

TOWARDS RESOLUTION OF THE PROBLEM OF ACQUIRING THE WRITING SKILL: PRECEPTS FROM THE PROCESS APPROACH TO WRITING FOR SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract

The acquisition of the writing skill has continued to pose difficulties to learners of English as a second language. This study explores the perceptions of various scholars on this persistent problem of learning writing. It also discusses the process approach to writing. This approach developed by mentalist theorists provides insights to solve the problem of acquiring the skill of writing. The study further presents the tenets of the approach which learners of writing should exploit to facilitate their acquisition of the skill. The paper finally recommends the implementation of the approach in teaching writing at all levels of Nigerian educational system.

Keywords: acquisition, writing skill, precepts, process approach.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the two expressive skills of language. The other skill, speaking, is easier to acquire and to express than writing. It is possible to see people who speak a language but cannot write it, but it may be impossible to come across people who can write in a language but cannot speak using it. Because ability to write in a language demonstrates one's mastery of the language. Many language learners want to acquire the writing skill.

Writing is also a sought-after skill because we are in a knowledge generation which demands the ability to read and write. Thus, writing is needed for success in jobs requiring literacy, for socio-economic survival and for success in examinations at all levels. Writing is also a store of value because a written

composition can last for thousands of years if well-preserved. In spite of the gains of writing, language learners are increasingly finding it difficult to acquire the skill.

Writing as a Difficult Task

There is a general agreement among scholars and practitioners of writing that acquisition of the writing skill and the act of writing are difficult. This notion is evident in the poor performance of students and graduates in writing tasks. Also, many scholars have commented on this difficulty associated with writing. Tribble (1996) defines writing as a language skill which is difficult to acquire, which requires some form of instruction and skill and which is not really picked up by exposure. Pete Hamill (2007) again observes that wiring is the hardest work in the world, not excluding heavy lifting. A related observation by Thomas Kane (1983) states, "Almost everybody labours to write, even those who work at the trade." In their own perception of writing, Barnet and Stubbs (2007) posit, "it is a universal law that given two tasks, one of which is writing, a person will prefer the other task." The linguist, David Nunan (1999) again contends, "in terms of skill, producing a coherent piece of wiring is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language."

The difficulty experienced in the acquisition of the writing skill and the act of writing has been attributed to two factors namely the private and complex nature of writing and to the methodology employed in teaching the skill in schools. Otagburuagu, Obah and Ogenyi (2007) establish that a major distinguishing characteristics of the skill is its private and complex nature. The privacy derives from the fact that the person who is involved in the process is the only one who generates and encodes the ideas to realize a certain semantic value. The definition of writing as enunciated by Byrne

portrays this complex, multi-faceted nature of writing as he states, “any piece of writing is an attempt to communicate something that the writer has in mind, that he has established and maintained contact with his readers, that he has to organize his material and that he does this through the use of certain logical and grammatical devices.”

The other factor blamed for writing difficulty is the methodology employed in teaching the skill in classrooms. The first layer of defaulters in application of methodology is teachers who avoid teaching writing in their language classes and do not employ any method. These teachers view teaching of the English language as implying the teaching of English grammar only. They spend the whole weeks of an academic session teaching English grammar and comprehension. Otagburuagu (2010) observes of this spectacle:

Experience and research show that most teachers tend to test writing in the classroom instead of teaching it. The tendency has led to deterioration in the writing proficiency of students especially in second language environments

This situation might have arisen because the teachers themselves were not taught writing and as a result have no knowledge to draw from. Murray (1985) describes this practice thus: the teachers want students to “study what we want them to study and to learn from us what we or our teachers learned.”

The other layer of difficulty in writing caused by methodology of teaching the skill is linked to the traditional or product approach employed in our schools. That was the approach contained in English language textbooks on writing for our primary, secondary and tertiary levels. The approach requires been discussed so as to see how it is a problem to writing. The product approach

was formulated by behaviourist theorist who argued among other postulations that language learning and the learning of any skill is through habit-formation and by one's response to external stimuli. The product approach as a philosophy of teaching writing, therefore, stresses these qualities:

1. That written works should be accurate in form, content and grammar;
2. That writing should respond to social situation;
3. That the ability to write well can be acquired by imitation, substitution, and drills.

The mandate of the product approach as can be seen is perfect but the sore point arises when one wants to achieve them. First, the approach encourages learners to imitate or copy models of good writing. In this, it jettisoned individual creativity and style. Second, the approach gives the teacher the marginal responsibility of providing models of writing, giving the writing tasks and assigning marks. The 1996 Dartmouth Conference condemned that notion that teachers should be "dictatorial authority figures in the composition process." Third, teaching writing according to the approach becomes an obsessive preoccupation with grammatical errors and forms. This concern about errors obscured the development of meaning and communication which are salient issues in writing. White and Arndt (1991) warn that the focus on errors improves neither grammatical accuracy nor fluency.

The Tenets of the Process Approach

The debilitating performance in writing all over the world of students who were taught through the product approach led to the search for a better approach. In the 1970s, researches by Janet Emig on one hand and Flower and Hayes on the other hand of the composing process of American students

resulted in the discovery of the process approach. Hairston describes this approach as “a major paradigm shift in the teaching of composition.” The process approach has recorded success in Israel, Hong Kong, Botswana, South Africa, Iran, America and other parts of the world where it has been introduced.

