HOW INDISPENSIBLE ARE MODEL ESSAYS IN MALAYSIAN CLASSROOMS?

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers’ approaches in their writing instructions may influence students’ way of writing not only in the classroom but also in future (Sahin, Bullock and Stables, 2002). It is a common practice in ESL classroom where students rely very much on teacher to provide the information they need including to write well (Normazidah, Koo and Hazita, 2012). In this case teachers need to focus on their teaching instruction as they hold a high responsibility in influencing the way students write. Teachers need to pay attention to the skills and strategies that they employ in writing lessons and activities so that students can master the skill and utilise them to become effective writers.

In this case, the product approach is one of the main practices employed in the English as a Second Language (ESL) writing instructions including in Malaysian ESL classrooms (Badger and White, 2000). This paper will discuss this approach in detail in order to improvise the writing instructions in the contemporary classrooms. This review is important because despite the shift from the product approach to process approach and then back to the product approach by teachers, the problem in writing competency among students still prevails. Why is that so and can that be overcome?

Obviously many teaching approaches in L2 writing actually stemmed from the L1 writing practices (Silva,1990). Meanwhile, there are many writing approaches practiced by ESL writing teachers in primary and secondary schools where the product and process approaches received the most preferences in Malaysia periodically in the education system due to the changes in the needs of the feasibility of the writing instruction selected by the educators and policy makers. Before the 1970s, product approach which focused on the text features of model texts was widely used as the writing instruction. Rules of grammar governed the nature of this traditional concept of writing instructional discourse (Nystrand, 2006). However, due to the great deal of critique about this approach which is very model based, the language
and education specialists began to pay attention to individual learning and processes of the mind.

Generally, it is a normal scenario in Malaysian ESL classroom that every language teacher may have approximately five classes to teach and each class might comprise 30 to 45 students. If teachers were to assign one writing assignment for every individual weekly, just imagine the amount of marking the teacher has to do and imagine how many hours it is going to take if teachers need about 15 to 45 minutes (depends on the level of students and the length of compositions) for each assignment? Marking essays can be a strenuous task for teachers. Thus, teachers resort to an approach that can enlighten the task of teaching writing to students. This is where the product approach has become a relief to teachers as a way to ease their task in introducing essays of many genres that could help the teachers to cover the syllabus. The use of model essays to teach writing in product approach has helped teachers in many ways.

**Product approach**

Product approach encourages students to produce an end product which may be identical to a model essay or the essay provided by the teachers with the main focus is about linguistic knowledge (Pincas, 1982a). Students will imitate some simple sentences to get familiarized with the content, 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. Then, students submit their essays to the teacher (evaluator) to be marked. After doing the necessary corrections students resubmit their essays. A typical product approach comprises four stages before students produce the end-product for evaluation. Figure 1 below depicts the stages involved in the product approach:
Advantages and Disadvantages of Product Approach

The proponents of product approach have highlighted the plus points of the approach in teaching writing. Before coming to a conclusion on which approach could work best for the Malaysian ESL classroom a thorough understanding of the strengths of the product approach is vital. The product approach has several advantages.

First, model essays can offer precise details about the forms and functions of syntactical and lexical features of a particular task in writing (Shahrina and Norhisham, 2006). This will help the students to obtain necessary input to continue writing about a particular task that the teacher intended to teach. Imitating the sentence structure of a model can be a good guide for students to learn to write correctly (Badger and White, 2000). Second, teacher’s response is the key role for students to see their mistakes and rectify 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 periods in schools (in Malaysian context). Since the focus of writing lesson falls mostly on the correct sentence structure that complements the grammar lesson (Sharinah and Norhisham, 2006), there is an opportunity for students for correction of mistakes and learn the correct grammar and sentence structure by looking at the teacher’s marking. In this way, teachers can make sure, to a certain extent, that erroneous structure would not become fossilized in students. This method
works the best if the teachers could mark the essays as soon as possible before the students forget what they have written after some time.

Apart from that, teachers may get students to go through the model essays thoroughly to scrutinise the details of an essay. The models can also be given to students for analysis and identification of sentence structure before the students finalise their writing (Ardnt, 1987). Students can enhance their writing skills by comparing and contrasting their own writing and the model essays. In this way, students can improvise their essays to become almost as perfect as the model essays.

However, the product approach that seems to lend a helping hand for teachers to solve the current problem has lent itself to numerous criticism that required educators and researcher to re-examine the way this approach is employed in ESL writing classrooms (Shahrina and Norhisham, 2006). When students are provided with model essays for reference and the effort stops there, it becomes a problem as students become absolute dependent writers as no further teaching and learning takes place due to numerous constraints including time as the main factor.

