WRITING THEORIES AND WRITING PEDAGOGIES

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Abstract

This paper explores the main approaches to understanding and teaching writing. Making a broad distinction between theories concerned with texts, with writers and with readers, I will show what each approach offers and neglects and what each means for teachers. The categorisation implies no rigid divisions, and, in fact the three approaches respond to, critique, and draw on each other in a variety of ways. I believe, however, this offers a useful way of comparing and evaluating the research each approach has produced and the pedagogic practices they have generated.

Keywords: Teaching writing; Pedagogic practices; Approaches

INTRODUCTION

A number of theories supporting teachers' efforts to understand L2 writing and learning have developed since EFL/ESL writing first emerged as a distinctive area of scholarship in the 1980s. In most cases each has been enthusiastically taken up, translated into appropriate methodologies and put to work in classrooms. Equally however each has typically be seen as another piece in the jigsaw, an additional perspective to illuminate what learners need to learn and teachers need to provide for effective writing instruction. Different approaches are therefore more accurately seen as complementary and overlapping perspectives, representing potentially compatible means of understanding the complex reality of writing.

In this paper I want to offer a brief survey of these frameworks and explore the main approaches to teaching and researching writing. I will break these into the three main aspects of writing (Hyland, 2002):

- The first approach concentrates on *texts* as the products of writing.
- The second focuses on the writer and the *processes* used to create texts.
- The third approach directs learners to the role that *readers* play in writing and how they need to think about an audience in creating texts.

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While each focus assumes a different idea about what writing is and implies different ways of teaching it, these approaches have become blurred as teachers have drawn from and combined them, to both learn more about writing and to provide better teaching and learning methods. In any classroom, then, a teacher may use on a combination of these. But I think it is helpful to separate them to see clearly what we are doing when we make teaching decisions. We need to know the theories, assumptions and research which support our teaching practices.

TEXT-ORIENTED RESEARCH AND TEACHING

First, text-oriented approaches consider writing as an outcome, a noun rather than a verb, viewing writing as the words on a page or screen, and here we see texts either as *objects* or as *discourse*.

Texts as Objects

First of all, seeing texts as objects means understanding writing as the application of rules. Writing is a 'thing' independent of particular contexts, writers, or readers - and learning to become a good writer is largely a matter of knowing grammar. So this view sees texts as arrangements of words, clauses, and sentences, and those who use it in the classroom believe that students can be taught to say exactly what they mean by learning how to put these together effectively. In the writing classroom teachers emphasise *language structures*, often in these four stages (Hyland, 2003):

- *Familiarisation*: learners study a text to understand its grammar and vocabulary,
- *Controlled writing*: then they manipulate fixed patterns, often from substitution tables
- *Guided writing*: then they imitate model texts – usually filling in gaps, completing texts, creating topic sentences, or writing parallel texts.
- *Free writing*: learners use the patterns they have developed to write an essay, letter, etc.

Texts are often regarded as a series of appropriate grammatical structures, and so instruction may employ 'slot and filler' frameworks in which sentences with different meanings can be generated by varying the words in the slots. Writing is rigidly controlled through guided compositions which give learners short texts and ask them to fill-in gaps,

compete sentences, transform tenses or personal pronouns, and complete other exercises which focus students on achieving accuracy and avoiding errors. A common application of this is the substitution table (Table 1) which provides models for students and allows them to generate risk-free sentences.

TABLE 1
A substitution table

There are The	Y	types kinds classes categories	of X	: A, B and C. . These are A, B and C. are A, B and C.

X	consists of Can be divided into	Y	categiries classes kinds types	. The are A, B, and C. : A. B. and C.

A, B and C are	classes kinds types categiries	of X.	

(Hamp-Lyons & Heasley, 1987, p. 23)

But while this has been a major classroom approach for many years, it draws on the now discredited belief that meaning is contained in the message, and that we transfer ideas from one mind to another through language. It assumes that a text says everything that needs to be said with no conflicts of interpretations or different understandings, because we all see things in the same way; but this is clearly not a viable position. Accuracy is just one feature of good writing and does not on its own facilitate communication. Even the most explicitly written contracts and legal documents can result in fierce disputes of interpretation. So our goal as writing teachers can never be just training students in accuracy because all texts include what writer's assume their readers will know, and how they will use the text. The writer's problem is not to make everything explicit, but to make it explicit for particular readers, balancing what needs to be said against what can be assumed.

Texts as Discourse

A second perspective sees texts as *discourse* – the way we use language to communicate, to achieve purposes in particular situations.

Here the writer is seen as having certain goals and intentions and the ways we write are resources to accomplish these. Teachers working with writing in this way seek to identify the how texts actually work as communication, regarding forms of language as located in social action. A key idea here is that of *genre*, which is a term for grouping texts together. We know immediately, for example, whether a text is a recipe, a joke or an essay and can respond to it and write a similar one if we need to.

