Potential Advantages of Process Writing For Students English Language and Literature at Jerash University in Jordan

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Abstract: *Among the four basic skills in English, the most complex and difficult skill to master is probably writing and writing in a second or foreign language is usually even more difficult than writing in the individual's mother tongue since most of the thinking is usually carried out in the mother tongue. And it is usually the case that a student who faces difficulty writing in ESL\EFL contexts will also face much difficulty when attempting to write in an academic context. Furthermore, the importance of learning to write in English is all the more important because of its acknowledged position as the global language of communication. Thus, the ability to write in English cannot be too emphasized.*

Keywords: *writing process,*

1. INTRODUCTION

In universities, students need to prepare and submit written assignments, critical reviews, term papers, essays, and theses as part of their academic assignments to fulfill their course requirements. Apart from the course requirements in learning institutions, Zamel (1998) has a different view from Maclellan (2004) and Jones (1999) and belongs to another school of thought that believes that writing has the ability to enhance learning in a particular discipline. Zamel(1998) explains that writing helps students to acquire content knowledge and in the course of analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating and making inferences, students are actually developing their cognitive skills. Bacha (2002) shares the same belief when she includes cohesion, summarizing and text organizing skills as well into the definition of writing skills. Furthermore, Manchónand Roca de Larios (2007) profess that writing requires the ability to solve linguistic problems and this helps students in the development of their second language proficiency. Unfortunately, some students are ignorant of the significance and importance of writing towards academic achievement in university and in their careers. Thus, it is imperative to inform students to acquire the requisite writing skills and the benefits that come with the writing process (Marton& Booth, 1997).

According to Lee (2002a), in many EFL contexts the teaching of EFL has undergone much developments and improvements in terms of content, pedagogy, assessments, and achieved learning outcomes. In the case of Jordan, while, the importance of English is limited to the process of enabling students to pass school exams and universities entrance selection purposes, the teaching of EFL in Jordan has also undergone transformation just like in other similar countries that consider the teaching of EFL as an educational and instrumental language (Al-Sawalha and Chow, 2012, Al-Khotaba, 2010).

However, while the relevant authorities in Jordan are aware of the importance of enhancing literacy skills in English for national and international purposes, in reality, in Jordanian schools the teaching of EFL focuses on preparing students for the Tawjihi examination and also for the Jordanian universities entrance examination and therefore concentrates on testing students' receptive skills such as listening and reading and ignores the productive skills like writing (Tahaineh, 2009).This is because English writing is not directly connected to the daily lives of students, resulting in English writing being of secondary importance with regard to other aspects of language skills.

In addition, in the academic environment in Jordanian schools and universities, the standard of

English is weak and this leads to poor written academic literacy (Rababah, 2003).

With specific reference to the Department of English Language at Jerash University in Jordan, the researcher noted that many students are incompetent writers and lack the proficiency to write fluently in English. Besides, students spend several years pursuing basic writing courses at the university but still encounter many problems when attempting to produce a piece of writing and many of them ask their high school teachers or more competent friends to help them complete the assignment.

In the ESL/EFL classroom, the teaching and learning of writing has been a longstanding problem among teachers as well as students. Studies that have been conducted in this area can be categorized according to three major theoretical approaches. Chow (2007) identified these three approaches as the traditional product oriented approach, the process oriented approach and the genre oriented approach to teaching and learning of writing.

2. CRITIQUE OF THE THREE WRITING APPROACHES

Tribble (1996) claims that the three approaches to writing are the subject of contention among a large number of ESL and EFL researchers and teachers. Firstly, they argue that the three approaches do not agree with each other in principle. Secondly, they are of the view that teaching writing within a constrained context creates several conflicting views.

One of the major weaknesses of the product oriented approach is that it focuses entirely on the final output rather than on the actual writing processes (Kamimural, 2000) and this may affect negatively the level of command of the writing skills. Similarly, Badger and White (2000) highlight the absence of the important aspects of writing such as planning, drafting and revising.

Thus, teachers who use the product oriented approach rarely provide instant feedback while the students are producing the written product as only the final product will be read and graded. In short, any problems that occur during the process of writing will be ignored as long as the students are able to produce the final product. In addition, Carrel (1982), pointed out that writing instructions tend to be ignored since what is required is that the final written product contain the textual features of writing, particularly grammatical and linguistic accuracy. In other words, the overall writing abilities of the students are of secondary importance since they judged on the basis of a particular task. However, despite its weaknesses, the product oriented approach does have its strength in that it emphasizes grammatical accuracy in the final product. Bearing all this in mind, it is important for teachers to equip their students with better linguistic knowledge and input and provide proper samples to help them write better (Chen, 2005).

