



The Utility of Synthetic-based Approach of Writing among Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study intends to examine the utility of synthetic-based approach versus traditional approaches of writing among Iranian EFL learners. To achieve this end, ninety students at Upper-Intermediate level were randomly chosen from the English population of Kish and Gooyesh English Institutes. The students were divided into three groups. Group1 was asked to do a writing task based on product-based approach. A writing task based on process-oriented approach was administered to Group2; later on, Group 3 was invited to write a composition to assess their performance based on synthetic-based approach. The result of the *t* test and two-way ANOVA revealed that the students performed better in writing using synthetic approach rather than traditional approaches to writing.

Keywords: EFL writing proficiency, Product-based approach, Process-based approach, Synthetic-based approach

1. Introduction

Even though for encouraging learners' writing a variety of writing methods are available, the main discussion of this thesis will focus on the product, process, and genre-based approaches. This study aims to acquire data on the usefulness of a synthetic-based model for writing among Iranian EFL learners.

According to Klein (1993), writing is the ability to put pen and paper to express ideas through symbols. Writing is a means of communication which can be used to communicate a message to reader, whether he is close or distant, known or unknown. Chastain (1988) has declared that this kind of communication has a great importance in modern world, whether it is done by means of paper- and - pencil or advanced electronic mails. In advanced composition courses the emphasis is primarily placed upon writing as communication. Writing, in both communicative and practical sense, involves some features that lead to overall language learning (Chastain, 1988). Writing anything to be learned assists students practice and rehearse the material and store it in long-term memory.

White (1992) defined writing as a complicated cognitive activity in which the writer has to control a large number of variables at the same time. He declared that at the level of sentence, the ability to control the content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, spelling, and letter formation is the main component. Besides, the ability of the writer to make a cohesive and coherent context and discourse based on the existing information is very significant (Bell & Burnaby, 2001).

Writing has an important role in helping students understand ideas and concepts. The results of a study carried out by Sommers (1999) at Harvard University showed that for most of the students, writing is a beneficial way to comprehend and use the ideas of the course. Although reading is a basic strategy to gather information, writing is the eventual strategy which leads to clarify ideas and thoughts.

Besides being a means of communication, writing also serves as a means of thinking, organizing knowledge or ideas, and learning. It is a complicated activity which includes different levels of composition task completion (Chen, 2002; Watskins, 2004). There exists no doubt that this skill, particularly for EFL learners, is a difficult skill to master because the students need to choose appropriate vocabulary, sentence, and paragraphs, and they also have to change these ideas into a readable text.

In most courses of English as a Second Language, the focus of attention is on improving the student's skills abilities in speaking, listening and reading but the development of writing skill is often ignored (Edelsky, 1989; Edelsky & Smith, 1989). The results of some studies reveal that only 2% of ESL courses are involved in improving student's writing skills (Harris, 1985). The mechanical aspects of writing such as syntax, punctuation, and spelling get the most attention, which is about 72% of this two percent. Yet, writing is considered an essential language skill for L2 learners (Hughes et al., 1983).

In the last two decades, research on writing has increased and new methods of teaching writing emerged. The major reasons for this change were researcher's concern about the inadequacy of traditional approaches in writing for different disciplines and also the styles students use in composing texts (Faigley et al., 1985).

During the audiolingualism era, writing was considered a passive which has only a supportive role. Thus, sentence structure was seen only as a support for the grammar class. After the development of product approach, it was used to show the significance of form and syntax, so the rhetorical drills became an important activity in ESL writing classes (Silva, 1990). In product approach, a pattern is given to students and they are asked to imitate that pattern and write an essay. The focus of such writing is often on the product of writing not the process of it.

In writing classes, teacher provides the input and the students practice writing development, which is mostly concerned with the knowledge about the structure of language, by imitation of that input (Badger and White 2000:154).

Based on what Hairston (1982) and Raimes (1983) declared, product-based writing is not a linear process. Although many textbooks advise writers to follow the exact sequences of writing, which is planning, organizing, writing and revising but the process that produces the product of writing is not linear, it is recursive.

It began to appear that it was impossible to understand what happen in the writer's mind during a composition by looking only at the texts and documents produced by the writers. Taking into account that limit of past studies, the field of writing studies redefined itself. The major aim was now to find out what actually happens when people write - in other words, to discover the cognitive processes that occur during writing (Emig, 1971; Britton, Burgess, Martin McLeod, & Rosen, 1975).

