

Developing Writing Skills through Effective Writing Approaches

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to discuss writing as an effective and productive skill while proposing six different approaches that successfully marry both the linguistic dimension and the task-related awareness students need to acquire in order to successfully express themselves in written forms. Grasping proficient levels of literacy is a universal goal for all children in the elementary classroom. This objective is especially challenging for English language learners particularly in the domain of writing. Writing has been identified as one of the most essential skills because the world has become so text-oriented. Due to this change, mainstream teachers as well as ESOL instructors, are in great demand of effective techniques to improve writing skills of this particular population. The purpose of this project is to provide research based techniques successful in improving the writing skills of ESL students. The findings suggest that through the use of technology, pre-taught vocabulary, various teacher influences and the implementation of positive diverse literacy practices, this goal can be attained. This article aims to discuss writing as a productive skill while proposing six different approaches that successfully marry both the linguistic dimension and the task-related awareness students need to acquire in order to successfully express themselves in written forms.

Keywords: written communication, productive skills, language skills, task-related skills, approaches to writing.

Introduction

The importance of English as a comprehensive means of communication has gained increased importance in the present social, political, commercial and professional contexts. With the advancements of information technology in diverse spheres of society, English has become the language of the world citizen. In the military academies in Romania, English has long been taught as a core subject throughout the entire educational journey, yet it has often been noticed that students are still lagging behind in achieving comprehensive productive skills, especially writing. Traditionally neglected in the practice of foreign language teaching, writing is probably the least popular skill to acquire among students.

However, it has lately emerged as an important element of the communication dyad, which also involves speaking, i.e. the oral manifestation of social interaction and exchange of information.

Writing to communicate is a complex skill: it transcends the act of mechanically copying letters and words or even forming simple sentences. It requires learners to create a writing product, by actively and critically using the target language, employing complex cognitive skills, analysing information and producing original work. Even more so, the communicative event is often typified by interaction with an audience that is characteristically absent.

Writing has always been seen as an important skill in English language acquisition. This importance is due to the fact that it reinforces grammatical structures and vocabulary that educators strive to teach their students. It is the area in which learners need to be offered adequate time to develop their writing skill, therefore more time should be devoted to it in classrooms containing ELLs so that they will be prepared to effectively communicate in real life as well as academic situations (Ismail, 2007). Exposing them to the writing process itself through various venues is an excellent way to reach this goal. Additionally, writing skills can be developed when the learners' interests are acknowledged and when they are given frequent opportunities to actually practice writing (Ismail, 2007). Because one of the main goals of ESL students is to learn to produce a well-thought-out piece of writing, a specific writing program must be in place in order to meet the needs of these learners. After careful evaluation of the literature, it was found that numerous researchers discovered the need for ESL students to be exposed to a variety of genres, strategies, and methods in order to succeed in the writing of English.

Writing as a Productive Skill

The developing of writing as a productive language skill has always been a challenging and difficult task. The actual process of writing implies teaching students how to write with coherence, how to use the suitable grammar and lexical structures, how to employ acceptable spelling and how to correctly choose the appropriate language register. Regardless of the level, good writing involves discovery, planning, developing ideas, creativity, and revision. In order to master writing, students need to learn a variety of techniques that help them understand and approach writing tasks in order to address them successfully. As in the case of all processes, teaching writing requires a systematic approach intended to motivate the students to express themselves in writing and make them aware of the steps involved in effective writing. There are different theories that substantiate a methodical approach to teaching writing.

Walter (2004) proposes modelled writing as a technique that rests mainly on teacher demonstration comprising revising, adding, asking questions, clarifying purpose. The same author introduces shared writing as a method to activate students to get more involved in the process of writing while practicing language patterns and acquiring functional writing strategies.

The “controlled” to “guided” to “free” approach is a three-phase technique introduced by Olshtain in 2001. As in the case of Walter’s approach, this method emphasizes the importance of modeling (in the controlled and guided stages), which later forms the scaffolding for free writing, a stage in which students are required to produce complete texts (paragraphs, compositions, essays) in response to a variety of stimuli (tasks).

