Content-Based, Task-Based or Theme- Based Tasks Aligned to 21st Century Themes in Teaching Writing

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ABSTRACT

Writing is regarded as being a difficult skill to acquire and for this reason, it is approached in classes less than it should or, not as appropriately as it should be. The present paper examines how writing is approached in classes by comparing how it is seen in relation to the other skills with a focus on writing vs speaking.Issues faced by teacher such as time available for lessons and correcting pieces of writing are tackled as wellas issues related to learners' language level and lack of interest in writing. For all the issues some solutions are suggested in an attempt to help teachers deal with the problems. Finally, it is discussed the importance of teaching writing and the benefits it brings to students. 331 teachers answered a questionnaire with questions related to the topics aforementioned.

KEYWORDS

1.   Introduction

For a long time writing in a foreign language was either seen as a means to support the teaching of grammar, vocabulary and other skills or its pedagogy was based on theories and approaches to teaching first language writing (Boas, 2017, p.2). The field of second language writing grew as the communicative teaching gathered momentum and teachers learned more about how to teach fluency, how to use authentic texts and contexts in the classroom and how to focus on the purpose of linguistic communication (Brown & Heekyeong, 2015). It was then that new approaches and methods were developed and, due to the arrival of rapid written communication, the development of information technologies and digital environments teaching writing has assumed much greater importance in recent years. These facts made it possible for more individuals than ever before to engage creatively and purposefully with written texts (Freedman et al., 2016).

Gibbons (2015, p.96) adds that in the contemporary world the level of sophistication in literacy skills is greater than ever before, including the many forms of digital literacy in order to access information and ideas and participate meaningfully in society and the global community. Yet, teaching writing as a skill is not very common.

2.   Results and Discussions

2.1 Writing VS Speaking

Teachers, coordinators, families and learners more often than not regard speaking as the form of output with more relevance when it comes to learning an additional language. In this research, 41.7% of the teachers responded that speaking is regarded as a synonym of learning whereas 25.5% consider reading, 22.4% consider writing and 10.6% listening as shown in Figure 1. This can be explained by the fact that speech acquisition is a natural part of early human development - by the age of 5, spoken language is normally highly developed with a working vocabulary of several thousand words and an ability to comprehend and produce grammatical sentences. Literacy, on the other hand, is a purely cultural achievement that may never be learned at all. Reading and writing are partly mediated by the phonological speech system, but an independent orthographic system must also be learned (Kellog, 2008, p.2). The fact that reading is linked to speaking (when students read out loud) may explain the reason this skill is considered more important than writing.
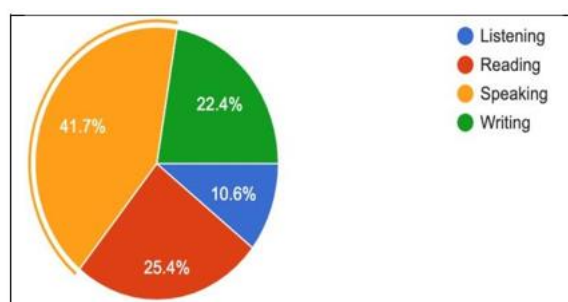

Figure 1. Skills more often regarded as synonym of learning.

2.2 Approaches to Writing

Teachers tend to approach writing in different ways and sometimes they do things intuitively not knowing much about how to deal with writing in their lessons. Some of these approaches will be described in the following paragraphs.

Product-based writing approaches have a variety of activities that can raise students' awareness in second language writing (Tangpermpoon, 2008). Basically, writing in product-based approaches has served to reinforce L2 writing in terms of grammatical and syntactical forms. Product writing focuses on "model" compositions that students try to emulate and how well their final product can be measured in terms of a set of criteria such as content, organization, vocabulary use, grammatical use, spelling and punctuation (Brown & Heekyeong, 2015).

