THE PROCESS APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF WRITING IN MALAYSIAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN SARAWAK: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

The English Language teaching profession of Malaysia is continually searching actively for pedagogical innovations which will improve the teaching of English as ESL/EFL for its secondary school students throughout the country. One recent 'revolutionary' innovation, process writing, has brought about many controversial issues among the ESL/EFL teachers in Sarawak, as they sort through their own ideologies and visions of the teaching-learning process. The present study attempts to investigate the (a) response of teachers and (b) the barriers behind the hesitancy of many teachers to use the process writing approach to teach writing in schools. Results indicated that there is a tapestry of factors determining the non-feasibility of the process writing approach in the teaching of writing. Student attitudes towards the language and learning, are interwoven tightly with class-time, teacher-workloads, competing teacher-priorities and differing teacher-ideologies regarding student-language competence and performance, as well as the success of language learning. The major recommendation of this study is the importance of flexibility. Teachers should "marry" different teaching strategies with process writing to suit the needs and language ability of the students and the competing priorities for teachers' class-time.
Abstrak

Para pendidik Bahasa Inggeris di Malaysia senantiasa berterusan mencari pelbagai pendekatan untuk mengajar Bahasa Inggeris di semua sekolah menengah di seluruh negara. Salah satu daripada innovasi terbaru iaitu "process writing", telah menimbulkan pelbagai kontroversi di kalangan guru-guru ESL/EFL di Sarawak, apabila mereka mengenalpastikan falsafah dan visi mereka dalam proses pengajaran dan pembelajaran. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk menyelidik (a) maklumbalas para guru dan (b) halangan-halangan yang membelakangi ketidak-mahuan ramai guru untuk menggunakan pendekatan "process writing" untuk mengajar kemahiran menulis di sekolah-sekolah. Keputusan kajian menunjukkan wujudnya perkaitan faktor-faktor yang menentukan penggunaan "process writing" dalam pengajaran menulis secara praktikal. Antaranya, sikap pelajar terhadap pembelajaran bahasa inggeris didapati mempunyai kaitan dengan masa untuk kelas, beban kerja para guru, persaingan dari segi keutamaan dalam tugas guru, dan pelbagai ideologi guru terhadap keupayaan dan kejayaan pelajar dalam bahasa tersebut. Kajian ini mencadangkan kepentingan fleksibiliti sebagai aspek terpenting dalam pemilihan strategi-strategi dalam pengajaran menulis. Para guru, seharusnya, menyatukan pelbagai stategi pengajaran dengan "process writing" bagi menentukan keperluan dan kemampuan bahasa para pelajar dan persaingan keutamaan tugas guru untuk masa di dalam kelas.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Tracking an innovation

The language teaching profession in Malaysia has been engaging in a constant search for methodological innovations to uncover the 'one best method' for the teaching of English as a foreign or second language (EFL/ESL, thereafter). Since 1988, it has experienced substantial progress in its search for pedagogical approaches, materials, creative ideas and technological innovations. In the 1970s, the prominent secondary school syllabus was a structural syllabus. This was replaced by a communicative syllabus in the 1980s. In 1988, the secondary school curriculum was replaced with the current integrated syllabus, or the Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM, thereafter). In 1997, the nation is embarking on an information technology or the 'multimedia super corridor (MSC)' era. Hence, the many proposals for the development of computer assisted language learning and the 'SMART' school concept.

The KBSM originated from the learner-centred approach. It, thus, provides the teaching practitioners with a wonderful opportunity for innovation in the development of material and pedagogical strategies. Various methodologies have
been tried out and implemented in secondary school classrooms throughout the country, such as group work, enrichment and remedial instruction, the class readers program (CRP), independent learning, creative and critical thinking (KBKK-Kemahiran Berfikir Krtikal dan Kreatif) and process writing. The new emphasis, therefore, has given rise to all kinds of new developments and directions in the employment of pedagogical devices and instructional strategies.

