

# The Right Approach in Practice: A Discussion of the Applicability of EFL Writing Practices in a Saudi Context

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe the different approaches applied to teaching writing in the L2 context and the way these different methods have been established so far. The perspectives include a product approach, genre approach and process approach. Each has its own merits and objectives for application. Regarding the study context, it may be noted throughout previous researches that the product approach is the most common way of teaching EFL writing. In this regard, L2 teachers are mostly concerned with grammatical accuracy and the final written product. However, this paper shifts the emphasis more towards the process approach and how this is more appropriate for the Saudi context. A further description of measuring elements in this approach is provided. Finally, this means of providing feedback is considered in relation to the teaching of writing. As a result, it is hoped that this paper will provide insights for developing writing practices in EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia.

**Keywords:** EFL, L2 writing, process approach, feedback, writing assessment, Saudi Arabia

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Writing in a Foreign Language

According to Raimes (1988), writing ability is an acquired skill rather than an innate one. Good coaching is therefore required in order to develop it properly. In this regard, Brown (2001) compares writing skills with swimming and thus identifies different types of swimmers, i.e. the 'non-swimmer, poor swimmer, and excellent swimmer' (p. 334). He explains that this could be applied to writing proficiency. For him, writing skills are not naturally developed, but rather learned. Furthermore, he explains that it is challenging even for the native speakers to acquire proper writing skills, and so for second language learners it can be even harder. Patel (2008) argues similarly that writing is a skill which must be taught and practised in order for the learners to become proficient.

### 1.2 Types of Genres of Writing

It must be borne in mind that there are different genres of writing. Mora-Flores (2009) categorises various types of writing, based on their organisational structure, as Narrative, Expository, Persuasive, Argumentative and Poetry.

These different types of writing may vary according to the difficulty in mastering them properly. In the case of Saudi Arabia (the context of the study), Al-Khairi (2013) investigated university EFL students' writing difficulties through a survey administered to 75 English-major undergraduates. The results of the data analysis revealed that argumentative essay-writing is a difficult task for the Saudi EFL learners to develop, more so than other types of writing like summary writing, letter writing, narrative essays, descriptive essays, and expository essays.

Moreover, learners were found to be unable to attain paragraph level in their writing. Al-Khairi (2013) related this to various factors such as insufficient teaching. Grami's (2010) findings are compatible with the previous ones, as he reports that Saudi EFL learners have a serious problem with their writing, which is evident from their low International English Language testing system (IELTS) writing scores in comparison with other skills. In this regard, a reconsideration of teaching practices, and specifically the adapted approaches in Saudi Arabia, is necessary.

## 2. Approaches in Teaching L2 Writing

There are different approaches to teaching writing in L2. They are actually complementary (Badger & White 2000). According to Rimes (1983), there is no one adequate approach, as there are different teaching and learning styles. Silva (1990) categorises the teaching of writing into four types: controlled composition, current traditional rhetoric, the process approach and English for academic purposes. Other approaches are proposed, e.g. controlled-to free; free-writing; paragraph pattern; grammar syntax organisation and the communicative approach (Hyland, 2002; Ramies, 1983; Tribble, 1996; Williams, 2005). Cohen (1990) and Brown (2001) classify these approaches as ‘product and process’ approaches. Badger and White (2000) also include the genre approach, together with the previously mentioned approaches. However, these are the most common classifications.

In Badger and White’s (2000) opinion, the product approach is concerned with the grammatical accuracy of the final product. In addition, the product approach views writing as knowledge of language structure which develops in imitation of the input into the text provided by the teacher. Meanwhile, Cohen (1990) asserts that the product approach relies on the assumption that learners are able to hand in a finished product the first time around. However, this approach does not work well for many educators, as it discourages learners from tackling their writing tasks in a serious manner; the focus is on an instant product and the grade the writer will get. This approach requires constant error correction, which will effect learners’ motivation and self-confidence (Grami, 2010). As a result, the process approach has evolved (Brown, 2001).

According to Keh (1990), the process approach is not new in education: it appeared in the early 1970s. Davis-Samway (2006) relates the emergence of this approach to the shift towards focusing on the cognitive processes involved in writing. The process approach views writing as a process, where the finished product is the result of a series of drafts (Cohen, 1990). A major drawback of the process approach, however, is that it might not be adequate for L2 learners in educational and social contexts other than their first language (L1) contexts (Holliday, 1994). The ideal situation would involve a balance between the process and product approaches, as Brown (2001) emphasises. In his opinion, it is hard to identify the process without considering the final product, as the ultimate goal for the learners is the product itself; however, this might not be applicable to all teaching situations.

