

# Classroom EFL Writing: The Alignment-Oriented Approach

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## Abstract

This paper outlines the alignment-oriented approach in classroom EFL writing. Based on a review of the characteristics of the written language and comparison between the product-focused approach and the process-focused approach, the paper proposes a practical classroom procedure as to how to teach EFL writing. A follow-up empirical study is conducted in classroom writing assignment to illustrate the alignment-oriented approach. Results show that learners show great interest in their reading materials. Besides, learners report being greatly influenced by their reading experience in their writing process, for instance, their lexical choices, writing coherence and tense usage. In this alignment-oriented approach, several factors should be paid great attention to, such as appropriate selection of materials and relevant task perception. It is hoped that this proposed approach can provide insights and implications to other EFL teachers and promote more in-depth studies in EFL writing research.

**Keywords:** alignment, alignment-oriented, product-focused approach, process approach, writing

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Introduce the Problem

Learning how to write is a challenge for EFL learners, because writing requires more exact composing of ideas through words. In fact, writing is one of four basic skills highlighted in language learning and teaching, and specifically, a productive skill. It refers to the activity of putting something in written form, but it is not as easy as it seems to be. Actually, writing is a skill that some native speakers never master, let alone non-native speakers.

### 1.2 Explore Importance of the Problem

However, it is a must for college EFL students, especially those in China, to learn to how to write and especially with good cohesion, because writing is a must-required skill for both their course credits and their further study. In other words, writing is not only a goal but also a channel of language learning to learners to successfully complete their college study and have access to further study. It is then of vital importance to probe into the question of how EFL classroom writing can be maximally enhanced. In this paper, we will perceive classroom EFL writing from the angle of alignment, aiming to provide practical solutions to the effective teaching of writing in an EFL setting.

In the following sections, characteristics of written language are presented so as to straighten up the possible formal features influencing writing, with a review of previous research on writing followed subsequently. Based on this, a classroom procedure is proffered within the alignment-oriented approach. A follow-up empirical study is then conducted to validate the alignment-oriented approach. Implications are discussed for the application of such an approach in the teaching and learning writing to EFL learners in the classroom setting.

## 2. Characteristics of Written Language

### 2.1 The Reading-Writing Connection

Reading is a receptive skill while writing a productive one. Through reading, learners can familiarize themselves with a variety of language forms, equip themselves with original ideas and get an idea of how language can be efficiently organized, all of which is of great help to writing. In fact, reading and writing are so closely related that their relationship has long aroused great interest among researchers. In the 1980s, many researchers thought that writing and reading are important to each other, both as skills, as cognitive processes and as ways of learning. It is believed that there is a high correlation between good writers and good readers and have viewed reading and writing as mutually reinforcing interactive processes (Stotsky, 1983; Graham & Herbert, 2011). Actually, though there are many differences between reading and writing, they influence each other reciprocally but not as inverses of each other. Shanahan (1984) proposed a bi-directional model that reading-writing relationship changes at different stages of language development and aspects of this relationship will be independent of each other.

### 2.2 Differences between Spoken and Written Discourse

Some researchers have indicated that students' writing tends to be "talk written down" (Shaw & Liu, 1998). This raises the question of just what the differences between spoken and written language, which is also a necessary condition for conducting good writing classes. According to Ur (1996), they are different in 9 aspects.

The distinctions between written and spoken modes play a vital role. First, written discourse is fixed and stable so the reading can be done at whatever time, speed and level of thoroughness the individual reader wishes. Spoken discourse is fleeting, and moves on in real time. Second, Written discourse is explicit while spoken discourse may be implicit. Third, the content is much more densely presented in written discourse than in spoken discourse. Fourth, the writing of a text is detached in both time and space from its reading; the writer normally works alone, not acquainted with the readers. Spoken discourse happens with the immediate interaction among participants and feedback. Fifth, written discourse is usually organized and carefully formulated, while the spoken discourse is more often impromptu. Besides, writing is much more slower than speaking. On the other hand, people usually read and understand the written discourse much faster than we can take in the same text if we listen to it.

