FL WRITING PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN FL LEARNING

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Abstract

Since FL writing is always regarded as the culmination of the other language skills FL teachers have been focusing their attentions mainly on students’ mastery of listening, speaking and reading, which, they believe, is the foundation of the writing. But the fact is that they unconsciously separate FL writing from the entire language learning process. That is one of the main reasons why the progress of FL writing has been relatively slow. This paper, on the basis of process-oriented writing theory, will explore the issues on the effective combination of four language skills in the FL teaching. This teaching approach leads students to learn writing effectively through the process of FL acquisition and communication, which, at the same time, makes the entire FL learning more creative and productive.

I. Introduction

The view of writing as a tool for learning and not just a means to demonstrate learning is one of the major contributions of the research into the writing process (Emig1977). No matter what teaching approaches are applied, the four basic language skills are interactive and cooperative. In our traditional FL teaching, however, FL writing has always been regarded as the most difficult part of the four basic language skills and relegated to the last stage in our teaching program. What we have failed to realize is that by the time our students are ready to write composition, that is create and express their own thoughts and ideas in the second language, they need the same kind of instruction that students in an English classroom need (Vivian Zamel 1976).

My paper will discuss the proper time and a suitable way for FL students to
begin to learn to write, and the various channels for students to obtain valuable and indispensable writing material resources. Finally this paper will describe some issues on implementing writing pedagogies to improve students’ entire FL skill.

II. The process writing approach based on natural communicative input is more adaptable to the beginning-level student

In our former college English teaching, only when students completed the first half of their FL study, did they begin to learn writing techniques, imitate model essays and write compositions based on some specific subjects. As a result, most of the students’ writing lacked originality; their writing was almost identical in thought pattern and discourse structure to their models. In addition, the students conducted their writing in isolation from the other language skills. When they were required to write, what they were able to employ from their former studies were words (some of which they had forgotten the exact meaning and usage), and some rules of grammar (unskillfully used).

We all know that usually, at the beginning of their university study, FL students begin to acquire a foreign language mainly through listening, speaking and reading. However some very important, fundamental and practical linguistic knowledge they acquired was not further consolidated and strengthened through another indispensable means of language acquisition; writing. What is more, the students’ training for writing competence was ignored, which led to great difficulty in their writing improvement in their upper-level study. Such unsatisfactory results have been perplexing to both teachers and students for years.

Last semester, based on process-oriented writing and SLA theory, I made a preliminary attempt to integrate FL writing with other language skills in my first year class. I redesigned my teaching syllabus and in my entire teaching I placed writing on the same level of importance as that of other language skills. I did not regard writing as an isolated topic to teach but as a means to communicate.

In class, I tried to make every unit topic related to real life, every class as a
real language environment and every student interested in talking, discussing and writing while he was learning. It was this process writing approach that began to change the first year students’ attitude toward this awesome subject; FL writing. Their writing confidence was heightened through frequent writing practice. They became more and more aware of the important communicative function of FL writing. As expected, FL writing not only became a tool for students to measure their linguistic accuracy but also a means for them to produce some creative ideas and original views in their foreign language study.

As beginning writers, their writings might not be very standard but flexible, creative or fluent. In their writing, some students maintained close ties with their own experience and reality, which fully embodied an effective practice of study for the sake of communication. Additionally, with frequent integrated training the student will not feel unprepared or at a loss when they are required to undertake FL writing in their later studies.

**Implications of the writing process approach**

- Such teaching process tends to construct a learner-centered classroom activity and form a co-operative learning atmosphere
- Students’ writing practice becomes more nature and easier due to the subjects discussed and talked about
- When writing as a learning process, students discover much more linguistic rules and acquire them naturally. With positive responses to this approach, their writing will surely become more confident, fluent and accurate than that of students in previous years.
- Writing assignments can be used to integrate other language skills, and the audience should be specified. Students need not always have the same assignment, and their classroom activities can be designed to be interesting as well as instructive.
- Once writing is a regular classroom activity, the means of evaluation in writing must be changed. In resent years peer response seems to hold
considerable promise as a viable tool in writing instruction at multiple levels (Wei Zhou, 2001), in which students can critique and provide feedback on one another’s writing in small groups. Such evaluation involves not only error correction but also encouragement of meaningful and interesting communication.

Ann Raimes (1985), in her “What Unskilled ESL Students Do as They Write”, states, “Writing itself has primary value as a language-teaching tool. Students can talk and write, experiment, play with language, take their time to find appropriate words and sentences, test out a text and change their minds, and guarantee a response from an audience. Nowhere else in ESL teaching are such ideal language learning conditions found”. So from my personal teaching experience, I have discovered that the FL students, who have almost no foreign language environment, need such an ideal language condition urgently. And integrating the process writing with other language skills appeared to be the best and most effective way to solve the problem.

