WRITING AS AN IDIOSYNCRATIC COGNITIVE PROCESS: IT’S IMPLICATION ON WRITING PEDAGOGY.

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ABSTRACT: The present paper attempts to review the literature on the process of writing and the approaches of teaching writing with the aim of making a paradigm shift in the writing pedagogy. This shift from the traditional teaching methods is materialized from the review of literature on writing approaches and writing processes that emphasize on writing as an idiosyncratic cognitive process oriented skill. The writing skills cannot be taught in a rigid framework of an approach based on the uni-dimensional perception of writing process. As such this new framework of writing pedagogy allows an eclectic approach in which writing skills can be taught keeping in mind the individual writers’ cognitive processes.

KEY WORDS - idiosyncratic cognitive process, uni dimensional, eclectic approach

1. INTRODUCTION

Acquisition of writing skills is a gradual and time taking process. This skill can be developed over a period of time with rigorous practice. Learners have to go through different stages of writing in order to completely master this skill. At the primary level it starts with writing out the individual alphabets and words. Later these words are stringed together to write sentences with appropriate use of grammar and correct punctuation.

A great deal of thinking and hard work goes into producing a good piece of writing. This process of writing primarily involves the generation of an idea, with great deal of thinking this idea is expanded and finally, comes the shaping and reshaping of the developed idea. According to Langan (2001) “It is frustrating to discover how much of a challenge is to transfer thoughts and feelings from one’s head onto a sheet of paper” (pg.13).

Flower (1985), remarked that reading is the transfer of symbol into thoughts and writing as the transfer of thought into symbol. The definition of writing by Flower is enhanced a bit by Byrne (1979), where symbols are replaced by words; he stated that writing involves the use of words arranged in a particular order to form sentences, which are further put together to form a paragraph.

Brown (2001) stated that writing is a product of thinking, drafting and editing. According to him in order to write something one need specialized skills of generating ideas; organizing these ideas in a coherent manner and finally the skill of editing the written text to check with appropriate grammar and punctuation to produce a final product.

From all the above definitions of writing, it can be finally summed up as being a productive skill that should be learnt and mastered by English language learners. The process of writing as a whole involves thinking, drafting and revising/editing. Writing is a means of communication that enables learners to express their ideas and knowledge with appropriate grammar, punctuation, format, vocabulary and so on.

The approaches to teaching writing are classified differently by different researchers. However, they can be broadly categorized into three main approaches: Product approach, Process approach and Genre approach (Hyland, 2002).

The next sections will discuss these approaches in detail and would try to redefine writing abilities in each context.

2.1 THE PRODUCT APPROACH

Various scholars have tried to define this approach over the decades in more or less similar lines. A few of the prominent definitions are given below.

Pincas (1982) notes that this approach looks at writing as primarily about linguistic knowledge, giving importance to the correct use of vocabulary, syntax and cohesion.

Hedge (1988), she explains that this approach involves “Getting the grammar right, having a range of vocabulary, punctuating meaningfully and using the conventions of layout correctly…” (Pg.8)

Hyland (2003) says that this approach of teaching writing views writing as a ‘final product’ (Pg.8), where the final product is well organized, logical and sentences are formed according to the rules of the language. He further explains that writing skills are improved by analyzing and imitating a given text in the form of exercises, such as filling the blanks, completing sentences, changing the tenses and other similar exercises.

Brown (2004) contends that in the product approach, learners should obey three specific characteristics of writing, which are as follows

1. The final product i.e. the written text should follow the norms of the standard English
2. Appropriate grammar should be used when writing and
3. Written text should be organized and coherent so that it is easy for a reader to comprehend the text easily.

Product approach views writing as a mechanical process where the knowledge of the language, elements of the language and limitation of the texts are given importance (Hyland, 2003). Tickoo (2003) also summarizes this approach as an approach where attention is given to the final product, where the learners focus only on producing a final text rather than undergoing the actual process of writing. The learners mainly learn the grammar of the language and use them appropriately.
This approach sees a piece of written text as “acontextually autonomous object” (Hyland, 2002), where the main focus is on the surface features of the language like grammar and punctuation. The goal of the instruction based on this approach is to ensure that learners learn the rules of language and use them appropriately. Thus invariably the writing skills would be improved.

This view of writing skills is similar to Behaviourism, where learning is viewed as a habit formation, where the learners are asked mechanically to imitate and copy models of texts. (Nunan, 1999; Raimes, 1983).

In this approach the students’ writing ability is assessed in terms of content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. From this perspective it is clear that learners are expected to show mastery in form and structure.

