Towards a Process-genre Based Approach in the Teaching of Writing for Business English

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Abstract

This paper proposes the application of the process-genre based approach for the teaching of writing in the English for Special purposes (ESP) context. It examines the development of the process writing approach in the light of other approaches to the teaching of writing in English and how it is shaped by theories in the first language writing (L1) as well as second language writing (L2) research. The process approach to writing still holds significance as an effective methodology, which is learner-centred, allowing language use as creative self-expression. In addition, it provides a framework for the genre-based approach to effectively function, especially in an ESP learning context.

Introduction

In the teaching of writing in English to L2 learners, there is the belief that certain aspects in the process of writing used by L1 learners can be taught to L2 learners to produce skilled writers among them. Underlying the idea is the assumption that L1 and L2 learners experience the same difficulties and thereby similar approaches can be applied as solutions to address these problems. This is influenced by the fact that much research on L2 writing drew upon and was guided by L1 writing research and theories (Kroll, 1990). This situation is compounded by the creation of approaches which are not sufficiently grounded in a comprehensive integration of the basic elements that are significant to the teaching of L2 writing, namely, the writer, the text, the reader or audience and the context (Silva, 1990). But with the increasingly greater role assumed by written communication skills in Business English due to changes in communication technologies, there is a need to consider the importance and the effectiveness of teaching L2 writing in the ESP context.

Research in business settings has revealed that more employees are now required to perform a larger share of correspondence themselves using the fax and the email (Louhiala-Salminen, 1996; Gains, 1999; Gimenez, 2000). It is therefore evident that knowledge and application of the relevant conventions of text processing and production in the context of the given business reality be given greater attention. In this context, studies on written genres in professional and academic settings as initiated by Swales (1990) are of practical importance. Based on his seminal work on genre analysis of moves in authentic research article introductions, we are informed that genre analysis serves to highlight the purpose of using specific linguistic structures, specify their conditions of use and explain the rationale for use in the given context, and

not merely to describe them. A genre-based approach can therefore offer us a way of looking at how a written product is used to accomplish its purpose in a social context – the business community.

But the teaching of specific specialist language text as an introduction to genres has been an issue in ESP, with some ESP practitioners not seeing its use as a critical feature in essential input materials (Hutchinson & Waters, 1993). While the opponents do not deny the relevance of such materials in some ESP courses, they have not fully realized that a mastery of the appropriate forms and language use is needed for one to function effectively in the workplace. In the Business English context, an appropriate method or even methods, which can enable ESP practitioners to teach genres as a way to accommodate this specialized need, is required. If this method or approach is found to be effective in teaching writing in English as well as meet the learner's specialized needs, it should be viewed positively as relevant methodology in the ESP classroom.

This paper offers to examine the relevance of both the process approach and the genre-based approach as relevant methodology in the teaching of writing in Business English. As both approaches were lead by a reaction to the shortcomings of the approaches in writing preceding them, a short historical overview of the approaches, their salient features and limitations will be dealt with. The aspects, which are considered in each approach, are the writing skills to be learned, the writing process, the text or written product, the reader or audience, the context, and the role of the teacher. Include in this paper are some criticisms against the process approach and how the genre-based approach attempts to address these issues. Yet, likewise, the process approach provides a framework to complement the application of the genre-based approach towards more effective teaching of writing.

A historical overview of the approaches to teaching writing

The process approach to the teaching of writing was lead by a reaction to the shortcomings in the controlled composition teaching in the 1950s and the current traditional approach, which was also referred to as the product approach to writing. The controlled writing approach had its basis in the audio-lingual approach, which was a much promoted method of teaching English as second language in the 1950s and 1960s. The underlying principles behind this approach are a mastery of a language was in speech production and this was to be achieved by drills and repetition (Silva, 1990). According to Pincas (1982), a proponent of this approach, the learner should internalize fixed patterns of smaller components in sentences before proceeding to larger units of composition or text. This was to minimize language errors among learners, a major concern of the approach. In short, learning to write was viewed as just another way to mastering grammar items. The learner's creativity was given little consideration and the teacher, who is usually the reader, was to function as a proofreader or editor who emphasized mainly on correct language usage. As the text to be produced was determined by the teacher, application of writing skills was limited to the given topics and hardly placed any concern on the audience or reader. In such a controlled environment, the development of writing skills in the learner was ignored. A resulting factor is the text produced was devoid of purpose and the reality surrounding the writer.

