

APPROACHES TO TEACHING SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer some guidelines regarding the background of the writing instruction and theory and how it has been regarded over the years. We will review the main approaches to teaching foreign language writing and present their advantages and limitations in order to guide teachers into making a grounded decision with regard to the right approach to be used in composition instruction at the advanced level. The insights derived from this research study can enable teachers to design the syllabus and base their teaching decisions on guiding principles. Moreover, it can offer shortcuts to effective teaching of the writing skill, prevent them from making mistakes which have already been made, offer a reference point for comparing their own strategies as well as help them become knowledgeable about why they are doing the things they are doing with regard to writing and thus become teaching professionals.

Key words: advantages, approaches, foreign language writing, limitations

Writing is a process of communication, “a system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer”. It is “language in a textual medium through the use of a set of signs or symbols (known as a writing system)” (Daniels, 1996, p. 2). It is important to remind that unlike speaking, writing is not an inborn skill or capacity (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996) and thus mastering its specific tools depends on teaching and learning, which are voluntary and contextual yet not compulsory and not happening in one go.

Due to the fact that it comes second to immediate interaction needs, which are obviously satisfied by speaking and listening understanding, writing seems to come to the forefront only after students have mastered the language. Traditionally, although writing elements are produced by

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learners starting with very early stages in their study (sentences, short paragraphs), the accent falls on the language used rather than on the message rendered.

Advocates of teaching approaches or methods based on behaviourism, such as the “audio-lingual method” dominated the pedagogy of English Second Language (ESL) classes especially in the 1950s and early 1960s, to the detriment of the written discourse. “[...] The theory of writing must be very different from the theory of language. It is not to be expected that patterns or principles that describe language should apply to writing, but little attention has yet been paid to the fact” (Daniels, 1996, p. 3). Linguists who did become aware of the significance of writing expertise argued that writing should imply an advanced and extensive language technique and thus it should only be taught at later stages in language instruction (Matsuda, 2001, 2003).

At the beginning of the 1960s pedagogical approaches to Second Language (L2) learners were reconsidered, mainly due to research findings which aimed at identifying the differences between writing L1 and L2 learners’ compositions. Yet, if in the 1950s teaching writing was eclipsed by speaking owing to Behaviourism, in the 1960s and 1970s reading assumed dominance over composition due to the theories of language that “focus on structures below the sentence, on decontextualized sentences, on meaning as inherent in the individual linguistic item, on reading as a decoding skill...”. (Kress, 1993, p. 3). Kress is of the opinion that the decoding/encoding representation has had a negative influence on the development of research in writing, predisposing researchers to assume that meaning exists independently of language and, even worse, to form a false view on the ‘code’ itself as something empty and neutral (Kress, 1993, pp. 4-5).

The next step in the development of teaching composition gave way to the adoption of practices beyond the sentence level in mid-sixties, putting to use structural exercises of paragraphs. L2 learners were required to have fundamental knowledge in order to be able to produce full compositions with paragraphs (Leki 1992). Such a practical application of syntactic structure to paragraph writing led second language research to “Contrastive Rhetoric”, whose pivotal concern had greater cultural influence on L2 writers’ rhetorical conventions (Connor, 1996, Kaplan, 1988).

These two highly deductive approaches stressed the tangible, analysable aspects of composition by perceiving it as a textual product, analysing its surface forms and paying attention to the linguistic or rhetorical resources which writers employ to produce them. In contrast, teaching writing in the context of meaningful social interaction and learning environments, rather than

adopting traditional skills-based and product-oriented approaches stem from Piagetian research² on cognitive development. The Swiss scholar proved that people construct understandings of the physical world through interaction with the world. Socially oriented research, outlined in Vygotski's terms in his work *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, hints to the construction of understandings in the process of social interaction. These constructivist notions of cognitive learning and development are also fused with cognitive processing research on thinking and problem-solving. Such an approach provides further support to process models of writing, which have proven their efficiency up to a point.

