

Title: Teaching ESL/EFL Writing beyond Language Skills

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Abstract: Writing activities have long been used in a foreign language class for reinforcing students' linguistic knowledge or other language skills. However teaching writing as writing in its own right has only been advocated in recent decades with the increasing awareness of second and foreign language students' needs to write for academic purposes in the target language countries. A writing-based pedagogy in second/foreign language has been evolved over the past two decades. The paper reviews the evolution of thoughts of what constitutes writing competence in a foreign language and several major approaches to teaching writing in a ESL/EFL language class -- from teaching writing as a supportive language skill, to teaching writing as a writing, from emphasizing patterns and product to the emphasis of the writer and their writing process, and to the more recent recognition of writing as a social activity. The author argues that teaching writing as writing is not only essential to the development of students' writing competence but is also valuable in promoting their language acquisition, cognitive development and learning in general. (175)

Writing is one of the “four skills,” commonly accepted goals of learning a foreign language, but often a skill that “falls through.” It is not uncommon to see learners with years of foreign language instruction experience have considerable difficulty when they have to write for communication in the target language. Chinese students who go to English speaking countries for advanced studies typically go through some initial difficulty in writing academic papers, though they may have scored high in the TOEFL test. This situation appears quite common with foreign language learners. The reason for this common failure is certainly multifaceted, but that students have not received sufficient or appropriate training probably lies at the heart of the problem. Writing activities in a foreign language class are often confined to exercises geared to consolidate lexical and grammar knowledge or exercises designed to check students' reading

comprehension. While these writing activities are necessary and even important in a language class, they are not *writing in its real sense*, nor do they lend themselves adequately to the development of students' writing competence— the ability to use written language for communication. The need to differentiate the two types of writing activities in a second/foreign language class, that is, *writing as a language activity* and *writing as a communicative activity*, has been widely recognized by researchers and practitioners. For instance, Kaplan (1982) holds that there are two types of writing in a language class: “writing without composing” and “writing through composing.” The two types of activities serve different purposes: the former is designed to reinforce grammatical structures; whereas the second teaches students to inform, relate, persuade, etc. In his book, *Rethinking Foreign Language Writing*, Scott (1995) also differentiates writing as a *supportive skill* and writing as *creation of meaning*. The former consists of copying, taking notes, writing lists, and filling in blanks, while the latter involves creating meaning through the arrangement of words, sentences, and paragraphs. The second type of writing includes writing letters, journals, reports, academic essays, and fiction. It is the second type of writing that is largely missing in many foreign language classes.

Research in the past few decades has indicated that writing, both as a *cognitive activity* and a *communicative skill*, goes far beyond lexicon and grammatical knowledge, involves many complex processes and requires special treatment and needs to be taught and nurtured for its own right. Language teachers need to be informed of current research and research-supported approaches to second/foreign language writing so that they will be better prepared to teach writing. This paper traces briefly the shift of trend from a *language-based* to a *writing-based* second language writing pedagogy that has been

observed in the past few decades in North America and some other English speaking countries. Although research and instructional practice on second/foreign language writing available today have been done mostly with learning English as a second language, it is the author's belief that such knowledge would be equally valuable for learning English as a foreign language and for learning any other foreign language.

Writing as a supportive language skill

Writing traditionally received less attention in foreign language education. A review of the history of second/foreign language teaching reveals that while language teaching is an old profession, teaching second /foreign language writing is relatively a new venture. It is not until the last 20 or 30 years that serious efforts were made to study second /foreign language writing. For a long time, the emphasis of a foreign language class was given primarily to the study of its lexicon and grammar. This practice might be justified since the goal of language learning at that time was “to learn a language in order to read its literature or in order to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 5). Students were not expected to communicate either orally or in its written form in the target language. Written exercises were designed to consolidate vocabulary and grammar or to test students' reading comprehension. Around the middle of the last century, the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) became popular in many second/foreign language classes. Rooted in a behavioral theory of learning and a structural view of language, the ALM viewed language learning as a habit formation and “emphasized the teaching of correct oral language through the study of pattern practice,

pronunciation, and grammatical structures” (Reid, 1993, p. 22). Writing, viewed as “the handmaid of the other skills,” certainly “must not take precedence as a major skill to be developed” (Rivers, cited in Silva, 1990, p. 13). As a result, it is not surprising to find that writing was “virtually excluded” and writing activities in a language class limited to “the teaching of handwriting skills . . . , and filling in the blanks of grammar and reading comprehension exercises” (Reid, 1993, p. 22). In addition to the general orientation in language teaching, the lack of experience and understanding of teaching composition among teachers and researchers at that time may also explain the low status of writing in a second / foreign language program. Writing was recognized as “the most poorly understood” skill (Terry, 1989, p. 43).

