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A Process Genre Model for Teaching Writing

WRITING INSTRUCTORS MUST DEAL WITH MANY ISSUES, SUCH AS HOW TO DETERMINE the importance of correct spelling and punctuation in early drafts, how to treat the different steps in the composition process, and how to analyze a text for its context and purpose. In the past several decades, different approaches have dealt with these issues, including the product approach of the 1970s and the more recent process and genre approaches. An understanding of the rationales and critiques of these approaches is important for English teachers who want to be more effective writing instructors. This article will briefly describe the different approaches and then will look at useful recent research about the advantages of combining the essential features from two approaches to create a new model.

The challenge of writing

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and students face certain problems in teaching and learning writing. As many teachers of English in China have noted, acquiring the writing skill seems to be more laborious and demanding than acquiring the other three skills (Zheng 1999). In fact, Nunan (1999, 271) considers it an enormous challenge to produce "a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing" in one's second language. This is magnified by the fact that the rhetorical conventions of English texts—the structure, style, and organization—often differ from the conventions in other languages. It requires effort to recognize and manage the differences (Leki, 1991).

In many countries, education systems emphasize writing for taking tests. For many students, the only reason to practice writing is to pass examinations or to get a good grade in the class. This focus on writing to pass examinations reduces writing to producing a product and receiving a grade from the teacher. This is not likely to make students interested in writing, which becomes decontextualised and artificial, giving students no real sense of purpose or perspective of a target audience.

Even though these problems will persist, there are ways to improve the teaching of this skill to benefit all writing tasks and prepare students for the writing they will have to do after they graduate. Three main approaches to teaching writing have been advocated and used in the past few decades of English language teaching. A brief survey shows that they have had their advocates and detractors over the years and that they are still under active discussion and debate.

The product approach

With the product approach, teachers focus on what a final piece of writing will look like and measure it against criteria of "vocabulary use, grammatical use, and mechanical considerations such as spelling and punctuation," as well as content and organization (Brown 1994, 320). The normal procedure is to assign a piece of writing, collect it, and then return it for further revision with the errors either corrected or marked for the student to do the corrections (Raimes 1983). The product approach has received much criticism because it ignores the actual processes used by students, or any writers, to produce a piece of writing. Instead, it focuses on imitation and churning out a perfect product, even though very few people can create a perfect product on the first draft. Another criticism is that this approach requires constant error correction, and that affects students' motivation and self-esteem. The product approach does not effectively prepare students for the real world or teach them to be the best writers. Nevertheless, the product approach still has some credibility because at some point there will be a final draft that requires attention to grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

The process approach

In the mid-1970s the process approach began to replace the product approach. The process approach identifies four stages in writing: (1) prewriting, (2) composing/drafting, (3) revising, and (4) editing (Tribble 1996). These stages are *recursive,* or nonlinear, and they can interact with each other throughout the writing process. For example, many writers return to prewriting activities during some stage of the revision process to develop a new idea or refine a viewpoint. The process approach emphasizes revision, and also feedback from others, so students may produce many drafts with much crossing out of sentences and moving around of paragraphs. The correction of spelling and punctuation is not of central importance at the early stages.

An important element of the process approach is the meaningfulness it brings to learners, who make a personal connection to the topic and come to understand the processes they follow when writing about it. This starts with prewriting and brainstorming to generate ideas and activate the *schemata,* which is the background experience or world knowledge a person possesses that allows a writer to relate personal experiences to the topic and discover everything he or she has to say. Since many student writers do not possess the strategies to recall, trigger, and activate these stored experiences while writing, the role of the teacher in strategy training is paramount. The result will be improved student writing because the connection with the topic and processes gives students something interesting to write about and the tools to do it.

According to Badger and White (2000), the process approach has been criticized because it views the process as the same for all writers, regardless of what is being written and who is

doing the writing, and because it gives insufficient importance to the purpose and social context of the piece of writing. Nevertheless, the process approach is widely accepted and utilized because it allows students to understand the steps involved in writing, and it recognizes that what learners bring to the writing classroom contributes to the development of the writing skill (Badger and White 2000).