Other than that, there was some confusion over the characteristics of the approaches used. Some teachers even claimed that they were using process approach but were focusing on the structure, content and stressed on the grammatical errors which are the main characteristic of the product approach (Mahaletchumy 1994). Meanwhile, some teacher were comfortable with the way they were trained and decided to adopt and adapt writing lessons according to the way they learnt writing in school, teachers training college or university as highlighted by Chow (2007) that it would be a safe assumption that most of the ESL teachers in Malaysian schools today learned to write in traditional product-oriented classes. These traditional classes focused on the correct use of English where the focal point was on linguistic features before rhetorical concern that was seen as the key to effective writing. Hence, teachers slowly reverted back to the product approach in the ESL writing instruction in the 1990s.

Another big issue is the process of writing is not focused. The students tend to write essays straight away without prior planning. Most of the time, especially during examination, students tend to neglect the earlier stage of writing that is the planning and organization part. And later after finishing the essay, many students do not allocate time for editing leaving only the composing part to take place during the examination period. Although, there is a good reason for composing in this way, that is due to the time constrain, the matter of fact is that good writers are not produced and the main reason is that the students are not trained in that way that they do not feel guilty at all for neglecting those important stages in writing. And this becomes their habit of writing even when students enter tertiary education that they lack good writing skills in producing good piece of writing.

Furthermore, most ESL teachers “overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers” (Zamel, 1985: 86), where
writing lessons become platform to practice grammar and other linguistic feature of the subject. Consequently, teachers tend to instruct students to write using ‘good use of language with error free structures’ (Majid, Mohamad and Cheong, 2012) as this area has become the main focus in the assessment of students’ writing. Since, there is a profound stress on examinations as the only benchmark for measuring academic achievement, the writing instruction in Malaysian ESL classrooms unavoidably focuses on the written product rather than the process of writing. Apparently, the student’s purpose for writing is also jeopardized where students then tend to write according to what they think their teachers would consent and deprive themselves from the autonomy of expression. Hence, students perceive that what to say with emphasis on the product is more important than how to say where the emphasis on the process of writing.

Currently, with the vast emphasis on the end product expected of student whereby good or passable essays are expected from students to qualify the needs of the examination education system is forcing the teachers to model a good sample essay and requires the students to master the skill to produce essays as parallel as to the original parallel to sustain the required standard of the examination assessment format and for teacher to accomplish their teaching of writing task as soon as possible to cover the syllabus in time so that they will have more time to do practice more essays with them which means modelling more essays to students so that students can remember the conventions better and regurgitate them during the examination to secure good scores.

While many agree that using model is unavoidable due to some identified reasons, there are also many who disagree that using model essays can lead the students astray because it is also discovered that models had certain false provision (Macbeth, 2010). It seems unlikely that there can be a one-size-fits-all model of writing instruction (Wingate, 2012). Therefore, this paper is hoped to be an eye opener to educators especially teachers to know that models can be harmful to students in the long run if not tackled carefully based on the needs of their students.

In Malaysian context, there are usually students of mixed ability that vary so extensively that only one approach cannot be implemented in most of the English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. In this case, in some, product approach may be useful for some classes or some students and other approach may prove rewarding for another. Product approach may seem to have many drawbacks but the fact that many teachers are practicing it proves that the prominent influence of this approach in teaching English especially teaching writing cannot be negated completely.

In this paper, we try to adopt and adapt the features the product approach based on studies done by other researchers to benefit the teachers so that it is feasible for the Malaysian classrooms. We do not mean to present this suggestion as either more perfect or more precious than any of the models, but
we have found it a useful way to organize the writing class and encourage students to write with less fear of making many mistakes that seem to impede students’ creativity in writing. The new suggestion is made based on the advantage of the product approach.

Generally, many students 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, providing a model will be helpful to the students especially to the students with low proficiency level (Hasan and Akhand, 2010). 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. Students are allowed to discuss and include necessary points related to the topic of discussion and organize them under the various main ideas.

Apart from that, model essays would be helpful for those who face problem to start writing for there are some students who stare at the paper and read the task again and again only to struggle with their first sentence. Therefore, writing stages at the pre-writing stage are crucial to get the potential writers started with the writing task. In the classroom it is understood that teachers do not have the luxury to carry out many stages or activities due to time constraint. Therefore, some crucial stages should be retained and some should be elevated or substituted with the stages or activities from the product approach for a better result.

CONCLUSION

Last but not least, the paradox that students who obtain good grades in SPM but struggle to write effectively as they enter tertiary education or work place should be avoided. It can be concluded that an awareness among those involved in the development of the younger generation need to be paid close attention to in terms of quality (ability to produce future independent writers) by everyone including the educational institutions and the society by not paying so much attention to the quantity of A’s obtained by a child but the quality of the result obtained by students can produce ‘A’ students who are able to move independently in future for the development of the country and nation.

It is an undeniable fact that in today’s day and age, end results become the main target, but the writers will not progress if they only focus on the end product by marginalizing the process of writing. Educators and students should realize that writing is not an activity to obtain a “finished essay” but it is more about the experience and know the importance of arriving at the end product by getting involved in the journey itself. This awareness would prepare them for another journey and another journey of writing.
REFERENCES


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