

Teaching Writing: From Theory to Practice

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Abstract: *Writing is a complex discovery process which necessitates enough instruction, practice, and experience. EFL teachers are, then, in need of a systematic approach with clear principles to help their learners fully develop this skill. The aim of this paper was three-fold. First, a brief theoretical overview of writing was given. Second, some pedagogical implications related to the teaching of this skill were listed. Finally, a detailed lesson plan was suggested. The plan can be adapted to fit the objectives EFL teachers seek to achieve.*

Keywords: writing, ESL/EFL writing, process, skill

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most useful and challenging language skills every second/foreign language learner strives to develop and master. It is useful for it serves various functions in our everyday life activities (personal, professional, and academic). It is challenging since the student writer needs to invest enough energy and time to fully develop and master this skill. That is to say, the learner needs to develop so many sub skills before embarking on the writing process. Richards (1990: 100) states that “learning to write in either a first or second language is one of the most difficult tasks that a learner encounters and one that only few people can be said to fully master.”

This view maintains the idea which stipulates that the process of learning how to write either in a first or a second language is among the very demanding tasks that every learner may undertake. This means that developing one’s writing skills requires enough exposure, training and practice. Therefore, one’s ability to write in any language is the criterion that proves to a higher extent his/her ability to function appropriately in his/her discourse community.

2. Defining Writing

Writing is not simply the act of forming symbols, i.e. making marks on a flat surface of some kind (Byrne, 1988). Rather, it is a process of discovery and exploration of ideas together with a construction of a framework to present these ideas in the best way. In other words, it is a thinking process and a discovery procedure to achieve one’s purpose for an intended audience (Taylor, 1984).

For Murray, writing is “an act of recording or communicating and much more. It is a significant kind of thinking in which the symbols of language assume a purpose of their own and instruct the writer during the composing process” (Donovan and McClelland, 1988:3).

In a nutshell, writing can be defined as the socio-psychological process of communicating coherent messages to a given audience in a graphicised form and standardised format.

3. A Historical sketch about writing

Silva (1990) claims that the history of ESL/EFL writing is to be viewed as a succession of approaches.

3.1. Controlled composition

Two views form the basis of controlled composition. The first one is that language is speech (structuralist linguistics) and the second one is that learning is a process of habit formation (behaviourist psychology). From this perspective, writing is viewed as a secondary skill, basically meant to reinforce oral habits. Fries (1945) states in this concern that “even written exercises might be part of the work” of the second language learner. Cited in (Krol, 1990: 19). This supports the belief that writing is not a skill in itself. Rather, it is meant to serve the other skills, especially speaking.

In this model, writing functions as Rivers (1968) postulates as “the handmaid of the other skills” (speaking, listening and reading), “which must not take precedence as a major skill to be developed” and must be “considered as a service activity rather than an end in itself” cited in (Krol, 1990: 13). Following this approach, the writer is simply a manipulator of previously learned language structures. The reader is the ESL teacher in the role of editor or proof-reader, not interested in the quality of ideas or expressions but mainly concerned with the formal linguistic features. This shows the ignorance of the role of the audience and the purpose of writing in this model.

3.2. Current-traditional rhetoric

The mid-sixties brought a new dimension for teaching writing in an ESL context. Within this framework, students became aware of the need to produce extended written discourse. They started to believe in the idea that controlled composition was not enough and that writing was not only the building of grammatical sentences. The central issue in this approach was the logical construction and arrangement of discourse forms. Attention was given not only to the paragraph elements (topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentence and transitions), but also to the various options for its development (illustration, exemplification, comparison, contrast, classification, definition, causal analysis, etc). Essay development is another important issue that was dealt with in this approach (introduction, body and

conclusion), and organisational patterns (genres or modes). Therefore, the formal facet of the composition is basically located at the centre of this approach.

Writing from this perspective is absolutely seen as a matter of arrangement, of fitting sentences and paragraphs into prescribed patterns.

3.3. The Process approach

Dissatisfaction with controlled composition and the current traditional approaches led to the introduction of the process approach. Taylor (1981) asserts that “writing is not the straightforward plan – outline – write process that many believe it to be” cited in (Krol, 1990: 15). Writing, according to Zamel (1983), is a “nonlinear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning” quoted in (Krol, 1990: 15).

