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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PRODUCT-BASED APPROACH IN TEACHING WRITING

Being one of the primary language skills, writing is used for written communication and language exchange. According to Brown (2001), writing is a process of idea generation, and coherent organisation of thoughts, with discourse markers and rhetorical conventions as means of cohesive transfer of concepts into a written text. Additionally, this process includes revision for a clearer meaning, editing for appropriate grammar, and producing a final product. Consequently, the final product of writing is the result of thinking, drafting, and revising procedures.

Nunan (1999) points out that for native speakers the production of a coherent and fluent piece of writing is presumably the most challenging thing in language. Foreign language learners face a far bigger challenge. A growing body of literature (e.g. Chastain, 1988; Fatemi, 2008; Ferris, 2003; Hyland, 2003) has addressed the significance and the difficulty of mastering this critical skill for language learners in school and lifetime (Warschauer, 2010).

When it comes to teaching writing in ESL, there are a number of approaches suggested by scholars, two of which are commonly practised in the classroom: teaching writing as a process and a product.

The *product-based approach* aims at the <u>final product</u>, the coherent, error-free text, where the end product is achieved by replicating the model text which is presented and analysed at the preceding stage of the lesson. On the contrary, the more contemporary *process-based approach* focuses on the <u>stages</u> involved in drafting a piece of text, treating the writing procedure as a highly creative activity that requires time, feedback and critical thinking to master the needed skill.

In writing pedagogy, the *product-oriented approach* is considered a more traditional method of teaching writing, having been practised for many years. Many ELT practitioners regard it as a prominent strategy for improving writing proficiency in ESL learners and favour this approach over any other for its effectiveness in relatedness to and consistency with bottom-up processing. The core of the product approach is sentence-level grammar, i.e., individual expressions/utterances and their structure system in text as the backbone units of discourse. Hence, discourse is the product of fitting these units onto the text and writing is seen as "a product constructed from the writer's command of grammatical and lexical knowledge, and writing development is considered to be the result of imitating and manipulating models provided by the teacher" (Hyland, 2003: 3).

Upon literary review of the matter, it was determined, that the product-based approach is effective in terms of adopting the target language.

By drawing on the concept of product writing, Harmer (2004) has shown that the approach of analysing the model text aims to help students see what language is used in the text and how it is constructed. The idea behind this method is that before learners can be expected to produce a coherent piece of text, they should first master the language at the sentence level. Therefore, classroom activities focus on the engagement of learners in imitating, copying and modifying models of the target language that usually focus on

sentence formation, punctuation and grammar. By practising such exercises in isolation, learners are expected to acquire the ability to produce a piece of writing with great accuracy, through habit formation to produce well-constructed sentences.

This principle, however, implies exposure to an increased number of tasks focused on grammar and syntax to improve learners' accuracy and reduce errors; model patterns are usually presented in the form of separate language fragments. This can be considered a disadvantage, as learners are likely to develop limited writing and will not be able to produce a piece of text beyond a few memorized grammatical structures. As Hyland (2003) contended, the ability to create or recreate grammatically correct sentences does not generally indicate readiness to produce appropriate written texts. In addition, writing tasks in this approach are predominately subordinate to controlled practice, with fill-in-the-gaps, sentence completion and tense transformation tasks. Such repetitive activities are likely to discourage flexibility and reduce students' motivation.

Regarding the matter of motivation, the title of the approach denotes that the emphasis is on the end result of the learning process. After learning the target grammar and lexis, students are expected to produce a final piece of writing that incorporates both of those aspects. The driving force of many learners' motivation in learning is manifested in their interest to reach the end product and receive feedback as soon as possible. Hence, the approach of focusing solely on the end product or outcome seems to be of little value to learners, for, as soon as their work is reviewed and assessed by the teacher, students are likely to leave behind the material and the knowledge because they were encouraged only by their grade.

Another idea supports the effectiveness of product-oriented pedagogy. As previously stated, this approach usually provides learners with written models drawn from different writing constructions of the so-called 'genres' (Harmer, 2004). Such a strategy may help learners recognize the peculiarities of a certain text in terms of syntactic patterns, vocabulary choices, and cohesive devices. So, when practising writing, learners will be able to identify and operate specific features of the text based on its relatedness to a certain genre or style, its formality or informality, and apply this subskill when analysing pieces of writing that contain similar or identical characteristics.

This other feature of product-based writing implies that the organisation of ideas in the text seems to be more important than the ideas themselves. The emphasis is put on how well the ideas are put together by learners, rather than on communicative content of writing. Learners are encouraged to organise their writing in a set of stages presented by the teacher and to replicate the model pattern in their own piece of writing. Consequently, the main indicator for "good" writing in this approach is the level of accuracy and clear exposition of ideas, but not their quality. On the one hand, this may be beneficial in helping learners stick to the required structure. On the other hand, by paying greater attention to the 'backbone' of the text, learners may neglect the creative aspect of writing and ignore the importance of idea development, which can improve their writing skills significantly.

A related feature maintains that the writing is performed following the pattern 'controlled-guided-free', suggesting that students first learn fixed patterns, then imitate the written model and finally make use of the patterns they have learned in order to complete the assigned writing. This process is logical and linear, however, provides little flexibility for both the learner and the teacher. The first two stages revolve around simply analysing, transforming and replicating the target patterns. This does not provide learners with much room for developing their own ideas, reducing their creative potential, which supports the

idea mentioned in the paragraph above. Moreover, this process usually requires the production of a single-draft writing. Therefore, at the very last stage of the process, learners need to recollect and apply all the knowledge of structure, style grammar and lexis they have learned in the first two stages, trying not to omit any essential features.

Taken together, these ideas suggest that the main features of the product-based approach in writing include the pattern of controlled-guided-free writing, focus on the end product, model texts for learners to analyse and replicate and major emphasis on accuracy of exposition and organization of ideas. Taking into account both drawbacks and benefits of this approach, it can be considered helpful in an array of ways. For instance, product writing can be suitable in preparation for examinations and language proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEFL which set strict frameworks for each stage that evaluates a particular skill. In this case, accuracy will serve as a great advantage in writing a good piece according to all requirements. Additionally, this approach can assist students in learning to produce a basic but grammatically correct piece of writing. Further implementing the process-based approach into the learning process can support and foster the development of writing skills, along with creative thinking and idea development.

Such a combination of ideas and features appears to make the product-oriented approach reliable enough to take the place of one of the most practised and prevalent in the field of writing pedagogy.

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