According to Product approach the learners when learning to write, go through four stages to produce a text. (Badger & White 2000; Pincas 1982; Hyland 2003). Hence, when teachers teach writing skills using this approach, they mainly focus on the teaching of grammar and general knowledge of the language.

2.2 THE PROCESS APPROACH

The process approach of writing mainly focuses on the various steps involved when producing a text (Stromquist, 2007).

Various researchers tried to define this process approach to teaching in different ways. A few prominent ones are given below.

Hyland (2007) stated that “this approach emerged from researchers study of the steps that accomplished writers engage in as they write i.e. the steps of planning and organizing ideas, translating ideas into text, reviewing and revising the result” (Pg.90).

Tribble (1996) suggests that process approach stresses on “… writing activities which move learners from the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the publication of a finished text” (Pg.37). This approach predominantly focuses on the writer rather than the text. Writing is regarded as a process of discovering meaning and developing organization (Matsuda, 2003). It involves what good writers would do when approaching writing tasks.

Kroll (2001) defines process approach as follows: “The process approach captures the fact that student writers engage in their writing tasks through a cyclical approach rather than a single-shot approach. They are not expected to produce and submit complete and polished responses to their writing assignments without going through the stages of drafting and receiving feedback on their drafts, be it from peers or from teachers, followed by revision of their evolving text” (pp.220).

Regarding this approach Pennington (1991) stated that “process approach regards writing as a creative and purposeful activity of reflecting both in the sense of mirroring and in the sense of deliberating one’s own thoughts” (Pg56).

Different researchers have proposed different schemes to explain process approach of writing. These schemes are slightly different in terms of terminology and activities. However, they are similar when it comes to the main idea i.e. writing is a process that goes through different stages.

White and Arndt (1991), based on the idea of process approach stated that “writing is a complex cognitive process that requires sustained intellectual effort over a considerable period of time” (Pg.273).

Process approach to writing aims to train students to generate ideas for writing, plan the ideas, write and rewrite in order to produce a final draft. Teachers who follow this approach give ample time and appropriate feedback to students to get ideas and present them coherently. With this view in mind Raimes (1988), stated that “writing becomes a process of discovery for the students as they discover new ideas and new language forms to express them.” (Pg.76)

A process writing approach makes teachers give students greater responsibility for their own learning. The students keep in mind that it is possible to improvise their writing as they go through different stages of writing.

In this approach there is scope for learners to write first draft, show it to their peers and teacher to enrich and revise it before writing a final draft. Since this approach focuses on fluency than accuracy, students are encouraged to write as much as possible without the fear of making mistakes.

Genre approach of teaching emerged from the systematic functional theory of language developed by Halliday (1978). Hyland (2007) clarified that in process approach the emphasis was laid on the individual writer and what processes occur in an individual writer is writing, but there is no proper proof that this would lead to development in writing skills of English as second language learners.

Process approach does not look beyond the individual writer whereas writing is a social process that takes into account the factors of an audience and purpose of writing a text. Hyland (2007) stated that genre approach to teaching writing has come into existence mainly as “a response to changing views of discourse and of learning to write which incorporates better understanding of how language is structured to achieve social purpose in particular contexts of use” (Pg. 1).

2.3 GENRE APPROACH

Genre based approach to teaching writing is based on the principles of a genre. Genre is defined by many theorists in different ways. Hyon (1996) defined genre as “oral and written text types which have formal qualities and communicative purposes in a social context” (Pg.695). Swales (1990) defined genre as “a class of communicative events, the members of which share same set of communicative purposes” (pg.58).

It can be summed up from these definitions and points of views that genre involves a set of communicative incidents which have pre-determined set of rules, styles and format for the users of a language by the experts in the field. Therefore, while teaching writing using genre approach the structural features (these features include the traits of writing i.e. organization, language form and style etc.) and the purpose of a written text are emphasized.

The above description of genre is similar to that of a product approach to teaching writing, where writing is considered only as a linguistic tool. The genre approach uses this concept and enhances it by stating that writing happens in different social contexts in varied forms (Badger & White, 2000).
Hence, depending on the purpose and format of a written text there are different genres of writing. Different researchers have come to classify the different genres of writing in different ways. These genres of writing are classified by different theorists in different ways. In some of the classifications the terminology of the genres has changed whereas the purpose of a written text has remained the same. Like the instructional writing from the above classification is sometimes called as procedural writing. The above given classification sums up the major genres that are used in today's classrooms.

The purpose of each genre would influence the schematic structure and linguistic structure of a written text. The schematic structure includes organization of a text (coherence and cohesion) in the form of an – introduction, body and conclusion, whereas linguistic features include the grammar, vocabulary, linkers etc. Writers have to use them in ways that are prescribed in order to convey meanings/ideas to readers without any ambiguity.

