

A Pedagogical Response to the Different Approaches to the Teaching of ESL/EFL Essay Writing¹

by Deng Xudong, *National University of Singapore* (elcdxd@nus.edu.sg)

The teaching of ESL/EFL writing has undergone a number of major paradigm shifts, three major approaches being product, process, and genre (there being recent discussions of a post-process approach). This paper will first outline some key theoretical and pedagogical features of these three major approaches with a brief discussion of the emergent post-process approach. On this basis, it argues that these approaches offer complementary, rather than the often-claimed mutually exclusive, perspectives to one another, and thus provide diversified resources which writing teachers can selectively incorporate into their writing syllabus and pedagogies. This paper will then exemplify this holistic way of the teaching of writing through a process-based syllabus imbued with genre and product based features and activities. It is believed that this synthetic approach empowers writing teachers and gives them choices and freedom in deciding upon which feature(s) they would like to incorporate into their syllabus in order to meet the needs of their different students.

■ Introduction

The importance of academic essay writing (dubbed the classroom genre by genre theorist and practitioner Ann Johns) for post-secondary students is sometimes questioned for its usefulness outside the classroom but should, nonetheless, not be understated (Johns, 1997). In addition to being one of the major means of gaining access to further education in various types of gate-keeping examinations such as international ones like TOEFL and IELTS and local tertiary entrance tests, academic essays also rank among the top written genre requirements for tertiary students in North American and Australian universities (Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Carson et al, 1992; Hale et al., 1996; Horowitz, 1986; Rose, 1983; see Paltridge 2002 for a review of these studies).

The teaching of academic essay writing has undergone a number of major changes in terms of theories and methodologies. These changes come from a number of different sources, including, for example, first and second language composition studies (Johns, 1990; Silva, 1990; Matsuda, 2003a) and English for Specific and Academic Purposes (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993). Three major approaches have typically been noted with respect to the teaching of writing in general and essay writing in particular: product, process, and genre (Badger & White, 2000; for slightly different classifications, see Silva, 1990; Matsuda, 2003a; Hyland, 2003a). Recently, there was even a discussion of an emergent post-process approach in the whole volume (Volume 13) of *Journal of Second Language Writing* (2003).

What do these approaches mean? What are their typical pedagogical features? When faced with such a diversity of theories and methodologies, what can writing teachers do? How are their current practices related to these different approaches? This paper attempts to address these questions from the perspective of a writing teacher. More specifically, it describes a practical approach to the teaching of writing in an ESL/EFL context which is process-based but is imbued with product and genre-based features. Based on this description, I argue that writing teachers, when equipped with knowledge of the various theoretical and pedagogical features of different approaches to the teaching writing, will be in a better position to put in the writing syllabus features which fit into their teaching context and thus better meet the diversified needs of different student writers.

■ Approaches to the teaching of writing

In this section, I briefly sketch the various approaches to the teaching of writing in the chronological order of their historical development and outline their key pedagogical features. I also assess to what an extent these features can be of use to writing teachers.

Product-based approaches see writing as mainly concerned with knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development as mainly the result of the imitation of input, in the form of texts provided by the teacher (Badger & White, 2000; Hyland, 2003a). One such approach, which was popular in the 1960s, typically used controlled composition, whose main focus

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was on sentence-level accuracy (e.g., Pincas, 1964). Later approaches in this strand began to focus on the writing of paragraph elements such as topic sentences, support sentences, concluding sentences, and transitions and on paragraph development through particular organizational patterns such as narration, description, classification, and comparison and contrast (e.g., Kaplan, 1970; see Silva, 1990; Matsuda, 2003a; Hyland, 2003a).

Process-based teaching of writing, however, shifts this focus on linguistic knowledge such as knowledge about grammar and text structure to a focus on writing skills, such as planning, drafting and revising, and emphasize on the content, ideas, and the negotiation of meaning (Badger & White, 2000). In this approach, writing is not considered to be a simple straightforward process with only one single draft, but a complicated process which involves a long process of idea generation, multiple drafts, interaction with other people (including the teacher and peers), revising and editing (Flower, 1989; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Zamel, 1983).

