

The Development Of Students' Writing In ESL Classrooms

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Abstract: As teachers of the EFL/ESL writing classes (English is taught as a foreign or second language), our main activity is to understand, plan and conduct writing courses. At first glance, this work is in many ways similar to the application of practical professional knowledge, that is, knowledge gained as a result of classroom experience. To some extent, of course, this is true, because, as in any profession, teaching is improved in practice. As teachers of EFL/ESL classes (English is taught as a foreign or second language), our main activity is to understand, plan and conduct writing courses. At first glance, this work is in many ways similar to the application of practical professional knowledge, that is, knowledge gained as a result of classroom experience. To some extent, of course, this is true, because, as in any profession, teaching is improved in practice. However, this is not limited to experience alone. Our classroom decisions are always based on our theories and beliefs about what writing is and how people learn to write. Everything we do in the classroom - the methods and materials we use, the teaching methods we choose, the assignments we give - is all controlled by practical and theoretical knowledge. When this knowledge is in a clear and understandable form, our decisions become more effective. In this way, familiarizing ourselves with existing knowledge about learning to write and write allows us to reflect on our own expectations and take an informed and critical look at current teaching methods.

Keywords: Writing, second foreign language, accuracy, structure, functionality, expressiveness, content, TESOL, ESL, EFL.

Introduction: Second language writing refers to writing in a language other than one's native language. This often, but not always, means writing in a language that the writer is learning. For many of us, it is also a field of theoretical study—that is, the study of the writing of non-native speakers. It also includes:

- the experience of writing in another language,
- the analysis of texts written in another language,
- the teaching of writing in another language,
- and the study of the process of teaching writing (Hyland, 2013).

In other words, second language writing is not just about what people do, but also about the texts they produce, and how this process is taught, analyzed, and studied. How we understand it depends in large part on what we are using it for. This field is closely related to TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages), applied linguistics, composition, and translation. It also includes teachers who teach in different languages. However, understanding the field of second language writing largely depends on how we

see the problems and what we think are the best ways to solve them. As such, the field is constantly changing. It must be acknowledged that the term “second language” itself is vague. It includes writing in any language other than the writer's native language and situations where the target language is the primary language of communication outside the classroom. That is, “second language” sometimes also refers to writing in a third, fourth, or foreign language. This suggests that what is complex and interesting is not just the writing itself, but the writers themselves. They differ in their history, level of language proficiency, purpose for writing, previous experience, and learning environment. As Casanave (2012: 297) notes:

“The field of L2 writing is not just about texts, but also about people (including ourselves) who write. Each person has their own L1 and L2 literacy history, as well as their own unique context.” In short, “second language writing” is a difficult concept to define precisely, but we can analyze it in terms of the ways in which it is learned and taught.

Since EFL/ESL writing emerged as a distinct academic

discipline in the 1970s, a number of theories have been developed to help teachers understand second language writing and the process of learning it. In many cases, these theories have been enthusiastically embraced, translated into appropriate methodologies, and applied in practice, in classroom settings. However, each theory is usually seen as part of a larger whole, as another perspective on what learners should be taught and what teachers should provide for effective writing instruction. Thus, although these approaches are sometimes interpreted historically as successive movements (e.g., Matsuda, 2003), it is a mistake to view them as such. In fact, these theories are complementary and overlapping perspectives that provide different ways of understanding the complex nature of writing. Therefore, it is useful to view these theories as different options for a curriculum, each organizing L2 writing around one of the following main areas:

- **Structural;**
- **Functional;**
- **Expressive;**
- **Content.**

Most teachers do not strictly follow one approach in their lessons. Instead, they mix and match their practices to the learning context and their personal beliefs about how students learn to write. However, while it is rare to see a single theory applied “purely,” one approach usually dominates. That is, teachers often use a variety of approaches, but they tend to lean more heavily on one. Therefore, while these theories are not always used as separate methods in practice, it is useful to consider each approach separately. This allows us to better understand what each one means about writing and how they can support the teaching process.