Register is also an important element to be taught alongside with language skills. Turbill, Barton, and Brock (2015) advocate the importance of developing students’ skills in tackling different types of texts. They posit that it is essential that students identify the common features of texts (type, social purpose, framework, language elements) before being exposed to different writing strategies that are based on these elements. The Practice of Teaching

Writing, most students need to write paragraphs, compositions, argumentative essays and reports for coursework and for exams. Applying a wide array of writing techniques should help students better understand the mechanisms of writing. A gradual approach to writing should take students on a journey that starts from simple paragraphs, centered on the idea of coherence and cohesion, to more complex productions, such as lengthy argumentations that pivot on personal opinions and demand critical thinking skills. In terms of more practical procedures, teaching writing as a productive skill involves the following steps:

1. Providing a model of the target written product;
2. Working on the model, with specific focus on meaning and form by guiding the learners to analyse the text in order to discover language, organization patterns, and register features;
3. Practicing on a similar task, by imitating the form and the language (spelling, structure, vocabulary, layout);
4. Producing an answer to a new task which involves personalizing both the content and the form.

Furthermore, there are some essential communicative aspects that should be considered when teaching writing:

- The task – it should be contextualized and formulated so as to answer the following questions: who?, what?, to whom?, why?. E.g.: You (WHO) have read an advertisement for a specialized course you have long been interested in. Write a letter of request (WHAT) to the institution organizing the course (TO WHOM) in order to find out more details (WHY).

- The audience – it is an essential element of communicative competence which dictates the manner in which we tailor our language according to status, gender, and age of the recipients. Unless we adjust the vocabulary, grammar, tone, register and style to the audience, communication may not be appropriate and may even be flawed. E.g.: 1) Writing an informal letter (the audience/recipient is a friend/relative/colleague/workmate) requires the use of colloquial language and of the informal register; 2) Writing a military report (the audience / recipient is a superior / members of the professional community) involves using formal language, register and style.

- purpose – it relates directly to the objective of the writing (giving information, making invitations, requesting information, making a complaint, expressing opinion) and entails conventions of style and register. The purpose of writing is correlated with language functions (to narrate, to describe, to explain, to inform, to argue, to convince) and determines the choice of vocabulary and grammar. E.g.: writing a compare and contrast paragraph – the purpose of such a writing piece is to discuss similarities and differences between people, objects, places or events, by using descriptive language (vocabulary) and the comparative of adjectives (grammar).

Regardless of the overall approach taken, it is only natural to conclude that teaching writing is a systematic process that involves going through gradual stages in order to deliver a final (written) product.

Six Approaches to Developing Writing Skills

As already discussed, writing as a productive skill is a complex mechanism that needs to be deconstructed into its most essential elements in order to be understood, taught and learned. The following diagram shows what writers need to take into consideration as they produce a piece of writing. Regardless of the many theories that substantiate writing as a productive skill, there is no answer to the question of how to teach writing. There are as many answers as teachers, students, teaching styles and learning styles. However, it is essential to understand the what, the why and the how of writing, in order to choose the most suitable techniques and the most appropriate approach.

1. The Controlled to Free Approach

This approach was first introduced by Raimes (1983) and is based on the audio-lingual approach which dominated second language learning in the 1950s and early 1960s. It is a sequential approach to writing which involves copying, manipulating or changing texts.

Students first practice with words and sentences, then move on to paragraphs and longer compositions. They are required to grammatically manipulate a given input, for example, changing sentences (statements to questions or questions to statements, negative to affirmative), transforming tenses (present to past, present to future) and voice (active to passive) or number (singular to plural). This approach focuses on grammar, syntax, and mechanics, and emphasizes accuracy rather than fluency. It does not pivot on creativity but rather on imitating, modelling and adapting pre-existing samples of content and format.

2. The Free Writing Approach

Byrne argues that "many students write badly because they do not write enough" (Byrne, 1988, p. 22). With this caveat in mind, the free writing approach focuses on quantity rather than quality. It is based on the principle that any given topic can generate vast amounts of writing, which should flow freely, abundantly and with minimal error correction. According to Scrivener (2005), this kind of writing may contain a lot of waste, but the valuable ideas that are born in the process may subsequently prove useful for the real writing assignment.

