On the Application of the Process-genre Approach to Teaching English Writing

Shi-Zhong ZHAO

School of Foreign Languages, Shenyang Jianzhu University, Shenyang 110168, China

Key words: Process-Genre Approach, Teaching Model, Teaching Procedures

Abstract: The process-genre approach to teaching writing has been forward by Badger and White (2000), but how to apply this approach is a great challenge we meet. Based on the previous research on the nature of writing, this thesis explicitly explores the theoretical basis of this approach. And then the writer puts forward a series of teaching procedures based on Badger and White’s (2000) teaching model. Furthermore, this thesis presents the theoretical foundation and the strengths of these procedures.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, the study of writing instruction has become part of the mainstream of applied linguistics, and some researchers have introduced various teaching approaches to English writing. Of them, there are three approaches that are more popular, that is, the product approach, the process approach and the genre approach. However, in practical teaching, people have found that each of the approaches has their respective strengths and weaknesses. In order to exert their strengths and overcome their weaknesses, Badger and White (2000) integrated the three approaches, putting forward the process-genre approach to teaching writing.

The process-genre approach begins with the situation which gives rise to a particular genre of writing, and then the students produce some writing in line with their own needs supported by the teacher, their peers and sample texts. To this day, this approach is considered as the most comprehensive one to teaching writing.

Nevertheless, the theoretical basis of the process-genre approach has not been explicitly expounded to this day. In China, in particular, few people have got knowledge of the approach, not to mention its application in EFL teaching. Moreover, Badger and White (2000) have not given specific teaching procedures that teachers can operate directly. Although some researchers (Wang, 2002) have put forward their own teaching procedures and suggestions, they are not detailed enough.

Therefore, this thesis attempts to explore the theoretical basis of the process-genre approach, and then present a series of teaching procedures based on Badger and White’s (2000) teaching model.

The Teaching Model of the Approach

The process genre approach was first put forward by Badger and White (2000) in University of Stirling, Britain. See the following figure of this teaching model:

Figure 1. A process genre model of teaching writing (Badger & White, 2000).
Seen from the model, this approach begins with the situation which gives rise to a particular genre of writing, and then the communicative purpose in a specific situation determines the mode, field and tenor. Based on this, students plan, draft their own texts in line with their own needs supported by the teacher, their peers and sample texts.

Take the instruction of writing a resume as an example. The teacher may select a resume as a model text, and then make students get to know the following points: its communicative purpose is to make the writer obtain a chance of being interviewed; its field is the introduction of the writer’s education and work experience; its tenor is to face an unfamiliar person—the manager of a specific personnel department; its mode is formal language. After this, students plan, draft their own resumes by imitation with the help of the teacher, their peers and the model text.

Theoretical Basis of the Approach

Before exploring this question, we have to go back to the basic question: What is the nature of writing? That is, what does writing mean? This is the question that many researchers have been concerning with.

According to Zha (2001: 27), “...writing is social, a way of interacting with other people; thus, every time you write you are trying to say something to somebody for some purpose. Unless a piece of writing does these three things, it does not really exist as writing. It is just an exercise, rather than a communication going on between people in order to accomplish something”.

Besides, writing is regarded as “who writes what to whom, for what purpose, why, when, where and how?” (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, p.203). In a word, writing is described as the writer and readers’ communicative activity on some topic decided by a certain purpose. Hence, if we want to ensure the success of communication, we must keep in mind our purpose and our audience (readers), which are so-called writing situation.

At the same time, writing is a highly complex activity, and it is a combination of individual cognitive processing, social-context influences and the writer’s background knowledge (Mokenna, 2002, cited in Zhao, 2003). Flower and Hayes’s (1981) model divides writing into three main parts: task environment, writing process and the writer’s long-term memory. In detail, task environment refers to the immediate context of a writing situation in which a written task must be completed; writing process refers to the activities taking place inside the writer’s head; the writer’s long-term memory refers to the larger social context including knowledge of topic, audience and writing plans (as cited in Wang, 2003).

All of these statements on the nature of writing emphasize the significance of writing situation (audience and purpose), social context and individual cognition. Thus, writing is a process which includes one’s selecting, organizing and encoding one’s thoughts into coherent form (Zhao, 2003). Faced with a writing task, a writer begins with an intention to convey with his prior knowledge about the topic, and then selects the aspects relevant to the topic to construct the new information (ibid.).

As for the ingredients of writing, Badger and White (2000: 154) has the following statement:

Writing involves knowledge about language (as in product and genre approaches), knowledge of the context in which writing happens and especially the purpose for the writing (as in genre approaches) and skills in using language (as in process approaches).

One’s writing ability improves with the “drawing out the learners’ potential (as in process approaches) and the providing input to which the learners respond (as in product and genre approaches)” (ibid.).