This approach calls for the provision of a positive, encouraging, and collaborative workshop environment

within which students, with ample time and minimal interference, can work through their composing processes. The teacher’s role is to help students develop viable strategies for getting started (finding topics, generating ideas and information, focusing and planning structure and procedure), for drafting (multiple drafts), for revising (adding, deleting, modifying, and rearranging ideas), and for editing (attending to vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and mechanics). The writer is the centre of attention – someone engaged in the discovery and expression of meaning. The reader is the one who does not pay attention to form. Instead, s/he stresses the content, the ideas and the negotiation of meaning. The third element is the text, which makes the whole process of writing. It is a secondary element whose form is a function of its content and purpose (Krol, 1990).

The table below explains clearly the different stages involved in writing following the process approach orthodoxy.

The Stages of the writing process	
1. Prewriting	Clarifies the purpose of writing, thoughts are generated through talking, drawing, remembering, brainstorming, reading, note-taking, searching for information, free associating and questioning to generate ideas.
2. Drafting	This is a rough, exploratory piece of writing in which ideas are organized and written up into a coherent draft. This stage of writing should not be evaluated, but supported. Topics and concepts are generated through quick-writes, free writing, graphic organizers, journals, learning logs.
3. Feedback	At this stage the writer receives the most guidance on how to improve his or her writing skill. Responses at this stage typically focus on meaning, not correctness. Activities include conferencing, getting feedback, sharing work; responding to comments, suggestions, reflecting on own writing (meta-writing). Through the questions and comments raised by the instructor or peers, the writer discovers, clarifies and refines his or her writing. Accepting criticism/comments is important at this stage.
4. Revising	Revising means re-writing the paper, building on what has been done, in order to make it stronger. Revision adds coherence, variety, transition emphasis and details. Revision eliminates irrelevance, wordiness and inconsistencies.
5. Editing	Editing is to check for and correct errors in grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, vocabulary and spelling.
6. Publishing	In this stage students share their final versions of writing with an audience.

(Adapted from Silva, 1987; Pennington, 1996; Raja Mussa, 2004; Susser, 1994) in (Gedera, 2011: 126).

The process approach to writing stresses the idea that writing is a cycle of revision during which students draft, edit, revise, and redraft their work.

4. The Nature of writing

According to white (1980), the writing skill cannot develop naturally. It needs training and exposure. Writing demands standard form of grammar, syntax and vocabulary. This indeed makes this skill challenging not only for foreign language learners but also for the native speakers of the language as well. Bowen et als., (1985) view writing to be more an individual effort and at the same time rule-bound and therefore more error-prone. The writer is expected to produce according to one model of spelling, and usually a reduced range of structures, with one hundred percent accuracy. S/He is supposed also to be consistent in style, avoid ambiguity, and limit redundancy by organising and writing carefully. Writing is, therefore, the most demanding of the four language skills that is why it should be looked at as a skill in its own right and should continue, at every level, to be developed further.

Furthermore, writing is a complex skill that makes the needed sub-skills also complex and very difficult to teach and to learn. This is due to the many requirements the writer has to attend to while writing. For Heaton (1975), the latter presupposes mastery not only of grammatical and rhetorical devices but also of conceptual and judgement elements. They are as follows:

- **Grammatical sub-skills:** the ability to write correct sentences.
- **Stylistic sub-skills:** the ability to manipulate sentences and use language effectively.
- **Mechanical sub-skills:** the ability to use correctly those conventions peculiar to the written language (punctuation and spelling).
- **Judgement sub- skills:** the ability to write in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose, with a particular audience in mind , together with an ability to select , organise and order relevant information (Heaton, 1975: 138).

The four sub-skills highlighted by Heaton form the backbone of writing in any language. The writer is, thus, supposed to master all these before embarking on the writing process.

Overall, the need for writing in modern literate societies, marked by the prevalence of print media and information and communication technologies, is much more extensive than is realised. Writing becomes a technology, a set of skills that do not come naturally, but rather are gained through conscious effort, experience, and practice (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996).

