



EVALUATION OF CURRENT WRITING INSTRUCTION PRACTICES - A PROPOSAL OF AN ALTERNATIVE WRITING LESSON

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Abstract:

Writing is a crucial yet complex skill in second language (L2) acquisition, often thought to be more challenging than reading. This article evaluates the writing instruction practices in a typical English course book, widely used in a monolingual Greek classroom, examining whether its tasks encourage independent L2 writers. Current practices emphasize guided composition and structural accuracy, limiting students' autonomy and engagement with writing as a communicative process. The article explores current theoretical approaches to writing instruction, including text-based, writer-based, and reader-based methodologies. It claims that a writer-based approach, which prioritizes personal expression and contextualization, better equips learners to develop writing proficiency. An alternative writing lesson is proposed, incorporating pre-, while-, and post-writing activities to enhance creativity, reduce cognitive load, and promote process-oriented writing. This lesson encourages independent idea generation, peer feedback, and revision, shifting away from rigid, form-focused exercises. The evaluation of the lesson highlights students' increased engagement and confidence in writing when exposed to a process-driven approach. Peer collaboration and drafting facilitated the students' development as autonomous writers. Ultimately, the study underscores the importance of balancing structure with creative freedom to foster meaningful L2 writing instruction.

Keywords: teaching writing, theoretical approaches to writing, pre-/while-/post-activities, peer feedback

1. Introduction

The acquisition of the writing skill during L2 learning is major since it is necessary for the learners to be able to achieve the goals any written output serves. Nonetheless, it is a particularly complex one; it can even be characterized as more difficult than reading, according to Flynn and Stainthorp (2006). "*Writing is learned not taught*" (Hyland, 2016,

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pp. 12-13), and the process can be quite complicated through various theoretical approaches and their implications to it. In recent decades there has been a shift from the idea of a text as an autonomous language system towards sociolinguistic theory that focuses on the writer as the conductor and the protagonist. The aim of this article is to evaluate the writing practices followed in a published course book. It will be investigated whether or not the criteria are met and if the tasks are constructed in a way that facilitates autonomous L2 writers. An attempt is made to present authentic produced material along with a lesson plan, indicative of how a writing lesson following specific approaches can be improved.

2. Current Writing Instruction Practices

2.1 Class Description and the Steps of the Writing Lesson

For the purposes of this study, the writing instruction practices presented are included in a course book distributed by a publishing company, widely chosen by a plethora of teachers working at private TESOL institutions. The book is used in a monolingual class of eight students, four boys and four girls between the ages of 10 and 13. All learners use Greek as their L1, and two of them are diagnosed with learning difficulties, dyslexia and dysgraphia, respectively. The younger learners tend to be more timid when it comes to the writing activities while the older ones seem more confident in producing the language. All in all, they all seem motivated and enthusiastic to conquer the skill.

The course book in question can be considered of elementary/pre-intermediate level. Writing is not the main function of the lesson, as it occurs once in every two units. It is the final task of the unit, and it occasionally appears after the listening practice, even though the listening output does not correlate with the topic of the writing activity. One or two complementary exercises pre-exist the writing task, making it obvious that the time allotted to the preparation for it is limited and inadequate if an attempt were to be made to treat writing as a major skill in its own right.

The writing components of the lesson involve providing a model text and requiring learners to follow it as a sample while producing their own writing (Appendix I, p. xvi). As expected, it is a common practice for course books to set the model and ask the learners to compose a text similar to that. Although the samples are rarely authentic, the general idea behind this is that these exercises will improve the student's ability to write (Zamel, 1976). Within this framework, though, the potential L2 writers are seen as passive users of the language since meaning and structure are fully provided to them. There is no negotiation between what is asked and what the writer can write, as there is explicitness and accuracy by means of guided composition.

Another common practice seems to be to structure the model text as a fill-in-the-gaps exercise in an attempt to exercise grammatical and syntactic accuracy. Conjunctions might be missing along with formed tenses, and the learner is asked to fill in the blanks. The importance of structured knowledge and effective training in appropriacy is

highlighted with practices like the above, rendering the minimizing of error occurrence a primary goal in this teaching-of-writing methodology.