The third major approaches, the genre approaches, see writing as attempts to communicate in social contexts. Various contextual factors such as the purpose, the subject matter, and the relationships between the writer and the reader provide a range of constraints and choices within which a writer can operate in producing a text (Hyland, 2003a). Three different genre approaches have often been identified based on their different theories, practices, and sometimes places of origin (Hyon, 1996; Johns, 2003). The most sophisticated genre pedagogies are undoubtedly those designed by the Australian Genre Approach, or the Sydney School (Johns, 2003). Such pedagogies provide detailed descriptions for some elemental factual genres such as recount, procedure, description, and report, and their main audiences are primary and secondary school children (Macken et al., 1989) and adult migrant second language learners (Feez, 2002). Thus far, they still have not exerted a great influence on ESL/EFL writing classes in tertiary education settings despite their great potentials. The second genre approach is what is often called English for Specific Purposes, or the ESP approach (Hyon, 1996). This genre approach provides detailed structural and linguistic analysis of genres in academic and professional settings, including, for example, experimental research articles (Swales, 1981, 1990, 2004), master of science dissertations (Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988), and business letters (Bhatia, 1993). Applications of this approach have mainly been in English for academic purposes curricula designed especially for ESL/EFL graduate students (Swales & Freak, 2000, 2004) and in English for professional communication classrooms (Bhatia, 1993; Rogers, 1995). But its impact has so far been negligible for undergraduate students enrolled in general-purpose ESL/EFL writing classes in tertiary institutions (Johns, 2003). This is understandable as the genre of essays or compositions is notoriously fluid and is difficult to be subjected to the move analysis typically used in the ESP approach.

The third genre approach, the New Rhetoric, concentrated principally in North America. It has focused

on the situational contexts in which genres occur rather than on their forms (Hyon, 1996) and has sometimes argued against the explicit teaching of genres (Freedman, 1994). Most of its applications have been in L1 classrooms, where native speakers of English learn to engage in an analysis of various elements of a particular context before and during the writing process (Coe, 1994, 2002). Its influence in ESL/EFL writing classes has been minimal, but the contextual analysis employed in this approach and also initiated by the Sydney School (see, for example, Halliday & Hasan, 1985) can be easily adapted to ESL/EFL writing classes.

The term 'post process' presupposes that the process approach to the teaching of writing, which has been dominating the mainstream ESL/EFL writing syllabus and curriculum especially in the United States for the past three decades, has come to the end of its life and that it is time to consider using new approaches that are emerging and evolving in response to the inadequacies of the process approach. But exactly what post-process approaches are and what their pedagogical practices should be like are by no means clear and uniform among writing theorists (Atkinson, 2003; Casanave, 2003; Hyland, 2003b; Matsuda, 2003b). Some equate the post-process approach with the Australian genre approach as a social response to the process approach (Hyland, 2003b). Others, however, emphasise on the diversity of different approaches as a key feature of post-process approaches (e.g., Matsuda, 2003b). According to Matsuda (2003b: 78-79), for example, post-process may be better defined as "the rejection of the dominance of process at the expense of other aspects of writing and writing instruction" and the recognition of the multiplicity of L2 writing theories and pedagogies. I concur with this view and will take it further to illustrate the synthetic approach to the teaching of writing described in this paper.

The above brief review of the different approaches to the teaching of ESL/EFL writing shows that each of these approaches seems to have a somewhat tilted focus on particular aspects of writing. Product pedagogies focus on sentences and texts, process ones on the writer and the writing process, and those of genre on the reader and contexts. An effective writing pedagogy would obviously be to incorporate the insights of all the three approaches. This paper provides one such example of a process-based approach imbued with product and genre based features and activities through the use of a portfolio system and student reflections.