We all have a repertoire of these responses we can call on to communicate in familiar situations, and we learn new ones as we need them. Common "factual genres" which students learn at school are:

- *procedure* – tells us how something is done
- *description* – tells us what something is like
- *report* – tells us what a class of things is like
- *explanation* – gives reason why a judgement is made

These are identified not only by their different purpose but by the stages they typically go through to achieve this purpose. So when we write we follow conventions for organising messages because we want our reader to recognise our purpose, and genre approaches describe the stages which help writers to set out their thoughts in ways readers can easily follow. Some examples of the structure of school genres are shown in Figure 1.

Genre	Stages	Purpose
Recount	Orientation	provides information about a situation
	Record of Events	presents events in temporal sequence
	(Reorientation)	brings events into the present
Procedure title or intro	Goal	gives information about purpose of the task – in
	Steps 1-n	activities needed to achieve the goal in correct
sequence	(Results)	states the final 'look' of the activity
Narrative	Orientation	gives information about a situation
	Complication	sets out one or more problems for the characters to
solve	Evaluation	describes the major event
	Resolution	sorts out the problems for the characters

Figure 1. Some common school genres and their structures

Thus genre provides a way of distinguishing, say, an *exposition* from a *report* in terms of their different schematic structures. Take the contrast between a simple model of each in figure 2 which are taught to primary school students in Australia:

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1. Exposition (presenting and supporting a point of view)

Thesis	A good teacher needs to be understanding to all children.
Argument	He or she must be fair and reasonable. The teacher must work at a sensible pace. The teacher also needs to speak with a clear voice so the children can understand.
Conclusion	That's what I think a good teacher should be like.

2. Report (tells us what something is like)

Classification	The bat is a nocturnal animal
Description	It lives in the dark. There are long-nosed bats and mouse eared bats and also lettuce winged bats. Bats hunt at night. They sleep in the day and are very shy.

Figure 2. Examples of two primary school genres   (Butt et al., 2000)

In addition to describing the stages of the genres students are often asked to write, teachers also focus on the typical features of these texts. So, for example, when teaching simple recounts and descriptions, teachers may find it useful to highlight the key grammatical differences between these two genres as:

- Descriptions tend to use present tense and recounts past simple tense.
- Descriptions make use of 'be' and 'have' while recounts usually contain more action verbs.

In more complex factual genres which students write at high school or university, such as reports or explanations, the features used attempt to remove texts from the here-and-now to more conceptual levels of expression. This is mainly achieved by:

- a high use of abstractions rather than more personal and concrete nouns.
- an increase in 'lexical density', or more content words over grammar words.
- a higher frequency of conditionals such as *unless, if,* and *because*.

- A greater use of nominalization, where actions are presented as nouns, so that *'atoms bond rapidly'*, for example, can be presented as an object: *'Rapid atom bonding'*.

So while genre teaching means attending to grammar, this is not the old disembodied grammar of the writing-as-object approach but a resource for producing texts. A knowledge of grammar shifts writing from the implicit and hidden to the conscious and explicit to allow students to effectively manipulate language (Hyland, 2004). This means getting students to notice, reflect on, and then use the conventions to help them produce well-formed and appropriate texts. One approach is the teaching-learning cycle (Figure 3).
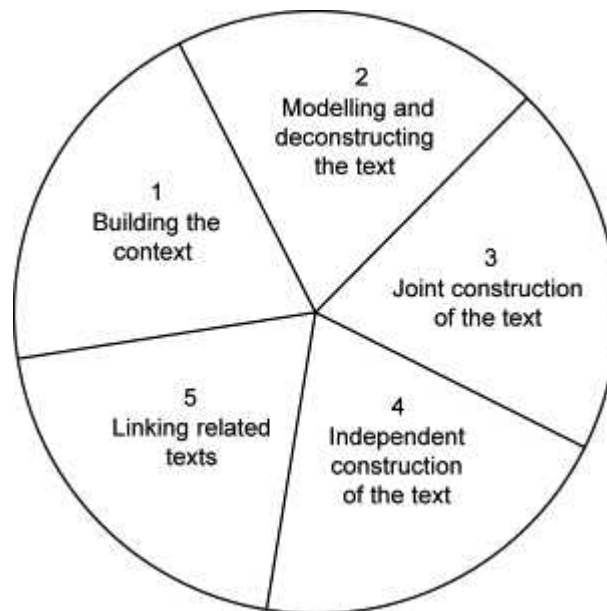

Figure 3. The teaching learning cycle

The cycle helps us plan classroom activities by showing genre learning as a series of linked stages which scaffold, or support, learners towards understanding texts. The key stages are:

- First understanding the purpose of the genre and the settings where it is used: So, how it fits into target academic situations. Who writes it, with whom, who for, why, etc? What is the relationship between the writer