When attempts were made to explain the inadequacies of such an approach in preparing learners for less controlled writing tasks in real life, they focused on the text or written product. Poorly written texts produced by L2 learners were viewed as constrained by the language and culture of the learner. Thus Kaplan's (1996; cited in Silva, 1990) work on constructive rhetoric analysis mainly sought to shed light on the different organizational structures of L2 written text in comparison to L1 text. It did little to examine how writing skills can be taught or the stages in the process of text production. Consequently, the product approach to writing viewed texts as structural entities with specific or organizational patterns such as narrative, descriptive and expository. Emphasis was directed to teaching language functions in such texts to encourage parallel text production. So, while the teacher's instructions offered scaffolding to the learner at the initial stages of writing, the move towards achieving a particular form in the text was "detached from the practical purposes and personal experiences of the writer" (Hyland, 2003: 7). In short, neither the controlled writing approach nor the product approach addressed the issue of the learner's needs and creativity. Prescriptive in principle, the product approach was based on two assumptions; firstly, the writing process was a linear process, moving from one stage to the progressive next, and secondly, the imposition of form on the written text was more important than the effective communication of purpose. The essential elements involved in writing, namely the writer, the writing process itself and the context were omitted.

The Process Approach to writing

The process approach to writing initially dwelt on the fundamental issue of L1 writing but with a shift in emphasis from the text to the writer and on "the cycle of writing activities" which are involved in text production (Tribble, 1996:37). Later, studies on L2 writers (Zamel, 1982, 1983; Raimes, 1985, Arndt, 1987) highlighted the fact that writing as an activity entails the writer or learner to move through identifiable stages of developing the text from data collection to publishing it. Secondly, the writing process is recursive. Additionally, cognitive strategies are central to the working of this approach.

Widely accepted models of the process approach have stages that include prewriting, composing, revising, evaluation and

finally, publishing of the product. As the learner moves from the initial stages of data collection or brainstorming for ideas to the final written draft, he/she can choose to review any of the stages, and revise to reformulate ideas via conferencing with the teacher or engage in peer consultation. It also stresses on the application of cognitive skills to facilitate the effective working of the process approach. Writing involves building up a problem-solving strategy to generate solutions and translate the ideas into a cohesively written text. It requires the learner to develop a 'reader-based' approach while writing in contrast to a 'writer-based' approach to communicate ideas to the reader (Flower, 1985). This gives significance and purpose to the writing activity, thus guiding the learner to make intelligent choices on the content knowledge to be used and how it could be organized for better effect (White & Arndt, 1991).

The teacher plays a greater role in this approach in providing input and consequently, feedback during the revision and evaluation stages. The number of times this is done is not restricted as writing is a recursive activity. The teacher's response serves to provide support for the learner in the writing process as well as engage him/her in critical self-evaluation of the written product. The teacher may also act as a source of input for the learner, though more advanced learners can rely on their own sources of input from the library or the Internet. But in the final analysis, the learner has to consider, to a fair degree, the context of the writing task. In summary, this approach informs us that writing essentially involves thinking skills and knowledge of the various stages in the process to transform information into coherently written texts.

