Comparative Analysis of Process Versus Product Approach of Teaching Writing in Malaysian Schools: Review of Literature

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Abstract: This makes a comparison analysis of the effect of process and product writing approaches on writing skills development of language learners in Malaysian schools. Literature reveals that despite of much importance attached to English language in Malaysian education system, students are found to have poor language competencies. This is more alarming in writing skills. Many studies have examined the problems faced by teachers and students regarding writing skills learning. However, little research has looked into the causes for this problem. This paper contributes to this gap in the current literature. For this purpose, the paper carries out a wide survey of existing research on process and product writing approaches. The paper also explores the reasons why product approach is adopted in Malaysian classrooms at the cost of process approach. The findings showed that teachers prefer to use product approach due to its easy application and avoid process approach due to its being time consuming. However, keeping in view the typical scenario of Malaysian schools, this paper suggests that instead of using either product or process approaches in isolation, teachers should blend both approaches and use them according to the demand of situation and nature of learners and their learning styles. This will help teachers to use the merits of both approaches and avoid their demerits.

Key words: Comparative Analysis · Process Approach · Product Approach · Language Classrooms

INTRODUCTION

Today, researchers have shown great concern about the low standards of English language learning among Malaysian learners [1]. They hold many reasons responsible for this state of affairs. For example, some say, that Malaysian students do not seem to be able to attain reasonable language literacy even after going through 11 years of learning English language at primary and secondary levels [2]. On the other hand, it is observed that much importance is given to English language in Malaysian education system. Despite of this, students are failing the subject especially in the writing section which is perceived as the lowest skilled area for students [3]. This study specifically focuses the writing component as it usually carries the greater part of the examinations. The paper investigates reasons of why students do not possess sufficient writing skills to produce well-constructed essays.

Recently, researchers have found that in Malaysian schools, many ESL teachers are faced with many challenges especially with writing instruction in ESL classrooms to conduct the writing lessons effectively [4]. On the basis of this situation they suggest that for students to develop good writing skills, the writing teachers need to use different writing techniques such as creative writing, reflective essays, and critical essays and so on in classrooms. This will provide students with more opportunities to practice writing. Scholars have argued that teachers’ practices in their writing instructions deeply influence students’ writing performance [5]. For this purpose they suggest that teachers for developing students’ writing skills, it is important that teachers need to have sufficient writing knowledge about writing techniques, feedback and evaluation so that ESL writing instructions are adequately carried out in an ESL classroom. This situation necessitates more investigation into the approaches that teachers adopt in Malaysian schools to teaching writing especially in ESL classrooms [6].

For knowing this situation in depth it is necessary to peak into the history of language learning. Literature reveals that many developments occurred in L1 composition pedagogy and research in 1960s, 1970s and...
1980s [7]. According to others many teaching approaches in L2 writing actually stem from the L1 writing practices as there are no comprehensive theories in L2 writing at present [8]. However, writers have elaborated that among the different language learning approaches, the product and process approaches are profusely used by language teachers in the ESL writing instructions around the world [9]. Interestingly, in Malaysia, these writing approaches practiced by ESL writing teachers at primary and secondary school levels have gone through several paradigm shifts due to the changes in the needs of the practicability of the writing instruction selected by the educators, institutions and policy makers [10].

The main aim of this paper is to make an analytical comparison about the effectiveness of product and process approaches and to provide the language teachers some insights about these two writing approaches. The review is important because it reflects on how the approaches are conceptualized in the classrooms while raising question about the prevailing low writing competencies among the Malaysian language learners. The paper also suggests the knowledge on how Malaysian ESL teachers and learners can overcome this problem contextually.

**Process and Product Approach as Writing Instructions**

**Process Approach:** Back in 1970s and 1980s, a paradigm shift occurred in the arena of writing process. This was the time when the process writing approaches were started to be employed in language classrooms with the attention to content prior to form [11]. In this regard, writers developed a cognitive model of writing processes. This consisted of components and organization of long term memory, planning, reviewing and translating thought into text. The planning stage was further divided into three sub-activities such as planning, generating and revising [12, 13].

In another study, [14] developed writing processes to help students to develop a cognitive structure within which the process of composing produces reconstruction of knowledge and stated the importance of prior knowledge either from students’ schemata or teacher-assisted activities in written discourses. Some scholars havetermed the students’ writing development as a movement from “knowledge telling” to “knowledge transforming”. They have further explained that it is an ability to decide what to include, what to exclude and how to order ideas [15, 16, 14].

