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Instructional Approaches to Teaching Writing Skills in an ESL Context

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Abstract:

Writing is considered to be one of the most difficult skills to be learnt and this somewhere makes writing to be matter of great concern both for the learners as well as for the teachers of ESL. Everything we do in classrooms basically depends on some kind of practical and theoretical knowledge which one acquires through an approach. Though, there have been numerous approaches to teaching writing in the history of language teaching which were enthusiastically taken up and were put effectively to be worked in classrooms. In fact each new approach added a new perspective to illuminate what learners need to learn and what teachers should provide in order to enhance effective writing in classroom context. These theories were complementary and overlapping on certain perspectives but also represented the means of understanding the complex nature of writing in a more potentially compatible manner. This paper is an attempt to analyze the different approaches to teaching writing and how much these approaches help to improve learners writing competence to produce good writing.

Keywords: Approaches, Classroom context, Complex nature, Learners needs, writing skills

Introduction:

Writing tends to be one of the most frustrating skills to almost majority of students who had been a part of academic learning carried out in all formal schools as a part of their daily routine. It is viewed as one of the most difficult and laborious skills both in the first as well as second language development. Majority of the teachers of academic globe assess writing on the basis of a high degree of organization, a high degree of accuracy, choice of vocabulary, grammar and coordination between sentences. This kind of assessment on the basis of some notions poses a serious threat to students taking of risks because most of them feel that their teachers would easily evaluate their progress through the act of writing and a wrong endeavor would lead their copies to be marked in red or green.

Most of the school writing syllabuses is designed to serve two basic purposes as pointed by Keys, 2000, Shanahan, 2004, Sperlin and Freedman, 2001 i.e. firstly to make use of basic writing sub-skills like planning, drafting and revising while they write and secondly to deepen and widen their knowledge regarding the subject. Though so much attention and thought to writing skills have been given, still in classroom context it is viewed as an instrument by which teachers measure the learning taking place in the classrooms and students aim to pass the examination.

Teachers put in so much hard labor, authorities plan the curriculum so that students improve their quality of writing yet most of the students tend to leave the school with a poor command

of the skill. Researchers and experts working on this issue have pointed out the imperfections they have found in the rendering of the skill that even today, majority of the teachers tend to keep their focus on the product received from students and avoid concentrating on how students reached their targets. Not only this many of them evaluated students writing on the basis of some preconceived notions of good writing which they have inherited from their teachers.

Approaches to the Teaching of Writing

With the advent of language teaching methods writing gained focus as a separate skill but had to undergo fluctuations with every new methodology. The first approach to make its way was-

Product Approach:

This approach is also known as the traditional approach to teaching writing skill because writing was taken up as a second hand experience by almost every student. Pincas (1982) says that in the product approach, “learning to write has four stages: familiarization; controlled writing; guided writing; and free writing. The familiarization stage aims to make learners aware of certain features of a particular text. In controlled and guided writing sections, the learners practice the skills with increasing freedom until they are ready for the free writing section, when they use the writing skill as a part of a genuine activity such as a letter, story, or essay” (cited in Badger and White 2000, p.153). Writing activities comprised of learning and memorizing endless lists of vocabularies, grammatical rules etc. of the target language and later using the acquired knowledge in the production of sentences translated in and out of the target language. Basically, the product approach was used to highlight form and syntax and the emphasis was more on rhetorical drills (Silva, 1990). The teachers’ real role in product approaches came after the students submitted their samples. They evaluated their students writing on the basis of some preconceived, dogmatic principles underlying their minds and a deviation from the existent norms meant the pages to be marked in red or green ink. With the onset of audiolingualism, writing got a further setback as it was viewed to be only a supporting skill and the writing classes mainly focused on sentence structures as a support to the grammar classes. Students were normally told to imitate a pattern of the given or prescribed essay such as “Write one paragraph about yourself and your school. Follow the model, but change the information that does not seem correct to you, For example: you write down your information and take as many structures and words from the model as you can use in your paragraph.” (Blanton, 1979). Generally, the focus of such type of questions was to measure the final scripts of the students and not how students found out their way to reach their target. With the passage of time it was felt that product oriented approach to teaching of writing was making students learn the mechanical aspects by focusing on imitation, grammar and syntax rather than focusing on, that one writes for an audience with a certain purpose and during the process of writing new ideas are created and formulated.

