

COLLABORATIVE WRITING – an innovative approach to teaching writing in second language in Vietnamese secondary schools

(Luyện viết theo nhóm – phương pháp dạy viết mới
trong các giờ học ngoại ngữ ở trường phổ thông)

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Lời giới thiệu

Ở một số trường học Việt Nam có xu hướng cho rằng nắm vững các cấu trúc ngữ pháp là nhân tố quyết định kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh. Phần lớn các giờ học tiếng Anh thường chú trọng ngữ pháp truyền thống nhằm cung cấp cho học sinh cấu trúc chuẩn và các bài viết mẫu. Phương pháp dạy này đem lại hiệu quả trong việc củng cố kiến thức ngữ pháp của học sinh. Tuy nhiên, có ý kiến cho rằng để phát triển khả năng sáng tạo và khả năng giao tiếp của học sinh thông qua kỹ năng viết, các giờ học cần khuyến khích luyện tập viết đoạn văn theo các chủ điểm liên quan đến cuộc sống và nhu cầu giao tiếp thực tế của các em.

Bài viết trình bày phương pháp luyện tập viết tiếng Anh theo nhóm, dựa theo giáo trình “Dạy viết tiếng Anh” đang áp dụng

thử nghiệm đối với học sinh chuyên ngữ trường THPT Chu Văn An. Phần đầu bài viết giới thiệu sơ lược về giáo trình và mô hình dạy kỹ năng viết. Các phần tiếp theo đề cập đến việc lựa chọn chủ điểm viết để gây hứng thú cho học sinh, các mẫu bài tập, phương pháp dạy viết, cách đánh giá khả năng viết của học sinh. Bài viết nêu ra những kết quả khả quan trong việc gây hứng thú học viết và khả năng viết tiếng Anh của học sinh sau một học kỳ thử nghiệm phương pháp mới.

Introduction

There has been a standard approach to teaching writing at secondary schools in Vietnam, which tends to put a great emphasis on teaching abstract rules and fixed patterns. Sample essays are usually provided as an aid to writing. Such a structurally based approach to teaching certainly plays a role in developing students' language

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knowledge in terms of discrete grammar points. However, it does not seem to encourage students' creativity or give learners a chance to do real-life tasks. Also, it is likely associated with learners' uniformity in self-expression and rotten learning, two worrying trends that I have observed in some English classes at the high school level. Therefore, I believe, learning to write should go beyond the boundaries of sentence structure to convey meanings and ideas for effective communication.

With this view in mind, an "Intensive Writing" course for the English majors aged between 16 and 18 has been implemented at Chu Van An National High School. On the grounds of a Course Design Project at Warwick University where I completed an MA in English Language Teaching, the course is carried out for the period of 14-week term with one hour (60 minutes) of instruction per week. The development of the materials is based on Badger and White's (2000) model of process genre approach to teaching writing. Through emphasizing various discourse structures of a written text and the intended audience of the text, the lessons intend to get learners involved in different stages of a writing process, from the generation of ideas and

writing the first draft, to the revising, editing of work and the publication of the essay. Also, with such distinctive features as real life tasks, consciousness-raising activities, peer-feedback activities and portfolio as assessment for creative learning, the course has produced intangible results in promoting students' creativity, confidence and independence in English learning.

Topic choice

Firstly, a significant increase in learners' interests in writing is attributable to the real life tasks, relevant to what students will do in the outside world. Writing for the school forum on a variety of issues raised by teenagers such as "How to be an attractive girl",

"Extra-curricular activities and English learning", writing a letter to apply for a summer job, writing a tourist brochure, etc. allows students to draw on present realities and meet their distant future goals of effective communication. By active participation in these debates and discussions, students are gradually becoming more confident, having opportunities to raise their own voice and improving their analytical thinking, two important factors for an

independent thinker. Grabe&Kaplan (2001) believe that writing is both a communicative and internally motivated activity. Writing on a topic of their own choice rather than teacher assigned tasks would stimulate learners' motivation and increase creativity.

Activity types

Equally important, learners' self-reliance has been encouraged by a number of consciousness raising activities that involve learners' participation in pair work and group work to explore the rules for themselves. One example might be learners noticing the text pattern or discourse features of an argumentative text through labelling each paragraph of the sample text with its functions before reaching an explicit understanding of the overall structure. These activities aim to promote learners' retention because they have to learn through self-exploring, and as Schmidt (1990:144, in O'Brien, 2004:10) argues, "those who notice most learn most, and it may be that those who notice most pay attention most".