As for process-based writing Tangpermpoon (2008) defines it as the way writers actually work on their writing tasks from the beginning stage to the end of the written product. Brown & Heekyeong (2015) state that process-writing engages learners in meaningful writing, encourages stages of multiple drafts and revisions, and provides formative feedback through conferencing in what is known as the process-writing cycle:

● Prewriting: Teachers will provide a writing task and help them to generate vocabulary and ideas by applying a number of strategies in class namely brainstorming, clustering, and discussion, without concern for correctness or appropriateness in the first stage of writing;

● First draft composing: Learners will use vocabulary and ideas which they have got from the previous stage to express what they want to convey in their writing;

● Feedback: In this writing stage, learners will receive comments from real audiences which can be a writing teacher or their peers and move on to new ideas in another draft;

● Second draft writing: Based on the comment of teachers and peers, learners will modify their previous draft by revising, adding, and rearranging ideas;

● Proofreading: In the final stage, student writers will not only discover new ideas and language forms to express their ideas in writing but also focus on the appropriate use of vocabulary, layout, grammar, and mechanics.

Genre-based pedagogy came to expand the notion of L2 writing as going beyond the planning-writing-reviewing framework by focusing on the linguistic resources writers need to communicate effectively. At the heart of the approach is the view that writing pedagogies should offer students explicit and systematic explanations of the ways language functions in social contexts (Shahrina & Norhisham, 2017). Boas (2017) mentions that a genre represents a style with certain characteristics and, when it comes to texts it represents how language is used for particular purposes with writing conventions so that readers can recognize the purpose.

Shahrina & Norhisham (2017) state that product, process and genre approaches received a number of criticism and by synthesizing the strengths from process and genre approach it was proposed the process-genre framework whose learning cycle summarized by Boas (2017, p.19) is:

● Contextualize social purpose of text and provide a sample text (genre);
● Engage students in genre analysis;
● Propose independent writing task and engage students in activities to generate and plan ideas;
● Engage students in the draft and feedback process;
● Assess student production.

Barrot (2015) summarizes that process genre allows learners to study the relationship between purpose and form for a particular genre as they use recursive writing processes. It also develops learners' awareness of different genres and of the composing processes More importantly, this approach is not limited to cognitive view but sees writing from a social perspective.

Regarding the approaches aforementioned, most teachers have heard of all of them as shown in Figure 2 and process writing is the one teachers feel more comfortable using(Figure 3). These results point out how continuous professional development (CPD) is paramount as 15.1% of the teachers has never heard of any of these approaches and 13.9% feels comfortable using none of them. Moreover, students would benefit significantly if teachers felt comfortable using a variety of techniques to approach writing in their lessons.
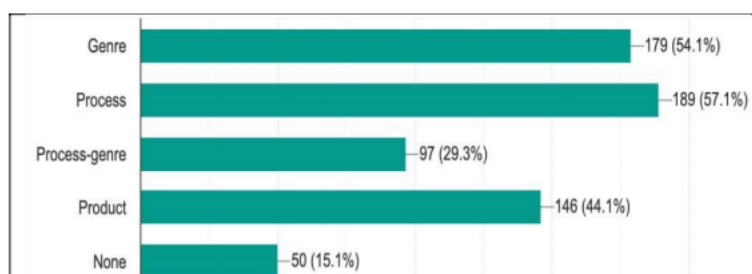
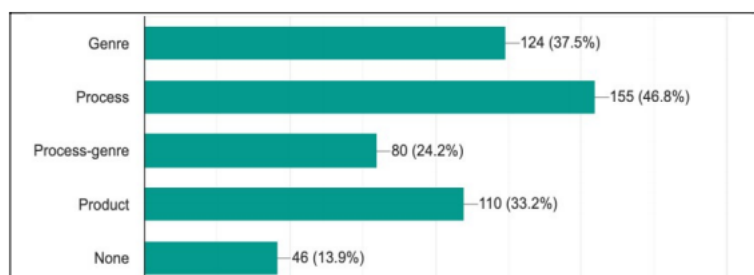

