigantic hole should be repaired at once. Or he may just write about conditions on the main street. This would exercise not only students' ability to control tone, but also students' awareness of how using different tones leads to different images of the writer being presented. As for topic of writing, students may not know what to write about. Teachers can equip students with writing a particular genre by stating the topic in a communicative manner telling students writing is not done in a vacuum and there is a purpose to each and every piece. Also, the teacher can give a model text and show them the structure of the particular genre so that they are to see how they could further improve their own writing [4]. In addition, students could be asked to brainstorm on topic of writing. As for style of writing, students are more exposed to stories or fiction and more trained to produce the narrative and descriptive modes of writing at the expense of the more formal and expository modes. They seem to have problems with writing the more objective, formal style. For example, in order to achieve the purpose of persuasion, articles need to be written objectively, using transition words and connectives like "since, because, now that, therefore", etc., besides euphemism in order to achieve the rationality and logic of reasoning. As for coherence of writing, teachers are to teach that the typically straight line of development of an English paragraph is the basis of its type of coherence, with topic followed by supporting details and conclusion, and other paragraph development patterns such as cause-effect, compare-contrast and problem-solution, etc. Genre explanation or practice is needed to ensure that students comprehend how the English paragraphs unfold in a straight line.

3.3. Cognition

Most of students who come to the universities in China are not able to read critically. With higher literacy, an important aspect is the ability to read a text critically, to see the connections between ideas and the implications as well as logical conclusions of these ideas. But for students in China, there is too much respect for authority or printed words, so that they often cannot question the validity of what appears in print. Undoubtedly, a cultural basis underlies this, which stems from the traditional respect for authority in the Chinese culture. Furthermore, students are not trained to read

critically or creatively, examining whether ideas are valid or logical and how ideas cohere and are coordinated to support a central meaning. Their attention is focused on understanding the local parts of the text reading for information instead of how the different parts of a text relate to one another and how they together contribute to the central meaning [6]. One of the development goals of reading comprehension ability set in the College English Curriculum Requirements for English Instruction to Non-English Major Students in China, for example, puts emphasis on critically analyzing different cultural phenomena, and forming one's own understanding [14].

Lack of critical assessment as readers results in lack of ability as writers. Most of students are not able to read their own writing critically just as they are not able to read other's writing critically. They are not able to find in their own writing how claims are made, how grounds of argument are provided for due support to them and, in the process of proving arguments, how to organize language argument for argument. In other words, students have problems with thinking in writing or problems with higher literacy skills. Here are four problems.

The first problem is failure to select information purposefully. They tend to use writing as a way in their eagerness to display their knowledge on a topic, without paying attention to their purpose behind writing. Very often they include irrelevant information in a piece of writing. The second problem is failure to use available information purposefully. They just repeat information available to them mechanically, without processing it to take into account the purpose of writing and make no attempt about the relevance of a piece of information to the topic of discussion or its application in the discussion, which the reader is left to work out. The third problem is failure to use information purposefully, being unable to see connections between ideas and to make generalizations based on given facts. In fact, for further understanding, students should relate ideas from different sources, comparing them, weigh them off and making connections, exploiting ideas to meet their purpose for writing and write purposefully in the end. The fourth problem is thinking problems with ordering ideas, with seeing the implications of and the relations between ideas. In their writing they tend to follow the order in which ideas occur to them, that is, following their own discovery procedure. They don't use information mentally quickly and intelligently according to the needs of the situation, in other words, they don't reformulate and reorder ideas to serve the purpose of their writing and meet the needs of their reader. Thus, students should follow different orders for different genres of writing instead of only from the point of view of writers themselves.

With the organization of materials, students usually write in the order in which they recall or collect their own thoughts, which reflects the students' discovery process. That's to say, students follow an organization that occurs naturally to them, but which may not be the order that best suits the purpose of writing and meets the needs of the reader. In writing, to come

up with ideas is only an intermediate step, but, next, they should further process information to produce the desired effects. Teachers should train them in the mental operations of processing information for given purposes. Students should learn to move away from simply following an organization that occurs naturally to the minds to using the ideas creatively or differentially, to use them for their purpose for writing, taking the needs of the reader into account.

Students have problems with higher order thinking skills identified in their writing even for American students [3, 11]. Students are worse at thinking for themselves than amassing facts and learning by rote. Normally, they would acquire knowledge, recall or set down factual knowledge. They lack an ability to apply that knowledge to an unfamiliar situation, or to analyze something new [2]. They should apply it, and question, criticize and reorganize what they have learnt.

In addition to learning thinking from critical assessment in reading learning, students should use writing as a way to improve thinking and find their own meaning. In teaching students writing at the advanced level, teachers should focus not just on verbal expression of ideas, but also ideas so that students can find their meaning by getting their thoughts down on paper through brainstorming. This leads to writing as a tool for thinking.

Writing is an important way to find or discover meaning and writing is seen as a discovery procedure. Many writers rarely begin writing knowing exactly what they want to say or what they think. Writers often gather a lot of facts and ideas and start writing, and then let their writing direct them to understanding and meaning. Writing is seen as a job of experiment like any discovery job; writers know what they think or what will happen until they see or try it [2].

It seems that in writing, in order to explain to others, we are compelled to make ourselves clear about our semi-formed or vague ideas and give them defined ideas and specific shapes in this way. Writing also helps to develop thinking skills as writing requires one to reason, rationalize, and solve problems, especially when it comes to argumentative and expository writing. We write down our ideas and reduce the burden of short-term memories and make our thoughts outside so that we can examine them from the outside and from different perspectives and therefore we are better able to find defects, gaps and inconsistencies in them and see the connections and relationships between them. Only by seeing these connections or relations between ideas will new ideas emerge and we discover our special meaning.

Finding our own meaning is a tool for thinking. Teachers can teach writing in the way of training students to write draft after draft so as to make their thinking external and display their thinking before them to enable them to examine them more critically, revising for deeper meaning and greater coherence instead of focusing on surface errors or mere editing when they revise. By examining ideas and facts presented before them in this way, they gain objectivity and view these ideas from a better perspective.

For students to write critically, teachers can train them to

use incubation, to let thoughts become mature in mind, to utilize the organizing processes that thinking and utterance may undergo on an involuntary level, operating on a subconscious level. Students can sit back to look at ideas at a distance or allow ideas to become mature in their mind instead of staying too close to what they read,

So, in teaching thinking in writing or teaching writing in teaching thinking, it is necessary for all teachers to train their students in this thinking ability, to think, to use the information from the subject and beyond instead of just delivering information to students. The cultivation of cognitive and thinking ability in language teaching is fundamental to education and teachers can take the process approach which cognitivists endorse, to develop cognitive and thinking skills.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, revision is important with attention focused on languages at the final stage, focusing on points of grammar when he goes over his writing. Teachers need to teach students to learn discourse structures in specific genres particular to special disciplines or fields by special disciplines or on the job, or in English for special purpose classes as they have gone beyond the fundamentals of writing. In order to achieve the purpose of persuasion, articles need to be written objectively, using transition words and connectives like “since, because, now that, therefore”, etc., besides euphemism in order to achieve the rationality and logic of reasoning. In addition to learning thinking from critical assessment in reading learning, writing is a way to improve thinking and cognition and find one’s own meaning.

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