Genre-based grammar activities appear to be another distinctive feature of the

syllabus, highlighting such aspects of language at the text level as the organization of the text, the thematic structure, i.e. the way Themes, the starting point of individual clauses are linked together to form a structure of the text, the basic relations between clauses in the text, the pattern of cohesive devices including reference and conjunction. For example, the analysis of the structure of an argument in pre-writing activities provides "a further model for students to draw on to create their own argumentative essays" (Paltridge, 2001:64), in the context of an article posted on the school bulletin board discussing the issues of dating. In addition, a genre based grammar is of great use to language learners in effective writing in English by providing insights into the structural differences in the writing styles between Western cultural tradition and their own preferences. The analysis of how themes of individual sentences can reveal the progression of the whole text could help Vietnamese learners, who tend to use a variety of topical themes in a single paragraph, shape and pattern their writing in a way that helps the reader to follow the flows of ideas more easily.

A process genre approach to writing

The design of the syllabus is based on the ground of Badger and White's model of teaching writing, a process genre approach (2000:153) - a synthesis of three main writing methodologies: the product approach, the process approach and the genre approach.

The first approach focuses on the products of writing, "by examining texts in various ways, either through their formal surface elements or their discourse structure" (Hyland, 2002:5). The second emphasises the importance of skills involved in different processes of writing, and the third approach, regarded by Badger & White (2000) as an extension to the product approach, pays more attention to the purpose of writing, the social context in which writing is embedded as well as language knowledge involved in writing.

Taking a perspective that writing is a communicative act, the emphasis of the course is to draw students' involvement in collaborative writing at different stages of the writing process. Group discussion to brainstorm the topic would likely generate a variety of ideas from which each individual could

benefit from their peer's strengths. It also builds up students' sense of teamwork when each member makes the highest quality contribution to the successful completion of the task. Drafting is accomplished individually based on the group's selection of content and logical sequence of arguments with the help of teacher as a facilitator. The revision stage includes whole-class feedback given by teacher on common problems in the first draft, followed by students giving comments on a peer's first draft and the final revision. Peer-feedback activities allow for peer writer-reader interaction and help students refine their drafts by diagnosing their own mistakes with the help of peer and a checklist on organization, content and language use. Learning through self-exploration and negotiation of meaning in the revision session has resulted in students' improvement in writing and the ability to take responsibility for their own learning.

Three approaches to the syllabus design, product-oriented, process-oriented and genre-based approach are complimentary in the development of students' writing ability. The understanding of text patterns in relation to the context of production

and the purpose of writing will enable students to choose “the writing strategies they wish to employ to achieve their goals”(Paltridge, 2001:6), i.e. writing for communicative purposes or for examination.

Assessment

A process-oriented approach to writing requires a new form of assessment that could address different aspects of writing rather than the traditional holistic marking. Students’ works are assessed in terms of portfolios, including their first drafts, the final pieces of written work and their reflections on the process of composing the final products. The final products are graded according to how much progress the students have made in going from first ideas, to drafting, revising and editing. Portfolios are marked on the basis of students’ improvement in writing throughout the course. Portfolios provide teachers a wider view of students’ progress by focusing on both the process and product of learning and can be seen as evidence of students’ self-development and enable students “to demonstrate their potential for future development” (Paltridge, 2001).

Conclusion

Contrary to the widely held belief that writing is a lonely activity where the writer works at his own pace and suffers to convey meaning with no one to help out, this course has demonstrated that supportive learning environment in the classroom context with the help of peer and teacher could stimulate learners’ motivation and develop their confidence in learning. It has also been evidenced that writing whole pieces of communication for intended readers rather than simply producing single correct sentences is likely to encourage students’ innovation and interests in second language writing. Finally, teamwork writing has proved to exploit the talent of each individual student, stimulating collaboration among learners and promoting creative thinking, which tend to be the determinant factors for them to become academically and socially successful adults.

*With special thanks to ELT
Professional Practice tutors at Centre
for English Language Teacher
Education, Warwick University,
England for their invaluable advice on
the design of the syllabus and for their
continuous support during the Course
Design Project.*

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