Apprasial of the Theories and Methods of Writing Skills in English Language

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Abstract

A number of theories and methods have been advanced in an attempt to solve the problems inherent in the acquisition of writing skills, especially in a second language situation. A host of these theories and their associated methods have received scholarly criticisms based on their limitations and inadequacy in fully addressing the concerns in the acquisition of writing skills. This paper attempts to review these theories and methods, with particular emphasis on their suitability and effectiveness in the acquisition of writing skills in English as a second language.

Keywords: Appraisal,theories, methods, writing skills, English language

Introduction

The central concern in second language pedagogy is the acquisition of the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The interplay of more than one of these skills is required for a communicative activity to take place. Though teaching goals may be directed towards the acquisition of any one of the skills, this effort is ultimately geared towards achieving integrated skills for language communication in a target language. Whereas listening and speaking are basically oral in nature, reading and writing are represented in a written discourse. Writing is usually the last language skill to be acquired in the language learning process such that the mastery of the first three skills becomes a stepping stone to acquiring writing skills.

Writing generally involves the representation of ideas and verbal symbols in printed form. Schmitt (2010:233), citing Bilzer, views writing as a process which "involves a series of highly complex cognitive activities that takes place in response to a rhetoric situation. It also involves a complex web of relationship amongst the elements of writing, including the writer, the reader, the text and reality".In writing, certain considerations involving the relational, strategic and textual aspects of written discourse are made as a total representation of the social and material conditions that precipitates writing. The responsibility of enhancing students' expressive ability in writing is the teacher's prerogative and this can be achieved by first, familiarizing and equipping the students with the theories and methods /techniques for communicative competence.

This paper therefore attempts to discuss the existing theories on which writing skills are grounded as well as the different methods applied in the teaching of writing skills especially in an ESL (English as a Second language) teaching and learning situation.

The Concept of Writing

The evolution of writing can be traced to the pictographic system of the Sumerians about 3000BC. The developmental stages of writing became systematized with the introduction of the orthographic representation, using alphabets. On the nature of writing, Otagburuagu (1997: 5) using the words of Broughton, explains thus:

> When we write, unlike when we talk, we are engaged in an activity which is usually at the same time both private and public. It is private because the act of composition is by nature solitary, but it is public in that most writing is intended for an audience. The act of writing differs from talking in that it is less spontaneous and more permanent and the resources which are available for communication are fewer because we cannot-as we do in conversation – interact with the listeners and adapt as we go on.

In the later part of the 20th Century, writing has received significant attention especially in the field of second language, which was greatly projected by the growth of composition studies especially in the United States and other parts of the world. Consequently, writing has become a viable area of research and instruction both in the first and second language acquisition.

Statement of the Problem

It is a known fact that receptive language skills like reading and listening are easier to acquire than the productive skills – speaking and writing. The acquisition of productive language skills such as writing requires a conscious learning effort and comes with certain challenges that require the writer to be abreast of the right procedures and technicalities inherent in writing. Most writers especially students, are deficient in these aspects. Schmitt(2010:231) quoting Matsuda, states that 'the writer's task is not as simple as constructing an accurate representation of reality;the writer also has to negotiate his or her own view of these elements of writing with the views held by the reader –the process which is mediated by the way the text is constructed.'

By virtue of the complexity of writing, students are faced with the uphill task of mastering the rudiments of writing. Elaborating on the complexity of writing, Bachman summarises the intricacies involved in writing by seeing writing as not just a representation of speech but that speaking,writing and signing are all manifestations of the language user's knowledge,perspective and communicative competence. The work therefore seeks to appraise the various theories and methods that guide effective writing to facilitate a hitch-free acquisition process of the writing skill amongst learners, especially in a second language learning environment.

Aim and Objectives
The aim of the work is to solve the problems inherent in the acquisition of writing skills through the following objectives:

- To sensitise writers especially students of the importance of writing as a productive language skills with associated laid down procedures and methods.
- To assess the various writing theories and recommend viable approaches for writers, especially students of second language learning.
- To project the intricacies in the acquisition of writing skills and proffer solutions for effective learning.

Theories of Writing Skills
A theory is a set of principles on which an activity is based. Theories cut across all disciplines. In the area of learning, learning theories have been advanced especially as it bothers on the acquisition of writing skills. Two basic theories of writing have been identified in the areas of English as a second language (ESL), namely, **Behaviourism,** and **Mentalism**.

- **Behaviourism**

Behaviourism as a theory of writing skills is associated with Thorndike,who believed that in the learning process, an individual establishes a connection between the stimulus and response, such that positive responses when repeated will encourage learners to master certain responses. This theory also called the trial and error theory stipulates that the bond between stimulus and response is strengthened by repetition. This means that for meaningful learning to take place, the teacher should engage the students in series of activities to motivate them put into practice what they have learnt. These prior experiences through trial and error help in crystallizing the accepted response. Behaviourism as a theory states that errors should not be condoned in the writing process. It propagated the design of language programmes, adequately structured and well timed, to instil in the learners facilitative attitude towards previous learning instructions.

