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Teaching Writing at Cuban Pedagogical Colleges: Choosing the Right Approach.

La enseñanza de la escritura en las universidades cubanas: selección del enfoque correcto.

Gerardo Martínez Pérez. [gmartinezp@udg.co.cu] iD
Master en Ciencias de la Educación Superior. Asistente.
Universidad de Granma. Bayamo, Cuba.

Alejandro Hermes Martínez Pérez. [amartinezperez@udg.co.cu] iD
Master en Ciencias de la Educación. Asistente.
Universidad de Granma. Bayamo, Cuba.

Eduardo Escalona Pardo. [epardo@udg.co.cu] iD
Master en Ciencias de la Educación Superior. Asistente.
Universidad de Granma. Bayamo, Cuba.

Abstract

This work focuses on the teaching of writing at Cuban Pedagogical colleges, on the selection of the right approach to improve prospective English teachers' standards at the time of producing different kinds of texts. The research is a result of the experience accumulated by the English teaching staff at Blas Roca Calderío College of Education in the University of Granma. To help teachers to improve prospective English teachers' writing competence, this article aims to present the combination of approaches in the teaching-learning process of writing skills as a possible channel. It is divided into two main sections. The first section provides some general theoretical information on each of the traditional writing approaches, while the second provides some hints on the possibilities to integrate them in the academic courses.

Resumen

El presente trabajo centra su atención en la enseñanza de la escritura en las universidades pedagógicas cubanas, específicamente en la selección del mejor enfoque para mejorar los

resultados de los futuros profesores de inglés para producir diferentes tipos de textos. El artículo constituye un resultado de la experiencia acumulada por los profesores de la Carrera Lenguas Extranjeras, Inglés de la Sede Pedagógica Blas Roca Calderío de la Universidad de Granma. Con el fin de ayudar a los profesores en su trabajo por incrementar la competencia de los futuros profesionales, este artículo tiene como objetivo presentar la integración de enfoques como alternativa posible durante el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje de habilidades de escritura. El trabajo se divide en dos secciones fundamentales. La primera sección ofrece una información general sobre cada uno de los enfoques tradicionales, mientras la segunda brinda algunas sugerencias sobre las posibilidades de integrar estos enfoques en los cursos académicos.

Keywords: traditional approaches; writing competence; integration of approaches.

Palabras claves: enfoques tradicionales; competencia escrita; integración de enfoques.

Introduction

People write for lots of reasons and writing is considered very necessary for academic/professional purposes, for life and jobs opportunities. In English, as a foreign language writing provides students with an opportunity to validate knowledge, acquire vocabulary and grammar.

However, this skill is the most complex to master in language learning since it is a process of figuring out ideas and complex thoughts; it involves remembering sounds, the shapes of the letters, vocabulary, grammatical structures, and punctuation. Indeed, teaching writing skills in English involves developing linguistic and communicative competence. Hence, learning how to write in a foreign language is a demanding task that can unmotivate students, and sometimes, teachers as well, who have to deal with different challenges, and one of those challenges is choosing the right approach.

Writing, when related with the other linguistic skills -- listening, speaking and reading -- is the most difficult one, since it entails the management of a wide range of both linguistic and rhetorical tools. Therefore, students need to get exposed to proper teaching strategies in order to meet their needs and cover their psychological and academic dissatisfactions when facing the writing skill.

However, teaching students to build accurate texts of any kind is not an easy task. It requires lots of observation, dedication, and research on the part of teaching staffs. It is their responsibility to design and put into practice appropriate strategies in teaching writing, taking for granted that proficiency in writing is a requirement for potential language teachers as far as their academic formation and future professional endeavor. All teachers agree on the fact that writing must be consciously taught, but the question they all ask is, "How?"

For decades, many methods, strategies and approaches have been tried; meaning that the writing skill has always been a concern for English instructors. Some of these methods have been applied, with more or less success, on different kinds of students depending on their specific professions and academic needs. Among these, the most traditional approaches have been centered on the product, the process, and the genre.

