Ameliorating the Writing Skill Among the University English Language Students

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Abstract:

The current study aims at investigating the methods utilized by teachers to enhance the writing skill among the students of English at the university. Producing well-structured written genres of an academic nature by undergraduate and postgraduate students of English has been always a challenging task. Hence, this study attempted to explore the issue by conducting a qualitative research using a structured interview designed to elicit reliable problem-solving strategies adopted by ten English language teachers ensuring courses in different modules at the department of English at El-Oued university. Results revealed that the deficiency observed in the students' writings can be overcome by means of intensive writing courses that focus on three main basic elements: structure, appropriateness and interaction. Furthermore, it was noted that the continuous monitoring and feedback contribute to the development of the students'writings.

Keywords: Writing, Written Genres, Writing Approaches.

Introduction

Writing is a productive language skill which is classified the fourth one after listening, speaking and reading. English languagesyllabi designers affiliated with the Algerian national education have always encouraged the utilization of all four skills so as to facilitate the foreign language acquisition and to achieve the desirable learning goals. Though, the writing skill is a source of anxiety for both teachers and learners due to its complex construction. It requires a good command of a number of competencies: orthography, grammar, rich vocabulary, cohesion, coherence, different levels of style as well as theanalysis and presentation of ideas and thoughts in a readable convincing piece of writing.This complexity will accompany pupils later even in their university studies since they will be depending on the writing skill in all modules while they are performing their assignments, composing essays and compositions in exams, e-mailing teachers, writing research proposals and theses…etc. For this reason, this study seeks to get in-depth information on how university teachers of English can ameliorate the writing skill among their students. This research then attempts to answer the following questions:

- To what extent can teachers contribute to the enhancement of the students'writing?
- Which written genres are of great importance to university students?
- How can the command of writing contribute to the shaping of the students' scientific future?

1. Literature Review

This section provides the theoretical background of thestudy by defining writing, clarifying the source of its complexity and presenting the different approaches utilized in its teaching.

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1.1. What is Writing?

Writing is an academic activity. According to Silva (1990:17), writing is "part of becoming socialized to the academic community, finding out what is expected and trying to approximate it". Hence, what makes writing, in the academic settings, special is the engagement in a given community called a discourse community. This idea is also signaled by Hyland when he stated that writing "….is also an interactional and social, expressing a culturally recognized purpose, reflecting a particular kind of relationship, and acknowledging an engagement in a given community" (Hyland 2003:27).

Rivers (1981: 294) states that writing is concerned with presenting information or expressions of original ideas and thoughts in a consecutive way in the new language. In the university setting, writing constitutes "a broad basis for development and use of language tests and language testing research" (Bachman, 1990: 81). Accordingly, students are most of the time tested in a written form rather than a spoken one. Written genres, then, should be attentively composed. Hilton and Hyder (1992, p. 7) state that "Writing requires greater precision and care than speech as it is a more formal act of producing a permanent record".

1.2. The Complexity of Writing

Writing constitutes a major concern for both students and teachers. It is a complex task and skill not only for foreign language learners but even for native speakers. Different activities are involved in the writing process. This can be a source of its complexity. According to Hedge (2000:124) , the writing process " …involves a number of activities: setting goals, generating ideas, organizing information, selecting appropriate language, making a draft , reading andreviewing it, then revising and editing . It involves a complex process which is neither easy norspontaneous for many second language writers". In fact, these different activities related to writing do exist as well even when composing written genre in the mother language. However, writing in the foreign language contexts tends to be more difficult.

The complexity of writing is due partially to the necessity of existence of many competencies: the linguistic competence, the discourse competence, the pragmatic competence and the strategic competence.These competencies form together the basis for a successful written text intended to convince readers.

The linguistic competence is indispensable for producing linguistically correct pieces of writing. As signaled by Prabhu (1987:69), "Learners, therefore need a relatively high level of linguistic competence to engage in production". Furthermore, writers should possess a discourse competence that concentrates on coherence and cohesion. According to Haliday(1985:48), "A text is characterized by coherence, it hangs together...what has gone before provides the environment for what is coming next". Cohesion can be maintained by: references, conjunctions, substitution, ellipsis, and lexical cohesion.