Anih 1987:79 explains the Behavioural theory thus:
> When an individual is faced with a problem unfamiliar to him,the individual tries manydifferent responses to solve the problem. If his first response isnot useful in solving the problem,he rejects that and tries another one.He continues trying so many responses until he hits the response that will solve his problem.At this point,Thorndike says, the individual now forms association or connection between the stimulus and response such that it is more likely for the response to occur again under similar circumstance.Stimulus is the problem presented and the response is the solution to it.

Behaviourism therefore promotes the repetition, language drills, and practice as useful techniques in the ESL teaching.

- **Mentalist Theory**

This theory was introduced owing to the failure of the Behaviourist theory to address problems in the acquisition of writing skills. The proponent of this theory, Wolfgang Kohler, proposed this Gestalt learning theory which is aimed at problem-solving. The advocates of this theory are known as Cognitivists. These Cognitivists view the writing process as an avenue for the learner to utilize his mental schemata in achieving well-constructed sentences. They refute the Behaviourist idea that errors should not be condoned in the process of writing; rather, for them, errors should serve as facilitative tools to improve on students' writing skills. Bell (1987:106) puts this idea more succinctly, thus:

> If errors are the results of hypothesis testing on the part of the learner, far from being a bad thing, they are only the indication for the teacher of the way in which the learner is trying to cope with the intellectual problem of making sense of the structure of the language to which he is exposed.

In this context, learners attempt to write in the target language, with no recourse to grammatical and structural accuracy, while the teacher examines and corrects him and encourages him to attempt a better write-up. This helps the teacher to detect the learner's weak points as well as plan cognitive and problem-solving strategies towards the learner's writing skills.

All these theories –Behaviourism and Mentalism – discussed above are put into practice in these major approaches of acquiring writing skills as follows:

- **The Controlled Approach:** Thisadvocates for the use of controlled composition in comparing grammatical and syntactic structures of the first(LI) and the second language (L2) in an attempt to ascertain structural differences using contrastive and error analysis as diagnostic tools.

- **The Uncontrolled Approach**: This approach stems from the primacy of the Aristotelian philosophy of freedom of expression. It sees writing as problem-solving activity involving goal definition, identification of problems, collection of data, planning and execution and evaluation.(Otagburuagu,1997:52). The uncontrolled approach,also known as the free approach, is that type of writing which provides the composition topic on which the learner bases his composing efforts without the teacher's guidance,

- **The Amalgamated Approach**: This is a combination of the Behaviourist and the Mentalist conceptions towards the acquisition of writing skills. This approach advocates the uses of various works of accomplished authors to impart not only writing skills but all the other language skills of listening, speaking and reading for an all-encompassing learning experience and easy transition from one mode of language skill to the other. This approach rejects the use of a single text to work on the four language skills as proposed by audio-lingualism, but accepts teaching which incorporates the four language skills,using various authentic texts.(Otagburuagu, 1997).

Methods of Writing Skills

Each of the above theories (Behaviourism and Mentalism) bifurcates into methods through which language can be transmitted, within the philosophies of the underlying theories.Methods are organised steps in which specific goals or identified approaches are actualised. A method is simply the manner in which a task is carried out in line with a given philosophy or goal. A host of methods have been identified in the acquisition of writing skills especially as it bothers on second language learning. On this, Schmitt (2010:236) opines that,

> Although the ability to write presupposes some level of morphological,lexical and syntactic as well as idiomatic knowledge, such knowledge alone does not guarantee the ability to write well because writing involves much more than constructing grammatical sentences. Sentences need to be 'cohesive', that is, they have to connect by cohesive devices in ways that can be followed by readers.

It therefore follows that writing entails methods that can help to achieve cohesion, aside grammatical constructions. These methods include the following:

The Audio-Lingual Method

This is a method which originates from the controlled approach in writing skills as promoted by the Behaviourists, with exponents such as Charles Fries, Brooks and others. This method asserts the primacy of the spoken discourse over the written, as Bell(1987:92) quotes that 'Speech is language'. The audio lingual method recognizes the four basic language skills but its advocacy for speech culminated in the development of the aural-oral method. Writing for the audiolinguists is an advanced skill which can only be taught by graduating tasks to agree with the developmental and maturational status of the learner (Otagburagu, 1997).

The Audio-linguist believes that the learner's writing proficiency can be measured only by his speech habits and fluency. In this method, accuracy in linguistic and grammatical structures is the yardstick in determining effective communication. This is achieved through group work, repetitions and drills.The Audio-lingual method has been criticized for its undue emphasis on habits and its failure to develop practical skills in the learning process.

The Social Behaviour Method

This method is also of the controlled approach attributable to the Behaviourists. Proponents of the method include Davies and Widdowson. These Methodists view writing as a social activity which relates the writer to the reader, as part of a social network.The Social Behaviourists believe that writing should be geared towards fulfilling a social function by conforming to social standards and also should serve as a means of communication and interaction amongst individuals in a given society. Otagburuagu (1997:38) quoting Widdowson on what should constitute a successful writing from the point of view of the social Behaviourists asserts thus:

It has to be tidy, correct, well-formed .It must keep up appearances .The writer not only has to design his text so that it effectively records his participation in the discourse and provides for the interaction of the reader, but also that it conforms to correct linguistic etiquettes, Accuracy ,in this way, becomes a necessary condition for fluency. . . ..

