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The Choice Made from no Choice: Insight into how Writing Skill is Taught in the Libyan Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In the EFL contexts, while much research is conducted towards investigating the problems that students face in writing and their writing strategies, studies on how EFL writing teacher teach and adopt the writing approaches to their students' needs and levels are few and far between. Such an imbalance needs to be addressed since how teachers teach, and the approaches that they opt to use, might have a direct impact on how students learn to write. In this respect, this research offers an insight into the strategies adopted by the EFL writing skill teachers at the Sabratha College of Arts, Libya. The findings of the study reveal that the Libyan EFL writing skill teachers often resort to teaching through grammatical structures. Rather than assisting EFL learners to write extended pieces of writing, the teachers are predominantly concerned about the teaching of correct forms and developing writing at the paragraph level. The possible reasons for teachers over reliant on such strategies can be traced to their over workloads, time constraints to finish the course which often results in ignoring individual attention to the EFL learners' writing. However, signs of recent writing pedagogies, such as pre-writing activities, are identified in classroom practice and textbook selection, which indicate the possibility of successful adaptations of the recent writing pedagogies in the Libyan context.

Keywords: Writing approaches, Classroom practice, Pre-writing activities, EFL writing, Libyan Classrooms

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1. Introduction

Selecting the suitable approaches for any teaching context is to a considerable extent influenced by teachers' cognition, teachers'

views and knowledge (Richards and Lockhart 1995: 98). These views of knowledge can vary from one teacher to another. Furthermore, Richards (1990:13)



have added that the roles that language teachers adopt form the basis for their decisions on selecting approach, material, tasks, techniques, and assessment procedures.

University teachers in Libya are usually responsible for designing their own courses. This requires selecting the appropriate approach to teach, the kind of classroom interaction that they think best supports their teaching, and consequently the material for their students, tasks, and activities. Their choice is usually restricted by many factors such as students' number and the teachers' knowledge of curriculum and students. Furthermore, the views of how writing should be taught influence both explicitly or implicitly teachers' selection of methodology.

2. Writing Approaches

There have been various approaches to teaching writing skill. Some of them are reviewed below.

2.1 Product Approach with Underlying Principles of Learning and Teaching

The product approach is a traditional, text based approach which is still used in many EFL classes, (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). The product approach is characterised by a focus on linguistic knowledge, including the appropriate use of vocabulary, and grammatical rules, (Tribble, 2003:37). The product approach focuses mainly on the production of a written text without reference to the process of producing it. Consequently, the product approach conceives writing as being mainly about linguistic knowledge, and thereby focuses on the appropriate use of vocabulary. Most of the time writing tasks encourage students to imitate given texts and transform models provided by teachers or textbooks. Accordingly, the final product which reflects the writer's language

knowledge is highly valued (McDonough and Show 2003:57).

The main focus of the product approach materials is the final product i.e. what students will write at the end of the lesson. Materials that apply the product approach are based around forms of genres such as topic sentences and description (Richards and Lockhart 1995: 310). In this approach, writing instruction has four stages: familiarization; controlled writing; guided writing; and free writing. In the familiarization stage, students learn specific features of a text. In the controlled and guided writing stages, the students write about the given topic with increasing freedom. In the free writing stage, the students use their writing skills in an authentic activity such as a letter, story or essay. A typical implementation of the product approach might involve the students to learn different descriptions of houses, by identifying, the adjectives used to describe a house, or the names of rooms. At the controlled stage, the students might write some simple sentences about houses or a piece of guided writing based on a picture of a house. Finally, at the free writing stage, the students write a description of their own homes (Badger and White 2000:153).

Cook (1992:136) mentions that the role of the teacher in this approach is to develop good language habits in learners, which is done mainly by pattern drills, memorisation or repetition of structural patterns. The explanation of rules is generally given when the language item has been well practised and the appropriate habits acquired. Brooks and Brooks (1999:7) add that teachers often transfer their thoughts to the passive students. There is not much opportunity for students to ask questions, think critically or interact with each other (Grabe and Kaplan1996:31).