Limitations of the process approach

Despite its advantages above the other approaches, the process approach is not without its limitations. The main criticism directed against it is that it does not adequately address the issue of the reader, especially when the form of the text expected is convention and content-specific. A review of business letters will illustrate this point. Firstly, some standard rules of writing conventions, addressing the recipient and sentence structure to present information are accepted norms of writing in the business context. The main reason for the lack of discrimination between different text types is the assumption that all types of writing are similar. Secondly, the 'imagined reality' of the writer does not necessarily reflect the real context existing in the business setting, thereby leading to a purposeful ignorance of the contextual meaning of a written text or discourse. In addition, teaching of the correct usage of forms and even of grammar items is neither explicit nor context-related. Consequently, it may lead to the likely increase of grammar errors and use of irrelevant forms in the final written product.

Significant differences exist in writing created for different purposes, for academic writing or scientific reports do not resemble legal briefs in totality. In order to provide a more substantive description of the form and linguistic functions of words and sentence structures in a text, it is necessary to consider the "socio-cultural and psycholinguistic aspects of text construction" (Bhatia, 1993: 11). One such explanation is provided by the genre analysis of texts.

The genre-based approach to writing

A genre is chiefly identified by the communicative purpose for which it is created in a particular social context (Swales, 1990). In the case of a written text or written discourse, various factors impinge upon its production and processing. These include the relationships and roles of the writer and the reader, the degree of formality and even the ideological principles held by both participants in the community. It is to be noted that most writing tasks in the field of business are "conventionalized regularities in the organization of various communicative events"(Bhatia, 1993:10). A business letter has to show certain conventions in writing opening or closing remarks to be accepted by the business community as such. Certain form-function correlations exist within the text too and learners need to be made aware of their usage if effective business purposes are to be achieved through it. Therefore, an informed study of the text according to genre analysis is useful, subsequently preparing learners for writing tasks at future professional workplace situations.

The genre-based approach also reveals the cultural or social practices brought to bear upon its language use and construction by the writer. Investigations by Jenkins and Hinds (1987) revealed that Americans use a reader-oriented rhetoric to influence the reader while the Japanese maintained a distance in the relationship through the use of set expressions in English in their business letters. This dispels the naive assumption that business letters in English are similar regardless of their places of origin.

However, a main limitation in solely using the genre-based approach to teaching ESP subjects is the tendency to be overly prescriptive, emphasizing on rules of construction of a particular genre above others (Bhatia, 1993). An investigation into what teachers think of using the genre approach in the classroom also cited a similar concern (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998). The teachers were concerned that the learners may end up writing genres as mindless imitation in producing written text. Consequently, creativity is stifled, depriving them of the ability to respond more effectively in a changing social context or workplace environment.

Business English in ESP

A clear definition of what constitutes Business English can be problematic. According to St. John (1996) Business English encompasses English for General Business Purposes and English for Specific Business Purposes. Pickett (1989) defines Business English as a "mediating language" between general English and technical Business English (cited in St. John, 1996). Given the multiple dimensions of what constitutes Business English, both considerations of English for General Business Purposes as well as English for Specific Business Purposes is the taken perspective in this paper. Three reasons are put forward for increased attention to the teaching of writing in Business English.

Firstly, the use of English in business settings is not only to achieve effective business communication skills but also to attain a higher level of specialized language skills. As expansion and participation in the international business arena is ultimately the final aim of most business ventures, there will ultimately be an increased demand for personnel with specialized Business English skills to occupy the specific occupational positions created. If such is the ESP situation at hand, it would be relevant and pedagogically effective if the learner begins mastering these skills, especially writing skills, even at lower levels of specialization. Secondly, most ESP courses are designed for specific learner populations with a practical orientation. People who attend these courses desire to learn specialized language skills to enable them to progress further at their workplace. Such specialized yet restricted competence is most likely to be achieved through the use and study of genres in real business contexts. Thirdly, the environment in which Business English exists is constantly subjected to changes -- socially, politically and even by new technological advancements in the field of communication technology.

