The Limits and Possibilities of Current ESL Writing Theory and Practice [1]

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Since the 1960s, a gradual shift has taken place in English as a first language (L1) writing theory and practice. The literacy notions of the traditional product-oriented methods were gradually abandoned for a process-oriented approach to instruction. Consequently, writing began to be perceived as a complex, nonlinear, recursive, and generative process that involves predrafting, and revising. It also involves consideration of purpose and audience and consultation of the writer's background knowledge.

The above transformations in L1 writing theory were echoed in English as a second language (ESL) situations. This suggested that writing is a process of natural generation of ideas with focus on meaning and communication that precedes concerns about form and grammar. Consequently, ESL writing instruction became to a large extent, focused on the literacy beliefs of heuristics, experimentation and emergent fluency rather than mechanical accuracy and fidelity to form. Thus, although with caution, ESL student-writers were encouraged to manage their writing acts by proceeding somewhat independently in a discovery mode in order to determine and solve the problem of their composing.

However, despite the wide acceptance of process-oriented instruction, there has always been some questioning of its validity, especially in ESL situations where student-writers are still acquiring the syntactic and semantic systems and the cultural ethos of a language other than their own. For instance, while Hairston (1982) hailed the process approach as a "paradigm shift" and Witte & Cherry (1986) argued that the new approach is perhaps "the most exciting development in the field of compositions studies", others denounced the new approach as "chimera", "hazard", and advanced "carcinoma" (cited in Susser 1994, 31-32). Dissatisfaction with the process approach even grew stronger as many experts and practitioners such as Applebee 1986, Miller 1992, Roen 1989, Silva 1990 and Zamel 1987 ex-

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[1] This is a refereed article.

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pressed concerns that the process-oriented pedagogies have not introduced much improvement neither in L1 nor in ESL classrooms.

The purpose of this article is to examine the limits and possibilities of current ESL writing theory and practice in light of available theoretical bases and research findings in order to suggest ways to improve practice.

Methodology

In order to identify the limits and possibilities of current L2 theory and practice, I used Silva's (1993) thorough review of ESL writing research as a blueprint. Consequently, I drew on the works of Arndt (1987), Benson, Deming, Denzer and Valeri-Gold (1992), Carson, Carrel, Silberstein, Kroll, and Kuehn (1990), Choi (1998), Dennett (1990), Raimes (1985), Reid (1992), Silva (1992), You and Atkinson (1988), and others to identify the threads that appear to be running through theory, research, and practice. I content analyzed the above line of research reports and categorized findings in two main categories: (a) limits and (b) possibilities of current ESL theory and practice.

Findings

The findings are reported according to a scheme comprised of the two main categories: (a) limits and (b) possibilities of current ESL theory and practice. The first category includes the subcategories of theory, placement, staffing, materials, and classroom practice.

Limits of current ESL theory and practice

Theory

Silva (1993) maintains that there is "at present, no coherent, comprehensive theory of L2 writing" (p. 668). This is primarily due to the newness of ESL writing as an area of inquiry and to the acceptance of a largely unexamined assumption that there is one universal writing process in both L1 and ESL situations, Second language writing specialists appear to have turned to L1 composition theories in order to get insights into ESL writing. These L1 theories are necessarily monolingual/monocultural and are based on the writing processes of native English speakers in North American colleges and universities (Silva 1993). However, the field of ESL writing is beginning to look beyond L1 writing theories in order to develop multilingual / multicultural theories that would improve ESL instruction and even

enrich the L1 theory of writing, but the attempt appears to be still in its formative years.

Furthermore, the "process" concept has been sometimes contentious both in L1 and ESL situations. For example, Susser 91994) maintains that the term process has been "used in three different ways: (a) to mean the act of writing itself, (b) to describe writing pedagogies, and (c) to designate a theory or theories of writing" (p. 32). This created confusion and contributed to much debate and little consensus among writing theorists and practitioners.

Placement

The placement options and procedures that appear to have been prevalent over the past few decades constitute another limitation in current ESL instruction. These options and procedures suggest that the majority of ESL student-writers in American colleges and universities are either mainstreamed into regular L1 freshman classes or placed in basic writing classes despite numerous differences among the learning styles and instructional needs of the three groups of student-writers. Furthermore, placing ESL student-writers solely on the basis of the achievement scores on standardize multiple choice tests further aggravates the problem. Most of the tests are not sensitive enough to measure writing proficiency. Consequently, student-writers could be placed at the wrong level (Benson, et al 1992).

Staffing

Another problem that appears to affect proper ESL instruction lies in the area of teacher preparation and staffing of ESL writing classes. For example, in teaching language in general and in teaching ESL writing in particular, teachers who are trained in and "profess to use a certain approach may not do so in actual" practice (Susser 1994, 40). In fact, studies have shown that teachers who consider themselves adherent to process writing may violate the principles of process-oriented pedagogy (Courtland & Welsh 1990, Courtland, Welsh & Kennedy 1987, Inghilleri 1989, Zamel 1985, 1990, Winer 1992). These studies point out that teachers of ESL writing may not be fully aware of the significance of their pedagogical strategies. For example, they may confuse intervention, which is a hallmark of process-oriented pedagogy concerned with meaning, with correction of mechanical errors. Consequently, these teachers may send conflicting signals and give their students contradictory advice.