A number of genres are covered by the writing exercises of the book, relevant to the learners' cognitive level. Different communicative purposes are covered -a recipe, a film review, a description of a favorite hobby or a pet, etc.- in an attempt to help students discern among the social purposes of using the language. As Bazerman (1997, p.19) stated, "*Genres ... are frames for social actions*", and if the goal is for students to develop their socio-linguistic competence, then they need to be trained in diverse types of writing. Unfortunately, the current writing practices of the book fail to set content for the writing activities, thus depriving students of choosing the correct genre and modifying their choices according to the context in which they write. The type of text they are to produce is pre-set and spoon-fed to them through the model text and the lack of preparation activities.

2. Theoretical Criteria for Writing Instruction

Indicative of the aforementioned claim of Flynn and Stainthorp (2006) that writing is a complex and quite difficult skill to acquire is the fact that there is a plethora of theories on how to teach it effectively. There are three main approaches to it, namely the text-based, the writer-based and the reader-based approach. Each one of the above has different principles while implementing the teaching of writing.

Text-based approach focuses on seeing "*texts as discourse*" (Hayland, 2016, p.4). Attention is paid mainly to microstructure, the way sentences are combined, as well as macrostructure, on the function of the used with language is put rather than form alone. Learner's focus is drawn to the significance of smooth information structure, which is crucial to the development of writing efficiency. As a result, "*the text is treated dynamically as an ongoing process of meaning*" (Halliday, 1985, p. 290), highlighting the significance of lexical cohesion, references and coherence.

Another prominent point in text-based approaches is the use of genre distinction between pieces of writing. This can be greatly helpful since the idea of contextualization is inherent in genres (Calfoglou, 2004b). It is important to help learners distinguish among the different social purposes of using language (a report, a narrative, a review, etc.) and pay attention to structure style and citation forms and functions. However, the above seems to promote some kind of routinized formalization which may lead to having students merely following stages and imitating structures. Lately, there has been a shift away from sentence-leveled, rigid analysis alone and towards a more interactive, flexible participation between the writer and the text.

Moving away from the idea of writing as a disembodied unit, in no need of context, the writer-based approaches shed light on expressivism, mainly on the need to "*become more concerned with the individual's purpose and desire for writing*" (Squire & Aplebee, 1969, pp. 118-153). Focusing on the writer means paying attention to the "how" of the writing rather than to "what" the final product is (Calfoglou, 2004b, p.193). Keeping in mind that

in writer-based approaches the process is as important as the product, the authentic lesson attempts to give writers a purpose to communicate genuine thoughts by evoking their personal experiences. Individual expression and content are the core of the writer-based approach rather than a controlled form, and thus, a link is created between genres and the social context of the text. Knowledge and manipulation of coherence-building mechanisms are essential, as well as making explicit what the writer wants to know. This is why it is major to teach learners not only to discover ideas but to uncover the language as well (Raimes, 1985).

A reader-based approach is a sensible consequence of the writer-based theory since, through genres and contextualization, writers perceive the production of language as not only cognitive but an interactive endeavor too. Through multiple discussions and reformulation, the learners developed the notion of an audience and the expectations the leaders might have of the text.

3. A Writing Lesson Proposal

During this authentic-produced lesson four writing variables are kept under consideration. The amount of guidance and control the learners will receive by the questions and the tasks, the nature of contextualization, the finality of the writing product and finally how much the instructor will choose to intervene during the writing attempt. These variables are the cornerstones of having a successful writing lesson where the learner will be able to activate strategies in order to become independent and to be given free rein to his creativity and expression.

The lesson was sequenced with the pre-/while-/ post- framework even though it is expected that the process might not be as linear and some back and forth might exist (Appendix II, p. xvii). The learners will be asked to revisit their drafts and initial writing as, according to Grabe and Kaplan, "*composing processes are interactive, intermingling and potentially simultaneous*" (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996, p.91).