The late 1970s and early 1980s saw an increasing awareness of the need for learners of English as a second language to write extended discourse in the target language. In response to this situation, writing activities that aimed at providing students with some “free writing” experience began to appear in English as second language class. For instance, “*Dicto-comps*” and *sentence-combining* were among the widely used writing activities. The former requires learners to recreate a short passage from memory after listening to it several times, and the later requires “the combing of ‘base’ or ‘kernel’ sentences into one longer compound or complex sentence” (Raimes, 1983, p. 107). These exercises were designed based on the assumption that written language was more syntactically complex and that discrete instruction at the sentence level could help students improve the sophistication of their sentence structures, and eventually improve their composition (Reid, 1993). Obviously, these activities were still essentially

language-centered because such activities do not involve creating meaning and the so-called “free writing” was not really free.

Approaches to teaching writing as writing

While this language-based approach to the teaching of writing still prevails in many second /foreign language classrooms today, significant changes have been observed in the past few decades. The driving force in these changes, like that in many other educational reforms, came from the recognition of the needs of the learners. When increasing number of non-native English speaking students began to appear in the higher education institution in the United States and some other English-speaking countries, it soon became apparent that many of these students were not ready for the writing tasks required for their academic study even though they might have good grammar knowledge. Language teachers began to realize that language-based writing activities were not adequate in helping students to develop writing competence and “there were more to writing than building grammatical sentences” (Silva, 1990, p. 13). This realization has led to the development of a new writing pedagogy that advocates teaching writing beyond language skills.

But, what does it mean by teaching writing as writing? What should or could be taught in a writing class? One early approach to these questions is what has come to be known today as the “*pattern-product*” approach, also referred to as “*current traditional rhetoric approach*.” This approach puts primary emphasis on learning “patterns” or “rhetoric,” defined as “the method of organizing syntactic units into larger patterns”

(Cited in Silva, 1993, p. 13) and “products”—the final completed pieces of writing. It is assumed that the difficulty second/foreign language learners experience in writing is largely due to a lack of understanding of the patterns or structural characteristics native speakers would typically use in their writing. For instance, native English writers are believed to write typically in a direct or “linear” fashion. It is therefore believed that to teach writing means to familiarize learners with various patterns of the written discourse of the target language. Writing class following this approach introduces learners to various modes of discourse, teaching them how to develop a paragraph with clearly defined *topic sentences*, *supportive sentences*, *concluding sentences* and how to write a “five-paragraph themes on topics assigned by the teacher, which were then graded without the opportunity to receive feedback and revise” (Matsuda, 2003, p. 67).

While this pattern-product oriented approach took a writing class one step further toward writing in its real sense, it was soon criticized for its emphasis on *product* only and on its nature of control and manipulation. The early 1980s saw a great interest in *writing process* that resulted in the *process approach* to teaching writing—the most influential approach that has had the major impact on second language writing research and instruction today.

The shift of interest from “product” to “process” can be attributed to the influence of the *process movement* in teaching composition to native English speakers that has resulted in what is called a “revolutionary paradigm shift” in English composition instruction. Borrowing theories from cognitive psychology, the writing process advocates viewed writing as a creative activity, a cognitive process which consists of several identifiable stages: pre-writing, drafting, revising and editing, and by which writers to

discover meaning, rather than a single action of recording meaning as was traditionally believed. They advocated that writing be taught as a *process* rather than merely to focus on the *product*, which implies that writing teachers should help students develop an awareness of their own writing process, provide assistance to them, and guide them through that process.

Inspired by the reform efforts in English composition, early advocates of process approach to second/foreign language writing claimed that the processes of writing in the first and second languages had much in common if not identical and that the difficulty second language learners experienced in writing was not so much with *language proficiency* as with their *writing competence*. They therefore advocated adopting methods and techniques used in English composition classes to ESL classes. The central idea of this process movement is that writing teachers need to look beyond the products of students' writing and to understand what happens when students write in order to provide assistance and guidance a student needs to develop writing competence. Since writing was viewed as a creative act, a process of discovery, through which writers seek and express personal feelings, experience, and reactions, it was believed that writing would be best facilitated when the writer was provided with a non-threatening environment and given the time and freedom to write without any constraints of formality (Zamel, 1976). And the imitation of various styles and organization patterns, though recognized as "useful for the students who are still coping with the acquisition of language" was, however, viewed largely irrelevant to "the expression of genuine thoughts and ideas" (Zamel, 1976, p. 69), and a writing class should be, first of all, a place where students can explore their ideas freely for students to write or to discover their ideas.