In the 1980s, a movement from a language-based approach to the process approach was seen in the ESL writing. However in recent years, the process approach is under serious discussion because it is believed that this approach has a monolithic view of writing (Badger and White 2000). The process approach focus on the skills and processes of writing in classroom setting and the result is the disregarding of social and cultural aspects that affect writing (Atkinson, 2003). There has been a surge in interest in English as Foreign language (EFL) writing recently, given the ever-increasing pressure to publish internationally among graduate students and academics as well as the universal desire to participate in commerce in the globalized world (Leki, 2002). In response to this growing demand on writing in English both academically and professionally, EFL writing instructors have embarked on a search for the most efficient and effective approach to enhancing student writing. Although few still employed a single approach (Liu, 2008), most proposed a balanced or integrated EFL writing pedagogy, combining these processes to form an integrated approach (Deng, 2007; Gao, 2007; Kim & Kim, 2005).

As Brookes et al. (1990) pointed out; the unbalanced L2 writing performance among the students is result of teaching writing approaches separately. Therefore, an integrated approach to writing is needed to enable learners to transfer what they have learned into an efficient writing.

Principle synthesis is the "desirable, coherent and pluralistic" approach which entails diverse learning activities depending on learner needs (Mellow, 2002). It has been used interchangeably with "disciplined synthesis" (Rodgers, 2004), "informed synthesis" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) , "unlighted synthesis (Brown, 2002), among other names. Rodgers (2004) predicted that this synergistic approach is "likely to shape the teaching of second languages in the next decades of the new millennium". Reid (2001) also echoed this viewpoint when discussing L2 writing pedagogy. Considering the fact that most L2 writing instructional approaches focus on a certain aspect of L2/EFL writing at a time (e.g., language, text, composing skills, reader expectations), it is obvious that using any single approach can lead to a skewed perspective on the issues encountered by ESL/EFL students (Silva, 1990).

To contribute to the need for more research on the value of synthetic-based approach toward teaching writing (Deng, 2007; Gao, 2007), the current study investigated the extent to which synthetic-oriented approach to writing helped Iranian writers to improve their writing proficiency. In the current study inspired by the work of Liu (2008), and Mellow (2002) who proposed an integrated EFL writing pedagogy through combining the approaches, the researcher tried to further understanding of the results of studies on the use of synthetic-oriented approach by looking particularly at their research design, the population, the treatments, and the procedures, hoping that seeing them from this perspective might shed a different light on the findings.

2. Research Questions

Regarding what has been discussed so far the following questions are raised:

- 1) Is the synthetic – based approach to teaching essay writing is more effective than product-based approach?
- 2) To what extent is the synthetic – based approach to teaching essay writing pedagogically better than the process – based approach?

3. Research Hypotheses

On the basis of the above research questions, the following two null hypotheses are formulated.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

The study was conducted on ninety Iranian EFL students aged 20-25 who were selected randomly from among 300 accessible Iranian highly motivated learners of English studying at two language teaching centers named Gooyesh and kish at Upper-Intermediate level. In order to diminish the effect of gender, the sample consisted of only female students. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to select the participants.

4.2 Instruments

For the purpose of determining the students' homogeneity, a proficiency test, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT), was administered to them. Writing skill, which is considered a proficiency test, must be a norm-referenced test and measure "global language abilities" (Brown, 2005, p .2). One of the characteristics of a proficiency test, which is a kind of norm-

referenced test, is that the given scores should fall into a normal distribution, which shows the interpretation of each student's performance in relation to the performance of all other students.

The second characteristic of the test is that "the test must provide scores that form a wide distribution, so that interpretations of the differences among students will be as fair as possible" (p. 8). In other words, a proficiency test tends to test overall general language proficiency.

The OPT consists of two test pads with 100 questions in the listening section and 100 more questions in the grammar section. The grammar test pad was merely made use of for identifying the student's level of proficiency, that is, first 100 questions in the grammar test pad. The passing point was 72.5 for upper-intermediate level. The OPT is capable of being utilized with any number of students of English to ensure efficient, reliable and accurate grading and placing of students into classes at all levels from elementary to advanced. The students were selected based on the results of the OPT and placed in Upper-Intermediate group.

The topics chosen for the purpose of writing comprised those broad and general ones which were not culture-bound or discriminatory.

4.3 Procedures

Firstly, the OPT was administered in order to determine the proficiency level of the students. In order to determine the right time for writing tasks, three students were selected randomly to write on the topics, after that, the appropriate amount of time for each writing task was decided on. The participants were divided into three groups of thirty students (Group1, Group2 and Group3), all at Upper-Intermediate level. Then, the first group was invited to write a composition, which takes approximately 30 minutes. The task was done based on product approach to writing. Before the data gathering started, the teacher briefly informed each participant about the different steps and instructions of the experiment. The participants were told that the aim of the tasks was for them to practice and improve their English writing skill.