■ The English for Academic Purposes course

The course, entitled English for Academic Purposes (computing), is designed for undergraduate students majoring in computing subjects at a Singaporean university. Students include both ESL and EFL learners from Singapore, Indonesia, China, Malaysia, Vietnam, and India. These students were required to take the course after they failed an English placement test. But attendance is not compulsory and the grade they got for the course

would not affect their Cumulative Average Point (CAP). In other words, they only have to pass the course in order to graduate, and even if they get a very high grade, it will not be reflected in their overall grade average for all the courses they take. This has a direct impact on their attitudes towards the writing course. All that we writing teachers can do is to minimize this impact so that students will learn, and willingly. The writing syllabus below describes such an attempt to heighten students' enthusiasm for the course and encourage students to take responsibility for their own writing.

The course has four major components: essay writing, grammar review in the form of text editing, reading, and oral presentation, but essay writing occupies the bulk of the syllabus with practically all the other components revolving around it. Thus for example, the text editing tasks equip students with skills to revise their own essays in grammar, vocabulary and punctuation.

■ The writing syllabus

In essay writing, students were mainly required to write two major essays: one explanatory and one argumentative. The teaching approach is largely process based, incorporating product and genre based features and activities through the use of a portfolio system and student reflections.

Process-based activities

The course follows a very standard process syllabus, guiding students through the whole process of writing for their two major writing tasks: generating ideas, structuring, drafting, focusing, and re-viewing (including peer review and student-teacher conferencing). So for each essay, students are required to produce at least three drafts: the initial draft, the second draft incorporating peer review comments, and the final draft incorporating teacher feedback after the student-teacher conferencing. By going through multiple drafts, students are made aware of the fact that a good piece of writing is often not a product of one single drafting, but requires strenuous process of revision and editing.

With respect to idea generation strategies, Peter Elbow's (1998) concept of free writing or exploratory writing and its benefits are introduced and particularly highlighted to the students, who were also given a number of practice opportunities in class. The recipe recommended by Elbow is simple and straightforward: write and keep writing for ten minutes without stopping and without worrying about quality. There are two obvious benefits for freewriting. First, it effectively overcomes writer's block. As writing well is not easy and involves a lot of hard labour, freewriting provides an intermediate stage for writers to engage in carefree writing before they set out on the more serious business of writing a decent draft. Second, freewriting helps disentangle our mind, which is very often inundated with a messy and chaotic mass of thoughts. By writing ideas down, we help ease the burden in our mind and are freer to think further on the topic. In any case, sorting out

ideas on paper is always easier than tidying up ideas in our mind. This strategy of freewriting for idea generation is well received by my students, as we'll see in their reflections.

To encourage the extensive revision and multiple drafting, portfolio assessment is introduced (for a review of portfolio pedagogy, see Deng, 2005). Students were asked to include the following items in their portfolio:

- Cover letter
- Two reading entries + reflections
- One explanatory essay + reflection
- One argumentative essay + reflection
- One timed writing + reflection

For both the reading and writing reflections, a list of questions were provided to guide students in their reflections of the reading and writing process. Typical questions for the writing reflection include: What particular difficulties did you encounter in writing the essay? How can these difficulties be overcome when you write your next paper? What did you do successfully? What did you learn from your successes? To what extent do you find peer review and tutor conferencing helpful in improving your essay? How do you like your final product? To what extent do you think you have become a better writer?

We provide the following instruction for the writing of the cover letter, based on Elbow & Belanoff's (2000) workshop course in writing:

By referring to your reading and writing reflections, summarize your thoughts and reflections on your development as a reader and a writer throughout this course. Write your thoughts and reflections in a cover letter to your tutor.

In your cover letter, you can discuss your strengths and weaknesses as a writer; your ways of working, past and present; your progress; ways in which you see yourself changing as a learner or writer; and/or your reactions to the different components, activities and assignments of the course and to the course in general.