Teachers usually present the new patterns, such as adjectives for describing houses. This is followed by the practice phase in which the students try to use the new pattern of the language by writing some sentences that use the presented adjectives. For the performance stage, students might describe their own houses. This might be used as practice or as a test to check the students' understanding of the lesson (Richards and Renandya 2004: 94).

It can be said that using the product approach, which is influenced by the transmission approach, does have a number of limitations. Littlewood (1985:91) states the following: first, the role of the students is usually a passive one; they are directed to respond correctly to stimuli. Product approach, with its emphasis on correct response, does not allow for learning from mistakes. Second, this approach neglects both the complexity of the processes involved in using language and the range of processes that can contribute to language learning. Third, there are not many opportunities for students to engage in the actual process of interaction and analysis in order to learn more effectively or discuss important features of language communication.

2.2 Process Approach with Underlying Principles of Learning and Teaching

The process approach to teach writing is a way of looking at writing instruction in which the emphasis is shifted from students' finished texts to what students think and do as they write, i.e. the focus shifts from the text to the writer (Tribble 2003:38). Consequently, the teachers' role as assessor also shifts to that of a facilitator who uses writing activities that move students from the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the production of a finished text by using a typical four stage process: prewriting,

composing, drafting, revising and editing (Wyse and Jones 2001:172).

This approach transforms the student from a passive receiver of information to an active participant in the learning process. Often guided by the teacher, students construct their knowledge actively rather than just mechanically receive knowledge from the teacher or the textbook. In this sense, the students' errors are considered as a positive sign of their improvement (Schunk 2004:292).

Writing courses, that apply the process approach, can be organised around skills and process such as brainstorming, organising ideas, drafting, and revising (Richards and Renandya 2004: 310). Process based syllabus shifts the emphasis from the product to the processes involved. This requires a move from transmitting information to students to interactive approaches that focus on the students' improvement.

A typical pre-writing activity in the process approach might be to ask students to brainstorm their ideas on the topic of houses, or to write a list of ideas to be include in the writing exercise (Nation 2009:117). At the composing/ drafting stage they would plan to write a description of a house, as based on their ideas generated by brainstorming. After discussion, students might revise the first draft by working individually, or in pairs or groups. Finally, the students would edit their writing. In the process approach, the teachers most often aim to facilitate the students' writing and help them in organizing their ideas and revising their drafts. Teachers may use procedures as group activities, teacher/student conference, and peer work (Susser1994:36).

According to Hyland (2003), the process approach modifies teachers' role, so that teachers help students to construct knowledge rather than to reproduce a series of facts. Their role is not to convey



knowledge but to provide students with opportunities and encourage them to build it up. Teachers are guiders and facilitators. The role of the teacher has two important components. The first is to introduce new ideas and, where necessary, provide the support and guidance for students to make sense of these new ideas for themselves. The other is to listen and diagnose the ways in which the instructional activities are being understood to inform further action. Teaching from this perspective is also a learning process for the teacher.

From the above, it can be claimed that the advantages of the process approach can be generalised as the following. First, it increases students' awareness of the process of writing and draws their attention to the importance of writing skills. Second, it does not focus on the accuracy of product, which is the source of students' frustration. Third, it encourages students' interaction with each other in peer response activities and focuses on the audience and purpose in writing. Finally, in a process approach, teachers concentrate on the development of students' writing as writing is more than the collecting of a final product (Graham and Kelly 1998:6).

However, Hedge (2000:10) argues that it is difficult to use this approach because while the process approach allows students to write and revise the drafts, they have to finish writing in a timed exam. The multiple draft approach is not suitable for timed exams. Furthermore, giving feedback on multiple drafts is time consuming particularly in EFL context where writing classes are often large in number. This was demonstrated in Tsui's (1995) study in which an EFL teacher could not apply the process approach due to the duty of covering grammar focused syllabus and exam oriented teaching.

