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## The Role of Process and Product Approaches to the Teaching of Writing

Ali Akbar Khansir

### Abstract

The aim of the paper is to compare and examines product and process approaches to the teaching of writing. Myles (2002, p.1) argues that “academic writing requires conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas. Writing is a combination of process and product” (Sokolik, 2003). Product approach to the teaching of writing emphasizes mechanical aspects of writing such as focusing on grammatical and syntactical structures and imitating models and this approach is primarily concerned with correctness and form of the final product, whereas, Process approach emphasizes that writing itself is a developmental process that creates self-discovery and meaning. It is concerned with the process of how ideas are developed and formulated in writing. The approach focuses on how clearly and efficiently a

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learner can express and organize his/ her ideas clearly. In this approach, students are given opportunity to write what they have in their mind on paper, writing without worrying about form, grammar and correct spelling. (Khansir, 2010).

**Key words:** Writing, Process and Product approaches, Genre approach.

## **Introduction**

The aim of the paper is to investigate the role of process and product approaches to the teaching of writing and compare the approaches have dominated much of the teaching of writing that happen in ELT classroom. Writing plays an essential role in language learning. Writing is defined as art of a writer. Hyland (2003) mentions the value of writing “the ability to communicate ideas and information affectively through the global digital network is crucially dependent on good writing skills.” It implies the fact that the mental representation by means of lexical manipulation is given in the form of script or marks in the process of writing. Thus writing defined as a term refers both to an act and the result of that act. This immediately sets up two possible perspectives on acquiring writing: Learning the process of composing and learning the form and organization of the product. But writing also has a social dimension and purpose, which can lead to other perspectives focusing on genre, voice and audience (Swalles 1990, Cope and Kalantzis 1993, Fairclough 2001, Ivanic 1998). Writing being one of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing has always formed part of the syllabus in the teaching of English language. However, it has been used for a variety of purposes, ranging from being

merely a 'backup' for grammar teaching to a major syllabus strand in its own right, where mastering the ability to write effectively is seen as a key objective for learners (Harmer 2004).

The learning of writing is one of the most important skills that second language learners need to develop their ability to communicate ideas and information effectively in target language. Writing can be recognized as an integral part of language learning process in ELT classroom. However, writing is a practical representation of unit of a language expression. Drawing pictures or letters is not writing. A sign painter might paint 'Persian characters' but he/she is not writing unless he/she knows how to write Persian, i.e. unless he/she understands Persian and the characters. Throughout the history of language teaching, linguists, teachers, and experts have stressed the different features of writing and this has given birth to a number of approaches to writing such as process, product, integrative, genre approaches, but in this study, process and product approaches are compared. Kroll (1996) mentions that process approach calls for providing a positive, encouraging and collaborative workshop environment within which students, with ample time and minimal interference, can work through their composing processes. He adds that in this process, the teacher's role is to help students develop variable strategies for getting started (finding topics, generating ideas and information, focusing and planning structure and procedures), for drafting (encouraging multiple drafts), for revising (adding, deleting, modifying and rearranging ideas); and for editing (attending to vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and mechanics). Pincas (1982, p. 22) argues that in the product approach, "learning to write has four stages: familiarization; controlled writing; guided writing; and free writing. The familiarization stage aims to make learners aware of certain features of a particular text. In controlled and guided writing sections, the learners practice the skills with

increasing freedom until they are ready for the free writing section, when they use the writing skill as part of a genuine activity such as a letter, story or essay” (cited in Badger and White 2000, p. 153). Nunan (1999) clearly states how very different this process approach is from the traditional product oriented approach. Whereas the Product approach focuses on writing tasks in which the learner imitates, copies and transforms, teacher supplied models, the Process approach focuses on the steps involved in creating a piece of work.

Bright and McGregor (1970) define product approach as a goal to prevent errors in students’ writing and he added that the pupil does not learn from his mistakes. If he did, the more mistakes he made, the more he would learn. Common experience, however, proves the pupil who makes the most mistakes is the one who has learnt and will learn least. In theory no mistake should ever appear in writing, though it must be admitted that this ideal is unattainable in practice (p. 130). Jordan (2000) acknowledges that process writing evolved as a reaction to the product approach, in that it met the need to match the writing process inherent in writing in one’s mother tongue and consequently allow learners to express themselves better as individuals. This is not to say, however, that product approach no longer exists, nor that it has no practical applications. Indeed, the process approach can still contain elements of product based writing.