The other three differences are also inherent in language itself. Writing normally adopts generally acceptable standard variety of the language, whereas speech may sometimes be in a regional or other limited-context dialect. Additionally, spoken discourse (at least the mother tongue) is often acquired intuitively, whereas the written form is in most cases deliberately taught and learned. Last but not least, spoken texts are far longer, normally (in the sense that they contain more words), than a representation of the same information in writing, simply because it is more redundant. Besides, speech is more important for survival and effective functioning in society than writing is. However, for classroom EFL learners, writing is a must and necessity for them to pass examinations and pursuit of further study. Writing is then important for these learners' survival and effective functioning in school and society.

## 3. Research on Second and Foreign Language Writing

One of the most controversial aspects in writing pedagogy has been the tension between the product-focused approach and the process approach. The focus of the former approach is on the final product, the coherent and error-free text, whereas that of the latter is on the steps involved in drafting and redrafting a piece of work. In the research literature, writing has been argued to be either product-focused or a process approach. These two approaches emphasize the difference between a final product and a process of creating the product, but neglects the role of alignment in the writing process, namely how to converge with what is correct or formulaic to write in their compositions. But alignment is of fundamental importance because foreign language learning is in essence a process of learning the correct and formulaic form of the language.

### 3.1 Product-focused Approach versus Process Approach

The product-focused approach focuses on producing different kinds of written products and emphasizes imitation of different kinds of model paragraphs or essays. According to this approach, writing is a product to be evaluated, a silent and solitary activity which can be learnt through imitating, copying and transforming models provided by the teacher or the textbook. The major concern of this approach is the sentence level grammar, as it is believed that sentences are the building blocks of discourse. It must be pointed out that this approach is consistent with sentence-level structuralist linguistics and bottom-up processing. In such classes, the teacher assigns a task, and the students think about it individually and put down their thoughts into words and then hand

in their products to the teacher. Thus, writing becomes a two-step process.

The process approach is contrary to and often compared with product-focused approach in teaching writing, which is consistent with discourse analysis and top-down processing. Based on the interaction theory, it emphasizes the composing processes writers make use of in writing, such as planning, drafting and revising, and seeks to improve students' writing skills through developing their use of effective composing processes. In this process, all the students have to do is to get their ideas onto paper without worrying too much about formal correctness in the initial stage. Then they may share their work with peers, getting feedback on their ideas and how they are expressed before the revision. Murray (1993) also says that writing should be treated as a process, "a series of steps or stages an author goes through to develop a piece of writing".

Both the product-focused approach and the process approach have their advantages and disadvantages. However, the product-focused approach seems to be severely attacked for treating writing as an end, while the process approach turns out to attract more praise than it deserves. Unadmittedly, the process approach has its merits. For example, it is learner-centered, and encourages the students' full participation; the students have to cooperate with each other and learn from each other in order to learn in this process. In other words, they have to engage in collaborative work to achieve good writing; collaborative work can broaden students' horizons and enrich their knowledge. Faced with many different opinions from peers, the students have to think critically, reconsider their own and make a choice. However, it also has its limitations: it may not satisfy students' need to practice factual writing required in school; it in turn will fail to foster the development of the students' critical thinking skills; it is artificial as well as unstructured, as students need models to practice and to improve their mechanical skills; it puts great demand on the teacher, because the teacher has to be well-trained and confident enough to make the process successful; and the negotiation between the teacher and the students may break down sometimes.

### 3.2 *The Nature of Writing*

In fact, writing should be treated as both a product and a process. In the teaching and learning of writing, students should not only be exposed to texts as models of writing but also produce writings. Raimes (c.f. Nunan, 2001) deals with this issue:

In a writing class, students need to be taught both how to use the process to their advantage as language learners and writers, and also how to produce an acceptable product on demand. A shortcoming of the debate around these issues is that process and product have been seen as either/or rather than both/and entities.