Genre-based activities

In addition to the writing process, students are also introduced to some genre specific features in language use for academic essays, notably the use of an appropriate tone or style (formal versus informal versus plain language use), an appropriate voice (impersonal and objective versus personal and subjective), the use of source, and the avoidance of plagiarism (see Johns, 2003: 208 for a list of features shared by expository academic texts).

A more prominent genre-based activity is one of genre awareness or context analysis. This activity uses a set of questions to uncover the different features of different genres of writing with respect to content, rhetorical structure, language style, and purpose. The set of questions (listed below) are adapted and simplified from Paltridge (2002: 87) and used to compare hard news stories and example academic essays from published

writing textbooks, two genres students may frequently encounter in their university life and be sometimes confused with.

1. What is the text about?
2. What is the purpose of the text?
3. Where do you typically find this text? What are the features of the text that tell you this?
4. Is this text formal or informal? How do you know?
5. Who writes it? How did you infer this from the text?
6. Who is the intended audience of the text? Which features of the text inform you of this?
7. How is the language and structure of the text influenced by each of the above factors?

The purpose of the activity is to raise students' awareness of contextual constraints on writing and different requirements for different genres of writing. This knowledge is important as they will not only know how one genre of writing is written in a certain way, but also why it is written in that way.

Product-based activities

Many often-used product-based activities were also part of our syllabus. These include the teaching of writing different paragraphs—introduction, main body, and conclusion. For the writing of main body paragraphs, students were taught how to write transition sentences, topic sentence, second sentence, support sentences, and summary sentence (Reid, 1994). They were also taught different ways of paragraph development such as exemplification, classification, and cause and effect. In the writing of an introductory paragraph, students were taught different attention-grabbing strategies and ways of writing a thesis statement or central idea statement (Deng, 2003a). For the writing of a conclusion paragraph, students were taught various closing strategies (Deng, 2003b).

In addition to the use of those commonly used activities, we also introduced the use of online concordancing for correcting their errors in word usage and collocations (see Gallo & Deng, 2002, 2007; Deng & Gallo, 2003 for more details). Students were first introduced some popular on-line concordancers such as Cobuild Concordance and Collocations Sampler (<http://www.collins.co.uk/corpus/CorpusSearch.aspx>), the British National Corpus Concordance Sampler (<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>), Variation in English Words and Phrases (VIEW) (<http://corpus.byu.edu/bnc/>). They were then shown how these online concordancers could be used to confirm or disallow a certain use of a word or a phrase in class throughout the semester. Finally, students were encouraged to use the on-line concordancers themselves in the correction of their writing errors, many of which I had circled when reading their essays. This activity is important as our students tend not to have a strong intuition of the language and often make errors in the use of even some very common collocations. Checking on-line concordancers gives them a whole list of instances showing how a certain lexical item is used in context and enables them to make a desired correction of errors in their writing.

■ Student reflections

In this section, I provide examples of the student reflections in the cover letter to illustrate how they perceive the course. The cover letter is chosen as it has often been described as the most significant entry in writing portfolios (Camp & Levine, 1991: 203) and even the most important aspect of the portfolio process (Weinbaum, 1991: 214). This is because cover letters can serve “not only to encourage, but also to enable, students to think substantively about their writing processes” and can offer a good deal of valuable information to teachers about students' writing behaviours and attitudes” (Conway, 1994: 92).

Changed attitudes to the course in general

Many students have written about their changed attitudes towards the course. Though some of their comments on the course may be overly positive and in the best grade-point interests of the writers, they at least show that students are aware of their identities as students and that they know how to position themselves towards the authority—their tutor. These comments, nonetheless, do provide important and encouraging information to the tutor about how the course is received. The following excerpts are two such examples:

It has been 11 weeks since I started this course and I must say that I have learnt a lot during this period. Your guidance has really helped me a lot in my development not only as a writer, but also my ability to speak and present confidently to a group of people. Initially, I was quite sad to have to take this course as I do not think that it will benefit me. I thought that it would only add on to the already heavy workload of a university student. Now I am glad to say that I was wrong to feel that way.