In contrast, the process oriented approach focuses on the student's processing skills and ignores the product (Badger & White, 2000). Such being the case, researchers are of the view that the process oriented approach to teaching writing may teach students to write effectively provided the students know who their target audience is. In other words, the students are only as good as the instructions given with each task, without which there is no guarantee they will be able to perform as effectively. As Badger and White (2000) point out, the process oriented approach does not equip students with the necessary linguistic knowledge to enable them to communicate effectively their ideas and thoughts in writing.

In summation then, each of the three approaches to writing has a characteristic weakness. Firstly, the product based approach focuses on the final product and ignores the actual process of writing itself. Secondly, in the process oriented approach, linguistic knowledge is not adequately included in the teaching and this may result in ineffective organization of ideas in the writing. Thirdly, the genre oriented approach is similar to the product oriented approach in that it does not give adequate attention to the linguistic skills that are necessary for language learners to effectively and actively produce a piece of writing in the absence of specific writing instructions. In addition its emphasis on the final product will only encourage students to become passive language learners (Badger & White, 2000). Notwithstanding, the different views regarding the three main approaches to the teaching of writing, it was found that the process oriented approach is the most dominant and reliable approach in the teaching of writing both in the ESL and EFL contexts (Tribble, 1996). Since the context of this current study is teaching writing in an EFL context, the following sections will go on to discuss in greater detail the process oriented approach to writing.

3. THE STAGES OF THE WRITING PROCESS

Since this research is investigating the possible causes of Jordanian EFL students' weakness in writing , the process oriented approach is the most suitable model to use because this model is conceptualized in terms of three writing stages, namely the pre-writing stage, the composing and drafting stage and the revising stage and editing stage (Tompkins, 2004). Alternatively, the three stages could be grouped into the pre-writing, writing and post writing stage (Tompkins, 2004).

3.1. Prewriting

The writing process always begins with prewriting which in effect leads to writing proper (Gunning, 2000). According to Wing (2009), prewriting is the foundation in the writing process, whereby a writer decides on the objective and target of the task and consequently selects the argument and outline for writing after carrying out preliminary research to locate ideas for the task. Wing (2009, p.1) also claimed that "optimal pre-writing strategies eliminate confusion and minimize writer's block while actually writing. Therefore, a mastery of pre-writing strategies is an invaluable investment that is a must for any serious, academic writer". Emig (1971 p.39), understands prewriting as "that part of the composing process that extends from the time a writer begins to perceive selectively certain features of his inner and/or outer environment with a view to writing about them-usually at the instigation of a stimulus to the time when he first write out words or phrases on paper elucidating that perception". In similar vein, Gauntlet (1978, p.29) added that "before a student begins writing, a process of prewriting or a procedure for stimulating thinking must take place. Prewriting involves sensing, imagining, feeling, talking, and writing". The amount of time taken for writing will depend on the amount of prewriting preparations. In this regard, Emig (1971) made a distinction between the length of time taken to complete a writing task and the purpose of that task by positing that students tend to use more time for personal tasks of writing and reflexive writing compared with teacher-directed or school work and extensive writing. Emig (1971, p.83) also maintained that in the process of attempting prewriting "most of the elements that will appear in the piece are present".

According to Raimes (1983) the activities of prewriting include gathering of ideas, rehearsing, reading, planning, discussing with peers and making small notes prior to writing the first draft. Similarly, Baiocco (1985) considered prewriting as pre-drafting where the writer begins with the given task and subsequently performs a series of activities leading to the writing of the first draft. Murray (1982) shares similar views; the only difference is that he likened prewriting to rehearsing for a writing task and is a part of the writing process itself. Thus he argues that rehearsing was "far more accurate than prewriting to describe activities which precede a completed draft" (Murray, 1982, p. 4).

The prewriting stage can be summarized as follows. The writer prepares for any eventual writing task. At this stage the writer may have the content but has no idea as to how to use the available content. However when the task is given, the writer will try to arrange the meanings and forms to create new and comprehensible content based on the requirements of the task. Then the writer will try to put together other pieces of content or information that come to his/her mind or attention in the course of eliciting for more ideas.

According to Walvoord and Smith (1982), skilled writers tend to think of new ideas while they are in the process of writing. It is a matter of creating new ideas apart from the ideas they already have. Usually after writing out their original ideas, they will realize the need to create more ideas which are linked to the original ones. That is, they approach the process of writing in a proactive manner. However, they do spend some time to plan before they begin the actual writing. Technically, the writer focuses on what to write in relation to the given task, and then decides on the field of study before choosing a suitable format to convey the ideas to the target audience. In this regard prewriting activities include research on the subject matter, making short notes, using one's imagination, outlining and a little writing (Hayes & Nash, 1996).