**Product Approach (PD):** The product approach is one of the most practiced approaches in schools around the world. This writing approach encourages students to produce an end product which may be likened to a model essay or the essay normally provided by teachers. The main aim of the approach is to provide some linguistic knowledge about to language student [19]. Writers explain that in this type of wiring approach, the students are expected to have knowledge about language. As a result, students merely imitate some simple sentences to get familiarity with the content. They also copy and finally transform the models into a new essay to be as perfect as the one that they have imitated by focusing on the correct language as instructed by the teachers. After that, the
students are required to submit their written essays to the teacher to be marked and graded rather than evaluated. Interestingly, the students are asked to resubmit the essays to the teacher after doing the necessary corrections. A typical product approach comprises four stages before students produce the end-product for evaluation. The chart below depicts the stages involved: This has also been adopted from [18].

**Figure 2: Product Approach (PC) Model:**

Stage 1: Familiarization  
Stage 2: Controlled writing  
Stage 3: Guided writing  
Stage 4: Free writing

**Comparison of (PD) and (PC):** The above review on both the processes of writing shows that the process approach focuses more objective and it focuses on the process of writing rather than the end-product. Writers also inform that in process approach, the end-product is not completely neglected. The best product is believed to be achieved after a few drafts. In this method, the grammatical mistakes are tolerated to improve the development of the content ideas of the learners. On the other hand, researchers argue that product approach is more concerned with finished texts. In this type of writing the main focus is on the linguistic accuracy of learners rather than their abilities. Some writers further say that under the product approach, the teacher’s feedback is based on the grammatical and lexical errors and the writing tasks become decontextualized where the contexts and audience are neglected. For more clarity, a comparison of Product Approach versus Process Approach is provided below with the characteristics of each approach.

**Product Approach:** imitate model text, features highlighted including controlled practice of those features, organization of ideas are more important than ideas themselves, emphasis on product, individual, one draft.

**Process Approach:** text as a resource for comparison, ideas as starting point, more global, focused on purpose, reader is emphasized, emphasis on creative process, collaborative, more than one draft.

The above characterization shows that product approach looks at ‘What is written in the text and what score can be given?’ and the process approach looks at ‘How is the text written and how to improve the development of the content and ideas’ [20].

**Which Method Teachers Prefer and Why?:** As mentioned above that the ESL writing teaching in Malaysian classrooms have undergone many paradigm shifts over the last many years. But before in 1970s, product approach became very popular due to its many features as illustrated in the above table. In this type of writing approach, the main focus is on the text features of model texts. Furthermore, in this approach, rules of grammar govern the language learning process. This is considered to be traditional concept of writing instructional discourse [10]. Despite of its less popularity, this approach is widely used by teachers around the world. However, according to some researchers, in later years, that due to the prodigious critique about this approach which was very model based, the language and education specialists began to pay attention to individual learning and processes of the mind rather than end product. For example, in the late 1980s, the process-oriented writing instruction with its emphasis on the process of composing rather than the end-product was introduced in Malaysian ESL classrooms [21]. However, this approach which focuses on the development of the writing process faced many constraints during its implementation.

On the other hand, some researchers are of the view that teachers consider the process approach to be time-consuming. Literature explains that process approach involves several drafts before students produce the final draft. Therefore, writers argue that many teachers are unable to finish the activities in one or two lessons which is usually the time allocated to teach writing per week. In addition, some writers suggest that teachers need more time to read and mark all the drafts prepared by the students which adds on to their workload. Recent researchers have argued that in Malaysian ESL classrooms every language teacher may have approximately five classes to teach and each class might comprise more than 30 students. Therefore, writers are apprehensive that the continuity of working on the drafts will be impaired if teachers are late in marking. As a result, many teachers overlook process approach for finishing the syllabus on time.

Another characteristic of process approach in view of linguistic is that in this type of approach many errors are tolerated. The reason is that the texts produced are not perfect as they are produced by students who are novice writers. Therefore, writers assume that the final essay produced is considered imperfect and there is a felt fear among the learners that mistakes (without deliberate
correction) will become fossilized in students. Some of the researchers also assume that language teachers are sometimes confused over the features of the approaches where they claim that they are using process approach but actually they are focusing on the structure, content. As a result, they stress on the grammatical errors which are the main characteristic of the product approach [22].

Research has revealed that most often, teachers resort to an approach that can enlighten the task of teaching writing effectively to their students [17]. This is the situation where teachers prefer to practice the product approach as a way to ease their task in introducing many types that could help them to cover the syllabus on time. This was the belief among language teachers in 1990s which motivated them to slowly revert back to the product approach in the ESL writing instruction [23, 22]. However, the product approach which was believed to solve teachers’ problems in the writing instruction has lent itself to other challenges in the teaching of writing. Consequently, the students become dependent writers when each time they are provided with model essays for reference by the teachers and the subsequent activities are not paid attention to [22, 14].