Figure 2. Approaches to writing teacher

Figure 3. Approaches to writing teachers feel more comfortable using

2.3 Problems and Solutions

Most of the teachers (68.6%) pointed learners' language level as an issue regarding writing. Tangpermpoon (2008) that writing requires students to have a great deal of lexical and syntactic knowledge as well as principles of organization in L2 to produce a good writing. This is also the view of Selvara & Aziz (2019) that state that students struggle with the lack of certain skills such as proper use of grammar, conventions, punctuation, and spelling. Learners feel insecure because they lack these skills in their L1 as well. In order to mitigate that teacher could try:

Presenting, in the pre-writing stages, specific grammar topics that may help students with a specific piece of writing. The language input can be provided either inductively by presenting several samples of authentic texts using the target language forms or deductively by presenting first the target language forms using authentic texts;

Practicing the target language forms through cloze test with options, cloze test without options.

Concerning punctuation, capitalization, spelling and text organization students might profit from activities in which they are led to notice these aspects and then practice them consistently;

In addition,67.7% of the teachers mentioned that a problem they face when dealing with writing lessons is the fact students don't like or avoid writing. This is because they find the tasks daunting - they don't know what to write and how to do it (Boas, 2017). Moreover, Tangpermppon (2008) states that if little attention is given to the audience and the writing purpose, learners will lack motivation in learning and have high pressure in creating their writing tasks. When it comes to process and process-genre approaches, the fact that learners tend to spend quite a long time to complete one particular piece of writing in the classroom as well as having no clear understanding about the characteristics of writing, make the process dull. 53.8% teachers consider this is a problem when dealing with writing. Some possible solutions for these problems are:

Genre analysis: Boas (2017) mentions that if students are led to recognize text structures that are particular of specific genres, they will be able to write effectively in these genres and achieve their communicative goal. She adds that students have to be taught rhetorical patterns and conventions explicitly and teachers should not assume students will pick them up incidentally;

Brown & Heekyeong (2015) mention that engaging students into writing is also related to authenticity; therefore, during lessons we should focus on real writing through content-based, task-based or theme-based tasks once students are more likely to write about topics of intrinsic interest;

Barrot (2015) states that authentic texts (print, broadcast, online media) aligned to 21st century themes and learners' personal and social experience which represent the culture of learners is highly encouraged for them to find meaning and relevance to the teaching-learning process.

Tasks that interesting and relevant to their reality and with the level of language required appropriate to the level of the class students are likely to feel motivated;

Students don't need to be required to complete the whole piece of writing in one lesson. They can write a paragraph and have feedback on it during the lesson and do the rest as homework. Another possibility is planning the entire process to last more than one lesson (Appendix 2) bearing in mind that the process must be a means to an end and not the end itself; without the product in view we could simply drown ourselves in a sea of revisions and demotivate students;

Written tasks do not need to be lengthy. Students can be asked to write, for instance, a note, an email, a social media post or an instant mobile message. In other words, the concept of composition has changed dramatically over the years.

When dealing with writing teachers tend to focus their feedback on the accuracy of the language structures. By doing so, correcting students' production when you teach large groups becomes time-consuming. 51.1% pointed it out as problem they face. Besides, this makes students feel pressured and refrain them from creative moments and thinking of the content of what they write. Teachers can change this by:

● Giving more feedback on content as opposed to form, stimulating revisions on particular grammar and rhetorical features may be a way of engaging learners.
● Using peer correction more often. Students check each other's productions based and by the time they have the final product it will take less time for the teacher to check it.
● Doing collaborative writing - using online service where documents can be shared and edited by multiple authors (UR, 2012).

