Teaching writing in the digital age: A critical review of pedagogical approaches and emerging trends

Pham Nga Hoang Yen*

*ThS. Scotch AGS – International School – Australian Grammar School,
Department of English, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Abstract: *This paper examines the evolution of writing instruction, tracing the shift from traditional to technology-infused approaches. It explores how digital tools and AI have transformed pedagogy, emphasizing digital literacy, multimodal communication, and personalized learning. The paper also discusses challenges and opportunities in the digital age, including ethical considerations and the need for critical digital literacy. It concludes by outlining future directions in writing instruction, emphasizing personalization, multimodal communication, and the importance of ethical writing practices in a digitally interconnected world.*

Keywords: *Writing instruction, multimodal communication, AI, ethical considerations, critical digital literacy, global collaboration.*

1. Introduction

Writing skills are one of the most important means of communication in social community and the academic environment from the past to the present. Historically, teaching writing in the terms of theory and practice has been widely discussed and examined in various studies since 1945 - "the beginning of the modern era of second language teaching in the United States" (Silva, 1990, p.11). The focus of writing instruction has chronologically shifted from grammar-based structures to functional writing. As a result of these transitions, there have been plenty of approaches and orientations proposed and expanded according to the teaching writing development. Although the latter teaching approaches largely dominated the former ones, none of them entirely faded. his paper provides a historical overview of the significant changes in teaching writing approaches over the past 70 years, discuss the latest trends of writing pedagogy, and make recommendations about the future directions in the related area.

2. Findings and discussion

2.1. An overview of the main trends in teaching writing over the years

According to Silva's (1990) classification, there have been four significant approaches to teaching writing in the second half of the twentieth century: controlled writing, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach, and the genre approach. These approaches influenced by four theories of learning writing, namely, contrastive rhetoric theory, cognitive development theory, communication theory, and social constructionist theory.

2.1.1. Controlled Writing Approach

Controlled writing (guided writing) was the dominant method from the early fifties to early sixties, originating from Fries' (1945) oral approach, which led to the audio-lingual method. This approach was based on structural linguistics (language is speech) and behaviorist psychology (learning is habit formation), undervaluing the importance of teaching writing in second language learning. Advocates of habit-forming teaching methods argued that creative writing would fade due to difficulties in choosing variables within patterns. Writing was primarily taught to improve speaking, listening, and reading, and was viewed as "a service activity rather than an end in itself" (Rivers, 1968, p.258).

In the controlled composition approach, learners made specific changes in grammar or structures to a given piece of writing, without altering content or organization (Raimes, 1983). This strict control allowed learners to produce writings with high accuracy. The learner acted as "a manipulator of previously learned language structures," while the teacher focused on linguistic aspects, not the ideas. The learners' writings were collections of grammatical structures and lexical items, with the setting within the classroom and neglected viewers or purposes (Silva, 1990, p.13).

2.1.2. Current-Traditional Rhetoric

From the mid-1960s to the 1970s, the increasing needs of ESL learners for extended compositions led to the proposal that guided writing should be combined with free composition. Silva (1990, p.13) introduced "the ESL version of current-traditional rhetoric," merging Young's (1978, p.31) "current-traditional paradigm" and Kaplan's (1967) "theory of contrastive rhetoric." Young's paradigm emphasized the written product over the process, analyzed discourse into smaller units (words, sentences, paragraphs), categorized discourse (descriptive, narrative, expositional, argumentative), and focused on usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and style (economy, clarity, emphasis). Kaplan defined rhetoric as organizing syntactic units into larger patterns and noted that learners' use of rhetoric could lower native readers' expectations due to L1 interference, making it essential to provide learners with writing forms.

Silva (1990)'s contrastive rhetoric theory emphasized the logical construction and arrangement of discourse. It emphasized paragraphs, their components (topic sentences, support sentences, concluding sentences, transitions), and styles (illustration, exemplification, comparison, contrast, classification, definition, causal analysis). The composition structure included "introduction, body, and conclusion," with organizing styles being "narration, description, exposition, and argumentation." This approach viewed writing as "a matter of arrangement," adjusting sentences or paragraphs to fit prescribed structures.

2.1.3. The Process Approach

The emergence of "cognitive development theory" (related to the natural process of language acquisition) led to dissatisfaction with guided composition and the contrastive rhetoric approach, as many scholars believed these methods demotivated creative writing (Silva, 1990). Consequently, ESL writing instruction shifted from a product-oriented to a process-oriented approach. This new approach emphasized effective writing strategies over grammar-based compositions, including stating objectives, brainstorming, planning, choosing vocabulary, writing drafts, revising, editing, and publishing.

One of the most common instructional models at this stage, proposed by Hayes and Flower (1980), included three steps: planning, translating, and reviewing. This model was expanded into several stages:

a. Prewriting: During the first stage, the writer selected the topics and brainstormed the relevant ideas (or information) for that topic. They could discuss with their friends, solve problems, search information in a library, read books, draw pictures, etc.

b. Drafting: The writer (as ESL learner) would write multiple drafts to develop their topic, and they might find it difficult to write the first draft. In the process approach, the center of attention was the content and ideas, not the forms.

c. Revising: At this phase, the writer could add or delete some ideas from their drafts or re-arrange the organization of the compositions.

e. Editing: Based their revised drafts, the writer at this stage needed to pay more attention to the spelling, vocabulary, grammar, or sentence structure. If necessary, they would be able to make some lexical and syntactic changes.

f. Publishing: At the last stage, the writer (as ELS learner) gave their final product to the reader (as ESL teacher). The reader would focus on firstly the content and the ideas of the writing to make comments on it.