Writing is a complex and cognitive process, which needs both models and appropriate procedures. In other words, we need a combination of the product-focused approach and the process approach.

Therefore, in the teaching of writing, teachers should be careful of integrating the two approaches. According to White and Arndt (c.f. Nunan, 2001), the following sequence of activities may be adopted in the writing class.

- a. Discussion (class, small group, pair)
- b. Brainstorming/making notes/asking questions
- c. Fastwriting/selecting ideas/establishing a viewpoint
- d. Rough drafting
- e. Preliminary self-evaluation
- f. Arranging information/structuring the text
- g. First draft
- h. Group/peer evaluation and responding
- i. Conference
- j. Second draft
- k. Self-evaluation/editing/proofreading
- l. Finished draft
- m. Final responding to draft

It must be pointed out that this sequence does not exclude the fact that the teacher have to present models for students to learn and imitate, and to draw their attention to the correctness of the language.

As for the students learning to write, they must consider four main questions throughout the whole process:

- a. What do I want to say?

- b. Who is the reader I have in mind?
- c. Why am I saying it? (What do I want the writing to do for ---- or ... to --- the reader?)
- d. How should I say it? (What is the best way to say it for the reader and purpose I have in mind?)

These four questions are closely interconnected; the answer to each question affects the writer's answers to the other three. These questions stimulate the students to think what they want to say as well as how they are saying it. These questions embody the spirits of the product-focused approach and the process approach, that is, the students not only focus on the form of their writing but also go through the different stages of producing the writing.

#### 4. A Practical Classroom Procedure

A good combination of these questions into the task will definitely improve the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of writing. However, time is quite limited in classrooms. It is commonplace for learners to wonder over the what, who, why and how for a very long period of time. How to achieve good results for these four questions then helps to better combine the product-focused approach and the process approach. To address this question, the alignment-oriented approach is proposed.

##### 4.1 *The Alignment-oriented Approach*

Alignment in the approach refers to the adaptation to and convergence with the appropriate language input provided. For learning effect to occur in language learning, learners have to align with what is correct and appropriate (Wang & Wang, 2015; Costa, Pickering, & Sorace, 2008). The underlying mechanism of such alignment (Pickering & Garrod, 2004) is priming, which is the tendency of people to use what has just appeared or used by others or themselves.

Alignment is originally a term to describe the interpersonal relationship between people in interaction (Pickering & Garrod, 2004). People in interaction dynamically align with each other by means of co-adaptations. In interaction, the participant interlocutors are present and visible. When this alignment is utilized in reading, there is also an interaction with the learner interacting and conversing constantly with the written text (Wang, 2011). If the learner aligns with the text, then the text can prime what the learner cannot use or don't know how to use previously.

In order to ease learners' cognitive load in finding answers to the above four questions, a reading comprehension passage is needed for the provision of specific contexts of what, who, why and how questions. This reading passage should better be open-ended, leaving room for learners' imagination to work in the subsequent writing task. The open-endedness of the reading passage will also make it possible for learners to continue in their subsequent writing. The already-read passage may provide the learners with sources of how to use language to express what they want. In other words, the provided piece of writing can prime the learners' later use of the language itself in their own writing.

##### 4.2 *An Alignment-oriented Lesson Plan*

The following lesson plan aims to demonstrate how classroom EFL writing can best be presented and what principles we have to bear in mind when designing writing techniques. We will use a traditional college English class as an example. It is worth pointing out that no special periods are set aside solely for the teaching of writing, as writing is a comprehensive activity involving grammar, vocabulary, conception and rhetoric, and closely related to other language skills such as reading. Thus, the teaching of writing is integrated into the intensive reading classes. The lesson plan is for "The Sampler", Unit 7, College English, Book I, which serves as the present case study.

Firstly, after the presentation of the text, the students are required to know the correct use of words and phrases. They may be encouraged to make sentences through imitation of the text and group discussion with peers. In this way, we can ensure that the students have really grasped what they should learn.

