Enhancing learners' Critical writing through Process Writing Approach

Case Study: First year Master Students of the department of English of UHBC University

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a writing unit sample about advert description based on Process Writing Approach. In fact, it is a six sessions unit from a critical writing course that counts six units focusing on the techniques and principles of persuasive writing for academic purposes. This unit was implemented with a class of 35 Master 1 learners reading for a MA in English at the faculty of foreign languages during the first term of 2015. The aim was to evaluate whether adopting such an approach in writing about authentic and meaningful topics really fosters learners' involvement and appreciation of writing and raises their critical thinking and creativity and helps them become better writers. The findings obtained from the formative evaluation rubrics and questionnaire provided some significant value in terms of students' achievement, improvement and

positive attitude towards writing. Students expressed their complete satisfaction with this kind of approach and authentic writing subjects as advertisements that constituted a cut from the traditional writing classrooms.

Key Words: process-writing; Motivation; Advertisement; Collaboration; Formative-Evaluation

1. Introduction

Writing is a complex human activity. It reflects one's thoughts. We use language to express what we think and respond to people and to the world around us. Thus, writing is not a mere operation of writing words and ideas on a paper in an organised acceptable way. Though organisation and grammar are important, organising our ideas in a clear logical and thoughtful way so as to be meaningful and convincing to readers proves to be more complicated. It is a big challenge for both teachers and learners. It demands a high intellectual and cognitive involvement from the learner and time, patience from the teacher as he has to face learners' demotivation and low performance and enthusiasm to engage in writing tasks. So, the main objective of this experiment was to evaluate whether writing about subjects of interest within a process-oriented approach would enhance learners'

involvement in writing, develop their awareness and improve their achievement.

1.2 Research context

Traditional approach is the predominant characteristic of teaching writing in our department of English. Courses revolve around given models or guidelines, focusing on grammatical correctness above all (Mahon, 1992). What underlies these writing courses is the traditionally teacher centered transmissive approach which renders the teaching of writing a mere receptive study where the emphasis is put on grammatical correctness and adherence to a given model (White, 1988). This is not to suggest that such knowledge is not invaluable, but students do not make sense of these guidelines and pre-determined models. Consequently, they become passive learners who find no difficulty to handle traditional reading/writing comprehension tasks where they have to apply prescribed ready rules. However, they find difficulties in engaging in persuasive writing tasks that demand language knowledge, time and guidance. Accordingly, they show no interest in such tasks and develop serious 'writing block' (Halsted 1975, p: 82)

To address this issue, a unit based on process-Writing approach was developed and put into practice with a group of master 1 learners of English at the faculty of foreign languages. It was a unit made of six sessions, lasting 1h30 each lesson where the task of writing was broken into different stages, giving

importance to the process learners go through in order to create the product rather than just the product.

1.3 Theoretical background and research aim

The present unit sample has been informed by process-writing approach which places more emphasis on stages of the writing process than on the final product (Leki, 199). It is learner-centered and enables learners to build understanding and to make sense step by step, making errors, correcting, planning, drafting, revising, editing and even publishing. Thus, the aim of the experiment was to establish whether this approach really facilitates the task of writing to students and if authentic texts as advertisement are meaningful and motivating enough to engage them in an active participation in the writing task and consequently improve their awareness and critical writing.

1.4 Research hypotheses

The following hypotheses have been formulated about applying process-oriented approach in writing about advertisement

   a. The writing subject attracts learners' attention,
   b. Collaboration with peers as well as their feedback is appreciated
   c. Teacher assistance and guidance help learners in the writing process
   d. Step by step writing tasks fosters learners' engagement till the final stage

1.5 Contribution of the experiment

Through this writing unit sample implementation, I wanted to investigate learners' response to this experiment, to analyse their opinions and feeling towards process-oriented approach to writing and evaluate its effect on their engagement during the whole process and on their final written product. The implication of this experiment could be a change in teachers' approach in writing courses.

2. Literature Review

Different approaches have been applied in teaching Writing. The most applied one in our department of English (based on survey conducted in 2005) is product-oriented approach where learners are provided with grammatical rules and guidelines to apply and where the focus is put on the product from the first beginning of the task of writing (Mahon, 1992). This unidirectional mode of teaching does not develop learners writing competence, nor does it increase their self-assurance in their ability to carry on writing autonomously (Raims, 1983).