These approaches have been, in a way or another, put into practice at Cuban pedagogical colleges. However, teachers' concern in terms of students' development of the writing skill still persists. Writing keeps on being the ability the students show the poorest records, and the one they feel less motivated to. Thus, the main objective of this article is to offer ways to increase English major students' proficiency on the writing skill at Cuban pedagogical colleges, focusing on the following issues:

- The general theoretical aspects related with each of these traditional approaches.

- Their potentialities to be combined.

- Their gradual application at different academic years of the English Major at Cuban pedagogical colleges.

On the one hand, this article is the result of years of systematic observation, methodological conferences, bibliographic search, and staff discussions. On the other, there is students' contribution with their endless fight to succeed when they are required to present writing materials all along their academic formation.

On an interview for a TV show, the renowned American writer Fitzgerald once stated that "Writing is easy; all you have to do is stare at a blank sheet of paper till big drops of blood come out of your forehead." Consequently, the teacher`s task is to make those drops smaller. That, in general terms, is the intention of this material.

Development

General theoretical aspects related with the traditional writing approaches.

The Product Approach

Raimes (1983) states that the product-based writing approach, also called the text-based approach or guided composition, focuses on reinforcing writing in terms of linguistic aspects, grammar, and syntactical forms. There is a variety of activities in product-based writing which can raise students' awareness in second language writing from the lower levels of language proficiency to advance ones through the systematic practice on sentence-combining, paragraph development, and rhetorical pattern exercises.

In the Cuban reality, weaknesses in the final product are often associated to lack of knowledge of the linguistic code, thus remediation focuses on language drills rather than on encouraging effective composing strategies. (Pratt, 1987). As the focus of the product approach

is on the finished text, emphasis is placed on various forms of textual analysis, such as sentence and paragraph analysis, and the analysis of writing into different genres. In the teaching practice the traditional product approach involves one or a combination of the following elements:

- The teaching of grammar

- The analysis of literary prose models

- The step by step breakdown of the writing process derived entirely from an analysis of the topic.

In a product-based outlook of writing, the main emphasis is on the final linguistically correct material. For this approach, writing skill involves knowledge of the target language structures, and students develop their writing through the study of model texts presented by the writing teacher through controlled or guided writing activities. Moreover, the product-based approach makes special emphasis on accuracy in writing, associated with the proper use of verbs, articles, prepositions, pronouns, tenses, and simple and complex grammatical structures, as well as those aspects related with punctuation and mechanics. (Tribble, 1990)

The Process Approach

Writing must be understood as a series of overlapping and interrelating stages; cyclical and recursive rather than linear. It is also seen as a form of discourse, involving a process of communication with an anticipated reader. A process approach to writing makes emphasis on the shortcomings resulting from a product-based approach. It focuses on the writer as an independent producer of texts and centers on the process the learner undergoes from the generation of ideas and the gathering of information to the publication of a finished text. (Tribble, 1990)

Matsuda (2003) considers that in a process approach the main concern is the 'process' rather than the 'product'. Here, writing is not a static activity, but a time-consuming one

involving a cycle of such steps as getting ideas, brainstorming, free writing, mapping, getting started, outlining, drafting, revising, and editing until the text is complete or published. (Harmer, 2004)

(Pratt, 1987) declares these important features of the process approach:

a) An outlook of writing as a recursive process,

b) An emphasis on writing as a way of learning and communicating,

c) The incorporation of a rhetorical context, a view that writing assignments include a sense of audience, purpose and occasion,

d) A way for feedback which inspires the writing teachers to get involved during the process,

e) A method of evaluation which determines how well a written product adapts the goals of the writer, to the needs of the reader, and

f) The principle that writing teachers should be people who write.

The process approach goes hand-in-hand with a new, more collaborative teacher's role. The teachers need to interact with the student-writers and respond to their writing not as a tester but as a facilitator. There are multiple kinds of possible responses and the teachers need to establish priorities.(Badger & White, 2000)

Tribble, (1990) ponders when writing, it is also important to consider the ways in which writers and texts interact with readers and the purpose and social context of the activity. These aspects are not particularly substantial to the product or process approaches, but constitute the core of the genre approach.