The genre approach

In the 1980s the genre approach became popular along with the notion that student writers could benefit from studying different types of written texts. As Nunan (1999, 280) explains, different genres of writing "are typified by a particular structure and by grammatical forms that reflect the communicative purpose of the genre." By investigating different genres, students can perceive the differences in structure and form and apply what they learn to their own writing. Even in the classroom, where academic writing usually predominates, writing tasks can be introduced that are based on different genres with roots in the real world, such as the genres of essays, editorials, and business letters.

According to Cope and Kalantzis (1993), the genre approach to writing consists of three phases: (1) the target genre is modeled for the students, (2) a text is jointly constructed by the teacher and students, and (3) a text is independently constructed by each student. The approach acknowledges that writing takes place in a social situation and reflects a particular purpose, and that learning can happen consciously through imitation and analysis, which facilitates explicit instruction (Badger and White 2000). The genre approach has been criticized because it undervalues the processes needed to produce a text and sees learners as largely passive (Badger and White 2000). However, supporters respond that the genre approach succeeds at showing students how different discourses require different structures. In addition, introducing authentic texts enhances student involvement and brings relevance to the writing process.

A process genre model for teaching writing

Today many writing teachers recognize that we need not rigidly adopt just one approach in the writing classroom. In some cases, combining the approaches results in a new way of thinking about writing. One example is a synthesis of the process and the genre approaches, which Badger and White (2000) have aptly termed the process genre approach. This approach allows students to study the relationship between purpose and form for a particular genre as they use the recursive processes of prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing. Using these steps develops students' awareness of different text types and of the composing process.

Application of the process genre model

When using the process genre approach, teachers should be aware of the following three general guidelines. First, because writing is so difficult, the teacher should adopt the role of assistant and guide and work closely with students to encourage them, offering helpful feedback and suggestions. It is crucial for teachers to offer positive and constructive advice on what students have written. Teachers also can make efforts to arouse curiosity and self-confidence by matching student interests to the writing topic, and they should be sensitive to any individual differences that arise in the writing process.

Second, teachers should directly train students about writing strategies. If teachers demonstrate how prewriting activates the schemata and outline strategies for the drafting and revision processes, students will be more successful in writing compositions. As Yau (1991) states, writing performance is as much a result of students' use of strategies in various processes of writing as it is of their handling of the language.

Third, teachers should include the listening, speaking, and reading skills in the writing class. Integrating the four language skills promotes the expansion of the students' overall language competence (Goodman 1986). The process genre approach makes this feasible, as background material is read during prewriting activities, and speaking and listening occur during lectures and when giving or receiving feedback.

Typically, the teaching procedure for the process genre approach is divided into the following six steps: (1) preparation, (2) modeling and reinforcing, (3) planning, (4) joint constructing, (5) independent constructing, and (6) revising. Figure 1, which is adapted from Badger and White (2000), illustrates how these