In reverse, one recommended method is the process writing approach, which has been seen as an improvement over the traditional methods of writing in recent years (Cheung, 1999). Nunan (1999: p. 312) defines the process writing approach as 'an approach to writing pedagogy that focuses on the steps involved in drafting and redrafting a piece of work. Learners are taught to produce, reflect on, discuss and rework successive drafts of work'.

So, the writing task is broken into four steps, namely, prewriting, composing/drafting, revising, and editing (Tribble, 1996).

This writing pedagogy sets the product at the final stage of text creation and enables learners construct meaning progressively moving from one step to another in a nonlinear way, i.e. learners can go back to the first draft, revise it and then continue writing. The focus is put on content and meaning and then on the form. As Badger and White state 'Writing in process approaches is seen as predominantly to do with linguistic skills, such as planning and drafting, and there is much less emphasis on linguistic knowledge, such as knowledge about grammar and text structure' (2000: 154).

Comparable with Badger and White, Silva (2003:28) refers to the Writing Process Approach as 'non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning'.

The process writing approach implemented in our writing unit sample has five main parts (figure 1 Unit sample writing process): pre-writing which has to do with motivating learners to write through the introduction of the topic, a phase where learners go through discovery/exploration, brainstorming and gathering ideas. Then in the composing phase, learners go through discussion, reflection, drafting, redrafting and re-writing after teacher's and peers' feedback. In the post-writing stage, learners review their writing, revise it again and then edit it before

submitting it in the final step which is the exhibition phase where learners present the work orally and in paper for teacher and peer reflection and evaluation.
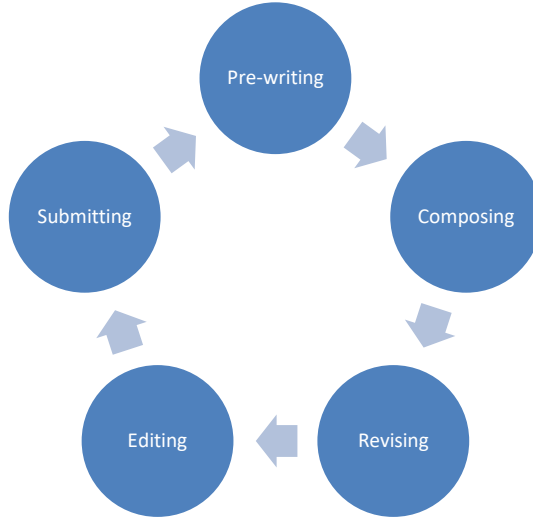

Figure 1 Sample Unit Process Writing

3. Methodology

Let's turn to practical suggestions as to how the aforementioned principles might be applied effectively in the classroom. How to get the learner to explore a subject, brainstorm ideas, organise them, draft, redraft, revise and edit the final product and present it in paper and orally in the exhibition phase.

3.1 Research Design

For this case study, the research design adopted was Formative Evaluation (FE) which is defined as '… a method of

judging the worth of a program while the program activities are happening. Formative evaluation focuses on the process' (Bhola, 199). The aim is to *identify learners' writing potential and actual progress all along the implementation of process writing till the final step.* This case study lasted 10 weeks and the unit sample presented here lasted six sessions of 1h30.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 35 students (gender was not considered as variable) reading for an MA in English Studies. All of them were enrolled in Developing a Critical Writing Course in the department of English of UHBC University of Chlef, in Algeria in the first term of the academic year 2015.

3.3 Data Collection Tools

The first data tool used was series of rubrics Powered by TeAch-nology.com- The Web Portal for Educators (paragraph rubric, writing rubric, and team work rubric,) and a questionnaire created to evaluate the impact of process writing approach on learners writing, on their involvement in writing process, on their attitude, and feelings towards this new approach. Rubrics are tools that state specific criteria and allow teachers and students to gather information and to make judgements about what students know and can do in relation to the outcomes. They offer systematic ways of collecting data about specific behaviours, knowledge and skills.