The above two mentioned competencies should be also accompanied by a pragmatic competence so as to ensure the appropriateness criterion; it is then related to "the ability to choose the appropriate forms of language. Crystal (1971:243) states that pragmatics "studies the factors which govern someone's choice of language when they speak or write.". Errors of a pragmatic source can hamper the text comprehension and acceptance. The strategic competence is also required while involving in the writing activity; "writers need realistic strategies for drafting and revising" (Hyland 2003:21). Moreover, the knowledge about genre is very helpful for the university students because it enables them to be prepared to respect the conventions of the discourse community for an ultimate goal to achieve their communicative goals.

1.3. Approaches to Teaching Writing

Harmer (2001:79) states that : "The reasons for teaching writing to students of English as a foreign language include reinforcement, language development, learning style and, most importantly, writing as a skill in its own right".The writing activity in the Algerian syllabi do exist at a very early

stage of acquiring English at the middle school when pupils learn to compose different sorts of paragraphs based on describing, narrating, explaining…etc. This will be extended in the high school where students acquire how to write longer essays. They are also taught the basis of arguing,analyzing,summarizing, comparing and clarifying. The critical thinking at this level is highly encouraged. Learners at this level are frequently asked to write compositions of 120 words length after each unit of teaching. In exams, students can choose between free subjects where only the topic of writing is provided,or they can choose to extend certain key phrases in a well-structured essay. What motivates students to write at this level is the high mark devoted to the written expression section.

At the university level, students of English should exploit their previous knowledge about the writing activity. They already have a strong background. However, at the tertiary education level, they will be taught how to write in a methodological way and how to achieve the goals of convincing the readers to meet certain needs.

Foreign language Teachers can choose among a wide range of approachesto teaching writing which vary from old to modern ones. Hyland (2002: 78) stated that:

> (….) fundamentally, writing is learned, rather than taught, and the teacher's best methods are flexibility and support. This means responding to the specific instructional context, particularly the age, first language and experience of the students, their writing purposes, and their target writing communities, and providing extensive encouragement in the form of meaningful contexts, peer involvement, prior texts, useful feedback and guidance in the writing process.

Teachers of foreign languages should be flexible and supportive. The choice of the right method can be related to different constraints and factors. A special interest is given to the context in which the teaching will take place.The context is affected by timeand place constraints, students' previous knowledge, students' age and motives to learn the language.

1.3.1. The Product Approach

White (1987: 265) defines the goal of product writing as, "… to go beyond sentence level manipulation to the production of paragraphs and subsequently of multi-paragraph compositions". According to Nunan (1999: 154), "…product-based approaches see writing as mainly concerned with knowledge about the structure of language".Four main stages are identified in the product approach:

- The first stage: model texts are presented to students to be read, and then teachers highlight the features of the genre explicitly.
- The second stage: this stage focuses on providing a controlled and guided practice of the highlighted features.
- The third stage:organizing ideas to fit the model text when trying to imitate it.
- The fourth stage: the text is produced exploiting the vocabulary and structures already seen.

This approach encourages students to mimic a model text. This fits the beginners. However, this approach is criticized because it discourages creativity since students are only asked to imitate a model text. The product approach has much in common to genre-based instruction.

1.3.2. The Process Approach

The process approaches to writing opt for encouraging varied classroom activities which promote the development of language use: brainstorming, group discussion, re-writing.This

approach considers writing as a process consisting of different stages. Drafting is the first stage when the student presents his/her written work that will be subject to reviewing and correction by the peers or the teacher by providing corrections and feedback before presenting the final version. Collaborative method is encouraged by this approach since it develops the students' competency and makes them aware of the different options and how they choose the language correctly so as to produce well composed writings that satisfy their academic needs.Kroll clarifies that the process approach can encompass many other types because it

> serves today as an umbrella term for many types of writing courses …. What the term captures is the fact that student writers engage in their writing tasks through a cyclical approach rather than a single-shot approach. They are not expected to produce and submit complete and polished responses to their writing assignments without going through stages of drafting and receiving feedback on their drafts, be it from peers and/or from the teacher, followed by revision of their evolving texts.
>
> (Kroll 2001 :pp. 220-221).