Secondly, the students may be given related topic to discuss with their fellow students. The teacher can divide the students into small groups to discuss what they are going to exchange with others, and then ask them to brainstorm individually before embarking on their initial discussion. At this stage, the teacher needs to tell the students not to worry about the grammatical or mechanical mistakes in their brainstorming, since the purpose of this process is to evoke more relevant thoughts on the topic presented in the original text.

Thirdly, the students are asked to exchange what they have brainstormed just now with their classmates, and are further encouraged to comment on their classmates' brainstorming results. The reason why students are supposed to communicate and comment is to help them reason whether their lines of thinking is appropriate or acceptable.

Fourthly, the students are asked to write after all the discussion and preparatory work. They are not given another new or related topic to write with. Instead, they are required to write after the original text “The Sampler” learned and introduced at the beginning of the class. The text “The Sampler” is a narrative, which tells a story of how the author “I” tries to help others but gets his intentions misinterpreted. The students are told that the text “The Sampler” is an abridged from a longer story, and the text in the coursebook contains only the first half of the story. Hence, to have a full access to the whole story, the students need to complete the story. Such continuation of the original text being learnt thus call the previously taught vocabulary, and discussion of content into play. In this way, both language form and content are guaranteed. The words in the original text can prime their later use by students, thereby consolidating the learning of vocabulary at the onset of the class illustrated in step 1. The appropriateness of content is ensured by the peer discussion part mentioned in step 2 and step 3. The students are encouraged to write as many words as possible within the time limit of 30 minutes. In the process of writing, the students are required to pay attention to the cohesion and coherence of their writing.

Finally, the students are told to exchange their own writing with their desk-mates to check the logic and coherence of their classmates’ writing. Meanwhile, the teacher can offer help when necessary in the discussion of the students themselves, especially when the students have difficulty with vocabulary, or when they disagree on. After the completion of peer discussion, the students get their own piece of writing back. At this time, the students are encouraged to self-edit or proofread their own writing accordingly with regards to both the logic, organization of content and grammatical mistakes. Before handing in their draft, the students are supposed to make their writing as neat and clear as possible. After all the student pieces of writing were handed in, the teacher has to go through every piece, give comments and suggestions about both the content and the form. It is also the teacher’s task to remind the students that they should not just throw their work away when they get it back. Actually, the habit of studying the teacher’s comments is very helpful to the development of their writing ability.

## **5. The Follow-up Empirical Study**

The above alignment-oriented approach and lesson plan was then applied to classroom teaching of Chinese EFL in usual class periods of Reading. The follow-up empirical study was aimed at validating the influence of the alignment-oriented approach on students’ writing performance as well as its process.

### *5.1 Subject Characteristics*

Two intact classes of Chinese EFL learners participated in the study. The learners were first-year Chinese college students, and their mother tongue was Chinese. All of them had similar language experience of English, that is, they all had about 10 years’ experience of learning English since primary school and had no experience abroad.

### *5.2 Sampling Procedures*

#### **5.2.1 Sample Size, Power, and Precision**

For each class of the learners, there were 34 students, with altogether 68 students. All students were asked to complete a questionnaire immediately after the application of the alignment-oriented lesson plan. This indicates that the students had finished their writing in class. The students were also notified that this questionnaire aimed to find out more about their process of alignment in their writing.

#### **5.2.3 Measures and Covariates**

The empirical study took place in the form of questionnaire, which includes 4 open-ended questions. Question 1 was supposed to find out whether any strategies were employed to finish the writing task in the alignment-oriented approach. Question 2 promoted students to think about whether the above strategies were helpful or not. Question 3 aimed to dig out what strategies were useful for the alignment of the writing task and the previous reading in their process of writing. Question 4 asked about the difficulties students encountered in the process of the writing task.

#### **5.2.4 Experimental Manipulation or Interventions**

The questionnaire was administered at the end of the alignment-oriented lesson. Questionnaires were handed out to the students by their classroom teacher. Each student got a copy and was instructed to provide answers to the four questions in the questionnaire. The students were asked to write down all that they could think of as soon as possible within 10 minutes. Altogether, there were 62 valid copies being collected later, which were then checked and counted.