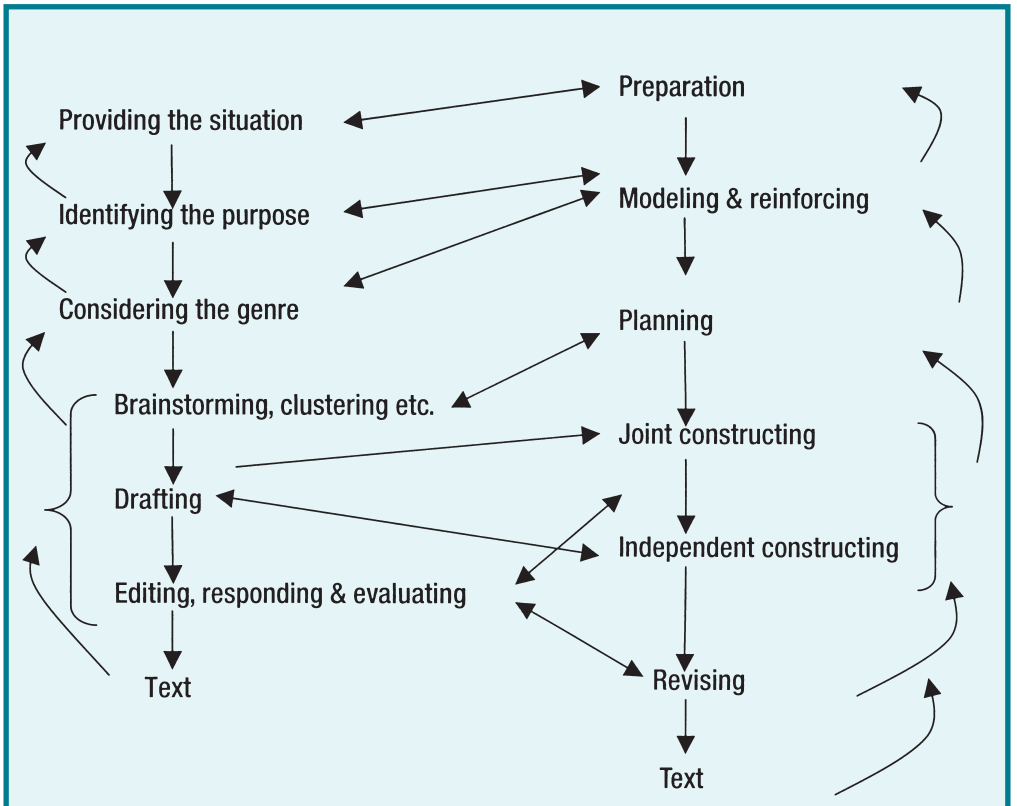

FIGURE 1: APPLICATION OF THE PROCESS GENRE APPROACH

six steps interact in a recursive way with themselves and with other writing skills. A short description of what occurs during the six steps will also illustrate how elements of the process and genre approaches work in unison.

1. Preparation

The teacher begins preparing the students to write by defining a situation that will require a written text and placing it within a specific genre, such as a persuasive essay arguing for or against an issue of current interest. This activates the schemata and allows students to anticipate the structural features of this genre.

2. Modeling and reinforcing

In this step the teacher introduces a model of the genre and lets students consider the social purpose of the text, including who the audience will be. For example, the purpose of an argumentative essay is to persuade the reader to act on something. Next, the teacher discusses how the text is structured and how its organization develops to accomplish its purpose. The students may do some comparisons with other texts to reinforce what they have learned about the particular genre.

3. Planning

In this step many meaningful activities activate the students' schemata about the topic, including brainstorming, discussing, and reading associated material. The aim is to help the students develop an interest in the topic by relating it to their experience.

4. Joint constructing

During this step, which will facilitate later independent composing, the teacher and students work together to begin writing a text. While doing so, the teacher uses the writing processes of brainstorming, drafting, and revising. The students contribute information and ideas, and the teacher writes the generated text on the blackboard or computer. The final draft provides a model for students to refer to when they work on their individual compositions.

5. Independent constructing

At this point students have examined model texts and have jointly constructed a text in the genre. They now undertake the task of composing their own texts on a related topic. Class time can be set aside for students to compose independently so that the teacher is available to help, clarify, or consult about the process. The writing task can be continued as a homework assignment.

6. Revising

Students eventually will have a draft that will undergo final revision and editing. This does not necessarily mean that teachers have to collect all the papers and mark them one by one. Students may check, discuss, and evaluate their work with fellow students, as the teacher again guides and facilitates. The teacher may make an effort to publish the students' work, which will impart a sense of achievement and motivate the students to become better writers. (See the appendix for a sample lesson plan using these steps of the process genre approach.)

Conclusion

Writing is an essential but difficult skill for EFL students to accomplish. Throughout the years, different theories have offered direction on how to teach writing. After the product approach was mostly discredited, it was supplanted by the more interactive and dynamic process and genre approaches. Although they have advantages and disadvantages, these two approaches have made valuable contributions to the writing classroom. Their techniques become even more useful when combined to create the process genre approach, which helps students use their individual writing processes to construct a text in a familiar genre.

According to Raimes (1983, 266), teachers should always try to provide students with writing assignments that can "unite form and content, ideas and organization, syntax and meaning, writing and revising, and above all, writing and thinking." The process genre approach does help teachers to unite all these features, and, in addition, it is personal and relevant, which is good news for teachers. Even if writing lessons are done in a classroom, they relate strongly to real-life situations, motivating students and preparing them to write for audiences outside the classroom.

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APPENDIX | SAMPLE LESSON PLAN

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Level

Intermediate and above

Time

2 hours, with a 10-minute break

Goal

To have students acquire an understanding of the purpose and structure of the argumentative writing genre and of the processes of prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing, and to have them use that knowledge to compose a text, both as a group and individually.

Activity 1 *(approximately 10 minutes)*

Purpose

To give students a clear idea about what they are going to do in class and to provide the context in which students will construct their writing.