The process approach then is widely utilized by teachers to teach writing to different groups. Having a variety of stages can facilitate the task of writing to students since it will be progressively presented. Consequently, the difficulty will be reduced by dividing the whole entity of the writing process into manageable steps.This approach is recommended to foreign language classes because of its efficiency.

1.3.3. The Content Approach

The content approach advocates that reading provides an input for content. Hence, this approach exploits the close relationship between reading and writing in learning languages. This approach then encourages students to read texts before producing written ones because reading is considered a basis for writing. " …both processes involve the individual in constructing meaning through the application of complex cognitive and linguistic abilities that draw on a problem solving skills and the activation of existing knowledge of both structure and content". (Carson and Leki,1993, Grabe 2001; in Hyland 2003:17).

This approach involves the following steps: generating ideas, presenting the language structures and vocabulary relevant to the topic and explaining the rhetorical patterns. Richards and Rodgers (2001) state that "Content-Based Instruction refers to an approach to second language teaching in which teaching is organized around the content or information that students will acquire, rather than around a linguistic or other type of syllabus"(Richards & Rodgers,2001,p.204).

1.3.4. The Genre- Based Approach

The Genre approach is based on the theory of genre. Swales (1990:58)defines genre as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes". He also defines genre as "a recognizable communicative event characterized by a set of communicative purpose(s) identified and mutually understood by the members of the professional or academic community in which it regularly occurs".

This approach considers writing as a medium to communicate with readers. ''The writer is seen as having certain goals, and intentions, certain relationships to his/her readers, and certain information to convey, and the forms of a text resources used to accomplish these." (Hyland 200: 18). For this reason, the student should be subject to genre-based instruction so as to be equipped with certain types of writings essential for his/her academic life. These genres should convince the readers as far as both form and content are concerned ''we don't just write, we write something to achieve some purpose: it is a way of getting things done.'' (Hyland, 2003: 18). According to Hyland (2004), the

main advantages of genre-based pedagogy consist in being ''explicit, systematic, needs-based, supportive, empowering, critical, and consciousness-raising'' (pp. 10-11).

1.3.4. The Process Genre Approach

It is an approach comprising a combination of the positive points of two approaches: the process approach and the genre approach. ''If teachers demonstrate how pre-writing activates the schemata and strategies for the drafting and revision processes, their students would be more successful.'' (Yan 2005: 20).

This approach is based on drawing a correlation between purpose and form for a particular genre as we use the recursive processes of pre-writing, drafting, revision and editing ''by laying out the main attributes of these two orientations side by side, however, it can be seen how the strengths of one might complement the weaknesses of the other.'' (Hyland 2003: 23).

Teachers in the Algerian context tend to be flexible while adopting the different approaches to instruct writing.Most of the time, as indicated earlier, the context of learning is of a decisive role for the teachers'choice. Many teachers adopt an eclectic approach since they consider it as efficient for heterogeneous overcrowded classes. The genre- based approachto teach writing is also supported because it is explicit and time saving. It also guarantees the production of successful written genres in terms of form and content.

2.   Methodology

This section is devoted to present the methodology adopted by the present researcher so as to achieve the research findings. It provides information about the participants and the sampling method utilized to select them,the data gathering tools, the data analysis procedure, the results and discussions as well as recommendations. A qualitative approach was adopted basing a structured interview. A descriptive and analytical methods to analyze datawere utilized.

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study are ten English language teachers working at the department of English in the faculty of arts and languages at El- Oued university.The study was conducted during the academic year 2020/2021. Two participants were female and eight of them were male teachers. Participants have ensured the teaching of different modules while they are teaching at the tertiary education.