Many researchers, for example, (Tompkins, 1990) assure that writers can generate most of their ideas and construct the basic structure of the content in the prewriting stage and one of the characteristics of students' poor performance in writing is that they do not plan before writing; they simply write whatever comes to their mind. In this regard, it is instructive to note that

Charney et al., (1995) indicate that the problem of having nothing to write results in writing apprehension. To EFL students, the inability to express themselves in the target language leads to frustration and apprehension in writing which is compounded by the lack of appropriate prewriting activities. Consequently it leads not only to poor English writing proficiency but also writing apprehension (Chiang, 2003).

3.2. Writing

The second stage, which is writing, involves drafting or composing the product. Drafting is also known as composing or translating and involves the process of putting ideas into language (Feng, 2001). In the first draft, the focus is on writing out the ideas with little regard for textual features like neatness, spelling or grammar (Murray, 1991; Gunning, 2000; Tompkins, 2004). This enables students to focus on the content without having to worry about the mechanics. They will attempt the refinement and corrections after they have written down all their ideas (Murray, 1991). Consequently, during the entire writing stage, students may return to the drafting stage as often as they need to since they do not start by rehearsing the final product in their minds before they start to write.

A number of studies, for example, (Campbell et al., 1998; Torrance et al., 1999; Mahalski, 1992) have indicated that most undergraduates produce more than one draft during the process of writing. These findings indicated a positive correlation between the number of drafts students produced and their grades as well as text improvement. However, Campbell et al., (1998) pointed out too that multiple drafting does not necessarily determine the quality of the final product. As Lee (2006) stressed the positive effect of students' multiple drafting depends on the meaningful revising process at each drafting stage. However, the effort of producing a number of drafts represents the first step towards understanding students' drafting behavior that would help teachers to address the students' problems related to the process of drafting.

3.3. Post Writing

When the first draft has been written, students then begin to improve it by making the necessary changes so that ideas are clarified and refined (Tompkins, 2004). The changes are made so that the text reflects the writing objectives. Thus, the revision process involves activities like adding, deleting, substituting, or moving ideas on a variety of discourse levels (Tompkins, 2004). If students need to add more ideas in the process of revising, they will return to the prewriting stage or the drafting stage to add more details. According to Yasuda (2005), revising is a general process which includes editing. The revising process is mainly concerned with deep-level changes that affect the meaning of a text, while the editing process is regarded as involving surface-level changes that do not affect the meaning of a text (Wong, 2005). In addition, while revision is often done either during the composing process or during the revision of an entire draft, editing is the last stage of the composing process (Wong, 2005).

However, (Gunning, 2000; Murray, 1991) observe that students who are asked to revise in school will usually focus on the mechanics of writing rather than on editing their ideas. Similarly, Campbell et al., (1998) discovered that unskilled students focused more on the mechanics of writing rather than making substantial changes to improve their drafts in the revising stage. In addition Campbell et al., (1998) claimed that students who viewed revising as an important aspect of the writing process which will help improve the whole text focused on overall issues such as idea elaboration, coherence, and unity. In contrast, students who viewed revising as a re-reading activity for the purpose of checking grammar and lexicon focused more on surface level features.

4. CONCLUSION

In light of the above discussion on the three writing models, it appears that given the problems encountered by Jordanian EFL students as highlighted early, process writing model has the potential to at Jerash University in learning to write in English in a holistic way. Apart from introducing them to the various stages and activities of producing a good piece of writing, the process itself has the potential to increase the Jordanian EFL student's enjoyment of the writing process. This is because Jordanian students usually do not know where or how to start when they are given a writing task. Besides, due to their limited exposure to English language materials, Jordanian EFL learners often feel inadequate and this may result in frustration when they face

difficulties while trying to organize their ideas to write English compositions. Consequently, they also face difficulty when they try to express themselves meaningfully in their writing resulting in many more problems as they attempt to produce a text.

In the face of these cumulative difficulties it is not surprising that many of these learners are not motivated by the writing process itself. In addition, many of their teachers complain that the objectives of teaching English writing are very prescriptive and restrictive since the curriculum for EFL in Jordan does not actually take into consideration the situation and problems experienced by students as well as teachers in pre-university as well as university. There is very little attention paid to the actual processes that are required for the production of good writing.

In this regard, the process approach to writing has the potential to address some of the significant problems faced by the students and teachers. The Jordanian EFL students at Jerash University will be introduced to a different approach to writing that hopefully will not frustrate and discourage them from continuing to learn to write in English. For instance, the first component of process writing in the form of pre-writing activities can help them overcome writer's block. The emphasis on expressing themselves at the drafting stage also helps them concentrate on the development of their ideas. As such the activities built into process writing serve to help the students gain the necessary cognitive skills and hence become effective writers. This idea is consistent with what Victori (1999) suggests, where EFL students should be taught strategies such as planning and organizing ideas and evaluating to write successfully. So, if the Jordanian students are engaged in similar activities but in a local context, then they will have the opportunity as well as option to learn to write more effectively.

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