Genre approach of teaching is based on the social and cultural context of written text. Hence it helps learners understand that writing is a tool that can be used to achieve certain things in society. Once the learners know how to use and for what purposes each of these genres to use, they would be able to use them flexibly depending on their own needs. This makes learners independent users of language.

Dudley-Evans (1998) said that learners at beginning or intermediate levels would be more benefited from this approach. Since writing skills are complex, learners at lower proficiency levels would appreciate the use of a model text to eventually write on their own. Learners in the initial stages would prefer to depend on sample texts especially when they are trying to write something new. This approach helps learners in providing appropriate scaffold.

3. THE PROCESS OF WRITING
3.1 COGNITIVE PROCESS THEORY
In 1960’s the product approach of writing was criticized, mainly because of its over emphasis on production of error free texts. It neither catered to the writers’ thoughts or expressions nor adequately described the composition process (Silva, 1990).

As a result of this criticism a new model of teaching writing emerged called cognitive model. This approach centers on what the writer does during composing process. This model of writing emerged eventually with addition of extra elements at each stage of writing.

The emergence of new approaches after product approach materialized because of a paradigm shift in the way of looking at writing process. The view of looking at writing as a mechanical process was replaced by writing as a cognitive process. With this new view in mind Vygotsky (1962) pointed out that thinking and writing are two inseparable elements, which are interdependent. His assumption of thinking which is developed through language supports the cognitive view of writing skills. He construes that language and thought are continual processes, where thoughts are expressed with the help of words and thus thoughts come into existence in the form of words.

Kellogg (1994) considered thinking and writing as two facets of a single coin, since both thinking and writing involve very similar cognitive operations. Hence according to Kellogg writing is not merely a production of error free texts but it is a “dynamic, problem-solving, recursive thinking process”.

The first cognitive model emerged during 1960’s; this model had “expressivity” as its core idea. According to this view students were encouraged to develop their own writing without being directive, assuming that writing is a creative process (Berlin, 1988).

Kaplan (1996) noted that this view encouraged learners to look for their own “authentic voice” and freely express them. According to this view writing is considered as a personal expression and discovery, where the process of writing is as important as the product. This model disproves the notion that good writing is mere generation of grammatically correct paragraphs. It focuses on how writers can develop writing skills with the help of a facilitator.

Based on this view, Hyland (2003) noted that “writing is learned, not taught, so writing instruction is non-directive and personal” (Pg.10).

In the present ESL context we observe heterogeneous classrooms, where learners have differing abilities and interest. These circumstances make it harder for any teacher to use one particular approach to teach writing skills. For some learners product approach to teach writing skills might be suitable, for some learners it might be genre approach that might be useful. One cannot say that one approach is advantageous over the other and generalize these statements to all learning contexts.

Best teaching approach in any context would be that which depends on learners, their proficiency levels, their needs and curriculum demands. In this regard Gardner and Johnson (1997) have observed “Writing is a fluid process created by writers as they work… In actuality, the writing process is not a highly organized linear process, but rather a continual movement between different steps of the writing process” (Pg.36). Each learner would have his/her own ways of going about the whole process of writing. There never can be a single best approach to teach all learners in a classroom.

All the approaches have their own set of merits and demerits. All these approaches were proposed like a formula, a rigid structure to be followed in order to become better writers. All these approaches are the result of washback effect of standardized tests. “On the other hand, rigidly conceived process writing instruction garners criticism as yet another form of teaching to the tests, something that curriculum theorists and practitioners agree tends almost always to narrow the curriculum and to reduce real learning” (Walling, 2006: Pg.7).

In the current situations, where the high stakes tests expect learners to think and write rather than just memorize and write. These “formulaic” approaches tend to fail as they help in producing formulaic answers (Walling, 2006). It is important to achieve good grades in a test; at the same time the major goal of learning is to write well. Learners should be taught how to write well so that they automatically pass the tests that are given to them. Learners should be given ample opportunities to explore all the ways in which they can learn to write well.

3.2 WRITING PROCESS
Writing process is conceptually divided into three phases, stimulus, process and product. The following given illustration represents these three phases of writing.

Figure 1. Writing process. Reprinted from Teaching Writing to Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic Learners (Pg. 11), by Walling, D.R., 2006, Guilford press.

As we have observed in earlier sections, writing is not a linear process. Rather it is cyclical and non-linear. Teachers who look at writing as a linear process tend to build unsuccessful writers.