Process Approach:

This approach emerged out of the dissatisfaction with the product approach that was resulting in students repeating the mistakes, lack of involvement with assigned topics, inadequate development of ideas and above all lack of confidence in writing. Tribble in his book “Writing” says that “The process approach is an approach to the teaching of writing which

stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models". (Tribble, 1996:160).

The breakthrough emerged after the founding of "Conference on College Composition and Communication" in 1949-1950, then with the publication of "Research in Written Composition" by Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd Jones, and Lowell Schoer in 1961 and finally the case study by Janet Emig "The Composing Processes of Twelfth Graders". These findings shifted the perceptions of the majority of teachers from the past assumptions and now writing was seen as what Zamel (1983) says "non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning". So now writing began to be viewed as a process comprising sub-processes in its term which were as-

Murray (1987): Collect, focus, order, draft and clarify.

Graves (1983): Pre-writing, drafting, revision, editing and publishing. But a typical model identifies comprises as Tribble (1996) sums up as: Pre-writing, composing/drafting, revising and editing.

These stages were said to be recursive and varied according to writer and text. On observing students while writing it seems that they all represent same behaviors of planning, writing and revising but in reality it differs from writer to writer.

Process approach gave way to student centered classrooms and the tasks assigned were designed to motivate students. Activities such as brainstorming, peer-conferencing, discussions and group work were encouraged so that students were exposed to wider knowledge about the subject/topic before taking up writing. Teacher's role was that of a facilitator and his/her judgments on students sample was done through feedbacks comprising positive remarks.

An important element which forms the basis of this approach is the personal connection which a writer develops with the assigned topics in the course of his writing. It in fact encourages learners to feel free to convey their thoughts and feelings through written messages by providing them lot of time and opportunity to reconsider and revise their writing and also seek assistance at every step where they lack confidence from their teachers. This approach became a worldwide famous approach and was adopted in almost every public school since 1970s. However, process approach too came under criticism as many felt that too much attention to the processes of creating texts has made products of writing into by-products.

Genre approach:

Swales has identified genre as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes"

Genre approach to teaching of writing considers writing as a social and cultural practice. This approach observes the social context in which a language is woven around much like Hallidayan view of language as a functional unit which holds the view that language evolves out of a social purpose keeping in mind the conventions and norms of a particular culture and context.

Genre based approach can be seen as an extension to product approaches as teachers tried to draw students attention towards the organizational and linguistics features reflected by a particular text type and sometimes provide with textual discovery tasks which are designed in such a way that students discover generic features and language forms occurring in a particular type of genre.

Classroom observations reveal that teachers provide students with model text but with the teacher guided analysis of the texts and then students were motivated to imitate features

provided to them in these models. Teachers had to play an active role as they need to provide ample opportunity to the students so they get familiar with the schemata associated to each genre and later students used these models as a reference when they tried to compose a text. However this approach too faced certain shortcomings such as that not every genre can be covered in class apart this approach was restricting creativity and was promoting prescriptivism.

Conclusion:

Writing can be interpreted in several ways by a teacher in a classroom context. A single approach may not prove to be successful where a teacher has to face heterogeneity. No approach can be perfect in itself as they all have flaws. Teaching writing skills in an ESL context is a very challenging as developing this skill takes a long time to see the improvement. All the three approaches mentioned above have received quite a number of criticisms therefore it is better that a teacher can initiate an eclectic approach by synthesizing the three models and work according to the context.

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