The Genre Approach

A genre based approach follows the conventions of genre as the writer produces the text for a specific reader in order to achieve a particular purpose to communicate his or her message Swales (1990). In genre based writing, focus is on 'discourse' and 'context' and writing is viewed as an essentially social activity in which texts are written to do things, the assumption being that if the reader cannot recognize the purpose of a text, communication will not be successful. Tribble, (1990)

Therefore, the focus in the genre approach goes to the reader. Tribble, (1990) assumes that approaches which focus on the reader highlight the limits of form and content that have to be recognized when a writer attempts to match a text to a social purpose. According to Swales, (1990), a genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes.

Effective writing requires a consideration of the purpose and the audience. So the writer must bear in mind the following questions: "Why am I writing?" and "Who will read my text?" This reflection will enable him to choose the appropriate language, the structure, and the proper lay out.

The approaches and their potentialities to be combined.

Presently, most specialists assume that with a major focus on the interaction between the reader and the text and also on the process of writing, integrating product, process and genre approaches can serve towards production of an effective piece of written text. This assertion is paramount because it reveals that the application of a single approach definitely does not lead to the formation of effective writers.

Taking into account the Cuban context and the characteristics of prospective English language teachers, the combination of approaches turns into a vital necessity. However, there is a question to ask: How could these approaches be combined? The answer might come in two directions.

The first possibility can be related with students´ academic year. That is, to complete their development, prospective English teachers must undertake four years of systematic academic formation. During these years, they receive several subjects, but the one most committed with the development of their communicative competence is Integrated English Practice. This subject is in charge of raising students' standards in the four basic linguistic skills, namely speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

However, freshman students arrive at college with different levels of proficiency in the English language what makes the teaching staffs strive hard to balance them up. The results often bring about high levels of dissatisfaction on both, students and teachers. These students can hardly write, not because they lack content knowledge or process knowledge, but because they lack language system knowledge.

No one can expose his/her ideas in the English language if there is a lack of the basic linguistic tools needed for that purpose. What to do then?

The product approach, which focuses on a linguistically correct final product, seems to be the preliminary alternative during the first academic year. It means that the students will be given enough guided practice through the discussion of model texts making emphasis on accuracy in terms of the proper use of verbs, articles, prepositions, pronouns, tenses, and simple and complex grammatical structures, along with aspects related with punctuation and mechanics. This intensive text discussion will guarantee a proper linguistic preparation. The following step

should be to prompt the students to imitate the models already analyzed in class. A similar methodology used to be applied during the 80`s with acceptable degrees of success, but it was dismissed due to misinterpretations on the application of the communicative approach.

During the second year, the students must be ready to be exposed to a process approach. Now they are prepared to face the demanding task of working by themselves and finding personal strategies to move along the writing process.

In the process of writing occurs and re-occurs five distinct stages: Prewriting, Draft writing, Revising, Editing, and Evaluation. Each stage performs a crucial function in the actual process of writing, and each stage has a distinct focus, different from that of other stages. According to the experience acquired with prospective teachers, the authors suggest to include a writing workshop once the students have accomplished the prewriting stage (see figure I). This will offer them the possibility to present their initial projects, discus them in class and receive group and professional suggestions to improve what they have planned.
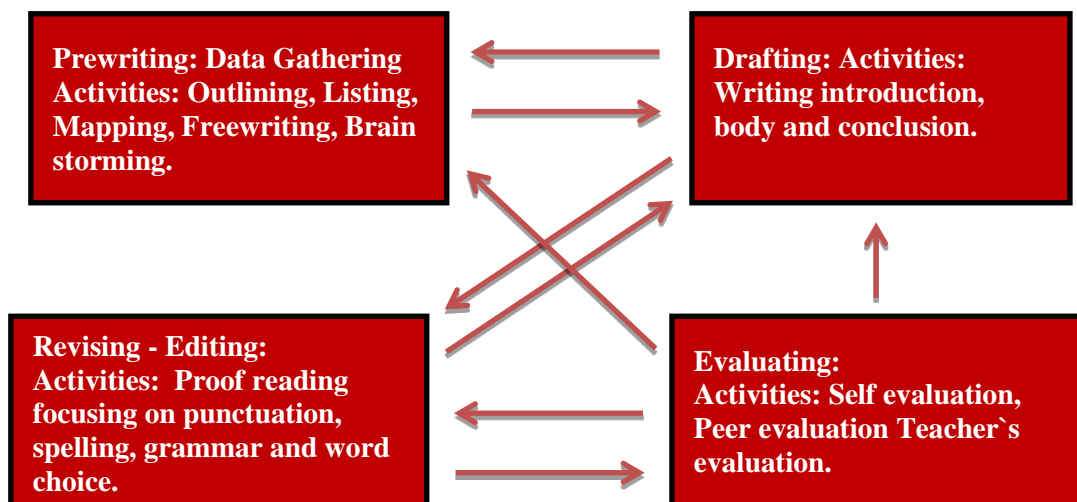
Figure 1