The three phases of stimulus, process and product show how writing usually proceeds. Each learner will have his/her own ways of responding to each of these phases depending on their interests and learning profiles. “What actually happens as the writer moves through each phase reflects the idiosyncrasies of the writer” (Walling, D.R., 2006, pg.10).

3.2.1 STIMULUS
Research has established that all learners construct knowledge in ways based on the functioning of their brains and how brains respond to stimulus. “The way that students’ mind work also influences how and how well they learn to write” (Walling, D.R., 2006, pg.1). Some learners learn from linguistic cues and some rely on logical or mathematical cues, visual learners respond easily to information presented in the form of visuals while auditory learners prefer audio cues and kinesthetic learners require physical activity to learn.

All learners need stimulus to write. In a typical classroom, this stimulus would be in the form of a writing assignment given by the teacher. It should be kept in mind that not all learners are equally excited to write or to respond to the given assignment or task. Teachers should plan or devise strategies to inculcate interest in learners regarding the given task. This can be done by taking into account the learners’ interest and their learning profiles and provide them stimulus in ways that match learners’ interests and learning profiles.

3.2.2 PROCESS
The process phase can be divided into two components, the mental component and physical component. Mental component includes activities where the brain functions that are necessary to write are involved. The mental component involves the functions of formation of ideas, brainstorming, analyzing, organizing, revising and evaluating etc.

The physical component involves the actual act of writing on a paper, typing, discussing with peers and teachers etc. The stimulus in the previous stage helps in moving to this process phase which would eventually lead to the product phase. Teachers need to use various instructional strategies to help all learners fully explore this process phase, which would help them become better writers.

3.2.3 PRODUCT
The product phase is the final phase of writing, where learners produce a written draft as result of stimulus and process. This product can range from initial jotting down of points to the final version of a written draft.

Learners make points, notes or use graphic organizers initially to write their primary thoughts or ideas, which they further refine and enhance with the help of stimulus. The arrow in the above illustration has a dotted line which describes an intermediate step which continues further to the tip of the arrow towards next cycle of stimulus, process and product. There will be number of cycles like this that a student goes through until a final draft which is acceptable is produced.

Though the arrow presented is in a linear fashion, it is more of a cyclical process than a linear process, where the product with dotted lines is an intermediate stop which further moves ahead with the help of stimulus and continues through the phases of process and product again.

Table 1: Instructional strategies for writing.
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Tiered assignments</td>
<td>Tiered assignments are designed to instruct students on essential skills that are provided at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. The curricular content and objective(s) are the same, but the process and/or product are varied according to the student's level of readiness.</td>
<td>Students with moderate writing skills are asked to write a four-paragraph persuasive essay in which they provide a thesis statement and use their own ideas to support it. Students with more advanced skills are asked to research the topic in more depth and use substantive arguments from their research to support their thesis.</td>
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<td>Compacting</td>
<td>Compacting is the process of adjusting instruction to account for prior student mastery of learning objectives. Compacting involves a three-step process: (1) assess the student to determine his/her level of knowledge on the material to be studied and determine what he/she still needs to master; (2) create plans for what the student needs to know, and excuse the student from studying what he/she already knows; and (3) create plans for freed-up time to be spent in enriched or accelerated study.</td>
<td>Rather than receiving additional direct instruction on writing a five-sentence paragraph, a student who already has that skill is asked to apply it to a variety of topics and is given instruction on writing a five-paragraph essay.</td>
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<td>Interest Groups</td>
<td>Interest centers are set up so that learning experiences are directed toward a specific learner interest. Allowing students to choose a topic can be motivating to them.</td>
<td>Interest Centers - Centers can focus on specific writing skills, such as steps in the writing process, and provide examples and activities that center on a theme of interest, such as sports or movies.</td>
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<td>Learning Contracts</td>
<td>Learning contracts begin with an agreement between the teacher and the student. The teacher specifies the necessary skills expected to be learned by the student, while the student identifies methods for completing the tasks. This strategy (1) allows students to work at an appropriate pace; (2) helps students work independently, learn planning skills, and eliminate unnecessary skill practice.</td>
<td>A student indicates an interest in writing a newspaper article. The student, with support from the teacher, specifies the process by which he or she will research newspaper writing and decides how to present the final product.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choice Boards</td>
<td>Choice boards are organizers that contain a variety of activities. Students can choose one or several activities to complete as they learn a skill or develop a product. Choice boards can be organized so that students are required to choose options that focus on several different skills.</td>
<td>Students in an elementary school class are given a choice board that contains a list of possible poetry writing activities. Examples of activities include, cutting out magazine letters to create poems, or dictating a poem into a tape recorder and transcribing it. Students must complete two activities from the board.</td>
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REFERENCES