One of the major strands, which has had the greatest impact on EFL instruction to date, is referred to as the "process approach". Zamel (1983) considers that the studies published by Donovan and McClelland³ in 1980, and Tate and Corbet⁴ in 1981 are of significant importance for the development of the writing instruction. The approach originates in American composition studies (Grabe and Kaplan 1996, pp. 18-23), and focuses on writing processes. According to this approach, students' need to experience prevails over their need to know. Moreover, teachers and students work together in a collaborative fashion to make meaning. The need for this kind of emphasis arose from a reaction against the traditional approaches to writing instruction, due to changes in the academic environment. Despite their language and vocabulary proficiency, many advanced students had trouble completing writing tasks or did not manage to meet the required standards. Consequently, teachers had to revise their teaching strategies and focus on writing starting with early levels of language study. Both teachers and students engaged in activities which contributed to mastery of the writing skill on the long run from the beginning.

Some of the criticism of the process orientated approach has been made by early exponents of the English for academic purposes approach, a programme which directs instruction toward skills required to perform in an English-speaking academic context, and connect knowledge and techniques across core subject areas, generally specific for university. This trend has become more prominent as the numbers of international students studying in European or universities all over the world is increasing. Students' study needs are addressed by teaching and testing the skills interactively and in an integrative way and approaching issues which are relevant for the

² Especially in terms of cognitive and developmental psychology; for further information please see Piaget, J. (1970) *Main trends in psychology*, London: George Allen & Unwin, Piaget, J. (1970). *Genetic epistemology*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company and Piaget, J. (1973). *Memory and intelligence*: New York: BasicBooks.

³ For comprehensive and detailed accounts see Donovan, Timothy R. and Ben W. Mclelland (eds.) (1980). *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition*. Urbana Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

⁴ Tate, Gary, and Edward P.J. Corbett (eds.). (1981). *The Writing Teacher's Sourcebook*. New York: Oxford University Press.

academic environment: writing essays rather than letters, choosing teaching materials based on academic texts, doing pieces of writing based on listening to university lecture excerpts etc. IELTS and TOEFL language recognition exams aim at testing students' and adults' academic skills rather than mere language proficiency.

The ability to master writing skills not only in mother tongue, but also in L2 nowadays can have a profound influence on the way in which individuals relate to the world and act upon it, as it ensures the individual access to a certain position within society and the possibility to advance. Gunther Kress considers that "Command of writing gives access to certain cognitive, conceptual, social and political arenas. The person who commands both the forms of writing and speech is therefore constructed in an entirely different way from the person who commands the forms of speech alone" (1989, p. 46). Also, mastery of the writing skills, both in L1 and L2 opens doors to self-development and improvement of one's cognitive skills. Writing involves the acquisition of complex judgmental skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, analysis, evaluation and synthesis which are classified in Bloom's Taxonomy (Figure 1), proposed in 1956, as higher order thinking skills Higher order thinking is not only more demanding in terms of teaching and learning, but also more valuable because such skills are more likely to be useful in new situations, other than those in which the skill was learned/acquired. For illustration, in Bloom's taxonomy, skills which involve creation of new knowledge are thought to be of a higher order, necessitating different learning and teaching methods, than mere learning of facts and concepts.

Talking about an example adapted from the State of Minnesota's Language Arts Standards for Grade 12, David R. Krathwohl (2002) showed that "A student shall demonstrate the ability to write using grammar, language mechanics, and other conventions of standard written English for a variety of academic purposes and situations by writing original compositions that analyse patterns and relationships of ideas, topics, or themes. (State of Minnesota, 1998)". He shows that it is necessary for students to be equipped with knowledge about the language while it is not enough if they do not demonstrate the ability to use it for specific purposes and produce it to express their own ideas and/or process given information.