This situation has discomfited the language researchers and practitioners alike. Thus, there is a call to scrutinize the original philosophy of the product approach and its four stages and the way it is implemented whether or not all the stages are practiced chronologically in the classrooms [23]. Recent researchers argue that the current language learning practice which focuses on copying sample essays seems to take over the stages involved in the approach for the convenience of teachers. In this situation, students fail to develop critical thinking skills of creative writing abilities when they are encouraged to learn the content by heart and replicate a model [24]. This attitude can lead students to become plagiarist in future as they do not feel guilty about taking others’ work without sufficient acknowledgements.

Another aspect of this situation is that examinations are considered as a benchmark for measuring academic achievements of students [25]. Recent writers have described that the above mentioned situation motivates the teachers to ask students to write using ‘good use of language with error free structures’ as the most preferred area in the assessment of students’ writing [4]. As a result, many teachers overlook the communicative aspect of the language by giving attention to the teaching of grammar [3]. In addition, some writers found that many ESL teachers who assume themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers tend to utilize writing lessons as a platform to practice grammar and other linguistic feature of the subject [26]. Thus, students are only the operators of the learnt language structure earlier and the teachers become the editors or proof readers who are interested in the linguistic accuracy and language [27].

According to some writers, teachers feel comfortable with the way they are trained and decide to adopt or adapt writing lessons in the same way they learnt writing in school, teachers’ training college or university. In this regard, [28] found that most of the ESL teachers in Malaysian schools today prefer to teach traditional product-oriented approach which focus on linguistic features before rhetorical concern. This is seen as the key to effective writing. But on the other hand, students tend to write according to what they think their teachers would consent and get deprived of the autonomy of expression. Others agree that using model essay is useful especially under inevitable circumstances. However, some writers argue that model essays can lead the students astray because these models have certain false provisions. Therefore, writers advise teachers to analyze the characteristics of the two approaches by way of scrutinizing the activities involved in both the approaches in order to provide the best for their students.

Recent researchers have demonstrated that the debate on the usefulness or disadvantage of both the approaches is to provide the best guidance for students. It still continues. However, there is still a pressing need to address the current problem that ‘ESL students need more improvement on English language proficiency and language use’ [30]. Observation shows that the process approach that seems to have many advantages gained much popularity in the 1970s and 1980s. It is still found to be the most favorable practice among the Malaysian language teachers. But as mentioned above, despite its popularity, the product approach seems to have many downsides but the fact that many teachers are practicing it proves that the conspicuous influence of this approach cannot be refuted completely.

Recent researchers have further mentioned that many teaching practices that seem to very perfect on paper may not work that smoothly in the real world of teaching practices in the classrooms. For example in one study, [31, 10] in a report say that the disparity between policy and practice in the Malaysian ELT curriculum is also one of the reasons that contributed to the low language proficiency among the Malaysian language learners. This
paper intends to propose an alternative which could effectively support both the approaches and be helpful for ESL writing teachers as a guide to teaching writing.

What Is the Solution?: In the Malaysian schools there are students of mixed abilities. This situation makes the application of one approach impossible in writing instructions almost impossible in most of the ESL classrooms. The process approach may be useful for some classes or some students while the product approach may prove rewarding for many others. It seems less possible to have an alternative approach by combining the merits of both approaches to complement each other to produce student writers who can be ‘authors’ than ‘copiers’ [6]. Therefore, these researchers suggest that before coming to a conclusion on an ‘alternative’ approach that could work best for the Malaysian ESL classroom context, a thorough understanding of the strengths of both the approaches is vital particularly keeping in view the typical scenario of the Malaysian language classrooms.

Researchers have explained in detail about both the approaches and their merits as well as demerits, however, the main question that can the process and product approach as pointed by [9] which seem to have dominated much of the teaching of writing earlier in the last four to five decades work well continuously? [31] Can the synthesis of these two approaches instead of the single approach help to produce students who do not have to memorize and regurgitate blindly during the examination? When students realize that they are not writing just to score, will they realize that it is more about the experience of arriving at the end product by getting involved in the journey itself that would prepare them for another journey, independently and effectively. Can this be implemented in classroom when employing one approach itself has become a big challenge? More importantly, can this suggestion reduce the teachers’ workload by way of looking at the marking loads? Lastly, can this method which is meant to provide sufficient practice to students in writing, help students to score “A” in the school or public examination while producing future independent writers?

