

## **Evaluating Product Writing Approach in the Context of Malaysian Classrooms: A Conceptual Paper**

Sarala @ Thulasi a/p Palpanadan

Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

Fauziah Ismail & Abdul Rahim Salam

Language Academy, 81310 UTM Johor Bahru, Johor, Malaysia

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to evaluate the practices of language teachers in teaching writing in the Malaysian classrooms. For this purpose, a detailed investigation into the existing literature was carried out. More specifically, the paper investigated the motivation of teachers for using product writing approach in teaching writing. The paper attempted to answer two questions: first, why teachers in the Malaysian classrooms prefer to use product writing approach dominantly, second, how model essays can be effectively used for developing students' writing skills. The existing literature revealed that teachers prefer to use product approach for several reasons. Helping students to obtain good grades, covering course requirements on time and preparing students for examination are some of the reasons for adopting this approach. The study also discovered that product approach is not an effective way to teach writing skills because it makes the students passive and become dependent learners. This paper suggests that teachers should use model essays carefully according to students' needs and capabilities.

*Keywords:* Product approach, writing skills, Malaysian schools

### **INTRODUCTION**

English language is growing in popularity as an important vehicle for communication in the world (Akinwamide, 2012). In the context of Malaysia, English language is taught as a second language in schools at all levels. Despite this, literature has revealed that students graduating from Malaysian schools have poor and low standards of English language skills especially writing skills (Normazidah, Koo, and Hazita, 2012). Researchers have reported that there are many causes responsible for this situation, such as classroom environment, teaching practices and lack of motivation on the part of teachers to adopt different techniques for teaching writing. As a result, when attempting examination, Malaysian students could not do well in English subject especially in the writing section, which is perceived as one of the most difficult part (Nesamalar, Saratha and Teh, 2001). In the context of Malaysian classroom and language curriculum, writing component receives more weight in terms of marks for an examination paper. Many researchers believe that writing skills are highly important to be mastered by students. The writing activities in which students take part will play a key role to enter into tertiary education or joining the work force.

According to some scholars, teaching and learning of writing skills are comparatively difficult than learning other language skills (Akinwamide, 2012). It is noted that teachers' writing practices deeply influence students' way of writing (Sahin, Bullock, and Stables, 2002). Although it is necessary that students need to develop good writing skills, the question remains whether they are given sufficient exposure to good writing practices which train them to be creative writers. In achieving this goal, teachers can use a strategy like executing innovative writing instructions in classroom for students. Furthermore, teachers must have sufficient writing knowledge and skills in the language teaching along with the required knowledge to carry out writing instructions adequately in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. For this purpose, the approaches practiced by the ESL teachers to teach writing in ESL classroom need to be further studied.

During early 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, different prominent developments took place in the arena of first language (L1) composition pedagogy and research (Hossein and Nasrin, 2012). As a result, many teaching approaches in second language (L2) writing actually branched out from L1 writing practices. There are no comprehensive theories in L2 writing at present in the domain of teaching and learning especially related to teaching of writing (Silva, 1990). However, among the available approaches, the product and process approaches are extensively used in language classrooms in the ESL writing instructions (Badger and White, 2000). Interestingly, these writing approaches practised by the ESL writing teachers have gone through different phases in primary and secondary schools in Malaysian classrooms.

The basic aim of this paper is to discuss the functions of the product approach and to look at the practices of teachers in Malaysian language classrooms who practise teaching writing. The paper also investigates into the motivations of teachers for using product writing approach dominantly. This review does a comprehensive reflection on how the product writing approach is conceptualised and practised by teachers in writing instructions in the classrooms while raising question about the prevailing low competency in writing among students.

## **CONCEPT OF PRODUCT APPROACH AND ITS APPLICATION IN TEACHING WRITING**

Research has revealed that product approach is one of the dominantly practised language teaching and learning approaches around the world. It is also known as Models Approach (Akinwamide, 2012). In the late 1970s, the practice of product approach widely prevailed in schools. It was used as the writing instruction which focused on very rigid text features of model texts. Under this approach, rules of grammar governed the nature of this traditional concept of writing instructional discourse (Nystrand, 2006). However, it was observed that the product approach came under criticism. There was a great deal of critique about this approach among scholars. They perceived that product approach was very model based. Thus, language and educational specialists started paying attention to individual learning and the writing processes rather than mere final write up.

Generally, the trend of using product approach intensified in the 1970s and 1980s, as a result, a new direction was sought and concerned was shown by researchers in the writing research. This discussion ended in the emergence of a new concept called process writing. Hence, as an alternative, the process writing approaches were recommended to be used in language classrooms with the attention to content prior to form (Raimes, 1991). However, the process approach became less popular due to its constraints such as time, workload related to marking the drafts, teacher's belief, and linguistic accuracy and so on (Chow, 2007; Majid, Mohamad, and Cheong, 2012).