Procedure

- Announce the following item for students to discuss in groups:
  "Administrators are discussing whether or not first-year and second-year students should be allowed to buy computers for their dormitories. Students are welcome to give suggestions to the administrators on this matter."
- Emphasize that the purpose of this lesson is to write and present letters on this matter to the administrators.
- Elicit the key word "persuade" by asking the question: "What is the purpose for writing the letter to the administrators?"
- Explain that the type of writing students are going to learn is a genre called "argument."

Activity 2 *(approximately 2 minutes)*

Purpose

To reinforce the purpose of argumentative writing.

Procedure

- Inform students they are going to read a sample argumentative text before writing the letter.
- Distribute the sample text and ask students to read the text while bearing in mind the following four questions:
  1. What do you think is the purpose of this text?
  2. Who do you think is the target audience?

3. Has the writer achieved his purpose?
4. Why do you think the text is persuasive or not persuasive?

Activity 3 *(approximately 6 minutes)*

Students read the text.

Activity 4 *(approximately 5 minutes)*

Purpose

To clarify the basic understanding of the argument genre.

Procedure

- Stop students' reading and review the four questions.
- Summarize the major points.

Activity 5 *(approximately 10 minutes)*

Purpose

To familiarize students with the structural features of argument.

Procedure

- Focus students' attention on the structural features that make the writing persuasive.
- Have students briefly re-read the text, asking them to pay special attention to the structural features by answering the following questions.
  1. How does the text begin and end?
  2. How is the whole text patterned and sequenced?
  3. How many stages does the text go through?
  4. What is the function of each of these stages?

Activity 6 *(approximately 5 minutes)*

Purpose

To share ideas about the given genre.

Procedure

Students finish re-reading and discuss their findings in groups.

Activity 7 *(approximately 10 minutes)*

Purpose

To reinforce students' familiarity with the structural features of an argument.

Procedure

- Call on group representatives to share their ideas with the whole class.
- Give comments and explain the structural features of argumentative writing by presenting a copy of the sample text with those features clearly marked.

Activity 8 *(approximately 10 minutes)*

Purpose

To reinforce students' knowledge of the structural features of argument by comparing good and bad examples.

Procedure

- Distribute another sample text of argument that is randomly ordered in structure, and compare it with the first one by using the following criteria.
  1. What is the purpose of the writer?
  2. Does the article achieve the purpose in the way the first one does?
  3. If not, what is the problem?
- Discuss the answers with students.

Activity 9 *(approximately 12 minutes)*

Purpose

To practice reorganizing and improving the disordered structure.

Procedure

- Direct students to reorganize the text according to the different stages of argumentative writing to improve its effectiveness in persuading the audience.
- Direct students to provide an appropriate title.
- Have students check the results with each other in pairs.
- Check the results with students and clarify important points.

Activity 10 *(approximately 5 minutes)*

Purpose

To arouse students' interest in the topic of this writing lesson.

Procedure

- Ask students to focus on the term *computer.* Write the word on the board as a spider web diagram.
- Ask students to brainstorm about things related to the word *computer.*

Activity 11 *(approximately 5 minutes)*

Purpose

To prepare for the joint construction of a text.

Procedure

- Direct students to divide information about the topic into advantages and disadvantages.
- List the responses on the board in two columns, *Advantages* and *Disadvantages.*

Activity 12 *(approximately 18 minutes)*

Purpose

To provide students with a chance to write in the argument genre as a group and to prepare them for individual work.

Procedure

- Inform students that they are going to jointly construct a letter to the administrators by using the genre they have just studied.
- Adopt the position that "First-year and second-year students should be allowed to own personal computers in their dormitories."
- Demonstrate the process involved in writing a text by asking questions and making suggestions about the structuring of the text.
- Write the generated text on the blackboard so that the students can concentrate on the meanings they are creating.
- Preview the jointly constructed text and revise it to clarify the major points.

Activity 13 *(approximately 10 minutes)*

Purpose

Students use what they have learned to write independently.

Procedure

- Direct students to write individually on the same topic.
- Encourage students to present their own views. Be available for help or consultation.

Activity 14 *(approximately 2 minutes)*

Purpose

To clarify what students should do for writing homework.

Procedure

- Assign students to finish the first draft for homework.
- Inform students to bring the first draft to the next class for revising.