Although according to some writers the process approach that had been a common practice in the past has many advantages. For example, the nature of the process approach which involves varied activities in the classroom such as group discussion, brainstorming and rewriting effectively contributes to the development of language skills. Thus, students can see their individual mistakes as they obtain immediate response from peers or teacher and more importantly, all the comments reach out to students themselves and not just their writing. As a result, students find what need to be rectified as teacher’s comments facilitate revision and improvement.

On the other hand, some writers explain the fundamental issue about process approach in producing several drafts before the final draft helps students in many ways. As the response to the writing begins in the first draft itself, students have the opportunity to promote the writing principle as the drafts develop further. Next, the students look at the development of writing critically and analytically as they are held responsibility for what is being written. Eventually, students and teachers become more motivated and interested readers and not just an evaluators merely focusing on the content development. This student-centered approach causes less worry and fear (of making many mistakes that could impede students’ creativity in writing) among students where they could get engaged in the writing activities and enjoy writing while learning takes place naturally. Also teachers also expect fewer errors in the final product [33, 18].

Nonetheless, the product approach too has several advantages. For example, in this approach, teacher’s response is the key role for students to see their mistakes and correct them. This is the only way to reach students since there is no time for teachers for individual coaching due to the number of students per classroom and the teacher’s teaching hours in schools (in Malaysian context). Second, there is an opportunity for students to learn grammar and sentence structure by studying teacher’s marking and feedback. This technique works better if teachers can mark the essays as soon as possible before the students forget what they have written after some time. Apart from that, by performing the marking, the teachers have the opportunity to show their credibility of being knowledgeable and responsible especially as a face value to be shown to their superiors such as administrators and other education officers. In a nutshell, it seems improbable that there can be a one-size-fits-all model of writing instruction [15].

Other researchers [23, 12] discuss two aspects of good writing of the product and process approach in his cyclical teaching framework for writing skills program that comprises four stages: awareness-rising, support, practice and feedback. In another study, [25] highlighted the importance of getting students involved in the composing process (the process approach) while providing students
with models (the product approach) for analysis and discussion as a guide to know the schematic structure of the written discourse for effective writing outcome. In a recent study [16] have suggested that the blending of the product and process approach to teaching writing will assist student writers widen their skills in using the language by experiencing a whole writing process as well as gain knowledge from the model texts. Yet in another study [32, 19] found it is useful to combine the process and product approach to teaching writing especially to the students with low proficiency in English. They feel that the information from a model can inform students about the conventions of expressing ideas which they may adapt to articulate their own expression.

Writers have argued that generally, many language learners struggle with their first sentence when they have to write an essay. Therefore, as many researchers have highlighted, writing activities at the pre-writing stage are crucial to get the potential writers started with the writing task. Taking into consideration of the importance of providing input in the brainstorming session [15] suggest for merging brainstorming and planning stages in process approach with product approach by providing a model to the students. Teachers can save time by providing students input found in the model and getting students to read and brainstorm on the features highlighted in the text. Others have also suggested that students need to be allowed to discuss and include necessary points related to the topic of discussion and organize them under the various main ideas.

Second, students may start working critically on drafts. In this way, students are more confident in starting their essays using the highlighted features into the targeted topic and produce the first draft (in pairs or small group). Next, students exchange the drafts and read each other’s work which would help them to become better readers. This stage defies the complaint about the product approach which allows only one opportunity for students to write and that too without face to face discussion with the teacher. Meanwhile students can improve their own drafts as they edit their drafts based on peer feedback until they work on their final draft (perhaps with least number of mistakes) by considering the teacher’s or peers’ feedback. Finally, teacher evaluates and provides feedback where students get to do the final corrections. In this way, the teaching and learning of writing may take place in a more meaningful way.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the above review this paper suggests keeping in view the typical situation in Malaysian language classrooms, it is essential to design language learning activities by adopting and adapting some prominent features from both the approaches that can be married to suit the Malaysian ESL classrooms. In addition, several research results prove that the combination of product and process approach help learners to achieve a better capacity in writing ability. This paper also suggests that a complementary use of product approach and process approach accordingly would be suitable for teachers (in Malaysian context) to teaching writing. This suggestion may not be either perfect than any other models, but it was found to be a useful.

On the basis of the above review the paper concludes that focusing on the end product alone will marginalize the process of writing and the real purpose of writing will not be achieved. Thus, the suggestion of designing activities by blending the process approach with product approach will be more effective rather than selecting one approach.

REFERENCES