III. Where can students obtain a large amount of communicative writing material resources?

By integrating the writing process with intensive reading, extensive reading and listening at the beginning of the English study, I encouraged the first year students to make full use of any language materials available to practice writing. Their writings involved summaries of intensive texts, thoughts on extensive reading and a clear narrative of the stories heard from tapes or learned from movies. In class, when an interesting and meaningful topic was assigned to students for writing discussion, each student had his own train of thought. And the materials related to the same topic the students collected varied greatly. Through discussing, processing and synthesizing, the students were helped to think through and organize their ideas before writing and to rethink and revise their initial drafts (Applebee, 1986, pp.95-96). It was obvious that the thought content and knowledge range produced by groups was far richer than those of
individual efforts.

So in their entire learning process of last semester, my students never felt a lack of materials for their various writings, nor did they feel short of materials to be used to communicate with each other and express themselves. Moreover, writing practice became closely linked with the students’ reading, listening and speaking, from which they continuously acquired an instinctive feel for the target language and gradually absorbed different linguistic, cultural and rhetorical knowledge.

Beside the various materials obtained from their courses in class, there are many other ways to help students accumulate a wealth of writing materials to facility their process writing activity. Their writing materials can also come from many practical communications.

Among them I would like to employ the most promising area; that is the Internet. On the Internet we can share all sorts of things with the world, get authentic materials from anywhere, and interact with people in distant locations as never before.

As far as I know, the use of the Internet in EFL is gaining popularity in many universities abroad. E-mail can provide a forum where people of similar interests can participate in a professional dialog and share resources. International key pal projects that enable students to correspond with native speakers of the target language are easily implemented where participants have the necessary access, equipment, and foreign contacts (Knight, 1994; Shelley, 1996). FL teachers can integrate E-mail-based activities to their curriculum, especially to their process writing courses, which provide a service for teachers seeking partner classrooms for international and cross-cultural electronic mail exchanges. E-lists and E-journals are all very important resources in this faceless communications environment, which virtually transport the target language environment to the foreign language classroom and allow the student to work in interesting ways with the authentic materials found on Internet.

In recent years many foreign language teachers in China also have begun to
turn their attention to some internet-based activities. In my FL teaching I encouraged my students to obtain some writing materials from the Internet and brought authentic resources to our classroom. Further research and practice in this area has already been brought into my FL teaching plan and prepared for further intensification.

As the Internet has transformed communication around the world, and a large amount of authentic resources can be used to make the foreign language classroom a marvelous place to learn, it is natural that Internet-based teaching should play a major role in the foreign language learning. With the computer being used more in our country, a more communicative language environment will be created. We should not only integrate Internet resources into our FL writing process but also engage ourselves in research in this area, because an Internet–based teaching approach is really full of vitality and potentiality.

IV. The process-oriented writing approach versus the other language techniques

Brauer( 1992 ) argues that writing should be on an equal footing with reading, listening and speaking in communicative, proficient-oriented FL instruction.

First of all, FL writing can not only demand more cognitive processing, but also reinforce effective reading processes. In turn, different types of reading materials can be the information resources for specific writing tasks. When FL writers are trying every possible way to absorb the necessary written source materials, their reading competency has been improving unconsciously. In other words the writing and reading ability of the FL writer are rapidly improved on a mutually beneficial basis. Because both reading and writing practice have the same cognitive process, they are intricately bound up in a social historical and cultural network.
Second, the composing process of FL writing in the classroom included group discussions, personal presentations, evaluation of peer responses and oral conferences. All these activities facilitated writing production. In group discussions students were kindled to confront each other's ideas. Even the students whose papers were not discussed could get some ideas from the papers that were discussed. Usually forming small groups might be better, for almost all the students have chance to express their own ideas and they are willing to demonstrate different views. Because of the necessities of various communications in FL writing class, the FL writers have to articulate what they cherish in the target language. The oral practice can be carried out through debates and the questions asked and answered among teacher and students. In addition, the frequent personal presentation based on concrete topic give the students formal speaking practice.

By means of all these strategies the FL students always encounter face to face communication, there is always a challenge of applying their spontaneous speaking ability to answer questions, to participate in debate and to express themselves in their writing classroom. Through these activities not only has their spoken communicative competency been improved, but a logical thought pattern has been formed for the writing process as well. In conclusion, the main language skills are connected and taught in a coordinated way, operating with and reinforcing each other in process writing activities.