Inclusion of a writing workshop in the prewriting stage.
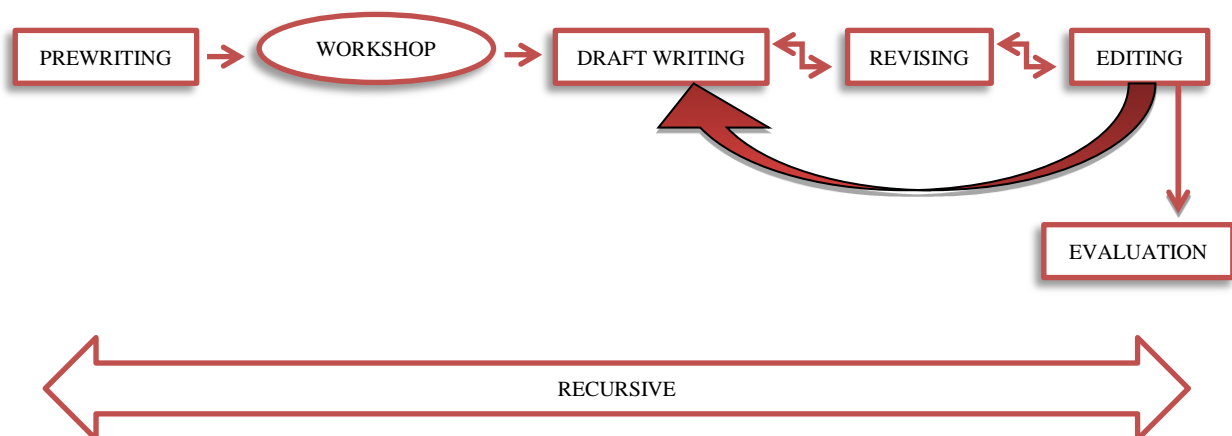
An approximation on how recursive this process is or how interrelated these stages are, is shown on figure II. Notice that it is impossible to move in only one direction. The role of the teacher is to have the students make conscious of these necessary movements when producing a basic correct text.

Figure 2

An approximation on how recursive this process is or how interrelated these stages are.

Prewriting: Data Gathering Activities: Outlining, Listing, Mapping, Freewriting, Brain storming.	Drafting: Activities: Writing introduction, body and conclusion.
Revising - Editing: Activities: Proof reading focusing on punctuation, spelling, grammar and word choice.	Evaluating: Activities: Self evaluation, Peer evaluation Teacher`s evaluation.

During these stages, it is recommended to take into consideration to a great extend the profits that cooperative learning can bring about. That is, the teacher must device writing workshops in which students present the results of their pre-writing stage to be discussed collectively. During these workshops, the role of the teacher should be to act as a facilitator to guarantee that at the end of the activity the students can count on potential writing projects. After this, the students should be able to undergo the rest of the stages of the writing process by themselves.

It must be highlighted that the diagram presented in figure 1 should not be seen as a literal description of the writing process as it occurs in reality. It is a perception of selected features of the writing process. This abstraction was formulated to help learners to understand

the nature of the actual process and to give them concrete advice as to how to go about the process, step by step. In a sense, it is an attempt to provide them with a mental picture of the process of writing. Academic reality proves that skilled writers already have their own way to go along, but poor writers do not.