At times it is perceived that classroom practices lag behind real life practices. Louhiala-Salminen (1996) in her research among the Finnish business community stated that the format of fax writing has changed. It now adopts a memorandum style and language use is less formal, more concise and speech-like. The business e-mail is also showing similar trends towards a reduced level of formality and uses a more flexible register (Gimentez, 2000). Therefore, it is pertinent that writing courses in Business English teach the construction and creation of genres to enable learners to adapt more effectively in future workplace environments.

The process genre-based approach to writing

Given the ESP context in which Business English resides, it is evident that the teaching of writing for Business English must consider the social and cultural context, the shared roles and language registers in that specific community besides the purpose of the communicative interaction. This can be achieved in the genre-based approach with its analytical approach to text study and production. A natural concomitant in the process is the development of writing skills in the learner, a basic objective of the process approach to writing. Notwithstanding the limitations of both approaches, a synthesis of process genre-based approach is seen as an accommodating as well as enriched mode to teach writing.

This approach retains the basic stages in process writing as the central framework of instruction. It provides guided stages for the learner, encouraging him to investigate and consider the types of content knowledge he/she needs to acquire, inclusive of the various genres as input material, at the pre-writing stage. The main aim is to help the learner consider a variety of genres, and not only one type as introduced by the teacher in the genre-based approach. This serves to eliminate the weakness in the genre approach, with its over-emphasis on form in writing. As a result, the written text to be produced in this approach is not preconceived.

The process approach contains an explicit system for decision-making and evaluation. Two advantages are apparent. Firstly, an approach that highlights critical self-evaluation and analysis of text is deemed to bring about language awareness in the learner, which is essentially the "enhanced consciousness and sensitivity to the forms and functions of language" (Carter, 2003: 64). In the process genre-based approach, the learners will be able to reflect on the similarities and differences existing between different types of genres to understand their situated use and variety. A sense of text form is obtained but not imposed upon the learner. This is in contrast to the genre approach adopted by the Sydney school, which commences the initial stages of writing with modeling of the text or genre. Even though it is acknowledged that in the final stage, the creation of a genre according to context is a positive aspect in the approach, its successful implementation is contingent upon the ability of the teacher to guide the learner through the stages given. More often than that, learner awareness is not inculcated due to a dominance of the teacher-agenda in the conferencing session with the learners, "thus precluding critique and student negotiation of generic conventions" (Johns, 2003: 204). Secondly, the flexibility of recursive writing allowed by the process approach in the reviewing and drafting stages highlights useful writing skills involved in the processing of different genres. Input materials (provided by the learner and the teacher) are useful complements to the cycle of activities in the process genre approach. Working young adults who constitute a substantial student population in Business English classes offer a rich source of information and authentic materials for potential exploitation by both other learners and the teacher. Grammar can be taught in context while reviewing the text at various stages of writing. So, while the genre-based approach conceptualizes writing purpose, language and context clearly, the process approach provides a framework for teaching text production skills in an effective way.

In such a facilitative learning environment, the learners can start writing using the process approach, review the available genres at a later stage or earlier stage of writing to obtain more information to make informed decisions, thereby writing more effectively in the context of the task set for them. Explicit teaching of the presence of some conventional features in genres is tenable but it is hoped that learners view genres not as ends in themselves but a means to achieve the ends.

Conclusion

The shift in focus in writing research from the product to the process approach has initiated much attention to the teaching of writing as an expressive act besides being a problem-solving activity. This was later followed by the genre-based approach, with its analytical description of the text, focusing on the social context of its creation and the communicative purpose it intends to achieve. It highlighted certain linguistic and structural conventions explicitly, thus enabling the learner to discriminate and make intelligent decisions leading him/her to write more effectively for various workplace needs in the future. Yet knowing their strengths and weaknesses serve to inform us better on what can work and is applicable in contrast to what cannot function in different learning situations and knowledge fields. It is therefore necessary for ESP practitioners to consider a combination of the process and genre-based approaches to teach the requisite writing skills in text production for professional genres.

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