### **Process approach**

The view of writing as thinking discovery and as more than recording is termed as process approach to writing. This approach to writing is learner - originated approach. Therefore, learners are free to write whatever ideas come into their minds. This exempts the student from the burden of skill acquisition and enables them to explore the culmination and variety of written language. This is generally called the process approach. This new paradigm is not actually new

of course. One can look back into history and find teachers from almost every age employing methods that sound much like our modern process approach. But an established approach seems to have been motivated by dissatisfaction with controlled composition and the current traditional approach. Flower and Hayes (1981) provides a detailed description of writing process, which leads to a well-known cognitive model of writing. This model consists of three aspects of writer's world such as: a) the task environment - this phase consists of writing assignment, the topics, the intended audience, the writer's motivation and purpose; b) the writer's long-term memory - it is also called the encyclopedia of world knowledge i.e. what the writer knows about – topic, audience, and the possible plans (writing); c) writing process - this phase consists of planning, writing, reviewing, and editing. The process approach reflects a shift in thinking away from the product of writing, towards the process of writing and from text to the writer. The focus is on how we can help children understand and engage in the act of writing how they use writing in different ways and how well they can discuss how writing differs according to its use and relationship. The emphasis of this approach is on writing as a set of behaviors, which can be learned, talked about and developed, in different situations. The focus in this approach is on the writer and the types of methodology used during the process of composing.

Taylor (1981) feels that as an advocate of this approach, writing is not the straight forward plan - outline writing process that many believe it to be. Zamel (1982) says that ESL writers who are ready to compose and express their ideas use strategies similar to those of native speakers of English. Raimes (1983, p. 10) argues that “teachers who use the process approach give their students two crucial supports: time for the students to try out ideas and feedback on the content of what they write in their drafts. They find that then the writing process becomes a

process of discovery for the students: discovery of new ideas and new language forms to express those ideas”. Linse (2005, p.101) acknowledges that “process writing helps native English – speaking children as well as EFL or ESL young learners develop English - language writing skills. Process writing is especially appropriate for ESL or EFL young learners because one of the prominent features is an emphasis on fluency”. Cameron (2001) determines that ESL and EFL learners just as young children learn to speak fluently; they also need to learn how to write fluently. The process view of writing is how students use their cognitive power to manage the composing process and how they explore, as they gradually develop organization. The process is not linear, but recursive and generative. It means that writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they want to approximate meaning. The process of writing involves setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, drafting, reviewing, revising, and editing, and that is why it is a very complex activity. Therefore, many ESL or EFL writers feel it may be difficult. This approach provides a positive, encouraging, and collaborative workshop environment to the learners.

The primary aim of the process approach is to help learners understand their own composing processes and to build their repertoires of strategies for pre-writing, drafting, and re-writing. The exact nature of help or support depends on the nature of learners, their reason for writing, and type of writing. In this approach, students are given sufficient time to write, and rewrite, to discover what they want to say and to consider intervening feedback from instructor as peer as they attempt to bring expression closer and closer to intention in successive drafts. The instructor in this approach to writing intervenes throughout the composing process, rather than reacting only to the final draft. The writer is the center of attention throughout the process and

what's why this approach is also called learner-centered approach. Finally, Seow (1995) argues that the process approach to teaching writing comprises four basic stages such as planning, drafting, revising, and editing. Three other stages could be inserted after the drafting stage; these are responding, evaluating, and post-writing. For each stage, suggestions are provided as to the kinds of classroom activities that support the learning of specific writing skills. For example, at the planning stage, teachers can help students generate ideas through such activities as brainstorming, clustering, and rapid free writing.