Indeed, the teaching profession has been revitalised by this 'revolution'. No doubt, some of the major moves into language learning and methodology have led to positive change for education in the country. Yet, there are some which have become controversial issues for teaching practitioners, thus, making the effort for 'innovation' worthless. Teaching practitioners are caught in an continuing struggle in the attempt to search for 'one best method' to teach the ESL/EFL students in the country-if, indeed, there is one.

This paper sets out to review and examine a recent trend that has influenced the teaching of writing practice in the ESL/EFL environment: Process Writing. Teaching practitioners have argued that this current 'revolutionary' innovation in the teaching of writing is not entirely practical for teaching writing proficiency.
1.2 Background for the research

1.2.1 Research motivation

The researcher's past schooling experiences as an ESL learner and in-service teacher in Malaysian ESL classrooms in Sarawak provide a motivation for this research.

The traditional approach to the teaching of writing among ESL learners has always emphasised the finished product of writing which, in turn, puts an emphasis on grades. The language teacher is the usual "audience" for students' writing. Student perceptions about the subtle messages of the teacher regarding the orthographic systems, content and style and the destiny of the final prose greatly affects their writing. Thus, many ESL learners, including the researcher, have been left anxious, frustrated and de-motivated towards writing and writing assignments.

The researcher's practical exposure to the process approach to the teaching of writing has made her realise that this approach offers something new in making writing tasks more comfortable in the classroom.

Process writing sees writing as an effective means to communicate information, for the exploration of thoughts and feelings as it stresses the cognitive and behavioural aspects of writing. It is identified as a "craft" that can be passed on from the more experienced craftsperson (teacher) to the less experienced (students) (Czerniewska, 1992).
The process approach to writing emphasises the notion that a successful piece of writing will emerge after a process of planning, organising, composing and revising. Good writers appear to have a sense of purpose, audience, and direction in their writing.

Process writing allows peers and teachers to guide beginning writers through the writing complexity that demands meticulous integration of a variety of acquired skills - from their choice of lexicon to syntax and their organisation of ideas. The mechanics of writing are introduced in stages, thus, breeding greater self-esteem in writing.

Furthermore, process writing answers the Malaysian Ministry of Education's call that in writing a composition, "instruction on how to write a composition must be presented to the students [by guiding them] through the processes of planning, drafting, editing and the final writing of the composition" (Pusat Perkembangan Kurikulum, 1990:4).

1.2.2 Statement of the research problem

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohammad has called upon young Malaysian students to become proficient in the English Language to gain international recognition and respect besides having the competence to communicate orally and in written form in diplomatic trade, commerce and information arenas. In addition, he stresses that they need to acquire the
English Language for other purposes such as for speech, trade negotiations, drafting of agreements or contracts, and in the use of computational information systems (Utusan Malaysia, 3 December, 1994).

The ability to write well is an asset to Malaysian ESL students for two major reasons:

1. it equips them for undergraduate studies at local or overseas institutions of higher learning, and
2. it prepares them for employment in government departments or private organisations which will demand a reasonably high standard of writing skills in international correspondence and reports of attendance.

Process writing, at its fundamental level, assists student writers to write fluently and competently in the classroom. This can serve as a benchmark for their future writing during their careers.

After the process approach to writing was introduced in 1989 to ESL/EFL teachers in Malaysian schools, in line with the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum English Language Programme (KBSM ELP), many teachers remain reluctant to practise this approach in their writing lessons. Many language practitioners in our country have become weary and cautious when it comes to their enthusiasm for new trends in methodological developments after 'bandwagoning' repetitious 'unworkable' innovations. Some have shunned 'revolution' and decided to adapt and adopt methodologies to suit their students and classroom needs. Hence, the researcher set out to uncover the reasons behind such hesitancy.
1.3 Aims of the research study

The research study was conducted to investigate (a) the use, and (b) the responses of secondary school ESL/EFL teachers in Sarawak towards the use of process writing to teach ESL students how to write in the ESL classroom.