2.3 Genre Approach

The concept of genre helps teachers to identify the kinds of texts that students will have to write in their target academic contexts and to organize their courses to meet these needs. This approach perceives texts as an attempt to communicate with readers. The genre approach emphasizes the role that readers play in writing, adding a social dimension to writing research by elaborating how writers engage with an audience in creating coherent texts (Tribble 2003:46).

The Genre approach emphasizes that writing varies with the social context in which it is produced. Thus, there are different kinds of writing purposes such as writing business letters, or scientific reports linked with different situations and are used to carry out different purposes (Hyland 2007:151). The notion of scaffolding emphasises the role of interaction with peers and 'experienced others' in moving students from what they can do now, to what are they able to do with out teachers' assistance. Hyland (2007:152) points out that students working together can learn more effectively than students work individually. This depends mainly on teachers' selection of tasks and involvement to scaffold writing from using controlled tasks to free tasks as students gradually understand the procedures of writing the given genre effectively.

Genre writing materials are usually planned around themes. Themes are chosen as real life activities in which people do specific things through writing. Using themes from real life such as health, smoking, work might motivate students to draw on their previous knowledge and personal experience. More often, however, genre based writing courses are organised around the texts students will need to use in a particular target context. Writing courses may be arranged around written genres needed in particular

work place such as writing scientific reports (Hyland 2003).

There are three stages in genre approach to writing. First, a model of a certain genre is introduced and analysed. Students then practice exercises which are relevant language forms to the genre and, finally, produce a short text. By using genre approach, students might read authentic descriptions of houses produced by estate agents to sell the property. As with product approach, the students would analyse the text identifying some grammatical structures like different adjectives and prepositions, taking into their consideration the social context (the fact that the text is based on a visit to the house); its purpose (selling the house); the audience (potential buyers); and that the words are supported by pictures. Students would then produce partial texts. Finally, they would individually produce complete texts (Badger and White 2000: 156).

The advantages of the genre approach can be described as follows: first, genre approach brings an important concept to writing: the reader. Second, it attaches equal importance to both the constraints of the writing situation and the writer's mental process, a dimension that is missing in the process approach. Third, it improves students' achievement in writing (Pasquarelli 2006:2). On the other hand, this approach received criticism because it focuses more on forms and styles than the process of writing.

2.4 Process Genre Approaches

This approach is combination of the previous two approaches. In this approach, writing needs knowledge about language (as in product and genre approaches), knowledge of the context and the purpose of writing and (as in genre approaches), and skills in using language (as in process approaches). The development of students' writing requires providing input to which students respond (as in product and genre approaches) and

focusing on students' skills (as in process approaches) Badger and White (2000:157).

A typical example of process genre writing tasks might be writing a description of a flat in order to sell it. This purpose has implications for the subject matter, the writer/reader relationship. While genre analysis focuses on the language used in particular text, in this approach the teacher needs to include processes by which students write a text reflecting these elements under the term process genre. This would cover the process by which students decide what aspects of the flat should be focused on as well as the knowledge of the appropriate expressions and structures to use (Badger and White 2000:158).

In such tasks, writing teachers need to support their students to know the purpose of writing such a text and the social context. So those students need to identify the purpose of the activity i.e. selling the house, different ways to write descriptions, knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, and skills such as revising and redrafting to write a description of a house.

Providing such tasks depends on students' level and knowledge of the given topic. In the previous example, students who know various adjectives for describing a house might need less input than those who do not. Where students lack knowledge, writing teachers can draw on three sources: the teacher himself to provide input in terms of instructions or explanations, other students as they can work in groups and examples of the target genre as models to follow (Hyland 2007:158). Based on this, asking writing teachers about the tasks that they use and in what way they think they are helpful will help to understand the approaches that they use.