The process approach is based on the mentalist theory of new cognitive or “Gestalt” learning theory which was propounded in 1915 by Wolfgang Kohler, a Germany psychologist. The theory emphasizes experience, human insight and problem-solving. It also insists that all learning including the learning of language is rule-governed thereby dismissing the notion that learning is by exposure to external stimuli. The theorists further argue that every human being has an inborn capacity to acquire a new language through a device called Language Acquisition Device (LAD).

The process approach has been lauded for its capacity to help students of English language develop the writing skill. Lynn Quitmann and Douglas Hesse (2007) describe the process approach in this way:

Experienced writers know that writing is a process, a series of activities that starts the moment they begin thinking about a subject and ends with proofreading the final draft. Experienced writers also know that good writing is rewriting again. Their drafts are filled with additions, rewordings and rearrangements.

Another view is by Tribble (1996) who sees the approach as: “writing activities which move learners from the generation of ideas and collection of data through to the publication of the finished text.” The characteristics of the approach are thus:

1. Writing should emphasize content and fluency;

2. Writing is a process involving movement through stages – generation of ideas, planning, draft, revising/editing and final version;
3. Movement across stages is not linear but recursive and often messy;
4. Development of ideas is in multi-drafts which are progressively revised to produce the final draft;
5. The teacher is an active partner in the composing process;
6. The student occupies center position in the writing process.

Application of the Principles of the Process Approach in Second Language Writing Classes

The process approach teaches that writing tasks should follow a process. Students understand a subject better if it is presented as a process. In this case, students are given the steps to follow to reach the goal. The steps help the student to produce better compositions than the so-called models. But in the product approach the teacher shows the model and students are to find their ways to replicate it. Many students may not be able to find their ways. This is why we are in this pathetic situation in writing. The act of showing students models and even providing guidelines as propagated by the product approach kills individual creativity or makes one a copier. The teacher should identify the stage as pre-writing, planning, draft, revise/editing and final version. Each stage is a centre of activity. The recursive nature of the writing process implies that transition through the stages is not linear. The writer can move back from the third stage, editing, to planning and pre-writing and leap forward to attempt some editing. That is why experts say the writing process can often be messy. This rigmarole in movement strengthens the content and communication of the composition.

Teachers should also encourage students to write multi-drafts. There cannot be an effective writing process as stressed by Watson (1980):

Writing is hard. It is not single process. Those who say they cannot write, and give up too soon, usually mean they cannot write good prose in a single process. Professional writers with years of experience behind them

often regard three versions as bare minimum and five to seven versions are not uncommon.

Smith (1982) again reveals, "One of the best secrets at school is that good writers produce multi-drafts and revise drafts constantly as they go through cycles of revision." The importance of multi-drafts is that it helps the ideas to manifest at full strength. Also, it helps one know what to write. Perl (2003) conducted an experiment using five unskilled college writers and discovered that writers know more fully what they mean after writing. This is because it is only after they had seen their ideas on paper that they were able to reflect upon, change and develop these further. The rigour of multitask makes writing difficult. However, Flower and Hayes agree that writing should be difficult and insist "Discovery is hard work. Writers don't find meaning: they make it."

Again, teachers should make their students know that the students are the centre of attention in their writing enterprise. What they think and how they express their thoughts are what matter. Tribble (1996) in an attempt to explain the central position of the student in writing as designated by the process approach defines process approach as:

An approach to the teaching of writing which stresses the creativity of the individual writers, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models.

The approach teaches that students should engage in the hard thinking and all the intellectual efforts associated with writing as well as take decisions at the same time on several crucial demands of writing. Aldowan and Ibnian (2014) reveals that the concern should be on what the learners wants to say and that his interactions and purpose should be of paramount importance. Kirby and Liner (1998) stress that the role of the teacher should be to help

bring those “mind texts of the students to the page.” He should be an imitator, not mere responder or mimicker of other people’s interactions and expressions.

English language teachers should further know that they have a responsibility to assist the students throughout the writing process. They should try to take their commitments further from showing models and administering marks on students’ outputs. The teacher is there to provide the feedback and corrections which will help the student find his bearings to the destination. The teacher’s handling of the feedback will determine the success or failure of the writing enterprise. Murray (1985) admonishes that comments made by teachers should “provide insights and information upon which the students can act to reshape and restructure the meaning.” To achieve this, Hyland (1990) recommends that the teacher’s comments or responses should be “conversational and discursive rather than coldly abrupt and in red ink.” Keh(1990) further states that the teacher should communicate in a distinctly human voice with sincere respect for the writer as a person and a sincere interest in his improvement as a writer. As teachers in a second language setting, we should not inundate students’ compositions with comments and marks but should concentrate on fundamental problems as the students cannot pay attention to everything at once.

The teacher should moreover not be too preoccupied with error correction and form. Perl (2003) condemns the preoccupation with error and form advocated by the product approach and which is the norm in our schools arguing that it inhibits idea development, that the process of discovery is constantly interrupted by undue attention to form and that these premature and rigid attempts to correct and edit “truncate the flow of composing.” With

that caution and with the understanding that the process approach treats errors as an integral part of the learning process, the teacher should be sparing in encircling errors as the preponderance of such red inks demotivates the student. Errors should be handled at the editing/revising stage. That stage affords the writer the opportunity to correct errors of grammar, spelling, punctuation and form after the content and communication have been fully attained.

Conclusion

The study recognizes the importance of the writing skill to the expression of proficiency in a language. It also underlines that there are problems associated with acquisition of the skill. As an important skill, there should be positive change in the quality of writing of our students and graduates. On this, the study recommends the introduction of the process approach to writing in English Language classrooms at all levels of education in Nigeria. The implementation of the principles of the approach will bring the desired transformation.

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