Philosophies in teaching academic writing

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Abstract: *The paper is aimed at presenting several philosophies in teaching academic writing at the university in which three aspects considered to have significant effects on the academic writing involving reading, task-based instruction, and collaborative writing tasks are mainly discussed. It is noted that the reviews of previously studied papers and the teaching experiences acquired by the writer within the process of teaching writing in the current context are displayed in each aspect. The first section introduces the notions of the importance of effective reading-the input to academic writing-the output before language learners initiate to write. In the next part, the philosophy of task-based writing instruction in academic writing is displayed, followed by the philosophy of collaborative writing tasks. The practical activities from the last two philosophies are implemented into writing classes, which benefit language learners. In the last section, conclusion is given to emphasize the advantages of the philosophies regarding reading, task-based instruction, and collaborative writing tasks in teaching academic writing.*

Keywords: *Writing philosophies reading task-based instruction, collaborative writing tasks*

1. Reading

It is strongly believed that reading and writing are inextricably intertwined, so "If you don't have time to read, you don't have the time (or the tools) to write. Simple as that." – Stephen King. However, the truth is the majority of the freshmen not majoring in English I am teaching appear to have no incentive intent to become engaged with reading texts in English because they lack confidence in their language competence and almost dedicate their energies to their specialty. As a language teacher, I tell them why and how they have to read. It is obvious that before beginning writers are prepared for their writing, they should spend some time reading the pieces of work of the others that are of a great source of ideas and content inspiring imagination (Spandel & Stiggins, 1997). My students have never experienced the life of early settlers, but they could imagine the primitive living conditions. In addition, across considerably extensive reading, proficient students are able to borrow techniques and writing styles of adept writers as models for the express purpose of captivating readers. Simultaneously, books, valuable tools reflecting critical thinking as well as logically developed arguments about criticizing controversial issues train learners for the crucial academic skills, particularly discourse competence for organizing perspectives in a cohesive and coherent way to make sense of what they want to convey to the audience (Frank,

1983). More to the point, as students are immersed themselves in reading a large number of divergent genres, the schema is gradually supplemented with concepts of various fields in the world. This enables the second language writers to widen their horizon and have better personal resources to draw on, which facilitates their creative work. Also, "better writers tend to read more than poorer writers, and that better readers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poorer readers" (Stotsky, 1983). The more learners read, the higher metalinguistic level their literacy attains in which learners expand on their sophisticated vocabulary and structure development (Wagner & Stanovich, 1996). The progress in term of complexity has been, by all means, made in well-read writers' compositions compared to non-readers', therefore composing a prose with a very different linguistic style without keeping the audience's eyes away from it. The over-arching aim of writing, evidently, is to transmit the message intended to the target audience with persuasion urging the language writers to employ plausible resources extracted from reading texts combined with prior personal experience into writing. As a result of that, writing proficiency, along with quantitative and qualitative aspects is significantly increased as expected in prescribed curricula. Serafini and Giorgis (2003) motivate students to pay much attention to what they are reading by chewing and digesting, for it has a profound impact on what and how to write. More

importantly, the new knowledge of the language is not absorbed until input is made comprehensible through exposure to writing texts (Krashan, 2004). In addition to examining the others' written scripts, students are encouraged to read their own pieces of writing aloud that is viewed as an efficient technique to retest meanings constructed and sentences expressed; this attributes to writing outcomes. Depending on different goals, the information bombarding from the text learners ingest needs to be carefully selected. One more thing, it is vital to place oneself in the shoes of the author by reading as a writer in order to scrutinize why this text is helpful for their own writing   (Purves, 1993).