Consequently, teachers started resorting to product approach. They believed that this approach was more useful and could enlighten their tasks of teaching writing effectively to their students. Writers have reported that product approach is helpful for language teachers in introducing various types of essays. This may be used for helping their students in learning and developing writing skills. At the same time, they also believed that product approach helps in covering up the syllabus on time. In this way, the teachers slowly were motivated towards practising the product approach in the ESL writing instruction in the 1990s (Chow, 2007).

Writers have documented that product approach basically encourages the students to produce an end product in terms of writing a piece of work or paper. This may be identical to a model essay or the essay provided by the teachers. The main purpose of the essay is to develop students' knowledge about writing skills. So here the main aim and focus of the activity is about developing more and more linguistic knowledge of the students and make them intellectually rich (Pincas, 1982a). In this way, students also adopt and imitate some simple sentences to get familiarised with the content. They also copy and finally transform

the writing models into a new essay to be as perfect as the one that they have imitated by focusing on the correct language. After that, the students are required to do their assigned task and submit their essays to the teacher (evaluator) to be marked. In return, after doing the necessary corrections, the students resubmit their essays to the teachers. In this way, the product approach encourages students to practise some simple sentences and finally produce an identical writing of the model essay given. Thus, product approach attracts students' attention to imitate a model by focusing on the correct language.

Writers are of the view that product approach mostly focuses on the content of the text as well as the score obtained (Hasan and Akhand, 2010). The product approach is more concerned with the finished texts in terms of the linguistic accuracies of students and correcting them. The teacher's role is to provide feedback for the development of the student's knowledge pertaining to the writing tasks. Thus, the teacher's feedback is based on the grammatical and lexical errors. In short, the writing tasks become out of context where the settings and audience are neglected. The Product Approach Model comprises of four stages (Steele, 2004): Stage 1- Familiarisation; Stage 2 - Controlled Writing; Stage 3 - Guided Writing; and Stage 4 - Free writing.

According to Steele (2004), there are four stages in product approach to teach writing. Each stage is discussed below in more detail. In stage one, teachers ask students to study the model texts. After that the features of the texts are highlighted. The second stage is controlled writing. In this stage, students practise the highlighted features, usually in isolation. The third stage is guided writing which is considered to be an important juncture where ideas are organized. Teachers who favour this approach strongly believe that the organisation of ideas is more important than the ideas themselves. The last stage is the free writing where students produce the end product based on the teaching and learning of the writing process. In this stage, students write comparable writing tasks. In order to be as fluent and competent users of the language, the students are encouraged to use the skills, structures and vocabulary they were taught earlier to produce a perfect end product.

## **TEACHER MOTIVATION AND PRODUCT APPROACH**

Product writing approach is one of the most popularly practiced approaches in the language classrooms. Different writers are of the view that using model essay to teach writing is useful especially under unavoidable circumstances. However, many scholars have different understanding. They argue that the model essays bring serious repercussion to students in terms of the quality of students' writing in the long run. Much literature has revealed that these models can help students to write essays and some studies show that models can also hinder students from achieving a better capacity in writing ability.

Many teachers are comfortable to practise or adapt product approach for some reasons. First, teacher's response is the key role for students to see their mistakes and rectify them. This is the only way to help students develop writing skills since there is no time for teachers for individual coaching due to the number of students per classroom and the teacher's teaching workload in schools (in Malaysian context). Second, in the product writing approach, there is an opportunity for students to correct their mistakes. They may learn the correct grammar and sentence structure by looking at the teacher's marking. In this way, teachers can make sure, to a greater extent, that erroneous writing structure would not become habits of students. This method effectively works if the teachers are able to mark the essays as soon as possible before the students forget what they have written after some time.

Other studies have found that some teachers feel more comfortable with the way they were trained in teaching writing. On the basis of their previous experiences, they decide to use product approach to teach writing. They also tailor made their teaching methods the way they learnt writing in school, teachers' training college or university. Chow (2007) stated that generally, most of the ESL teachers in Malaysian schools today practice the traditional product-oriented writing. This approach heavily focuses on linguistic features. This is considered as the key to effective writing. Consequently, the students tend to write according to what they think their teachers would consent and deprive themselves from voicing out their own expression.

In addition, the teachers have the opportunity to show their credibility of being knowledgeable and responsible in their field by marking the students' writing. This belief is generally demonstrated as a face value to be shown to their superiors, such as administrators and other education officers. Although product approach is believed to be helpful for teachers to solve problems in the writing instruction, it created other challenges in the teaching writing. In one study, Wingate (2012) demonstrated that students found that the model texts were very useful in providing information prior to their writing activities. The researcher

suggested that analysis of model text can be a good starting point for writing instruction, followed by the development of critical perspective and not otherwise.