1.4 Research Objectives

The research study was conducted:

1. to identify the barriers/problems that may impede ESL teachers in Sarawak from using the process writing approach to teach writing in schools;

2. to investigate the extent to which students are given opportunities to engage in process writing.

1.5 Research Questions

1. Do ESL/EFL teachers in Sarawak who have experimented with the process writing approach encounter any difficulties? If so, what are those difficulties?

2. How do ESL/EFL teachers in Sarawak respond to the process writing approach?
1.6 Significance of the study

It was hoped that the data collected would offer insights for a better understanding of the "real-situation" that surrounds the current writing lessons in schools. It is the researcher's hope that such insights could assist ESL/EFL teachers in Sarawak to consider what measures might be taken to remove or lessen the impact of such barriers to teaching and learning how to write effectively among ESL/EFL learners.

1.7 Limitations of the study

The researcher considers the following aspects of the research to limit the scope of this study:

1. The obtained results of the study may not be representative of the whole population of ESL teachers in the country.

2. The results obtained will only be representative of the items asked in the survey questions.

3. The study is conducted among teachers from the sub-urban schools in Sibu, Sarawak. Thus, the findings might vary if the research study were to be investigated among teachers of the rural areas.
1.8 Definition of terms

(a) process writing: The step-by-step guide to writing. Herber and Herber (1993) state that it is the integration of writing with course-content [which] can be characterised as a process approach to writing instruction. The emphasis is on the total writing process: Prewriting activities that stimulate thinking and organise information and ideas; writing activities that create drafts of products and subsequent revisions according to reader response; refining products so they can 'go public' (p. 242).

Herber and Herber (1993) citing Applebee (1986) further explain that process activities can be classified into various stages that include brainstorming, prewriting, drafting, revising and editing. Flower and Hayes (1984) point out that these processes are recursive.

Raimes (1983) emphasises that writing is a process, with adequate time provided to develop the piece of writing, a recognition of the recursiveness of the process, and encouragement of exploration of topics through writing. Process writing is characterised by prewriting activities, multiple drafts, peer editing, with final editing for form reserved for the final draft.
(b) recursive: While writing a draft, for example, proficient writers may interrupt their writing because they may make some discovery that sends them back to reformulate their original ideas.

(c) traditional approach to writing: an approach that puts emphasis on the finished product of writing which, in turn, puts emphasis on the grade for learners' writing. It focuses on the instant product of writing (Cohen, 1990).
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

Writing is a complex skill for every writer. Effective writers undergo a pre-planning, painstaking and unending process before they produce 'good' writings. If writing is difficult for the effective writers, then the ESL/EFL students in secondary schools in Sarawak would face more writing challenges.

2.2 Writing in ESL/EFL

For many of the ESL/EFL students in Sarawak, writing is a 'noose around their necks'. They have to face all the conventions of writing in another language and culture, while simultaneously coping with the language itself, so that what is written can be comprehended by the readers. These, obviously, are what the majority of students lack.

Psychological problems can disturb a student's motivation to write: "Writing becomes more difficult when students have a fear of making errors" (Tunku Mohani, 1992: 26).

Bryne (1993) points out that most students fail to express their ideas in writing, as writing in ESL/EFL classroom is often a task imposed on the students by the
teacher. Linguistic problems are common among these students, especially in constructing sentences, using correct tenses or ensuring subject-verb agreement.

Pica (1986), cited by Tunku Mohani (1992:26), sums up the pains and frustration of student writers:

... (They are) Required by the conventions of written English to express themselves at a far more precise level of grammatical accuracy and rhetorical organisation in their written expression than in their spoken language, many students become confused, distressed or even bored with the demands of their writing assignment (Pica, 1986:6).

Yet, grammatical form, as Raimes (1983) stresses, is essential to composing although it should not interfere with the composing process. Furthermore, many Malaysian teachers' concerns regarding their students' proficiency in semantic-grammar serve to reinforce the learners' perception that 'good' writing is a writing free of grammatical errors.