Finally, Figure 4 shows that 32.3% of the teachers responded they do not know the difference between writing for learning when writing is a mere back-up to the teaching of other skills or systems – and writing for writing – when writing is taught as a skill with students producing texts in specific genres for a specific communicative purpose. This fact has a direct impact on how teachers perceive materials. As writing appears as a support for the teaching of reading, listening, speaking, grammar and lexis, teachers responded that after reading this is the skill that more often receives attention in materials and lessons (Figure 5). Moreover, this result shows the importance of teachers undergoing CPD to perceive the importance of and how to teach writing as a skill as mentioned earlier in this paper.
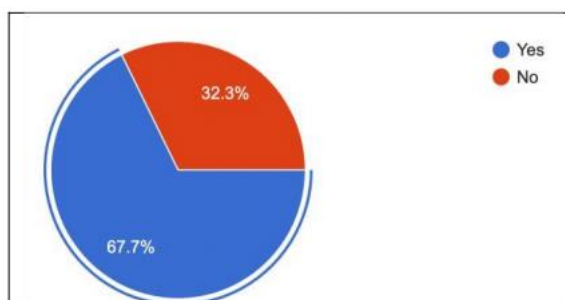

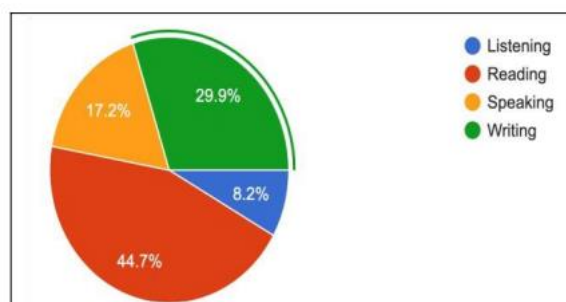**Figure 4.** Difference between writing for learning and writing for writing

Figure 5. Skills that are given more attention and materials and lessons according to teachers

2.4 Reasons for Teaching Writing

There are considerable reasons for devoting more attention to developing students writing skills. First, writing is a problem-solving task in terms of content (what to write) and rhetoric (how to say what is intended). Second, written assignments can assess students' language development in a much more authentic manner if compared to multiple choice, cloze and open-cloze activities. When it comes to bilingual education, CLIL (content language integrated learning) is about developing academic literacy. Therefore, students should be encouraged and required to write in different content areas. In addition, writing demands writers to use virtually everything they have learned and stored away in long-term memory, challenging their cognitive systems for memory and thinking - writing is par excellence a thinking process (Ball; Kelly & Clegg, 2015, p. 159). Moreover, the whole process in order to achieve a final product (piece of writing) develop learners low-order and high order thinking skills. If the Bloom's taxonomy is considered, a well-planned writing lesson goes through all the levels and beyond:

Remember: when a context is set students recall previous knowledge of the topic;

Understand: if learners are exposed to a model text, they can identify patterns, select information and take part in discussions;

Apply, Analyze and Evaluate: learners can brainstorm ideas about the topic and illustrate them in a more relevant context, come up with ideas and compare with the model, point out differences and similarities as well as criticize their own decisions;

Create: learners use everything they have developed up to this moment to assemble their first draft.

At last, students can develop interpersonal skills such as teamwork, active listening and problem-solving by giving and receiving feedback on them on each other's productions. The research showed that 75.2% think their students can benefit from having more lessons focused on developing writing skills (Figure 6). Those who answered no (5.1%) or not sure (19.6) may have done so because their focus is on English for specific purposes such as traveling in which learners are not required to or interested in writing.
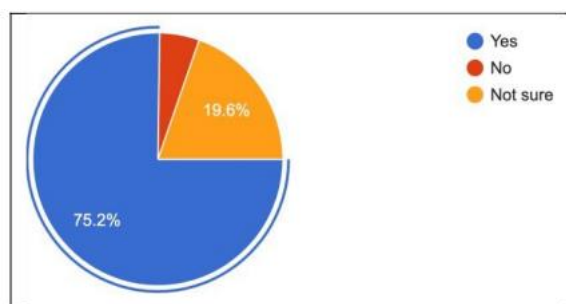
Figure 6. Teachers' opinion about writing being beneficial to students

In summary, if lessons focus on real writing through content-based, task-based or theme- based tasks aligned to 21st century themes, learners' personal and social experience which represent their culture and with the level of language required appropriate to the level of the class or the right amount of support is provided, students are likely to feel motivated and not only they but also teachers will benefit substantially.

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