A purposive sampling was adopted to select the participants because it provides an easy access. This type of sampling is not time and effort consuming and provides aquick contact with participants. Most participants have a work experience in teaching that exceeds ten years. They have served earlier in the national education as teachers of English either at the Secondary or the Middle schools before being university teachers.

2.2. Data Gathering Tools

A structured interview was used to elicit the data of the study. It contains ten questions that focus on three main elements: the types of written genres used at the university level, the difficulties encountered by students while involving in the writing activity and the approaches adopted by teachers to enhance the students' writing skills. All the questions asked required long answers since they all of the type of WH-questions that aim at providing in-depth information. The participants were interviewed face to face.It was easy to do so since the present researcher is an insider and occasional meetings with participants is not a difficult task. Data was gathered during a term of one month. The participants' responses were recorded then analyzed qualitatively.

3.   Results and Discussion

The teachers asserted that the fourlanguage skills are important for the students of English at the university level because the receptive skills, listening and reading, are mandatory prerequisites to perform the two productive skills which are reading and writing. They added that an importance

is given to writing because most assignments, test and exams are written in nature. Students are most of the time assessed in a written form. Hence, having a good command of the writing skill will not only contribute to the students' success in the different semester exams but will also shape the whole future of their scientific and social life.

   Participants also stated that teaching writing at the tertiary level to the English language students is assigned to teachers who are ensuring the instruction of the written expression module. It is a basic module that aims at developing the competency of writing different genres as well as presenting the methodology of dealing with the writing activity. There are also other modules that can enhance the writing skill among students. The 'Academic Writing' module, for example, is interested in presenting the standards of the academic writing to the students so as to do well in their academic written genres.The module of 'Study Skills' also can direct students to how to write certain genres properly. The module of 'Methodology of Scientific Research' provides technical recommendations and criteria of scientific writing that will help students to write research projects that meet the requirements of the scientific community writers.

According to what was stated above, it is concluded that the responsibility of teaching writing at the university can be shared among all teachers without exception with different proportions. Even though the 'written expression' module is fully concerned with developing the writing skill,teachers of certain modules such as linguistics, civilization and literature can help in enhancing the writing activity through providing occasional instructional sessions or feedback to students before and after exams.

Participants also asserted that due to time constraints, the traditional approaches to teach writing are neglected because they fit beginners rather than advanced students of English studies. They added that they generally tend to use an eclectic approach to teach writing which suits the specificities of different groups. Most teachers also declared that they support and adopt the genre- based approach since it develops the composition of written genres among students in a short time. This approach depends on the explicit teaching of the different constituents called moves that constitute a given genre. In this approach, the lexico-gramtical choices are also taught in a direct way to students. Participants also signaled the positive results obtained after their resort to the genre-based approach to teach writing.

      When asked about the written genres that are considered as essential for students, the participants answered that three different types of genres are of great importance to students and they should be acquired early at the their first undergraduate stage at the university. These types of genres are:

- Genres necessary to conduct academic related tasks:these are genres that determine the student's academic destiny since they are directly related to the success, moving to the higher section and graduation. The genres belonging to this category can comprisewriting compositions and essays of different sorts:argumentative, descriptive, narrative…etc. as well as compositions based on analyzing, explaining or summarizing issues or comparing and contrasting things or ideas. These genres are required in exams, tests assignments, doctorate competitions…etc.
- Internal communicational genres: this category constitutes genres required by students to communicate internally within their academic institution. This involves genres of e-mailing teachers for different reasons such as informing, asking for assistance and apologizing for not performing tasks;communicating with the administration by composing letters of inquiry, requests of different forms such as requests for correcting marks,presenting justifications, informing about an absence. Most of this genres will be either developed personally by the students themselves or taught in the module of 'study skills'.

- External communicational genres: these are genres utilized by students to communicate with external academic institutions for differentacademic reasons. This category includes genres of letters of application, motivation letters,Curriculum Vitas, professional e-mails...etc.