With regard to the genre approach, Badger and White (2000) indicate its similarities to the product approach. This is as a result of the evolution of the latter, and relates to the assumption that the genre approach considers linguistic elements but, unlike the product approach, places each written product in its social context, as well as taking into account the relationship between writer and audience. Hyland (1990) describes genre as culturally formulated, stating that it usually represents how language is used to produce specific knowledge in society. The major drawback in this approach is that it represents learning as an imitation, a partial understating and a conscious application.

### 2.1 The Process Approach

The process-oriented approach can serve learners at an intermediate level, where it might be an effective approach to help them establish the process of developing a piece of writing. According to Susser (1994), students who are acquainted with writing processes can identify the process that best suits their writing style and the specific writing task they are facing. The process approach was represented by Tribble (1996) as involving prewriting, drafting, revising and editing. It is further described by Badger and White (2000) and Raimes (1983). Based on their description, the process approach may be used to develop the design of a lesson on writing in a linear process.

In this regard, a study was conducted by Alhosani (2008) to measure the effect of the process approach on Saudi learners’ writing development. The data revealed that English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers recommend the process approach to develop Saudi learners’ writing ability. This study was conducted among Saudi ESL young learners in the USA, with a sample of five learners in conventional on-campus teaching. The study recommends further investigations into the process of pedagogy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). Furthermore, a study conducted by So and Lee (2013) used a model based on the process-oriented approach with online and offline activities in Korea. The results indicated that the participants (pre-service teachers) received high scores for their writing at the end of the study.

Regarding its emphasis, Badger and White (2000) demonstrate that the process approach is related to the linguistic skill of drafting, rather than to linguistic knowledge such as grammar. Kroll (1990) described the essence of the process approach for developing a collaborative environment for learners, and Shih (1986) describes it as pertaining to the following: providing feedback by instructors or peers, allocated time for writing

and rewriting, building learners' repertoires in prewriting, drafting and rewriting, and central significance to the revision process.

Furthermore, Badger and White (2000) claim that the teacher's role in this approach is to facilitate the writing process, rather than provide input or stimulus. Mora-Flores (2009) indicates that in the process approach, the teacher helps learners to discover their mistakes, develop their writing, and decide on style and structure. She relates this to the idea that learners will experiment with language and feel comfortable about making mistakes. Teachers will then have the chance to realise learners' development in writing. This approach is supported by Hyland (2009), who points out that focusing on accuracy is not the right way to improve writing.

For many years, writing classes in KSA have tended to be an extension of grammar teaching. Regarding that, Al-Seghayer (2014) highlights that one of the major constraints affecting English teaching in SA is related to teaching methods (see also, (see also, Elyas, 2008; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014; Elyas & Picard, 2010, 2012, 2013; Elyas). Learners are instructed to memorise grammatical rules and terminology. On the other hand, the main focus in teaching writing involves linguistic features and is at sentence level (Al-Ahdal, Alfallaj, Al-Awaied & Al-Hattami, 2014). For Hyland (2009), although learners may very well be able to produce syntactically accurate sentences, they are not necessarily able to develop a suitable written text.

However, this is not the only constraint, according to Dikli, Jenrnigan and Bleyle (2015), as seen in Oman, where writing instruction is developed in teacher-centred classrooms and relies on rote memorisation. According to the authors above, this applies to most of the Arab world. Furthermore, Dikli et al. (2015) describe writing instruction as being more related to filling in the blanks, something that has an isolated focus and appears to be decontextualized. They further report that a study conducted by Ezza (2010) in three different countries in the Arab world, namely Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Morocco, revealed the same results about the teaching of writing. The investigated courses are described as being heavily dependent on a product-oriented approach, where writing is little more than a grammar exercise.

Regarding the actual application of the process approach, a more holistic description appears in a study conducted by Sun and Feng (2009), who examine the process approach by comparing it with the product approach in an experimental study. They define the two groups as minimal control and maximal control, with the results indicating the development of writing skills in the experimental group.

However, in adapting the process approach especially in the case of Saudi context certain limitations must be considered. According to Badger and White (2000), the process approach tends to be 'monolithic', in the sense that the writing process is mostly the same, regardless of what is being written or who is writing. They provide an example of the equal weighting given to postcard writing and academic essay writing, even though these are very different. Another criticism of the approach is given by Horowitz (1986), who believes that the process approach will leave students unprepared for writing exams. In addition, it will give them a false perception of the evaluation process.