### **Criticism of Process Approach**

Although process approach has been generally well and widely received in ESL and EFL composition, a number of criticisms have emerged from English for academic purpose. One major part of this criticism is that process approach does not adequately address some central issues in ESL or EFL writing. Reid (2000 ) suggests that process approach neglects seriously considering variation in writing processes due to differences in individuals, writing tasks, and situations, the development of schemata for academic discourse, language proficiency and insights from the study of contrastive rhetoric. Horowitz (1986) argues that the process approach creates a classroom situation that bears little attention to the situation in which students' writing will eventually be exercised. He believes that the process also ignores certain type of important academic writing tasks, and the approach gives students a false impression of how university writing will be evaluated; and the approach focuses on the individual's psychological functioning and neglects the social-cultural context, that is, the realities of academics that in effect, the process approach operates in a socio-cultural vacuum.

## **Product approach**

Product approach to writing is a well-known, familiar and mostly popular approach to writing. It seems to be as old as the art of writing itself and is still being popular in spite of its various shortcomings and criticism. With the passage of time, this approach to writing has been called by a variety of names such as controlled composition, guided composition, accuracy centered writing etc. This approach was popular in the 1950s and 60s. An advocate of this approach, Charles Fries (1945) argues that writing is secondary and is concerned with and acquired through the oral habit of language. And of course, since it seemed necessary to write things down as an aid of memory, many teachers still ask their students to write in order to reinforce something that they have just learned to understand or say, in order to reinforce a grammatical concept that has just been introduced.

In this approach, students are given sentences and paragraphs to copy or manipulate grammatically, for example, change statements, into questions, changing words or classes or combining sentences. Since the vocabulary is highly controlled, errors are avoided. It also evaluates students' progress or achievement by grading their productions. In this approach, there are a number of writing activities such as copying; gap filling, the controlled composition frame, writing down, picture reading, and current traditional rhetoric are described.

For example, copying as one of the activities of controlled writing which, in this activity, the teacher provides sentences or short passage to the students. Then they are invited to copy it or assign sentences, exercises to drill grammatical concept. This type of composition or exercise exposes the student to acceptable sentence and paragraph structure. After the students have done the copying, and the teacher try to correct error of his students, this kind of practice trains the



students to be careful when they write. Second activity is gap filling. In this activity, teacher can begin by allowing students to see and read through the passage once or twice. The passage should then be replaced by a passage with a gap to be filled in by the students. For each gap filling exercise, emphasis should be on a particular grammatical element such as subject, verb, object, etc. Third activity in this approach is the controlled composition frame. It is an exercise designed to give students practice in putting various segments together to form complete sentences, a number of sentences could be put together from the given frames to form paragraphs. Another activity (fourth activity) is writing down. It is a controlled composition method which requires teacher to read a short story or passage to students. The students are required to write down the short story during reading. This kind of activity provides opportunity for the students to listen to good sentence structures and match letter with sounds. Thus, this method provides the students with practice in anticipating syntactic elements as well as in spelling correctly. The fifth activity is picture reading which requires original sentence construction by the students. The subject matter of the composition is provided by the picture given by the teacher. To be able to interpret the scene in a coherent manner, students have to fall back on their visual perception, their experience based on familiarity with the scene presented and their power of imagination. Newspapers and magazines provide good material for picture reading exercise. It challenges and so prepares them for independent composition assignments.

The last activity (sixth in order) is current traditional rhetoric. By the mid-sixties the current traditional rhetoric was introduced as a bridge between controlled composition and free composition. In this activity, students are trained to produce extended written discourse, to organize syntactic units into larger patterns, i.e., beyond the sentence, but they are bound by the

parameters strictly prescribed by the teacher or textbook. The emphasis of this approach is the logical construction and arrangement of discourse forms i.e., cohesion and coherence. Here importance is not given only to its elements (i.e. topic sentences, supporting sentences, concluding sentences and transitions), but also to various options for its development (illustration, comparison, contrast, partition, classification, definition, casual analysis and so on).

The approach is prescriptive in nature; it means that writing is basically how we can arrange the fitting of sentences and paragraph into prescribed patterns i.e. (introduction body and conclusion). As far as the classroom activity of writing is concerned, the emphasis is on form and students may, for example, be asked to change a general statement like, 'Thermometers' measure temperature into definition.' Thermometers are instruments which measure temperature. Another popular type of exercise that asks for transformation is sentences combining, which aims to train students to vary their sentence length, to use compound and complex sentences and to exercise stylistic options. Students are given the sentences of a paragraph and have to find sentences that do not belong, or they are given sentences in random order and have to put them in the best order in a paragraph or essay.