### 5.3 Data Analysis

#### 5.3.1 Strategies Used in the Alignment-Oriented Approach

The results showed that students did employ strategies in completing this alignment-oriented task. There were 7 main strategies which were employed by students, as was presented in Table 1. Two most frequently used strategies were making inferences about and memorizing the situation model, and underlining and memorizing details. The situation model refers to the time, space, involving characters and cause and effect. These two strategies suggested that to better finish the ensuing task, the students paid attention to both the macro structure and micro details in the reading text. The macro structure concerned the content and the theme of the passage, which had to be convergent in the reading text and the written task. The micro details were related to the details, which might be what the unique characteristics of the characters in the original reading text.

Table 1. Strategies used in the alignment-oriented approach

Frequency	Strategies
1	making inferences about and memorizing the situation model in the original reading text
2	underlining and memorizing details
3	spotting important sentences and words
4	weighing difficult or important details
5	mastering the theme of the reading text
6	paying attention to the coherence and cohesion of the text
7	giving full play to imagination

#### 5.3.2 Useful Strategies in the Process of Writing

Although the students reported uses of strategies, only several strategies were found to be helpful in the process of writing. The most useful strategy from the questionnaire was outlining data, such as the names of the characters in the reading text and matching characters with their unique features and possible actions. The second strategy was more global, which focused on the writing style of the original reading text and relevant linguistic clues. These linguistic clues were later made use of in the subsequent writing task of continuing the story.

#### 5.3.3 Difficulties in the Process of Writing

In the process of the writing task, students admitted that they had encountered some difficulties. Difficulties included vocabulary, sentence construction and the maintenance of story development from the reading text to the writing part (Table 2). Vocabulary difficulty occurred when students were uncertain about of the lexical spelling or the appropriate word choice. Sentence difficulty referred to circumstances when students did not know how to construct sentences to convey desired meanings. The maintenance of story development was that students could feel unsure whether they had diverged from the original text to some extent in either content or the style. The alignment effect occurred when the students successfully solved these difficulties by using the same vocabulary, sentence structure, or style in their own writing as that in the previous reading text. The first two difficulties of vocabulary and sentence construction could be well solved when students had access to the original reading text and looked back to the text. Similarly, students could also well maintain story development if they looked back at the original text more or back at the original text or when they comprehended the original text better.

Table 2. Frequency of difficulties in the process of writing

Frequency	Difficulty
1	Vocabulary
2	Sentence construction
3	Maintenance of story development

## 6. Discussion and Conclusion

The above results showed that the alignment-oriented approach could be well applied in EFL classrooms by closely integrating reading and writing. In this process of finishing the alignment-oriented approach, students consciously or unconsciously utilized strategies. Some of the strategies were facilitative for the completion of the alignment-oriented task, in which the previously-read text primed students' later use of language. The convergence between students' writing and the reading text suggested alignment, which was also a learning effect. This learning effect was beneficial to EFL learning and acquisition, because alignment meant the possibility of priming the usage of new language targets (Wang, 2011).

The above results have great implications for EFL learning and acquisition. In real life, writing is very important to EFL learners' study and future work, but most college students find it extremely difficult. This may be due to many factors, but the way writing is taught or learnt can be one of the major reasons. Traditionally, both teachers and students treated writing as either an end or a means, which means that they either believed the product-focused approach or the process approach. Undeniably, the purpose of writing is the expression of ideas and the conveying of a message to the reader. It then follows that the ideas themselves should be taken as the most important aspect of the teaching of writing. However, there are also other important things, such as the careful constructions, more precise and varied vocabulary and sentence patterns, and more correctness of expression in general. Our task then is to find a fair balance between these two: content and form, or rather the product-focused approach and the process approach. The alignment-oriented approach, as presented in the current research, well combines content and form by underscoring the importance of alignment between EFL learners' production of the language and their comprehension of the language.

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