All in all, this integrated teaching approach not only helps students learn writing through reading, listening and speaking, but also gives some special writing advantages to the entire FL learning process

Advantages of the integrated approach

- FL students’ reading competency can be enhanced through various relevant writing practices. Just as Ilona Leki asserted in 1993, “Writing is a way of reading better because it requires the learners to reconstruct the structure and meaning of ideas expressed by another writer”.

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Teachers can teach students pragmatic conventions and audience awareness through writing practice.

FL writing can facilitate students’ problem-solving strategies and help them improve their abilities to organize both old and new information in their FL learning.

In order to benefit from the use of speech to explore topics for their writing and obtain evaluations from peer responses, FL students always encounter face-to-face communication and formal speaking practice in class.

Such a teaching mode involves a critical thought, which tends to place students in the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating information gathered from their observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication.

**Further discussion issues**

Greenia (1992) asserts that FL writing helps acquisition of a foreign language, supports development of critical thinking skills and provides direction for otherwise aimless class discussion.

1. **Foreign Language Acquisition in writing**

   FL writing process teaching approach actually involves the process of language acquisition. Only through language acquisition will FL writing accomplishment become much more steady and protracted. So a further research should be made on what is the interrelationship between FL writing and FL acquisition? How FL Writing contributes to FL acquisition or vice versa? Joan (1985) asserts that an understanding of the development of L2 writing ability requires an understanding of SLA in general, because L2composition underlies L2 writing ability in a fundamental way.

2. **Error correction in writing**

   Error correction may be the most knotty issue in FL writing teaching. When we integrate writing with other language skills, students’ writing products are increased and the effective and accurate evaluation of the writing is an urgent problem before us. It is obvious that the effect on the traditional
way of error correction is now called into question. Some researchers have found grammar correction ineffective, some think it harmful to students learning attitude, and still others claim that grammar correction should be abandoned. In my writing oriented teaching, I tried several ways to correct students’ writings but still under experimental phase. So a large number of study and experiments are badly needed to prove its feasibility. Since the new way of writing evaluation involve both teachers and students or readers and writers. We should make it clear what role the teacher plays. What problems can be effectively solved by student’s involvement? With a non-stop pursuing in this area I hope to obtain a proper and effective way of writing evaluation based on the nature of the correction process and the nature of language.

3. Critical thinking in writing.

In our process writing practice should students be encouraged to apply critical thinking skills? We try every possible way to take FL learning as an authentic language communicative activity, but this activity also involves questions, discussion, argument creation, evidence evaluation, etc. With a better development of critical thinking skills, students are encouraged to analyze, criticize, and advocate ideas, to reason inductively and deductively. So it is extremely necessary for FL students to master the critical thinking skill, which can motivate them to greater achievement in their foreign language learning process.

V. Conclusion

In process-oriented writing class the proper instruction is crucial in realizing the writing objective. FL teachers should know very well what parts of teaching contents should be taught and what parts of them can be learned by students themselves. In other words a thorough and feasible syllabus should be made before the course starts. The syllabus should include each step of teaching practices in details, such as course documents to be used in class and out of class, particular task for particular student, the objective for each class as well as ultimate aim of the FL learning.
Since FL learning in colleges and universities basically completes within two years, the initial stage would require the use of controlled processes in order to perform learning process accurately and effectively. FL teachers should play an important role in helping FL students integrate their writing activities to listening, speaking and reading. FL teachers should have the ability to convey the writing resources in all meaningful, functional situations, which encourage FL students to promote discussion and bring out their communicative skills. Teachers can also provide students with sufficient supplementary materials and with a good deal of such relevant learning sources, so that students always feel more confident to reach their goal of communication in both spoken and written English.

In entire FL learning activity, a variety of educational media should also be used to transmit information, which is most beneficial for FL learning context, such as a tape recorder, Internet blackboard, e-mail and web site. All this means that the students can obtain up-to-date cultural information, authentic reading materials, communicative skills, self-paced instruction, a learner-centered environment and a collaborative learning experience.

With so much material available, and with frequent writing assignments, the students will have a good foundation for their FL writing. So the appropriate instruction in writing and computer technology give FL writers an ideal language environment and a promising and encouraging perspective in their FL writing as well as in their FL learning.

To summarize the discussion above, it can be seen that FL writing, if appropriately taught and developed, can benefit FL students greatly in various stages in the course of their FL learning. It is said that a good beginning is half task. Our efforts should be made from the preliminary stage. We should intentionally and efficiently keep FL writing abreast with reading, speaking and listening at the beginning of College English Study. These four skills are inseparably connected, if one of them is neglected, we shall but waste the labor which we have devoted to the others.
References


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