

Theoretical and pedagogical foundations of the process approach to ESL composition

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In a recent article, Hamp-Lyons (1986) asserted that the process approach has had a “tremendous impact” on the teaching and the research of second language (L2) writing. Motivated by the previous assertion, this paper, first, attempts to identify some of the main theoretical and pedagogical features of this approach based on Zamel’s (1983), Raimés’ (1983), Horowitz’ (1986), Liebman-Kleine’s (1986), and Silva’s (1990) articles. Then an analysis of some of its shortcomings is provided. This reaction paper has been facilitated by the influential framework of approach, design and procedure by Richards & Rodgers (1992) in order to analyze and evaluate a teaching method.

After reading Zamel (1982, 1983), it can be affirmed that the Process Approach to ESL Writing (PAEW) is based on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Brumfit & Johnson 1979; Widdowson 1978), it has been inspired by research in first language (L1) composition and was mainly influenced by the cognitivist process group, who advocated “writing as problem solving” (Johns, 1990).

APPROACH

The principles and assumptions of the PAEW can be grouped around the following key concepts: process, thinking (problem solving), discovery, meaning, revising, and strategies. The process

Approach is the result of studies focusing on the process by which writers compose written texts (Johns 1990; Raimés, 1993; Silva, 1990). The assumption is that if one wants to teach writing effectively, one should understand the writing process, first.

Composition is a complex thinking process (Raimés, 1983). To some extent, writing is like problem solving and requires higher order thinking skills. Writers think about the topic and discover solutions as they compose, “which thus enables them to modify their discourse as it becomes necessary” (Zamel, 1983: 181).

“Writing is indeed a process of discovering and making meaning” (Zamel, 1983:166). Research studies in L1 and L2 composition have shown that exploring, reformulating, clarifying, and integrating ideas in a cyclical process are essential to generate or create meaning.

Conceiving writing as a process of discovery implies that revising is an integral component of composition. Research studies have provided evidence to support the fact that skilled writers use revising throughout the process. Zamel (1983) reports that her students deleted and added sentences to clarify ideas, rewrote sentences so that they expressed the writer’s intentions, shifted paragraphs

around to connect their ideas, wrote new paragraphs to develop or expand their thoughts, etc.

Skilled ESL writers appear to have individual writing strategies and they use them effectively in order to create meaning. Zamel (1983: 180) reports that her advanced students know “what to anticipate, how to pace themselves, and what to focus on as they write and rewrite”. In addition, first, they concentrated on how to make meaning, then on how to organize it, and finally on how to best express their ideas.

The text is a product and consequently it is secondary in PAEW. This is supported by research studies, which have demonstrated that skilled ESL writers attend to language forms only after ideas have been clearly expressed (Zamel, 1983). The writer’s ideas, the content and the need to communicate would determine the appropriate language forms (Silva, 1990).

DESIGN

The fundamental purpose of the PAEW is to enable students to create meaning through written language. This aim is supported by the CLT, which promotes the use of an L1 purposefully and communicatively. In fact, one of the principles of CLT is that “language is a system for the expression of meaning” (Richards & Rodgers, 1986: 71).

In a PAEW, the syllabus is learner-centered. In other words, the syllabus is organized around personal, interesting and relevant topics for the writer. As a result of a learner centered syllabus approach, the students (writers) are the center of attention. Their role is very active, since they are in charge of thinking, exploring, discovering, solving problems, revising and

negotiating and constructing meaning. Furthermore, students are allowed to explore their ideas, to engage in topics of their interest, and to make their own decisions about the most effective ways to communicate. This can help students understand their own writing strategies, to use them more effectively and to relate the student’s own experiences to those of their peers (Hamp-Lyons, 1986).

Finally, students should be given the opportunity to share their writing with other student’s (Zamel, 1982: 206). These group work experiences are intended to make students sensitive to audience considerations when they write. In addition, these shared experiences help them review their writing based on another’s point of view and most importantly, it allows them to learn from each other.

In the PAEW, the teacher is a facilitator. The teacher’s role is to help students develop appropriate strategies for writing and encourage and provide a positive learning environment. Furthermore, teachers become learners, too. Teachers should observe students’ composing process in order to get a better understanding of it, to identify areas that students need some help with, and to intervene in a non-directive way (Zamel, 1983). As soon as a problem arises, teachers and students should work together. For example, if students cannot generate lists or notes before writing, teachers can help them by means of brainstorming and pre-writing activities.

In relation to language concerns, these are analyzed by means of an approach similar to “error analysis”. The assumption is that “establishing the cause of errors is necessary before prescribing corrective

measures..." (Zamel, 1982: 183).

PROCEDURE

The classroom is seen as a collaborative workshop where students freely compose their written texts, without too much concern about the time and with minimum, teacher intervention. According to Johns (1980), most ESL composition classes are based on the following activities: pre-writing (finding topics, generating ideas, focusing, planning structure), drafting (preparing multiple drafts), revising (modifying, deleting, adding ideas), and editing (attending to sentence structure, vocabulary, etc.).

CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Richards & Rodgers' (1982) framework has provided the reader with a whole picture of this approach. In each of the levels, the PAEW exhibits sound and convincing principles, procedures and techniques which contribute to supporting the key premise announced by Zamel (1983: 165) about the composing process: "Composing is a nonlinear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning". Nevertheless, this framework has also provided the author with insights to identify some of its critical weaknesses.

By the mid 1980's the phrase "process, not product" became the great buzzwords in the TESOL community. Supporters of a PAEW proclaimed it almost as a complete theory for teaching writing (Horowitz, 1986). But is a theory of writing complete, only because it focuses on process? The approach based on Silva's (1990) elements of L2 writing: text, writer, reader, context and their interrelationships, reveals some of its main weaknesses.

The first reason why focusing on process does not provide a complete theory of writing is because it fails to really acknowledge the importance of the text. Whether one wants to admit it or not, the result of the writing process is a product which is constrained by certain discourse or rhetorical patterns in each language. Especially when the ESL writers are in the beginning or intermediate levels, they need to work a lot on the language to create meaning, simply because they are in the process of learning the L2. In addition, if the rhetorical patterns are different across language, a good amount of interference can be expected. Could this not be a good reason for some of the professors' comments on the ESL students' papers which highlight the lack of cohesion and/or coherence?

The second argument that shows another weakness of the PAEW lies in its slight concern for the audience (context and reader) of the writing piece. The emphasis on personal writing and on free selection of writing topics can lead the students to focus exclusively on themselves. "Good writing is 'involved', writing a dogma which assumes that students who choose their own topics and care about them, are better writers" (Horowitz, 1986: 142). However, the reality that ESL students have to face in school runs against this ideal practice. At school, students do not have much freedom on topic selection and the tasks they are assigned range from timed essay exams to highly structured assignments (Horowitz, 1986). In other words, they are not prepared to write according to and for a "discourse community".

The third reason to highlight the incompleteness of a process oriented approach is that it fails to provide guidelines to establish an interaction