In another study, Hasan and Akhand (2010) found that students study the model essay and learn it by heart. Then, on the demand of the teacher, they reproduce it or replicate the model. Thus, the overuse of models stifles and inhibits students' writing creativity and turns them into mere copiers. This statement highlights the drawback of the product approach. As a result, students are inclined to become dependent writers when each time they are provided with model essays for reference. This attitude on the part of students can lead them to become plagiarists in future as they reproduce others' work without acknowledgment. Apparently, it is important to evaluate the original indication and implementation of the product approach as being practised in the classrooms systematically. Since product approach involves 4 stages (Steele, 2004), teachers should at least pave way for students to produce a free writing activity. This can reduce the risk of training students to become mere copiers.

Literature has shown that currently, there is a profound stress on examinations as a benchmark for measuring academic achievement (Koo, 2008). The teachers provide writing instructions to students where students are expected to produce good writing as far as language accuracy is concerned. In Malaysian language classrooms context, this area has become the main focus in the assessment of students' writing (Majid, Mohamad, and Cheong, 2012). Consequently, teachers overlook the communicative aspect of the language by giving attention to the teaching of grammar (Normazidah, Koo, and Hazita, 2012). Furthermore, most ESL teachers who assume themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers tend to utilise writing lessons as a platform to practice grammar and other linguistic feature of the subject (Zamel, 1985). Hence, students are only the operators of the learnt language structure earlier and the teachers become the editors or proof readers who are interested in the linguistic accuracy language (Luchini, 2003). This will eventually suppress students' creativity in writing activities.

## USING MODEL ESSAYS IN TEACHING WRITING

Model is important in the process of writing. In the product writing approach, students who copied the thesis sentences face problems with supporting points which they leave unattended or repeated the points in the thesis statement itself. Students realise that models are "cases" and therefore should not to be adopted "literally" (Macbeth; 2010). Some students imitate the insufficient writing model structures to support a claim such as using a quotation or paraphrase. However, some good students managed to rectify the "false promises" of the models by knowing that different assignments require different way of writing. She found that students need to be alerted about the false provisions so that they may know and understand the necessary adaptations or changes needed to be done to the models before embarking on the writing activity.

Writing models are regarded as the "skeleton" or framework for students especially novice writers to begin writing by assisting them with the skills required to establish an assignment. However, models can also lead students "astray" if one is not aware of the limits (Macbeth, 2010). Her findings revealed three types of false provisions - *the introductory to an essay, the thesis connection and structure* (2010:40). First, students who followed models could not write 'interesting' introduction for their own essays. The models were supposed to be used as a guide for students to progress toward independent construction which was misused by some students. Secondly, students who follow the models' thesis statement without paying attention to the meaning found themselves defending similarities and differences that opposed their own opinion.

The above discussion also shows that the debate among researchers about which approach is more suitable or provides the best guidance for students continues to be a challenging topic. There is a pressuring need for addressing the current predicaments that ESL students need more improvement in learning English language proficiency especially writing skills and language use (Ghabool, Edwina, and Hossein, 2012). In Malaysian context, there are usually students of mixed ability that vary so extensively. This makes reliance on only one approach in writing instructions almost impossible in most of the ESL classrooms. In addition, literature further clarified that Malaysian teachers today generally prefer to use the product approach. The study found that the end result becomes the main target of the teachers. They allow their students to learn few grammar rules and apply the rules in their writing. However, literature revealed that focusing on the end product alone, by marginalizing the process and the real purpose of writing, will not get the students to step forward.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study discovered that teachers in Malaysian schools prefer to use product writing. Based on the review, this paper suggests that models for effective teaching writing need to be tailored to suit the students' needs and proficiency level. This will help to achieve the best outcomes in developing students' writing skills. Students will be able to write independently and effectively when they realise that they are not writing just to score a good grade. Hence, the use of models in teaching writing can be very effective if it is accompanied by application of different techniques. The study also found that model essays can be effectively used by teachers for developing writing skills among the students as a start. It depends solely on the adaptation and suitability of the model essays. For this purpose, teachers must realise and know the ways of evaluating the strengths and the weaknesses of the method adopted for teaching before applying it in their classrooms.

The paper concludes that awareness is needed to be created among those teachers who are involved in developing students' writing skills. Teachers should pay close attention to produce future independent writers. The attention should not only be on preparing students to obtain high grades but it should be also focus on the quality of writing skills prepared by students.

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