... whether you believe or not, I'm really thankful that I had this course in the first semester because second may be too late in both my studying and feeling.

Reactions to course components

Another frequent topic from student reflections in the cover letter is their reactions towards the various components of the course. The most frequent comment among them is on their free-writing experience, showing that it was probably one of the best received components of the course.

... free writing requires you to keep on writing for ten minutes without stopping. It was something new to me. At first I still couldn't really grasp the whole idea. I would think for a while and then wrote what I would write in my essay. Of course this defeats the whole purpose of free writing. It is supposed to help you start the essay by continuous writing, and through the process to write anything that comes to your mind without any worries of grammatical and spelling error. Indeed, it helps to get my ideas flow before I start on any essay and I have adopted this practice every time I need to write any kind of essay.

A few students also commented on the usefulness of on-line concordancers in their writing. Here is one example:

There is another weakness in my writing, is the using of appropriate words. For many words I only know the translation of it, don't know exactly how to use them in the essay. Before, I just put them as Chinese meaning and add them in the essay. Many times, it is a mistake or even a funny language error. In this course, I get to know a very useful tool to help me conquer this disadvantage, which is the concordance. I never know there is such a thing before, now I found it is very useful to a writer like me who is not an English native speaker. It shows me how actually native speakers use this word. What is the typical word using before and after this word, is it using properly in this case in my essay? Concordance solved these problems very well for me.

Changed conceptualisations of essay writing

Some students also made comments on their changed conceptualisations of how to write an essay. These conceptualisations are useful as they crystallise the students' understanding of the essay structure. One such interesting piece is as follows (see particularly the part in bold):

As a writer whose native language is Chinese, I always try not to touch the main points of my essay directly which is a typical writing method in Chinese. However, this is not a good way in writing an English essay. There are thesis statements in every paragraph mostly in the beginning in English essay, which state the main idea of this essay or whole essay if it is in the introduction. Now I consider writing English essay as drawing a tree, all the points are like the branch of the tree, you have to draw them first and list them there very clear. After that, adding those leaves to every branch which is the supporting part in the essay writing. (Author's bold)

Gaining and regaining confidence in writing

Many students have reflected upon their lack of confidence in essay writing before taking the course and later gaining confidence after it. One Vietnamese student had a long recount of how he regained his confidence in writing.

To tell the truth, I used to be a good writer in my language when I was in my hometown, Vietnam. Some of my writings were even on a weekly student magazine of the city. However, when I came here, everything changed. You don't know how shocked I was when I received the mark for my first writing assignment. Writing in English is totally different from writing in my own language, from structure to words usage. I have never learned how to write in English when I was in high school. I learned English mainly just in Grammar, Vocabulary, Reading and Listening but not Speaking and Writing. When I

came here, academic study requires a good English skill. Writings come always as tests, essays, and projects. I lost my self-confidence in English since then. I was just an inexperienced writer in an advanced academic environment.

Fortunately, I attended this course and gained back my self confidence steadily. I knew that it is not that I can't do it; it's just the matter that I was not ready for this. I had vocabulary and grammar skill, I just simply don't know how to put them together in order to describe a whole unity topic. I was really confused and then just wrote by instinct just to have something to submit. Later, during the course, I knew more about the structure, the way of organising the ideas, the words and how to connect them as a united essay.

Conclusion

This paper described a synthetic approach to the teaching of writing, which is process based but is imbued with product and genre based features and activities. This description is important as it shows how the often-claimed exclusive approaches to writing can be combined in practice. It also provides a good link between theories for the teaching of writing and actual classroom practices in a specific context.

Many writing teachers are often confined to a given syllabus or curriculum before they actually start teaching. There may be little room for manoeuvring. But understanding the various writing approaches and pedagogies can be helpful for making an informed decision as to whether changes to the existing syllabus are needed and if changes are necessary, what changes should be made.

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