One way to look at writing is to see it as a coherent arrangement of symbols on a page or screen, that is, an orderly representation of words, phrases, and sentences that is structured according to a set of rules. This interpretation of second language (L2) writing leads to viewing writing as a product and focuses primarily on grammar and the formal structural units of the text. According to this view, learning to write in a foreign or second language is primarily a process of acquiring linguistic knowledge, namely the basic components of a text, including word choice, syntactic patterns, and ****cohesive devices****. This approach emerged in the 1960s from the convergence of structural linguistics and behaviorist learning theory (Silva, 1990). According to this view, writing is a product of the writer's grammatical and lexical knowledge, and development in writing occurs as a result of repetition

and use of models provided by the teacher. For those who adopt this approach, writing is an extension of grammar, that is, a means of reinforcing language units and testing the ability of students to construct grammatically correct sentences. Others, however, consider writing to be a complex structure and believe that it can only be learned by developing the ability to control lexical and grammatical units. Teaching writing based on language structure typically involves a four-step process:

- 1. Familiarisation:** Students are taught specific grammar and vocabulary, usually through careful reading of the text.
- 2. Controlled writing):** Students practice the given structures, often through substitution tables.
- 3. Guided writing):** Students imitate the sample texts given by the teacher.
- 4. Free writing:** Students write essays, letters, or other texts based on the structures they have learned.

In this approach, texts are viewed as a chain of grammatical structures, so lessons use “slot and filler” structures—that is, exercises in which new meaningful sentences can be formed by changing words. The most common form is substitution charts, which allow students to mix and match ready-made sentence structures and safely practice writing. This form is so popular that it was even used in a recent cable television commercial. Writing exercises then continue with directed compositions, in which students are asked to complete short exercises such as filling in the blanks, completing sentences, and changing verb tenses or pronouns. The main goal of this approach is to teach students to focus on accuracy and avoid errors.

By teaching writing as a combination of lexical and syntactic forms, students begin to understand good writing primarily as knowledge of these forms and the rules behind them. In this approach, accuracy and clarity are the main criteria for good writing, while content and communicative meaning are often neglected or considered later. If teaching writing is primarily aimed at teaching students to produce ready-made structures, then feedback on writing is also limited to correcting errors in control of the language system. Therefore, many of the techniques used in this method are still used to increase vocabulary, gradually develop writing, and build confidence in students with low language skills. However, the structural approach also poses certain problems. One of the biggest drawbacks is that teachers or textbook authors often present short structures based on their intuition rather than on real text analysis. This limits students to writing only a few sentences, which results in them struggling

in real writing situations.

Furthermore, focusing solely on grammar may not lead to effective writing. This ignores not only context, but also the relationship between writer and reader. In fact, grammar is only one component of good writing. For example, in the UK National Curriculum, the main areas of writing include:

- vocabulary;
- spelling;
- punctuation;
- handwriting;
- sentence structure and grammar.

Thus, grammatical accuracy is not the only indicator of improved writing, nor may it be the most important one. Teachers often encounter students who can construct grammatically correct sentences but who cannot produce coherent or complete text. Also, a decrease in errors in an essay is not always a sign of improvement—it can sometimes be a sign of not taking risks because of the fear of making mistakes. Most importantly, the goal of teaching writing can never be to teach accuracy and clarity alone, because written texts are always produced in response to a specific communicative situation. The writer draws on knowledge about the reader, similar texts, and how to express them. At the same time, the reader also reconstructs meaning from the text, drawing on his or her knowledge of language and context—a fact that has been confirmed in research on knowledge-based inference in reading (e.g., Nassaji, 2007). Therefore, very few L2 writing teachers today consider writing to be just about “good grammar.” At the same time, writing is not unimportant in learning a language. A writer must know how to express his or her meaning clearly through words, sentences, and text structures. So, we certainly need to include formal (grammatical) elements in our writing lessons, but at the same time, students need to learn how to apply this grammatical knowledge for real purposes and in real contexts.

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