However, that is not the way a writer composes in reality. ESL (or EFL) learners, thus, need to be encouraged to progress through a series of strategies of planning, organising, composing and revising (Hedge, 1993).

Students ought to be alerted to the purpose and the audience for writing (Flower and Hayes, 1981).
Learning how to write is to learn how to convey meanings to the audience in the written mode. How wonderfully convenient life would be for teachers if learning to write in ESL/EFL were just a matter of putting things down on paper!

2.2.1 Factors affecting ESL/EFL writing development

Many of the student writings in secondary schools in Sarawak are determined by various factors, including:

1. Needs and objectives in ESL writing.
2. Individual differences.
3. Motivation to write.
4. Cultural and linguistic experiences.
5. Integration of language skills.
6. Extensive readings.
7. Writing practice.

(Scarcella and Oxford: 1992:12)

Carefully planned writing instruction encourages the students to learn more about the composing process. It teaches the students to exploit their thinking skills in the native language through recursive or problem-solving activities. Writing practice should be integrated with listening, speaking and reading.
As the KBSM English language syllabus takes the behaviourist and cognitivist view of language learning, language is best learnt through the balancing of 'accuracy' and 'fluency' within the socio-emotional and universal value dimension, for the purpose of dynamic communication in the language (Asiah, 1988). By taking the integrated approach, KBSM hopes to overcome the factors pertaining to writing problems among the students.

2.3 Writing in the Integrated Secondary School Curriculum of Malaysia (KBSM)

The KBSM specifies that topics for writing are to be drawn from the context of the home and school; the community, town and village; the state and country; and the ASEAN region and the world (Curriculum specification Form 5: ix).

Writing is taught in integration with the other three language skills of listening, speaking, reading plus the grammar items, sound system and vocabulary, and moral values.

Furthermore, the instructions on how to write a composition, and a writing model must be presented to the students, and students should be guided through the processes of planning, drafting, editing and the final writing of the composition (KBSM ELP Form 5:4).
The English Language Program (ELP) in KBSM is based upon the learner-centred approach, thus, it calls for the utilisation of task-based activities for teaching. It, therefore, gives rise to the implementation of new pedagogical strategies to bring about effective and purposeful writing among the students. One such pedagogical 'revolution' is the process approach to the teaching of writing.

2.4 The process approach to the teaching of writing

If the ultimate goal of our teaching of writing is to develop fluent writers, it is necessary for teachers to teach students how a fluent writer composes. The process approach sees language as holistic whereby the language systems and skills are interwoven tightly to produce meaning.

The writing of a composition involves four basic steps: pre-writing, revising and rewriting. However, in the teaching of ESL/EFL students, each step must be reviewed according to the special needs of the learners. Zamel (1985) emphasises that student writers should be taught how to write to suit their purpose, audience and the need to communicate meaningfully.

Herber and Herber (1993) describe the stages within the process approach can help students think and organise their ideas before writing, besides helping them to rethink and revise their initial drafts. Instructional activities associated with
the process approach include brainstorming, journal writing, small group activities, teacher-student conferences, emphasis on multiple drafts, postponement of attending to editing until final drafts and the deferment of grading.

Flower and Hayes (1984) add that writing stages appear and reappear as an organising idea extends from the preparation to the guidance to the independent phase of the teaching of writing strategies.

It is essential to examine how fluent writers compose and to see the writing methodology that is involved.

2.5 The stages within the process approach model

According to Raimes (1985), experienced writers consider purpose and audience while consulting their background knowledge constantly. They plan and let ideas incubate. They revise whatever they have written. Basically, she says, writers do not follow a neat sequence of outlining the writing.

2.5.1 Prewriting/rehearsing

At the prewriting stage, students generate ideas for the topic they are going to write. This can enhance their thinking skills, getting ideas to interact, develop