The Social Behaviour Method was applauded for taking cognizance of the audience in the writing process as well as promoting the motivational aspects of writing. Nonetheless, it was not considered universally satisfactory, hence the search for another method.

The Text Variation Method

This is also an off shoot of the controlled approach which prioritizes on the individual subject or discipline of the students with their associated peculiar writing strategies and skills. The method aims at inculcating different writing styles based on academic subject using paraphrases, summary and note-taking as demos for writing skills, in addition to discussions and explanations in imparting writing skills amongst learners.Gorman (1963: 41-45)opines that this method aims at 'teaching varieties of writing appropriate to academic discourse'.The text variation method was noted for its significant contributions in the area of Genre, Style and Structural accuracy in writing, yet it could not exhaustively address the concerns in the acquisition of writing skills.

The Product Method

 This method emphasizes on writing outcomes as against the writing process. It believes that good writing comes with grammatical proficiency. This method is also grounded in the controlled approach of the Behaviourists. According to Gabrielatos (2002:5), "the Product method is the traditional approach in which students are encouraged to mimic a model text, usually presented and analyzed at an early stage". This has been the method in practice in most institutions in West Africa for many decades. It uses drills and extracts from passages written by accomplished authors as models for imparting good writing skills amongst learners. The method also had its limitations and was unable to fully address all the issues in the acquisition of writing skills.

The Process Method

This method tends to focus on varied classroom activities which promote the development of language use, through brainstorming, group discussion and rewriting. Kroll(2001) views the process method as serving as the umbrella term for the many types of writing courses. According to him, this means that the students engage in their writing tasks through a cyclical approach rather than a single-shot approach. In his words,

> …the learners are not expected to produce and submit complete and polished responses to their writing assignmentswithout going through the stages of drafting and receiving feedbacks on their drafts,be it from peers and/or from their teachers,followed by revisions of their evolving text. (Kroll, 2001: 220-21).

Ultimately, eight stages of this model were identified as follows: Brainstorming; planning/structuring; writing the first draft; peer feedback; editing; final draft; and the teachers' evaluation. Generally, this method is more collaborative and more globally focused than most methods, though it was still considered inadequate to address the problems of writing skills.

The Design Method

This design originated from the free or uncontrolled approach. It advocates the uniqueness of writing as an instrument for design. According to Kostelnick (1989: 267),'the desire to change the face of writing pedagogy in the 60s and the theoretical insights of cognitive psychology helped to give rise to the design method'. This method propagates the non-linear nature of a good piece of writing and the fact that errors/mistakes in writing are indications of linguistic inventions as against inhibitory elements to learning. Though this method was applauded for its problem-solving approach, yet it could not fully address the challenges inherent in the acquisition of writing ability.

The Communicative Method

This method is derived from the amalgamated approach to writing. It is a clear departure from the erstwhile writing method of Chomsky's linguistic competence to communicative competence. White (1998) citing Hymes stressed that language usage in a given context is a vital consideration which is complementary to grammatical rules.

White (1998:17) summarises the theoretical foundations of the communicative theory thus:

> Hymes theory of communicative competence proved to be an important theoretical influence on the evolution of communicative language teaching(CLT)during the 1970. Indeed the formative influences of CLT were socio-linguistic rather than psycholinguistic and include not only the theoretical impetus provided by Hymes,but the influence of speech act theory,through the work of Austin (1962)and Searle (1969) and the discourse analysis(e.g. Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975).

This method therefore accounts for what a speaker needs to know to communicate effectively in a culturally significant setting (Otagburuagu, 1997:61). The communicative method also laid the foundation of communicative essence in language teaching with notable contributors such as Hymes, Austin and Searle, among others. It advocates that writing should take cognisance of its contextual peculiarities.For example, a Nigerian writer must incorporate certain elements in his writing that are peculiar to his environment in order to achieve communicative competence.

Conclusion

Knowledge is not simply represented in writing, but through writing, knowledge can be transferred. Writers often draw on practices to reflect the social make-up of a given society. A good theory of writing acquisition should incorporate not just the grammatical concerns but societal inclinations and aspects of writing within a given context, bearing in mind the interplay between the writer,

reader and the text. The task of the teacher in imparting writing skills amongst learnersis to blend the grammatical and syntactic knowledge of writing with communicative proficiency to achieve linguistic and communicative competence in the acquisition of the written skill and, by extension, other forms of language skills.

Recommendations

The study recommends as follows:

i. Pedagogical activities in writing should be a synergy of grammatical knowledge and communicative competencies centred on the learner's environment.

ii. No method of writing should be used in isolation, rather the teacher must complement appropriate methods to accommodate the writer, reader and the text in imparting this language skill.

iii. Other language skills such as speaking, reading and listening must be considered to determine the pace with which writing skills will be inculcated into the learners.

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