Although most English language post graduate courses and English writing books include information about the above mentioned writing approaches, it is not that



easy to apply most of them mainly in EFL classrooms including the Libyan context. This is due to the fact that teaching English language in the EFL classrooms is mostly teacher-centered. The familiar practice of teaching is teacher lecturing or asking a question, a student answering while the rest of the class is passive, (Fareh: 2010:3620).

As a consequence, there has been limited research on how EFL writing teachers teach writing; how they choose their methods of teaching, what influences their choice and how they adopt the western approaches to their local needs. Consequently, the concern of this paper is investigating the approaches that writing teachers use and what characterized their teaching practice.

3. Methodology

In light of the literature discussed above, this study examined the following questions:

1. What are the approaches that Libyan college teachers use in teaching English writing?
2. What classroom practices characterize the writing teachers' teaching practice?

3.1 Data Collection Techniques

In order to answer the above mentioned research questions, study used interview and classroom observation as primary tools of data collection as these techniques are commonly suggested while conducting qualitative research in education (Punch 2009:121). Gillham (2000:46) sees observation as 'the most direct way of obtaining data' whereas, Stake (1995:64) claims that the interview is the main road to multiple realities'. Therefore, both tools were used to capture the intricacies of teaching English writing in the Libyan classrooms. Observations are also conducted to triangulate emerging findings; that is, they are used in combination with interviewing to substantiate the findings. Observation is an important way of collecting information

about people because people do not always do what they always say they do (Johnson and Christensen 2004:186).

However, it might not be possible to determine exactly why people behave as they do through the use of observation and people may act differently when they know they are being observed (Johnson and Christensen 2004:187). Therefore, classroom observation is combined with interviews to provide more understanding of the issues related to the teaching practice in teaching writing as Denzin and Lincoln (1998:89) state that observation findings are more validated when combined with other methods. Semi structured interviews were selected to collect data for this research as it aimed to have something 'of the best of both worlds' by deciding on predetermined themes to be covered, but at the same time 'leaving the sequence and the relevance of the interviewee free to vary, around and from that issue', (Freebody 2003: 133).

3.2 Data Analysis

The interview and classroom observation data were analyzed with reference to the research question mentioned above. During the analysis, answers were sought related to the approaches that writing teachers use and how they teach writing. Interview data were initially coded under the broad heading then gradually modified into sub-categories referring, for example, to different activities that writing teachers use.

3.3 Study Context

The context of this study is the English department of the college of Arts in Sabratha, Al Zawia University, Libya. The samples selected consisted of 4 writing teachers who teach English writing skill in the English department.

The English language department, where these teachers work, provides four year programs that cover English literature,

English language skills, and translation. Students who graduate from these departments are expected to work as English teachers.

3.3.1 Participants

The findings reported below are based on observations and interviews with four writing teachers working in Sabratha College of Arts. Their teaching experience varied from 2-5 years of teaching. The number of students in their classes was between 25-30 students.

The interviews were conducted in English, though participants occasionally used Arabic language where they felt it is necessary to explain a concept or to give examples.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Classroom teaching practice

Of the various elements of the classroom teaching practice, the main focus was on how writing teachers taught writing skill in their classes. All the participants started with explaining the information and lecturing is the dominant talk in the class. Teachers often depend heavily on textbooks. There is little opportunity for students to practice extended writing. The teaching practice is thereby characterized mostly by the teaching of grammatical rules.

T1, who teaches English writing to first year students, believed that it is important for students to write correct topic sentences and learn the organisation of the paragraph. Due to the assumptions that the teacher has about grammar and the importance of writing correct grammatical sentences, most of the lecture time was devoted to explaining grammatical structures such as tenses and adjectives.

According to T1, 'grammar is the cornerstone of the language. If they master grammar they will manage to write correct sentences'

From this view, what is important is what the students are able to write such as correct grammatical sentences, rather than fluent

writing. This approach focuses on form and accuracy, and the written text is simply a means of assessing the students' ability to manipulate the grammatical structures practiced in the classroom (Richards 1990: 106).