5. The Components of Writing

Needless to say that writing is a complex process that necessitates bearing in mind various elements. The writer is, then, required to pay ample attention to those elements to produce a piece of writing that is worth reading. They are as follows:

5.1. The process

It has to do with the various stages involved in writing. Some of the phases are: getting started, generating ideas, writing drafts and revising (Raimes, 1983). Hedge, in contrast, suggests a more explanatory representation of the process of writing which comprises these sub-processes:

Getting ideas together → planning and outlining → making notes → making a first draft → revising/redrafting → editing → final revision

Figure 1: The processes involved in writing
(Mc Donough and Shaw, 1993: 186)

A short look at these two representations displays that writing involves processes that match the mental processes inherent in writing and which work together to produce a neat paper.

5.2 The audience

This concept is as important as the other components. Writers need to know in advance the nature of his/her readership. This knowledge influences the decisions that have to be made during the course of writing. Having information about the reader is a prerequisite, for it will lead the writer to produce a text that readers will consider significant and worth the time and effort it requires. Goodman argues that “texts are shaped as much by the writers’ sense of the characteristics of their readers as they are by the writer’ own characteristics. That is as true for a shopping list or a letter as it is for a newspaper report or novel.” Cited in (Brooks and Grundy, 1990: 20).

The readers’ needs and expectations, then, have a bearing on the way the writer groups his/her expressions to form a unified text.

5.3 The message

Writing means communication. The latter entails having a message to send to a receiver, having something to say to someone (Meziani, 1986).

Normally speaking when one writes, he/she writes for a specific purpose (to persuade, to inform, or to clarify). Therefore, a basic component of writing is the purpose (either explicit or implicit) that one has in mind, i.e. the external or internal motive for writing. (Brooks and Grundy, 1990)

For this reason, it becomes necessary to help learners become aware of the purpose underlying each piece of writing. This, in fact, will help them tune what they want to convey and how it is to be conveyed.

5.4 The content

A piece of writing should be substantive. It has to be very significant, since writing carries the writer’s point of view revealing his/her particular thoughts about the topic and his/her attitudes toward the topic and the audience through details, structure and language. The content is, thus, supposed to be clear, relevant, original and logical to be fully understood by the reader.

5.5 Organization

This component concerns the way the different parts of the discourse are organized. Any piece of writing should have a topic sentence, supporting ideas/details and a concluding sentence (Raimes, 1983). Harries (1993) adds another dimension to text organization which involves two text structures: (a) narrative texts in which the writer tells a story (a sequence of events that follow a certain chronological order). (b) Non-narrative texts which are of three types (argumentative, descriptive and expository).

5.6 Grammar

The concern here is with the rules of grammar which includes: verbs, agreement, articles, pronouns and so on and so forth.

5.7 Syntax

It has to do with sentence structure (SVO), sentence boundaries (where a sentence finishes and the other starts) and the stylistic choices at the writer’s disposal given the context and audience type.

5.8 Vocabulary

The word and the tone come into play here. This means that the writer has to make the correct decisions while working with vocabulary. Part of text comprehension is a matter of the appropriate choice of the lexical items to be used.

5.9 Mechanics

This component is related to the layout or format of the piece of writing (good handwriting and correct spelling and punctuation). Raimes (1983) suggests the following diagram to show what writers are supposed to consider in their endeavor to produce a clear, fluent and effective piece of writing.