The lesson starts with two pre-writing activities in an attempt to activate the learner's schemata on the topic, i.e. describing the ideal house. A video will be watched where people give their ideas on what they consider a perfect home in order to raise interest in the topic (Appendix III, p. xviii). Simultaneously, the teacher can write on the board useful vocabulary from the video to create a possible lexical pool for later use. The second activity presents them with one or two questions in relation to what they have just watched and asks them to free-write some answers. Quick-writing is activated here in order to avoid formalities and allow free expression as well as zero focus on mistakes and structure.

In preparation for the writing, the learners are presented with their task. They are asked to imagine that they have moved into a new house and that they write a letter to a pen pal describing their new home and how their ideal house for them and their family would be. Here, the focus lies on contextualization and purpose. The students have a specific genre in mind, an informal letter, so they know who the reader and the actual

content will be. This is an opportunity for brainstorming before the actual writing in order to guide them on ideas, the language and the correct structure, as well as ask them to draw from similar past experiences they might have. Time will be given to them then, approximately 15 minutes, to compose their letter, with emphasis given on individual, unimpeded expression. The role of the teacher is minimized to just monitoring them and offering useful help when asked.

During the post-phase of the writing activities, the students focus on reviewing and editing their work. They have not composed the final product yet since the recursive nature of writing is addressed. A model text is given to them, and the students are asked to review each other's letters, working in pairs. This way they can contribute to the process of reviewing, offering the peer reader expectation rather than just simply imitating. Comments are made on structure, on lexis, on ideas. Peer-feedback regarding the organization of paragraphs and on the base of the language used is offered based on how the model letter is formed. In activity 6, which is the last one of our lesson, learners can take their letters back and have an opportunity to review and edit them, taking the comments of their classmates into account. The last phase of self-editing is what constitutes the recursive nature of writing. The product is not final until it has gone through re-evaluation, re-thinking and possibly re-writing of some parts. This is how students have the opportunity to build up their own text with creativity rather than focusing on finality and accuracy. Lastly, the pieces of writing are given to the teacher, who will correct them and provide feedback during the next lesson.

4. Authentic Writing Lesson Justification

The described writing lesson follows the pre-/while-/post-writing framework and aligns with Feez's (2002) five-stage model of writing instruction: building context, working with a model, joint text construction, independent writing, and linking related texts. The lesson is structured within a fifty-minute session, adapting these stages to fit time constraints.

4.1 Pre-Writing Stage: Activating Background Knowledge and Generating Ideas

The lesson begins with a video related to the writing topic to engage students and activate their background knowledge (Kramsch, 1997). This audiovisual approach helps trigger students' shared schemata and personal experiences, making the writing process more meaningful. Quick, free-writing exercises follow as this technique helps them focus on fluency and idea generation rather than grammatical accuracy. Prior knowledge is assessed here by the teacher, and brainstorming is introduced. Ideas are compiled on the board alongside relevant vocabulary as a means to structure students' thoughts and help them gain confidence. At this stage, the emphasis is on contextualizing the writing, setting clear goals, understanding the audience, and determining the appropriate writing mode.

4.2 While-Writing Stage: Independent Writing and Creativity

Students are tasked with writing a letter to a pen pal describing their ideal house. In this phase, the teacher takes a step back, acquiring a minimal role and allowing students to independently engage in the creative process. The instructor supervises their progress without imposing heavy guidance, allowing this to be a cognitive and personal experience.

4.3 Post-Writing Stage: Peer Feedback and Revision

After drafting, students exchange their writings in groups to provide peer feedback. Constructive evaluation is promoted here, focusing on organization and ideas rather than grammar and spelling. A model text is introduced at this stage—not before writing—to allow students to compare and contrast their work against a structured example without restricting their creativity.

4.4 Final Revision: Writing as a Recursive Process

Students reflect on peer feedback and revise their drafts if necessary, reinforcing the idea that writing is an evolving process involving planning, composing, reviewing, and re-planning before final editing. Throughout the lesson, the primary objective is content creation over accuracy. The teacher remains a guide rather than an evaluator, ensuring students experience writing as a form of self-expression and personal growth.