T2 and T3, who teach second and third year, applied aspects from the process approach such as pre-writing activities. From the classroom observations, it was noticed that teachers used a variety of activities to help their students elicit ideas at the presentation stage of the lesson such as asking questions about the topic, group discussion and using mind maps.

Another activity that the teachers used is to work in pairs and groups to put the information that they got from their discussion and brainstorming in order (Hedge 2000:311). This can be seen from the fact that teachers in this group tried to balance focus on form with focus on content by providing guided to free activities (Griffiths 2008).

T3 believed that 'it is useful to use pre writing activities to help students generate ideas and understand the given topic'

All the above mentioned teachers used 'College Writing' textbooks for their teaching. In this book, the activities are presented according to the process approach: pre-writing, writing, reviewing and revising. Each unit of the book is based on reading passage to help students form ideas and learn new vocabulary related to the topic that they will write about

With regard to fourth year, T4 used similar way of teaching with balance focus on form and meaning. However, the teacher focused on the genres that students will need in their real life such as writing a CV, and an application letter. The teacher used eclectic material from different writing books and from internet educational websites. T4 believed that 'they will graduate by the end of



this year, thus they will need to apply for jobs and submit their CVs'

4.2 Discussion

On the surface, it is worth noting that like ESL/EFL writing teachers, the participants of this research used a mixture of more than one approach and that teachers frequently combined these approaches to suit their lesson plans and the goals that they tried to achieve. As Byrne (1988:23) pointed out, few teachers use just one of the approaches in their classrooms; instead, they tend to adopt an eclectic method that suits their purpose. However, from observing the four teachers, the major feature that characterised their teaching was their tendency to explain and deliver information. The widely used approach was one that emphasised presentation, practice, and performance. This is very much corresponding with You's findings from investigating teaching writing in China which indicates that the product approach is commonly used in classroom practice with some attempts to adopt the process and the genre approaches (2004:105). The use of this approach does not develop the students' ability to write since much of this writing is at the sentence level. This clearly has its value in language learning, but as is stated by Hedge (2000:10), successful writing depends on more than the ability to write correct sentences

Using these aspects of the product approach might reflect the cultural and professional identity of how these influenced the way the teachers enact their roles. In other words, when teachers understand their roles as assessors and their main duty is to teach students how to produce correct sentences, they will select the method that enables them to control the class. Most Libyan teachers have been taught by this approach and consequently, their cognition and understanding of language teaching are

influenced by their learning experience. According to Freeman (2002:6), teachers interpret new content through their existing understanding and modify new ideas based upon their beliefs of what already works.

It was noticed, however, that there was discrepancy between 'reported actions' and 'observed actions' in the teachers' responses. For example, in the response to the interview question about which approach they used, all the teachers mentioned that they used the process approach. However, the classroom observation to their classes revealed that they applied the product approach most of the time. This might mean that the teachers have the content knowledge about different approaches but they lack the pedagogical content knowledge to apply what they know. For example T2 and T3 used some aspects from the process approach such as pre writing activities and put the students into groups but both neglected the stages of process writing such as writing more than one draft. Instead, they asked their students to write just one draft. In a follow up question in the interview with T2, she mentioned that asking students to write drafts will require long time of correction.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The product approach characterizes most of teaching writing because it helps teachers to focus on teaching grammatical structures and keep control over the class. In contrast, using the process approach might be considered as a challenge because it requires students to work on drafts which are time consuming for teachers. The same can be said about the other approaches and this has been the case in the Libyan context where the traditional methods of teaching still dominate the teaching practice. However, it is important to report here that the signs of using new writing pedagogies, such as pre-writing activities, are identified in the

classroom practice. Some teachers tried to balance focus on form with focus on meaning. They applied an eclectic method of both product and process approaches to teach writing which indicates the possibility of successful adaptations of the recent writing pedagogies in the Libyan context.

Thus, on the basis of the findings of this study, it can be said that opportunities of professional development should be provided to support writing teachers in their efforts to apply new teaching techniques and to enhance their teaching skills.

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