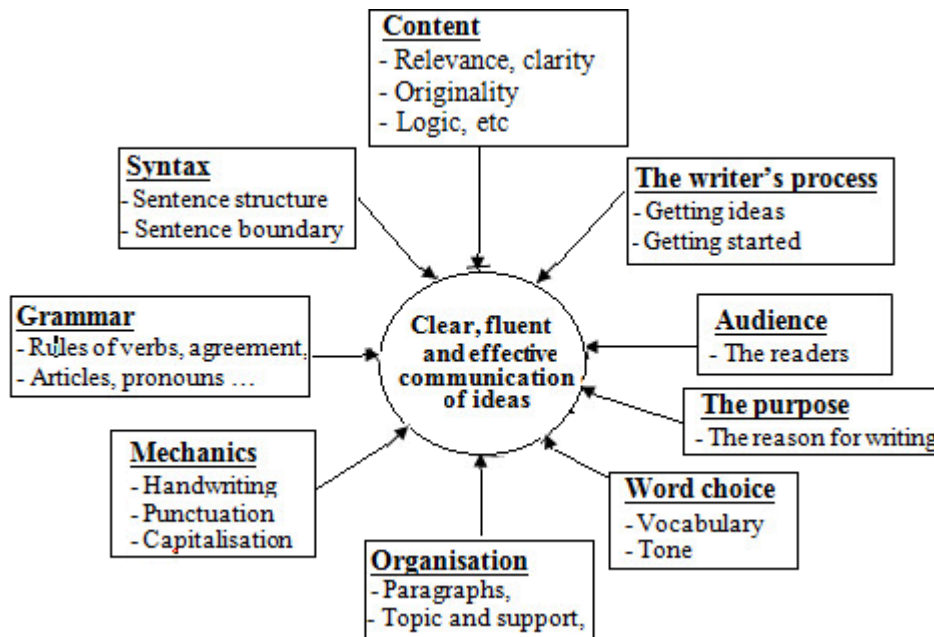


Figure 2: Producing a piece of writing
 (Raimes, 1993: 6)

This diagram suggested by Raimes (1993) includes all the necessary tools writers need to be equipped with to be able to produce a piece of writing that is worth reading and responding to.

6. Conclusion

This paper has been a humble attempt to shed some light on the different aspects that guide the teaching of writing. It is divided into two main parts. The theoretical one has been devoted to defining writing, giving a historical overview about ESL/EFL writing, discussing the nature of this skill and its basic features, and listing its components as well as the processes writers need to go through to come up with a neat and clear piece of writing. The practical part, on the other hand, has been allocated to highlighting some pedagogical implications that may benefit all ELT practitioners. At the end, a detailed writing lesson plan has been presented.

1) Pedagogical implications

For a successful writing lesson, EFL teachers need to:

- a) Raise learners' awareness about successful writing processes, reader's expectations and linguistic and textual conventions.
- b) Support learners by providing them with models, clear and specific learning goals, meaningful contexts to practise writing, carefully structured activities, clear presentation of materials, and constructive feedback.
- c) Promote learner autonomy in and outside the classroom.
- d) Cover the range of uses that learners will perform in their daily lives. This may include filling forms, making lists,

writing friendly and/or business letters, note-taking and academic writing.

- e) Assume that the product and process processes are not in opposition but rather complementary, both can be integrated in the EFL class just as fluency-oriented and accuracy-oriented activities or intensive and extensive reading are integrated in the speaking or the reading class.
- f) Adopt a workshop stance to writing, starting with understanding students' reasons for writing and encouraging their voice and choice in the brainstorming stage, via reading, note-taking, searching for information, free associating and questioning to generate ideas.
- g) Make feedback helpful and meaningful by avoiding short comments on learners' writing such as "unclear", "good" or "mind your handwriting" which give little direction to students for a better re-construction of writing drafts. Instead teachers should encourage self-review, peer-editing and the using of guiding checklists.
- h) Bear in mind that though writing is an individual endeavor and students should be granted ample opportunities to refine their writing skills, the various steps of process writing call for cooperative learning and negotiation of ideas as students in groups pool their resources to come up with relevant ideas, a well-structured outline and reciprocal reviewing and editing.

2) A Sample writing lesson plan

Level: Intermediate

Component: Writing

Sub-skill in focus: The use of appropriate vocabulary.

Objective: Students will be able to write an e-mail to their e-pals describing their schools using appropriate adjectives.

Time: 1H30

Stages	Procedure	Rationale	Mode of work	Timing
Lead in	- A joke or a riddle.	- To put students in the English mindset.	→ T S →	3 mns
Understanding	- Students read a paragraph and choose the best answer.	- To activate students' background knowledge about the topic.	Pair work	7 mns
Analysing	-Students read the paragraph again and answer some questions.	-To check understanding.	Group work	7 mns
Crafting	1. Students put the sentences in the correct order to write a contrast paragraph.	- To make students aware of the paragraph organisation.	Individually then in pairs	7 mns
	2. Students use a linking word from the box once to complete some sentences.	-To make students aware of the importance of linking words.	Individually then in pairs	7 mns
Planning	1. Students complete the spidergram with ideas about the topic.	- To generate ideas about the topic.	Small groups	10 mns
	2. Students use the information in task one to fill in the outline	-To organise the ideas to make an outline.	Small groups	10 mns
Drafting	-Students use the notes in the outline to write the e-mail.	-To put ideas into print.	Individually	15 mns
Editing	-Students exchange e-mails to edit them using a checklist.	-To encourage peer editing.	Pair work	10 mns

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