### **Criticism of Product Approach**

In spite of the fact that the product approach is well known as familiar and mostly popular approach to writing, it has its weaknesses. "The weaknesses of product approaches are that process skills, such as planning a text, are given a relatively small role, and that the knowledge and skills that learners bring to the classroom are undervalued. Their strengths are that they recognize the need for learners to be given linguistic knowledge about texts, and they understand that imitation is one way in which people learn." (Badger and White, 2000, p. 157)

## **Difference between Product and Process Approaches**

The traditional product – oriented approach and the process approach differ in the assumption about writing as well as the methodology each employs. The process approach emphasis on the writing process dictates a different view of the writing product and closer examination of the writing process. Freedman and Pringle (1980) argued that “the changes are fundamental: this shift implies different sets of values, different epistemologies. It requires as well as new and explicit theoretic constructs, and large scale revisions of research methodology and pedagogy” (p.177). They added that the process approach requires us to view a piece of writing within a total rhetorical context which includes writer, audience, and world as well.

There are many differences between process and product approaches as follows:

- In product approach, writing is a product to be evaluated, whereas in process approach, writing is a process to be experienced.
- In product approach, there is one correct procedure for writing, whereas in process approach, there are many processes for different situations, subjects, audiences, and authors.
- In product approach, writing is taught rather than learned, whereas in process approach, writing is predominantly learned rather than them taught.
- In product approach, process of writing is essentially linear; planning proceeds writing and reversion follows drafting etc, whereas in process approach, writing processes are varied and recursive.
- In product approach, the process of writing is largely conscious, whereas in process approach, writing often engages unconscious processes.

- In product approach, writer must be taught atomistically, mastering small parts and sub skills, before attempting whole pieces of writing, whereas, in process approach, writing is learned best from attempting the whole text.
- In product approach, writing can be done swiftly and in order, whereas in process approach, the rhythms and pace of writing can be quite slow, since the writer's actual task is to create meaning.
- In product approach, writing is a silent and solitary activity, whereas in process approach, writing is essentially a social collaborative activity.
- In product approach, accuracy gets more emphasis, whereas in process approach, fluency gets more emphasis.

### **Genre approach**

Product and process approaches cannot be studied properly without touching upon the notion of genre approach, in this paper. Genre approach is one of the new approaches to ELT. There are some similarities between genre and product approaches, according to Badger and White, in some ways, genre approaches can be regarded as an extension of product approaches (2000, p. 155.). They add that genre approaches like product approaches regard writing as pre-dominantly linguistic but, unlike product approaches, genre approaches emphasize that writing varies with the social context in which it is produced. Flowerdew (1993, p. 307) acknowledges that “so, we have a range of kinds of writing - such as sales letters, research articles, and reports—linked with different situations.” Swales (1990, p.58) argues that “a genre as a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes.”

Reppen (1995) describes a genre –based approach as providing students with ample opportunities to become aware of the different purposes of written communication and the different ways information is organized in written texts. Unless students are exposed to these different text types and are given sufficient practice in these types of writing, their written products will leave much to be desired.

## **Conclusion**

Writing is the one of the four essential skills of language needed for a combination of process and product to develop learner’s skills to write well in second language classroom. Richards and Renandya (2000) address that there is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for L2 learners to master. The difficulty lies not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into readable text. Myles (2002, p. 1) argues that “the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience.” In product approach, Badger and White (2000) offer 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. “Product approach only emphasizes linguistic aspects, but ignores the content part, writing freedom, and cognitive approaches. It shows low surrender value in creative writing, it says nothing about “the process of composition and it cares for only accuracy, but not for fluency.”

Tribble (1996, p 33) suggests that “process approaches stress writing activities which move learners from the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the publication

of a finished text.” Implementing process and product approaches to writing can easily be done in both ESL and EFL classrooms with learners if the several techniques, activities and the amount of time that teachers devote to the development of writing skills will depend upon the objectives of their program. However, applying both product and process approaches to teaching writing in second or foreign language classrooms are necessary to help the learners to improve their capability in writing further.

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