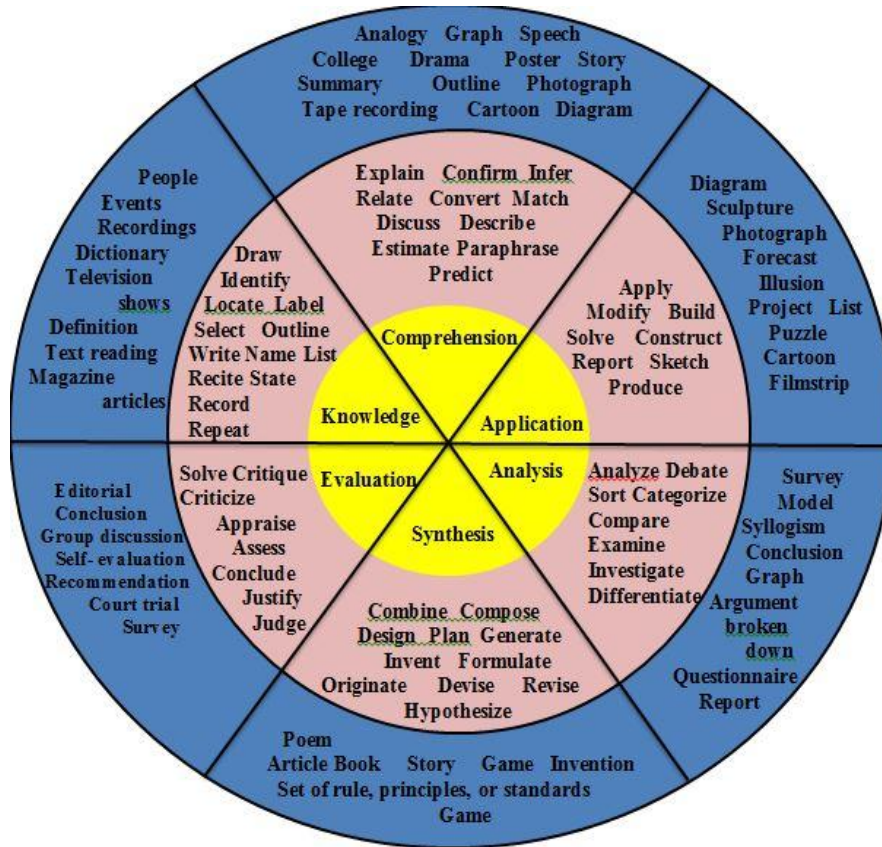


Figure 1. *Graphic representation of Bloom's Taxonomy of learning objectives within education originally proposed in 1956. Source <http://www.educatorstechnology.com/2013/03/a-great-blooms-taxonomy-wheel-for.html> Copyright © 2012 Educational Technology and Mobile Learning (Kharbach)*

Stubbs considers that “Written language makes a radical difference to the complexity of organization that humans can manage, since it changes the relation between memory and classification, and it allows many forms of referencing, cataloguing, indexing, recording and transmitting information [...]; an analysis of written language also requires to be placed within an analysis of signifying systems. The mere fact that something is written conveys its own message, for example of permanence and authority. Certain people write, and certain kinds of things get written.” (Stubbs, 1987, pp. 20-21)

So far, research studies focused on different aspects of writing (the reader, the writer, the writing task, the writing structure etc.) and/or on the writing classroom, presenting some options for either the student writer or the teacher. These options might be viewed as constraints on the student writer or the teacher, which might impact both their writing behaviour and the writing

course design. Therefore, it is crucial for both the teachers and students to understand the underpinning elements of writing in order to approach it as a conscious process.

Developments in L2 writing have undoubtedly been influenced by the research, theory and study conducted in the teaching of writing to native speakers of English. Due to its complex and unique nature, L2 writing has its own teaching and learning perspectives, patterns and applications. However, up until the last decade of the 20th century, Romanian teachers' initial or in-training courses on ESL did not offer any real support for writing pedagogy and thus the teaching practice mostly relied on teacher's intuition rather than on theories or researched approaches.