All along the third and fourth years, the writing course should assume a genre approach to producing written texts. The idea is to start the courses with an analysis of authentic texts related with particular genres and, in due course, to teach the students thebasic conventions of that piece of genre and then to ask them to produce similar texts on their own. At first, the course should include the analysis of different paragraphs and essays. Then the teacher offers sample paragraphs and essays for the students to analyze in the classroom. Later, the students should be encouraged to get and study similar paragraphs and essays on their own. Having learned the basic conventions of a specific type of paragraph or essay, the students will start to produce their own texts. Writing the texts certainly will take place along a process approach-- already familiar--as they will be likely to have to write several drafts until they hand in the final copy. See fig. 1

The second possibility, less profitable as far as the authors' experience, is related with the combination of approaches since the very beginning. Combining approaches requires a valuation of students' records on the English language. It is well-known that not all freshmen start with the same or similar levels of proficiency in the English language. But if it were so, as sometimes happens, then there is the possibility to focus on a combined strategy to help the students become better writers in each of the four years of the English major. This is a demanding endeavor in which diversity and territories play a most important role.

Any writing program which is merely based upon a certain view may not reflect the true nature of writing. Hence, a writing program that views writing as a production of a piece of text

that is realized along a process and that reflects the social conventions expected from aspecific genre is likely to secure better success.(Hughes, 2003)

It is of paramount significance to point out that prospective teachers of English, will show foremost progress in all the basic components of writing, if they produce similar texts on their own as a result of the study of a variety of genres making emphasis on their specific features and conventionalities, on the general linguistic aspects these texts require, and on the process and strategies to develop them. (Spack & Sadow, 1983)

In fact, a prospective teacher of English, as well as any student writer, can compose socially recognized, coherent and well organized texts through an intensive writing program that attempts to integrate product, process, and genre approaches. This requires lots of effort on both students and writing teachers; but, taking into account students' needs and teachers' dissatisfactions, the attempt is worth a try.

General ideas about writing teaching

Teachers should keep a balance between the content of the writing activity they design or choose from books, the objective they want to accomplish when assessing the students and the students' needs and language level. Creativity is very important when adapting activities from books or other materials to make the task appealing and realistic for the students (topics according to the real context and the learners' age and experiences), you wouldn´t ask writing letters today, but emails, just to provide an example.

Taking into consideration the dimensions and descriptors for the writing skill stated in the Common European Framework of Reference, first, when designing/choosing writing tasks, examine what the objective is; if it is to train/teach punctuation, grammar, vocabulary,

spelling, collocation, capitalization; or if it is to train/teach content, organization (coherence and cohesion).

On the other hand, the quality of teaching and activities/tasks to train/teach the writing skill are considered paramount in comparison to the hours devoted to the development/improvement of the writing skill, which means that sometimes students spend plenty of time doing written assignments at home, and as a result, there is no progression at all. Practicing is very important in writing, of course, as we learn how to write through writing itself; but it doesn't lead to success when students have no guidance or when the stages of the writing process are not accomplished in teaching. In this respect, it is considered that the best place to teach writing is at school, in the classroom, a perfect environment where students are encouraged to follow instructions, interact and learn from each other, have fun while learning and develop skills.

Conclusions

1. Learning to produce an effective piece of writing can be rather difficult unless students are given both enough instruction as to what effective writing involves and adequate training chances to apply the basic conventions of writing.

2. Product, process, and genre approaches provide the most common bases to device writing courses in correspondence with prospective teachers' needs and the basic goals of the programs.

3. In spite of the fact that each of the approaches has its specific characteristics and seeks student writers' development with different focuses, there is always the possibility to combine them either in extended courses all along the major or in specific academic years.

4. Any writing strategy must highlight and take advantage of all the benefits of these approaches involving students actively in the writing process, helping them to produce well-organized texts with relevant content, language use, and powerful vocabulary in line with specific genres.

5. All teachers of English must consider the basic elements of an integrated approach to writing in the language classroom, so that student writers involved in such a practice learn to produce effective written texts an how to teach writing to their future pupils.

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