Thus, the process-genre approach to teaching writing—the integration of the three approaches—corresponds to the nature of writing to the greatest extent, and its theoretical foundation is certainly the combination of the ones of the three approaches, that is, behaviorist theory, social constructivism, interactive theory and genre theory. Therefore, theoretically, the process-genre approach to teaching writing is feasible.
**Application of the Approach: Classroom Teaching Procedures**

Based on Badger and White’s (2000) teaching model, this thesis attempts to present a series of procedures, including the following four steps:

- Analysis of Model Texts
- Independent Writing
- Revising
- Editing and Proofreading

**Analysis of Model Texts**

In this step, two sub-steps are included, that is, Teacher’s Model Analysis and Students’ Imitation Analysis.

In the first sub-step, the teacher chooses a typical text of a certain genre as a model text, and analyzes to students the writing situation in terms of the audience and the communicative purpose of the genre, and then analyzes context of situation in terms of the field, tenor and mode, finally analyzes the background knowledge, generic structure and linguistic features.

In the second sub-step, the teacher selects another typical text of the same genre and asks students to analyze it by following the above procedures.

In this step, the first sub-step belongs to the input stage, and the second sub-step belongs to the intake stage. According to Ellis (1994), intake is “the portion of the input that learners notice and therefore take into temporary memory” (p.708). If learners have no opportunities to notice the input, the input will not be processed into their memory system. Instead, if learners are provided with authentic data to observe, analyze on their own, the input taken into short-term memory can be converted into long-term memory, and then the internalization will occur. By students’ imitation analysis, the characteristics on the genre will internalize in students’ brain as schema knowledge.

**Independent Writing**

In this step, each student will create a composition independently. This includes three sub-steps---choosing a topic, planning and writing the first draft.

Of the three sub-steps, the stage of choosing a topic is very important, because “whether a piece of writing is good enough to achieve the intended purpose depends heavily on the proper choice of the topic...” (Feng, 2002: 9). Furthermore, choosing a suitable topic will increase the writers’ interest in their writing tasks, ensuring that they have a lot of things to say while writing. According to Ammon (1985), if a writer is very interested in some topic, he will have a high motivation of writing. Therefore, the teacher should give students as much freedom as possible in choosing a topic. Even if the topic is provided by the teacher, the teacher should make it be close to students’ life, interest and so on.

Here comes the time of planning. Bearing the knowledge acquired in the last step—Analysis of Model Texts in mind, students consider writing situation, identify context of situation and generate content, organization and language. What is needed to be pointed out is that the generating of content, organization and language interact with one another. For example, the expression of language is determined by the content, because the content is realized by language, that is, content → language; on the other hand, the usage of language may realize the goal that the content determines, or cannot realize the goal because of the writer’s limited proficiency of English levels. At this time, the writer has to choose other suitable ways to express his intention (Ammon, 1985). In other words, language can affect the expression of the content, that is, language → content.

Of the generating of content, organization and language, the generating of content is not very easy. If students have not enough topic knowledge, they will not know what to write. At this time, students should read the articles which are relevant to the topic from the Internet, newspapers, journals and so on to explore the topic that they choose.

After the planning, students may begin writing the first draft, in which content and style are stressed, while grammar and mechanical errors are ignored. This corresponds with the features of the process approach.
Revising

This step refers to the revision of the overall organization, the content and the message of the piece of writing.

In this step, the process writing is revealed to the most extent. Moreover, the interaction, either among students or between the teacher and students, are emphasized. While peer-revising, students may evaluate, critique and edit each other’s composition in groups. Thus, the writing is moving from writer-based to reader-based, and hence students’ interest will be aroused. After this, students revise their own drafts in reference to their peers’ feedback, and then the teacher comments the compositions either by written comments or having conferences with students. On the basis of this, students will write their own final drafts.

Editing and Proofreading

In this step, students first concentrate on the sentence and paragraph level of the compositions, checking the unity, logic and cohesion, and then proofread the mistakes, such as grammar, word-spelling and punctuation.

In this process, students must turn their attention from the writing process to the written product. After all, the product is the ultimate goal; it is the reason that we go through the process of analyzing, planning, drafting, revising and editing. Process is not the end but the means to the end.

Summary

Through the above analyses, we can see that it is feasible to apply the process-genre approach to teaching English writing by means of the above teaching procedures. Nevertheless, like all other approaches, the process-genre approach may have some limitations, for instance, it is time-consuming and cannot meet the demands of those students who are ready to take examinations; moreover, it is unfit for learners of low and intermediate levels of English.

Because of the limit of time, we have not done any experiments to test whether the process-genre approach is effective or not. Further research is needed to explore whether the process-genre approach is effective or not and how effective it is compared with other approaches.

Acknowledgement

This research was financially supported by the Shenyang Jianzhu University Foundation.

References