The process-oriented approach's advantages were highlighted by researchers like Raimes (1983, p.78), who claimed it enabled learners to generate creative ideas and explore new language forms. Writing was viewed as "a developmental process," encouraging learners to determine writing subjects and types from their own experiences and observations. Compared to the product approach, the process approach facilitated creative compositions and supported writing fluency.

2.1.4. The Genre Approach (or The Social Approach)

Since the late 1980s, the process approach has faced criticism from scholars supporting English for academic purposes. They argued that the process-oriented writing instruction overlooked the diversity of writing styles and contexts and the development of academic schemata (Reid, 1984). As a result, genre-based writing instruction emerged as a new approach in ELT (Badger & White, 2000). This approach, seen as an expansion of product-based pedagogy, considered writing as predominantly linguistic but focused on the variations caused by different social settings. It recognized various writing types, such

as letters, essays, research journals, and reports, specific to their contexts. The genre approach viewed genres as sets of social or cultural settings where people share the same communicative purposes. Swales (1990) classified these purposes into six genres: narratives (stories), recounts (retellings), information reports (facts), instructions (how-to guides), explanations (reasons), and expository texts (opinions). These genres determined the writing's linguistic inputs, such as grammatical structures and vocabulary. Furthermore, Cope & Kalantzis (1993) put forward "a wheel model of genre literacy" (p.11), which included three stages: (1) a model of the target genre (the teachers explained a sample of the genre to be worked with); (2) the joint-negotiation of text by learners and teacher (the teachers instructed the learners to write compositions by asking and answering questions, and (3) the independent construction of texts by learners (the learners construct the genres by writing many drafts and gave them to the teachers to take advice). Theoretically, if there were a need for the reappearance of any stage, that stage could be re-done as many as possible; but in practice, it hardly ever re-appeared. To sum up, in the genre approach (or the social approach), writing was viewed as a necessary skill employing language knowledge to accomplish social purposes, and its development was considered as "the analysis and imitation of input in the form of texts provided by the teacher" (Badger & White, 2000, p. 156).

2.2. Current developments in teaching writing

The digital age has transformed writing instruction, expanding its scope, and redefining pedagogical approaches. Technology and artificial intelligence (AI) have revolutionized how students learn and engage with writing. Tools like grammar checkers, AI-driven platforms, and other digital resources have offered real-time feedback, generated creative prompts, and provided personalized guidance (Kuteeva, 2023, pp.34-36). This shift reflects the evolving nature of 21st-century communication, which often combines textual, visual, and auditory elements to convey messages more effectively. By integrating images, videos, and sound, students can enhance their storytelling and engage viewers in more dynamic and interactive ways.

The digital landscape has also opened new avenues for multimodal expression. Students are now encouraged to go beyond the written word, creating multimedia presentations, blogs, vlogs, and social media content that engage diverse audiences and platforms (Jewitt, 2013). This shift reflects the evolving nature of 21st-century communication, which often combines textual, visual, and auditory elements. Additionally, online platforms have facilitated collaborative writing opportunities on a global scale, fostering cultural exchange and exposing students to a wide range of perspectives (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

The democratization of information via the internet has enabled learners to become more self-directed in their writing education (Siemens, 2005). With access to abundant online resources, tutorials, and writing communities, students can tailor their learning to individual needs and interests. This personalized approach complements traditional classroom instruction, allowing exploration beyond a set curriculum. However, digital transformation brings challenges such as equitable access to technology, plagiarism, misinformation, and the need for critical digital literacy skills. Despite these challenges, technology's potential to enhance writing instruction is vast. The rise of "self-sponsored writing" has enabled learners to independently practice and refine their skills with online support. This shift necessitates moving from teacher-centered instruction to a student-centered, inquiry-based approach. Such an approach encourages active engagement with authentic materials, peer collaboration, and the development of critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the complex digital landscape (Yancey, 2009).

3. Conclusions and recommendations

Teaching writing has significantly shifted from traditional methods to technology-infused approaches. The popularity of integrated, digitally driven writing instruction reflects a fundamental reimagining of how writing is taught and practiced. Looking ahead, several trends are likely to shape the future of writing instruction:

a. Increased Personalization and Adaptivity: AI-powered tools will offer more personalized feedback and tailored learning paths, catering to individual students' needs and strengths.

b. Emphasis on Multimodal and Multilingual Communication: The growing importance of

visual and audio elements, alongside multilingual communication, will necessitate a broader definition of literacy and writing proficiency.

c. Ethical Considerations and Critical Digital Literacy: As AI writing tools become more sophisticated, issues surrounding authorship, plagiarism, and bias will require careful consideration and proactive instruction to promote ethical writing practices.

d. Global Collaboration and Cultural Exchange: Online platforms will continue to facilitate cross-cultural collaborations, fostering global understanding and enriching students' writing experiences through exposure to diverse perspectives.

e. Continuous Professional Development for Educators: The rapidly evolving technological landscape demands ongoing professional development for teachers to effectively integrate new tools and strategies into their classrooms.

The future of writing pedagogy goes beyond merely integrating new technologies; it centers on empowering learners to become critical thinkers, creative communicators, and ethical language users in a digitally connected world. Educators must embrace technological advancements and prepare students for 21st-century challenges and opportunities. This involves creating a learning environment that encourages innovation, collaboration, and the development of skills needed to produce and assess content in various digital formats.

Additionally, teachers must emphasize ethical writing practices and educate students about plagiarism, a critical issue in writing today. By fostering original thought and proper attribution, educators can guide students in navigating the complexities of authorship and intellectual property. Ultimately, the aim is to develop writers who are proficient in both traditional literacy and digital communication, equipped to succeed in an interconnected world.

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