The participants do support the idea that writing is a means to engage publically is social issues as signaled by Broughton(1980:16). "When we write, unlike when we talk, we are engaged in an activity which is usually as the same time both private and public. It is private because the act of composition is by nature solitary, but it is public in that most writing is intended for an audience". Writers do not write for themselves, they rather write to an audience to achieve certain communicative goals.For this reason, students should be taught explicitly that satisfying the discourse community to which they are writing for is of great importance. The acceptance or refusal of their written genres is closely linked to what extent they have respected the writing rules and standards designed by the discourse community. Accordingly, the students should be able to move through the different discourse communities adequately so as to achieve their communicative goals.

Participants stated that the increased opportunities available for students such as the different exchange programs and the students' mobility resulted from the numerous agreements conducted between the University of El-Oued and international universities encouraged students to be more interested in the productive skills, speaking and writing, so as to increase their chances to gain a scholarship.

Participants supported the views of Walsh (2010 cited inKlimova, Blanka2012). "Writing is important because it's used extensively in higher education and in the workplace. If students don't know how to express themselves in writing, they won't be able to communicate well with professors, employers, peers, or just about anyone else. Much of professional communication is done in writing: proposals, memos, reports, applications, preliminary interviews, e-mails, and more are part of the daily life of a college student or successful graduate".

Participants viewed that composing successful e-mails by students should be reinforced especially at the post-graduation level when students have to communicate with their supervisors frequently. The great number of e-mails exchanged among supervisors and students have to be carefully composed to avoid any form of misunderstanding. The proposals also should be well planned and constructed. The participants viewed that the writing techniques presented while teaching the 'research methodology' module is of great importance for the constructing of research proposals, articles and theses.

Participants advised that students have to be self- dependents in improving their level in writing because what is offered by teachers can be further developed by them through extensive personal research. Students can develop writing by reinforcing the skill of reading because reading and writing are closely related. In addition, more practice of the writing skill can be of great impact to better their level of style.

Conclusion
This study was conducted to investigate the methods utilized by teachers to enhance the writing skill among the students of English at the university. The findings proved that the mastery of the writing skill by students will help them to succeed in their university studies. It will also enable them to communicate correctly internally when they address their teachers, supervisors and the administrative staff and externally when they contact other academic institutions.
The findings come to answer the research questions. Teachers can contribute in ameliorating the students' writings in different ways by utilizing a variety of methods and by adopting the most appropriate teaching approaches. Most of the time, the genre- based approach to teach writing proved to be efficient to the university students. The eclectic approach was also supported.

    The findings also support the principle that students should master different competencies so as to be able to produce a piece of writing accepted by the academic community. The focus should be on three basic factors which are:

- Structure: The written text should be linguistically correct. This can be maintained through a good command of grammar.
- Appropriateness:the linguistic competence is insufficient to produce a correct written text. Students should use high levels of style and respect the principles of pragmatics that are necessary for meeting the appropriateness criterion.
- Interaction: writing is a form of interaction between the writer and the reader. The success of this interaction is based on the acceptability of the written text by the intended discourse community.

A conclusion has been made that themastery of writing contributes in shaping the students' scientific future. It is a route to academic success and opens new horizons for students to communicate confidentially internally with academic and administrative staffs and externally with other international academic institutions.

Writing also enables students to adhere in different discourse communities. They will be able to produce genres accepted by different kinds of intended audiences. For this reason, it is recommended that students should be explicitly taught about the different written genres necessary in their educational career. Moreover, teachers are recommended to inform students at the very beginning of their university studies that developing writing is mandatory for their both academic and social success. Both teachers and students should be convinced that writing is a sort of engagement in academic and social life and they have to work accordingly so as to better succeed in this sort of engagement.

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Appendix: The Interview

1- What makes the writing skill important?
2- Who assumes the responsibility of ameliorating the students' level of writing?
3- Which modules are closely related to writing?
4- Which approaches you see appropriate to teach writing at the university level?
5- How can teachers contribute in enhancing the students' writing?
6- Which written genres are of great importance to university students?
7- How can the command of writing contribute in shaping the students' scientific future?
8- How can the students engage publically is social issues by means of their writings?
9- What encourage students to improve their writing?
10- How can students contribute in improving their writing skill individually?