Furthermore, the majority of ESL classes in American colleges and universities appear to be staffed with non-ESL specialists. Consequently, ESL student-writers have been taught by teachers who may not be ready to deal with their specific instructional needs. For example, Joseph (1992, cited in Braine 1994) stated that the ten teachers of writing whom he interviewed reported that "ESL students were reluctant to talk in class and didn't let teachers know if they understood instructions, had different proficiency levels from native-speaker students and needed more explanations, which the speakers found tedious" (p. 43). The same teachers responded negatively when asked if they were aware of rhetorical differences across language and cultures. This indicates that these teachers are not equipped with the requisite skills and knowledge to handle ESL writing issues such as the transfer of organization and thought patterns from their native language into English, which is harmful for the academic achievement and development of ESL student-writers. As Benson et al (1992) maintain, ESL student-writers need "an instructor who understands the second language acquisition process and how to communicate about language in the ways, the writers, have learned language (p. 66)

Materials

Instructional materials should also be selected to meet the teaching objectives of particular groups of student-writers. In ESL situations, for example, the need may exist for books that focus on language difficulties, idioms, prepositions, tenses, subject-verb agreement, vocabulary building and so forth. Such books, however, may not be appropriate for basic writers who have either covered them in elementary school or as part of their acquisition process of the language. Likewise, developmental textbooks that emphasize literature-based writing assignments might not be appropriate for ESL writers who may feel that their needs to develop their linguistic skills have been left unattended (Benson et al 1992).

Furthermore, Benson at al (1992) state that most of the currently available supplementary materials in the form of teaching guides, transparencies, test packets, and computer software programs are intended for the native speakers of English. Meanwhile, there are quite a few such programs available for ESL instruction. It is also equally important to assign topics that are culturally relevant and relevant to the student-writer's background knowledge. Topics that are culturally biased could be unfamiliar and even offensive to ESL writers, which complicates the problems of writing and may lead to failure and withdrawal.

Teaching practices

Classroom practice should focus on the specific instructional needs of ESL student-writers. These needs encompass a wide range of lexical and grammatical as well as rhetorical and strategic concerns. The needs may also vary from one instructional group to another. For example, Yu & Atkinson (1988) have shown that ESL student writers have problems relative to (a) substituting lexical items for words that have similar sounds, (b) improper word choice, and (c) incorrect word class across nouns, adjectives, and verbs. Furthermore, ESL student-writers were found to mix tenses and misuse active and passive voice. They may lack communicative competence and tend to use and repeat inappropriate vocabulary. Fluency was also found to be problem as one student-writer only managed to write "101 words for English composition in one and quarter hours" (Yu & Atkinson 1988, 274).

In addition, reader orientation is another area of concern in ESL writing given that considerable numbers of student-writers come from cultures that embrace non-linear thought patterns. Consequently, such writers may fail to compose according to the expectations of an audience who values linear thinking. In fact, Scarcella (1984) reported that ESL student-writers were found to be limited in their ability to orient their readers, although they had written lengthy but ineffective orientations. This is because the attention-engaging strategies of such writers and their clarifying devise were rather restricted compared to those of their native speaker counterparts. Arndt (1987) also reported similar problems with ESL student-writers and suggested that "the teaching of L2 writing must always have a twofold aim: not only must it help inefficient writers become more efficient in regard to their writing strategies; at the same time it must help all writers price more effective L2 texts" (p. 265).

Likewise, teachers should provide feedback that addresses the specific instructional needs and expectations of the various groups of student-writers (Leki 1991, Hedgcock & Lefkowitz 1994, Benson, Deming, Denzer, Valeri-Gold 1992). While certain student-writers expect feedback on the content, style, and rhetoric, others may value corrective feedback of their lexical and grammatical miscues. Consequently, ESL classroom practices need to enrich the lexical and grammatical resources of student-writers as well as equip them with the strategic and discourse as well as cultural knowledge in order to help them improve their fluency, manage the complexity of their composing, and engage their readers.

Possibilities of current ESL theory and practice

Despite the aforementioned limits, the process-oriented pedagogies have several possibilities in the ESL classroom. These possibilities do not need further belaboring. It suffices to mention that these pedagogies have been widely accepted in various ESL situations and could improve instruction, if implemented properly. For example, these pedagogies provide opportunities for involving students in their own writing, an experience of ownership and self-sponsoring of writing is often said to be empowering. Furthermore, the process approach to writing is supported by widely accepted beliefs about teaching composition such as the beliefs that (a) composition cannot be taught via sets of identifiable rules and (b) the classroom can be a setting for real communication. Both beliefs are congruent with making meaning and peer collaboration that are hallmarks of the process approach.

In addition, the process-oriented pedagogies "seem to be providing unifying theoretical and methodological principles" (Raimes 1991, 441). These approaches also help student-writers to manage the complexity of their writing and are consistent with the process syllabus for language as defined by Nunan (1988): "a syllabus that focuses on the means by which communication skills will be brought about" (p. 159).

Conclusion

In order to actualize the possibilities of process-oriented ESL writing instruction, the need exists for developing multilingual/multicultural theories of ESL writing that would provide insights into understanding the unique nature of the writing process across language and cultures. Further research is needed to explain the linguistic, cognitive, pedagogical, and cultural variables that influence L2 writing.

Second language student-writers should also be placed in special classes to receive instruction specifically designed to address their learning needs. Classes should be staffed with ESL specialists who are cognizant of and sympathetic to the needs of ESL student-writers. It is also advisable to conduct in-service training workshops to sensitize English faculty to the needs of ESL students, ensure proper preparation of ESL instructional materials, and increase coordination between programs in composition students and ESL studies.

The instructional needs of ESL student-writers need to be assessed not only on the basis of standardized test scores that might not be sensitive enough to measure writing proficiency. Rather, these tests should be supplemented by writing samples to be administered prior to enrollment in classes. Finally, ESL classroom practice should focus on the learning needs of student-writers whether needs be lexical, linguistic, strategic, or rhetorical.

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