## *2.2 Feedback in the Process Approach*

According to Raimes (1983), teachers who use the process approach provide their students with two crucial elements: time (for students to try to develop new ideas) and feedback on the content of the drafts. He further explains that students who are given appropriate feedback from readers like the teacher or other students will discover new ideas when they revise their first draft, which they can develop in the second draft. In this regard, continuous interaction with teacher and peers is the principal element in the process approach (Tribble, 1996).

Moreover, deciding on the type of feedback is an important element during error correction of written material (Bitchener & Ferris, 2012; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). With regard to written feedback, one important dichotomy is the distinction between direct and indirect feedback. Hyland and Hyland (2006) define direct feedback as that used for correcting linguistic forms, e.g. crossing out unnecessary words, morphemes or phrases. Indirect feedback is where the teacher indicates errors in some way, like circling, coding or using other marks, but does not provide the correct form, leaving students with a problem brought to their attention. In this regard, most of the experts favour indirect feedback as it has the potential to help students develop their L2 proficiency and metalinguistic knowledge (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005).

Another type of written corrective feedback was examined in a study conducted by Ferris and Roberts (2001), who examined the effect of explicit, non-explicit and no feedback on written material in an experimental classroom study (see also, Rajadb, Khan, Elyas, 2016: Alsomali & Elyas, 2016). They found that less explicit error correction was helpful, as learners were able to self-adjust their mistakes. Furthermore, Elwood (2013) found through his study on non-explicit feedback that EFL learners in Japan reacted positively towards their

teacher's written corrective feedback on their written material.

In the context of this study (Saudi Arabia), Al-Khairi (2013) reports that one of the necessary steps to solving EFL learners' writing problems in Saudi Arabia is by commenting on their written errors. Furthermore, (Grami, 2010) pointed out that EFL learners are aware of the need for and importance of feedback from their teachers, in order to develop their writing.

### 3. Writing Assessment

The question of how to assess writing is a very challenging one. Cohen (1990) implies that there are numerous things to evaluate in a written piece. These include rhetorical structure; organisation; register or level of formality; style; economy; accuracy of meaning; appropriateness of language conventions (grammar, spelling and punctuation); readers' understanding; and readers' acceptance.

According to Weigle (2007), assessment is a broad term which includes different sorts of activities that teachers can use to evaluate their students' learning needs, progress, and achievements. Weigle (2007) has provided a classification of test types: formal through a traditional writing test, in which learners are given a period of time to generate a piece of connected discourse; and informal, through the evaluation of artefacts, such as assignments, and portfolios. Weigle also explained the test development procedure as setting measurable objectives, deciding on the type of assessment, setting tasks, and scoring.

Ferris and Hedgcock's (2004) approach to providing feedback emphasises the use of a test scoring rubric. They further suggest asking L2 learners to write a cover memo, to be submitted with revisions, in order to explain how they considered and addressed the comments they received, or if they chose not to address them.

Furthermore, different types of scoring are applicable to extensive and responsive writing, such as holistic scoring, primary trait scoring, and analytic scoring (Brown, 2010). According to Brown (2010), holistic scoring represents the overall assessment from the reader. Primary trait scoring relates to the achievement of the primary purpose of the essay. Meanwhile, analytical scoring breaks the written texts being assessed into a number of subcategories such as organization and grammar.

### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, writing instruction must be considered in a broad sense, not only through the use of a specific approach, but through the consideration of learners' whole experience in a specific practice (Piper, 1989). The emphasis in this paper related to the process approach that may provide learners with the chance to practise and gain influential feedback from teachers and peers, and so to support their learning.

This paper presents a brief description of the implications of the process approach and its possible impact on L2 writing development. It has become evident that new moves must be made to improve learners' writing abilities in Saudi Arabia. The process approach will enhance involvement in the writing class, through the development of several drafts (Badger and White, 2000). Moreover, learners in Saudi Arabia are still struggling with writing courses that present each step of the writing as an isolated element. These individual elements can then become hard to be put together. This is in contrast to the stance where literacy proficiency is examined in the writing process.

In addition to the above, providing learners with feedback can play a role in developing their writing proficiency in Saudi Arabia. Indeed, EFL teachers must be precise about the way they use feedback in class. Learners' levels and the specific teaching objectives will relate closely to the type of feedback adopted. The use of indirect feedback must be examined in the Saudi context, as it has been found to be more efficient in promoting learner's autonomy (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2005). Consequently, further consideration for the process approach with the inclusion of the feedback is needed in future research.

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