3. The Paragraph-Pattern Approach

This approach stresses the importance of organization. It is based on the principle that communication is constructed and organized differently in different cultures and according to different contexts. Because this approach is centred on organizational patterns, students work with paragraphs which they copy, analyse and imitate. Exercises can include re-arranging scrambled sentences (in a paragraph), mixed paragraphs (in a longer composition), identifying general and specific information, writing a suitable topic sentence for a paragraph, writing supporting details for a main idea, or identifying the main idea that covers an enumeration of details.

4. The Grammar-Syntax

Approach Introduced by Raimes in 1983, this approach advocates simultaneous elements to be taken into account: grammar, syntax and organization. Starting from the premise that successful writing stems from an effective combination of discrete

language skills, the grammar-syntax approach is designed around writing tasks that require students to pay attention to organization while focusing on grammar accuracy.

Clear organization derives from the efficient use of more than appropriate vocabulary; it requires informed knowledge of verb and tense structure, linking devices and even sentence structure in order to produce a coherent and cohesive paragraph. In preparing students to address a task, all the mentioned elements must be either taught for the first time or reviewed as separate elements, and only after inserted into the larger written product. More importantly, such an approach links the purpose of a piece of writing to the linguistic instruments needed to convey the respective message (Chavez, Espinosa & Tapia, 2011).

5. The Communicative Approach

The communicative methodology also links two essential elements in the above-mentioned diagram: purpose and audience. Furthermore, such an approach adds authenticity to the writing task and the product thereof, as students are encouraged to behave like writers in real life contexts and ask themselves some crucial questions that will guide their writing: Why am I writing this? (Purpose) Who will read it? (Audience). Although the teacher alone has traditionally been the audience for the students' written products, this approach shifts the focus from the (somewhat) sterile instructional purpose, by extending the readership to suit a more authentic communicative goal. The formulation of the task is the place where the larger audience is located and consequently the students are offered a contextualized purpose for their writing, one that helps them select the most appropriate language, content and level of formality. This approach – with specific focus on reason and audience – illustrates Byrne's (1988) belief that writing tasks should be as authentic as possible and that real-life contextualization motivates students to write better.

6. The Process Approach

As indicated by the system, the process approach reallocates writing resources towards the process rather than towards the product itself (Harmer, 2001). It is a comprehensive approach that successfully marries the why, who and the how of writing, while systematically organizing the content. It is a complex technique, which involves various stages of research and effectively combines receptive skills in the pre-writing stage (reading, listening) with oral (discussions, debates) and then written responses (Golkova&Hubackova, 2014). Wider and more abstract topics are explored in detail, with specific attention given to language (lexis and grammar) and research is encouraged so as to build up on content and generate ideas.

The main advantage of this approach is that it fosters creativity, allows students to work at their own pace and offers them a chance to revisit their work and improve it along the process. In the words of White and Arndt (1991), "the goal of this approach is to nurture the skills with which writers work out their own solutions to the problems they set themselves, with which they shape the raw material into a coherent message, and with which they work towards an acceptable and appropriate form for expressing it." (p. 5).

Conclusions

Starting from the premise that writing effectively requires writing skills and language proficiency, this article pivots on the idea that written expression involves understanding specific task-related elements (reason, audience, process), while language is perceived as the medium of communication. Consequently, the theoretical approaches discussed in this article are substantiated by the belief that effective writing abilities are only developed at the intersection between task-related and language-related skills.

Task-related skills refer to task fulfillment, format, and appropriate usage of register and style. Responding to the task in a correct manner involves adequate organization that indicates a logical and coherent flow of ideas. In other words, task completion requires writers to state their purpose clearly, to tailor their message according to the target audience by choosing the proper language, tone and style, to deploy relevant and pertinent ideas, and to choose the appropriate text type, depending on the situational/ communicative context.

Language-related skills indicate the learners' language proficiency: the use of lexical structures appropriate to the given task; an awareness of grammar and syntax suitable for the purpose of communication; register and style tailored according to the audience; suitable linking devices that ensure the coherence and the cohesion of the text; accuracy of spelling; and use of important punctuation marks to transmit the message unequivocally.

Developing writing skills is a long-term investment. Far from being a mere matter of transcribing language into written form, writing is a thinking process that demands a conscious intellectual effort over a considerable period of time. This article has discussed theoretical approaches to developing writing skills as an intention to offer both students and teachers of English an opportunity to clarify and deepen their theoretical understanding of writing as a productive skill while creating a fertile framework for their future journeys into the intricate realm of written expression.

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