The process approach has had a major impact on teaching second /foreign language writing. The process oriented ESL writing teachers began to borrow techniques from English composition class. They provided students with ample time and freedom to write topics of their own choice. Students were allowed to write the same topic in multiple drafts. Peer review and teacher conferencing were adopted to provide student writers with feedback for revision. Fluency was emphasized over accuracy. For instance, techniques such as *journal writing*, *quickwriting* were used to engage students in exploring a topic by writing freely, as quick and much as they could, without paying attention to mechanics, grammar, and organization because writing as a process implied that what writers first put down on paper was “not necessarily their finished product but just a beginning” (Raimes, 1983, p. 10).

In addition to the stress that a writing class was a place of writing for self-discovery, a writing class was expected to do more. Since research seemed to have found that good writers and poor writers differed essentially in the strategies they used in writing, learning to write “entail[ed] developing an efficient and effective composition process” (Silva, 1993, p.16) and teaching writing implied increasing student writers’ awareness of their own writing process and helping them develop viable strategies for getting started (finding topics, generating ideas and information, focusing, and planning structure and procedure), drafting (encouraging multiple ideas), revising (adding, deleting, modifying, and rearranging ideas), and editing (attending to vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and mechanics).

The process approach has extended the purpose of a writing class from learning to write to writing to learn -- writing for self-discovery and personal growth. It has also

broadened the content of a writing class from language skills and forms of writing to the content of writing, the cognitive process of writing and the strategies employed in the process. While the concepts of the process approach have been commonly accepted and writing classes have become more process orientated, its adequacy in preparing second / foreign language students for academic study has been questioned in recent years.

Research on academic writing in universities in English-speaking countries indicates that students are not given much freedom in deciding what to write. Instead of using personal experience as a source, most academic writing involves using secondary sources and requires some research activity. Besides, the product, not the process, is actually what is evaluated and students are expected to observe the conventions of academic writing and meet the expectations of the academic community. From this point of view, “learning to write is part of becoming socialized to the academic community” (Silva, 1990, p. 17), not merely a private activity for self-discovery. The new perspective has added new dimensions to the second / foreign language writing class. It has been advocated that different academic discourse genres be introduced to student writers and “specific skills such as the synthesis of multiple sources, the connection of theory and data, the summary of and reaction to readings, and the report on a participation experience” (Reid, 1993, p. 38) be taught in the writing class.

Integrating writing-based activities in a language program

The function and content of second /foreign language writing, as reviewed above, have changed dramatically in the past few decades. The move from a language-based to a writing-based second/foreign language writing pedagogy has largely been a response on

the part of the language teaching professionals to the increasing awareness of the needs of language learners. It can also be attributed to the increasing knowledge of the nature of writing and the development of this particular competence.

While traditional writing activities are necessary and have their merits in a language class, it is obvious that they are not adequate to develop students' writing competence. Writing as a communicative competence cannot automatically grow out of linguistic knowledge. Some mechanic pattern drill type activities in fact have just limited value even in promoting language skills, for language is essentially a tool for communication and, therefore, language acquisition is best facilitated through communication, that is, through meaningful use of the language, both orally and in its written form.

Global communication and competition and rapid growth of information technology have made it even imperative for a foreign language program to equip its students with a solid writing competence. If writing is an important skill to develop, then the question is how the competence can be developed. The answer seems quite obvious that we learn to write by writing, and by writing in its real sense. Although every normal human being can speak, not everyone is able to write or write well even in his native language. The fact implies that learning to write is a deliberate effort and it needs to be taught and nurtured. This is even more so when writing in a second / foreign language is considered. Research, as briefly mentioned above, has indicated that much more is involved in writing in a foreign language than simply a mastery of vocabulary and grammar. Some researchers (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992) have proposed that writing competence consists of, at least, four components: *grammatical competence*,

sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence. Viewed from this standpoint, each approach to writing reviewed above has its merit in a writing program.

Incorporating writing-based activities in a language class is important because developing writing competence is one of the ultimate goals for language teaching, its value, however, goes far beyond that. First, writing as communication gives students a reason to learn the language that would serve as a motivating force for learning. Second, writing as a productive activity promotes language development. It is in writing as production not as imitation that students' knowledge of vocabulary and grammar is called for in its most active manner. The process of fixing and refining language to get ideas better conveyed is a much more meaningful and effective way to improve language skills. Finally, writing can be a powerful vehicle for learning. Writing is a highly demanding intellectual activity, "a creative act" and "a process of thinking things through." The process of learning to write effectively is a process of learning to think clearly in the first place. Writing involves many cognitive activities and learning skills, such as locating, selecting, reading, recording, synthesizing, and evaluating information. The value of writing in promoting higher order of thinking is obvious. Besides, whether it is personal expressive writing or writing for academic purpose, student writers have to face the ideas and content they are going to write about. More specifically, in a foreign language class, writing can play a role in helping students learn the history and culture of the target language country. So, implementing a writing-based writing program can help language students better-prepared for their future career.

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