5. Evaluation of the Lesson Proposed in Section 3

It has become apparent that the writer-based approach is prominent for authentic lesson planning and the motivating force behind that is to encourage learners to not be afraid of composing their own writing in L2. As expected, all approaches have advantages as well as drawbacks and, in this section, it is quite interesting to evaluate the students' reaction to this authentic writing lesson.

To begin with, the learners interacted really well with the video projected at the beginning of the lesson and seemed enthusiastic about the topic. They were triggered to offer ideas and opinions as well as to answer the questions following it. Setting a time limit for this exercise motivated them and made the process more challenging while it was proven to be a basic source of ideas for the next phase, brainstorming. Taking into account that the younger learners might find the task difficult, the instructor had chosen to write on the board the ideas produced during brainstorming as well as a box with possibly useful vocabulary. While this was helpful, the lack of model writing during the writing phase was daring for some students. They seemed reluctant to start writing without guidance and confused as to how the correct structure of paragraphs should be. Although, according to Grape and Kaplan, "*no set of linguistic signalling will provide information to construct the text logic completely (...)*" (Grape and Kaplan, 1996/2014, p. 70) it became apparent that the lack of a model made them apprehensive. What Pincas (1962,

p.1) called a "*controlled-habit formation*" that could lead to a mechanical exercise is evidently what students are trained at.

During the post-stage of the lesson, there was a shift in the atmosphere. The pair-work done, combined with the model letter, seemed to create a positive vibe in terms of evaluation. Any comments coming from classmates as well as careful but discreet guidance by the teacher, encouraged the students to move on, rewriting and re-editing their draft, feeling more secure about the final product. The fact that the emphasis was put on creativity, expression of ideas and structure seemed to liberate them from the anxiety and the bias of making grammatical and vocabulary mistakes.

Responding to the writing positively, the texts were assessed generally, focusing on the general idea and content.

6. Conclusion

To recapitulate, it is evident that acquiring the writing skill in L2 is not only challenging but quite complex as well. The three major approaches to it, the text-based, the writer-based and the reader-based approach, all have pros and cons. Since the writer-based approach seems to be the more creative one, it was chosen as a guideline for the production of an authentic writing lesson. By dividing up the lesson in stages, the process becomes easier to navigate, and the cognitive load is reduced, facilitating the novice learners, as errors are no longer considered a threat and the content is given a strong boost (Kallestinova, 2017).

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Evangelia Giovanoglou is an English Language teacher. She received a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece and a Master's degree from the Hellenic Open University, Greece. She has been active in teaching English as a foreign language in the private sector since 2007. Her current field placement is with the Merchant Marine Academy of Crete, Greece as a visiting professor for the subject of Maritime English. She is interested in intercultural classes and teaching English for Specific Purposes.

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Appendix I: The lesson plan: A proposal

Procedure	Aims	Time
Pre-writing stage		
1) Students watch a relevant video	To raise interest in the topic	8'
2) Teacher introduces 2, 3 questions for quick-writing	To activate schemata – possible ideas – no focus on mistakes	7'
3) Introduce the actual writing topic / Brainstorming / Writing of useful vocabulary on the board	Discuss content-context	8'
While-stage		
4) Ss are given time to write the letter	Creation of the written task	15'
Post-writing stage		
5) A model writing is given to Ss/work in pairs/comment on each other's writing	Peer-feedback	7'
6) Ss get their letter back to edit and make changes	The recursive nature of the writing process	5'

Appendix II: The task sheets

- 1) Watch the following video where people describe their ideal homes. try to get ideas on how your ideal home would be: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dpbpmk-ju5m>
- 2) Try to answer the following questions briefly! do not worry about mistakes; just come up with good ideas!
- 3) How big will your house be? How many rooms will be there for you and your family?
- 4) What special rooms do you and your family need? Why?
Is there going to be any outdoor space? Maybe a garden or a swimming pool? Why?
- 5) Your writing task: Write a letter to a pen-pal living in London, telling him/her about your new house and describing how your perfect home will be! (120-150 words)

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