These rubrics were dated. They provided information about learners as they achieved activities, interacted with peers, thought aloud, asked for teacher's guidance and peers' help and how they managed with peers' and teacher's feedback during every session. Writing and paragraph rubrics were used to evaluate essay format and mechanics at all steps of the writing process, from the introduction, to the thesis statement, to the topic sentence, to supporting ideas and conclusion. The second tool was the Process Writing Approach Questionnaire (PWA Questionnaire) which was a five-Likert scale format with7 close-ended statements and one open-ended statement. The close-ended items were about the participants' agreement ranging from 5–strongly agree, 4–agree, 3–uncertain, 2–disagree, and 1–strongly disagree. The open-ended statement left gave opportunity to participants to freely express their opinion. The questionnaire was distributed to participants at the end of the experiment to investigate their feelings and attitude towards this new environment of learning they experimented.

4. Analysis and findings

As far as the criteria (indicators of quality upon which to base judgements) established in the rubrics concerning writing mechanics, the breaking of the task into different steps proved to have facilitated essay writing. Time given to write, revise and rewrite enabled learners correct their mistakes and improve their writing at the level of syntax or lexis. Learners found difficulties

with the thesis statement, but they were given enough time and guidance to rewrite it and improve it thanks to teachers in time feedback. Instead of using 'good' or 'bad' or 'ill structured', the teacher used 'why not…', 'what about…' making suggestions on change and leaving the choice to the learner.

When comparing the first draft with the final product, most sentence structure had been improved, spelling as well as vocabulary misuse had been corrected. However, teacher's assistance and help were necessary, in particular while dealing with advert description where learners had to use technical words and photography jargon. A technical vocabulary word list was distributed to learners in addition to a website address of helpful terminology to consult in case of need. Participants relied on teacher's feedback too often. They asked for teacher's approval too much. The rubric describing their behaviour showed that they were not autonomous yet.

The prewriting phase where learners immersed progressively in the topic and discovered the world of advertisements, helped them make sense of the topic and discover adverts' claims and hidden messages and thus facilitated the task of writing. Learners' participation in activities expressed their satisfaction with video adverts examples which were displayed as a warming up.

The findings obtained from the questionnaire provided some significant value. Students had a positive attitude towards

writing step by step. Participants expressed their complete satisfaction with drafting, redrafting, peer-correction and teacher guidance and feedback. To the question: 'Do you write better than before?' over 80% answer positively. 92% of learners loved the topic of advertisement and answered 'yes' to the question 'does advert analysis helped you identify hidden messages and false claims?' They were also satisfied with the delighted and relaxed atmosphere of learning and acknowledge that pair-work, peer discussion and teacher's continuous guidance and constructive explicit feedback were of great help and brought them knowledge about essay writing. 87.5% appreciated introduction and paragraph checklists provided. Together with the handout of technical vocabulary list, learners said they were able to organise their writing in logical and coherent way. While analysing the data, we found out that there was a positive correlation between items, namely 'writing better than before, vocabulary and checklists support, teachers' suggestive corrections and relaxed atmosphere'. Learners were satisfied with this formative stress-free writing process.

To the question whether they wanted Process Writing Approach to be adopted in their English courses, learners approved unanimously.

5. Conclusion and recommendation

The findings of this study which focuses at the first stance on learners' motivation and engagement in the writing process provides insight into students learning and growth. They enable the teacher to find out under what conditions success is most likely, what individual students do when they encounter difficulty, how interaction with others affects their learning and concentration, and how teacher's clear and constructive continuous feedback and guidance can help them improve their writing mechanics. The positive attitude and motivation developed in the process writing approach is also the result of authentic topics chosen to reflect on, analyse and write about, as the analysis of different genres is an intellectual exercise which builds both cognitive and literary skills (Hyland, 2007).

Based on the aforementioned findings, the following recommendations can be put forward. A great care should be taken as for designing writing activities which should be of a realistic and authentic nature and should be interactive and not too time-limited because it is through time and progressive practice and motivation that learners' low performance and negative attitude towards writing may be changed. The various stages implied in process writing will facilitate and engage learners in writing. They are given the opportunity to generate ideas and use their own language resource without fear and stress because they know they can revise, correct and improve their work before submitting the final product. Above all, what will be

evaluated is not only the final product, but also all efforts made in the process of writing

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