At the time, writing instruction in Romanian high schools involved primarily teaching students how to respond to the reading of literature books or fragments (mostly available in mother tongue) and making literary comments on them, which was very much similar to what students were requested to do in L1 language and literature classes. Teachers also resorted to writing in L2 as a wrap-up activity, used to reinforce the learning of vocabulary and language structures at the sentence level and not as a means of delivering messages or any kind of information. Many English teachers assumed that grammar and translation were the most important components in English training and focused on helping students develop them, while students were not motivated to develop their English writing ability as it was rarely required inside or outside of the classroom or even for the Romanian A-levels at the time. Since students were hardly ever taught how to write in English and develop appropriate organization, they lacked proficient writing skills in English. Since then, the teaching of canonical literature has become less relevant and was substituted by learning how to write for a variety of purposes including reports, structured essays, formal and informal letters, e-mails, resumes, essays, business documents etc.

There are many factors which contribute to the need to approach writing differently by students/ adult learners and teachers alike. Some of them follow the European or even global trend in the evolution of nowadays life and others refer to the reality of the Romanian society:

- the unwavering role of English, which is the language of international communication, being now the most widely used language in the world (Mydans, 2007);
- the popularity of the Internet and its increasing availability for people of all walks of life, along with the easy access to various other sources of information in various languages, made people from different corners of the world come in contact and communicate either by spoken language or in writing;

- increasing migration all over the world for different reasons, ranging from economic to personal ones which brought about changes in professions - although individuals may be able to take on a full range of knowledge roles in their native language, if they wish to enter a multinational multicultural community, they also need to prove their capacity to write in one of the international languages;
- lifelong learning⁵ has become a necessity, thus people need to develop skills and competences throughout their lives, not only for their own personal fulfilment and their active engagement with the society but also for their ability to be successful in a constantly changing world of work. Hence, being knowledgeable about how to write cover letters, references, CVs etc. and backing the content within such documents with skills and experience is mandatory;
- research and other academic programmes are open to international students all over the world;
- having Romanian academic diplomas recognized by other European countries;
- the creation of the European Union enabled students' access to universities all over Europe - current estimates suggest that around 5,000 Romanian students go abroad to study each year, but the number continues to rise (Lever, 2012);
- various European projects (Comenius, Leonardo da Vinci) have been implemented in Romanian elementary and high schools which facilitated student and teacher mobilities and exchanges and offered the context for creating final projects in the communication languages (from letter exchanges to brochures, reports etc.);
- developing international programs such as: Tempus, Copernicus, CEEPUS, Socrates/Erasmus, Monet, and e-Learn within Romanian universities;
- the introduction of The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, by the Council of Europe in 2011 and used to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe and, increasingly, in other countries (2011);
- the acknowledgement of the eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning, based on commonly agreed objectives, indicators and benchmarks, peer-learning and dissemination of best practice at the European level, two of which being communication in mother tongue and in foreign languages (Figel, 2007);

⁵ See The European Commission's documents for comprehensive and detailed accounts of the Lifelong Learning Programme.

- the implementation of many projects supervised by/in collaboration with countries from the European Union, whose objectives are to adapt the Romanian Education System to the European one;
- the changes operated by the Romanian Ministry of Education in the curriculum with regard to the teaching of foreign languages, the visible teaching shift from getting students to be knowledgeable about the language to acquiring language skills, as well as the specific language competence tests that students need to pass as part of their A-levels;
- the increasing interest in taking language recognition exams such as IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, Cambridge etc. for studying or working abroad;
- more and more multinational companies multinational companies coming from dynamic emerging markets are opening subsidiaries in Romania;

Concluding, writing in English has become a necessity in the last decades in Romania due to such changes. Teachers should monitor how students put the newly acquired knowledge to communicative use and transfer it to real-life situations, bridging it to school, family life and daily activities. They should constantly see to the development of up-to-date writing content and skills, supplementing students' need for growth to serve exam requirements or everyday communication situations. L2 teachers should be aware of the role they play in the achievement of specific educational and life-inclusive goals.

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