2. Task-based writing

It is undeniable that the biggest concern the teacher encounters is the absence of students' active involvement in writing settings. Writing, beyond doubt, not an easy task probably leads learners to stressful circumstances in which they have to struggle with where they can start and what new ideas they should produce to be corresponding to the topic given. Task-based writing instruction (TBwI) has proved to be an extremely effective instructional approach that benefits both the teacher and learners to some extent. According to Jessica (2004), TBwI highly values real learning in an attempt to address diverse language students' needs; thus, a wide range of interesting writing tasks relevant to reality encompassing problem-solving, compare and contrast, cause and effect, analysis, etc. is adopted in everyday lessons. These authentic activities provide learners with ample opportunities to contact with real-life language through language study, thereby inspiring their burning desire to be involved in the learning process more actively. Furthermore, students are required to incorporate not only their previously internalized knowledge but also their critical thinking into writing tasks to analyze, synthesize and evaluate the information collected; this helps language individuals achieve necessary skills to adapt to academic study and to the outside world later on. Such a demanding work, of course, needs a coalition between classroom participants using the target language to share perspectives, negotiate the meaning in an effort to have the matter addressed effectively (Ellis, 2003); and noticeably, communicative interaction greatly contributes to the language acquisition when both input and output are taking place at once. More importantly, the teacher is flexible in choosing genuine assignments to be appropriate with learners' language proficiency. For instance, the series of well-designed sequence tasks can be embedded in course planning for incapable language learners in order that they might gradually build up cognitive complexity, and linguistic difficulty prior to confronting with target tasks. Additionally, students are supplied the rich-input environment with a myriad of print and online materials relating to the writing task without being concerned about limited resources combined with the teacher's scaffolded assistance from a high level to a lower level of support for task completion. It is evident that TBwI turns the teacher's dominant role into a position of a facilitator not telling what and how learners should do but paving the way for new discoveries. What is more, because "Creativity is an inherent aspect of all pedagogical tasks" (Mishan, 2005), it is extremely important to have a favorable language environment established where learners can self-study under guided instruction and activate their brain to have thinking emerged for that sake. Overall, the task-based approach to writing, I believe, fosters meaningful learning, promotes sustained and volitional engagement, and creates more creative writers; so, it is worth trying in the second language writing class. It is, hence, used as an extra assignment that can be done outside the school. My students are required to write down their own thoughts in about 100-150 words relating to any print they are interested in and post their writing on the forum once a week. The others certainly read their friends' works to give some feedback or ask questions for unclear parts. In addition, the prize is given to the student who has the best poem or short story reflecting the structures taught in the class; this really provokes interest among learners.

3. Collaborative writing

The collaborative writing is necessarily adopted in the class, for it best suits my students' needs and exhibits great benefits for enhancing the quality of compositions to some degree, I believe. According to Swain (2001), when composing in pairs or groups, learners, on the sociocultural corner, take language-related episodes (LREs) into careful consideration which pushes them to have to think thoroughly about the target language employed into their talks and deeply pool their linguistic resources to have a much better resolution towards the language related problems encountered. In addition, more heads

are better than one head and every individual has different strengths and weaknesses of language. A beneficial mutual learning milieu is thus formed wherein members of the writing group could freely get personal points of view uttered out, correct each other and provide assistance for low language proficiency partners while working face-to-face on the script. This helps my students build strong will escaping the cover of shyness, unconfidence to be involved in writing. Besides, cooperative writing activities making students be fully aware of a high sense of responsibility, especially their own contributive values into a finished product increases their motivation to endeavor to co-construct the new knowledge, which is presumably beyond their ability, to achieve one common goal (Donato, 1994).

Because of the reduction of cognitive load by the "division of labour", collaborators are at ease brainstorming the ideas, discussing various aspects of language including content, grammar, lexicon and mechanics throughout the writing process, this results in more accurate outcomes compared with completing tasks individually (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2009). Also, Ana (2012) states that the more authors are working together, the more resources the writing can be drawn on. So, group writing advantages learners, in addition to reaching the higher number of LREs, as well as producing the complex texts with fewer errors. On more thing, the experience in working with fellow classmates furnishes learners with employability skills for real workplace context. Moreover, formative assessment gained from cooperative work offers the language teacher a clearer perspective of how students' written scripts are produced and what concerns students are having in their writing; this informs some pedagogical actions towards writing. I claim that collaborative writing tasks, by pair work or group work, facilitate the second language learning and enhance syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy of the written texts generated, which stimulates the teacher to use this helpful technique for teaching writing either in the second language or the foreign language and for assessing purposes. Nevertheless, it should be noted that collaborative writing is more likely to be applicable to the novices. In the case of coping with challenging writing tasks, the advanced level students also need cooperation but just for sharing newly acquired knowledge, exploring what the task

is about and making an outline as a part of planning before setting pen to paper.

4. Conclusion

Writing in the foreign language has been increasingly becoming a very hard work for most of Vietnamese teachers and students as well due to the impact of long-standing traditional approach, placing much emphasis on grammatical structures for examination purposes. The language teacher needs help individuals be aware of the significance of writing and its close relationship with other skills in order to motivate them. I believe that the positive effects of reading, task-based writing instruction and collaborative writing tasks as already explained above turn foreign language learners into better writers.

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