Another writing task with a topic which had some bearing on the previously- mentioned topic was administered to the subjects in Group2 applying process approach. Again, the students were informed about different steps of process-writing before. The same procedure was repeated for Group3 using synthetic-based approach. The objective of different tasks was to figure out whether there was any difference between three approaches to teaching essay writing to the learners.

5. Results

The obtained results of the group statistics of product-based and process-based approach to writing are summarized below. Table 1 indicates the means of the scores, and standard deviations in two treatments in both product-based and process-based approaches.

Table 1. Group statistics of product- and process-based approaches

Type of Treatment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Writing Score				
Product-based Approach	30	10.57	76537.	218.
Process-based Approach	30	13.76	77531.	228.

A *t* test was also conducted between the results of each treatment in each group (product-based and process-based) for the purpose of figuring out whether the difference was significant or not. The result of *t* test is presented in table 2.

Table 2. Results of *t* test in product-based and process-based approaches

		Levine's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means						
			Sig.	T	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference
								Lower	Upper
Writing Score	Equal variance assumed	.000	-9.390	23	.000	-3.19	3.906	-2.2705	-1.7795
	Equal variance not assumed		-9.390	19.756	.000	-3.19	3.906	-1.9653	.823

A close analysis of table 2 shows that there is a significant difference between the means at the 0.05 level. Based on the mean differences, it can be concluded that learners performed better using process-based approach.

The same procedure was done to compare the performance of the learners based on process-based and synthetic approaches. The group statistics results are presented in tables 3.

Table 3. Group Statistics of process-based and synthetic-based approaches

Type of Treatment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Writing Score Process -based Approach	30	13.76	77531.	221.
Synthetic-based Approach	30	15.49	79843.	228.

A *t* test was also conducted between the results of each treatment in each group (process-based and synthetic-based) for the purpose of figuring out whether the difference was significant or not. The result of *t* test is presented in table 4.

Table 4. Results of *t* test in process-based and synthetic-based approaches

		Levine's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means					
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
		Sig.	T	Df	Sig.	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Writing Score	Equal variance assumed	.000	-9.217	23	.000	-1.73	3.123	-2.495	-1.0532
	Equal variance not assumed		-9.217	18.127	.000	-1.73	3.123	-1.855	.798

As can be seen in table 4, there is statistically significant difference between the means of the two groups (process and synthetic-based approaches) at the 0.05 level. Therefore, according to the mean differences, we can conclude that learners performed better in writing using synthetic-based approach.

The procedure was repeated in order to compare the performance of the learners based on product-based and synthetic-based approaches. The group statistic result is presented in tables 5.

Table 5. Group statistics of product- and synthetic -based approaches

Type of Treatment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Writing Score Product -based Approach	30	10.57	76537.	218.
Synthetic-based Approach	30	15.49	79843.	228.

A *t* test was also conducted in order to figure out whether the difference was significant or not. The result of *t* test is presented in table 6.

Table 6. Results of *t* test in product-based and synthetic-based approaches

		Levine's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means						
		Sig.	T	Df	Sig.(2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Writing Score	Equal variance assumed	.000	-9.417	23	.000	-4.92	3.420	-2.5347	-1.8390
	Equal variance not assumed		-9.417	19.336	.000	-4.92	3.420	-1.8337	.892

According to table 6, there is a significant difference between the means at the 0.05 level. Based on the mean differences, we conclude that learners performed better using synthetic-based approach than product-based one.

A two-way ANOVA has also been conducted in order to see whether there is a difference between students' performance using three different approaches. The descriptive statistics have been indicated in table 7.

Table 7. Descriptive statistics

Std. Deviation	Mean	N	Group
0/67	10/76	30	1product
0/43	15/13	30	2Synthetic
0/69	13/36	30	3process
1/89	13/05	90	

As shown in table 7, the calculated mean in product-, process-, and synthetic-based approaches are different.

Table 8. The results of analysis of variance

Sig	F	MS	Df	SS	Source of Variance
0/000	383/14	144/01	2	288/02	Between groups
		0/37	87	32/7	Within groups
		-	89	320/72	Total

The table indicates that there is a significant difference between three groups regarding the three different models. According to tables 4. and 6., the results of the *t* tests indicate that synthetic-based approach significantly affects learners' writing. Therefore, the first null hypothesis is safely rejected; in other words, synthetic approach does have significant effect on L2 writing proficiency development. Through a close analysis of tables 2, 4, and 6, we can conclude that the performance of learners in each approach is significantly different. Therefore, the second null hypothesis is also safely rejected; that is, there is a significant difference between synthetic-based approach and process-based one in developing L2 writing proficiency.

6. Discussion

Through a comparison between product- and process-based approaches, the researcher noticed that the learners performed better in writing using process-oriented model. As Nunan (1991) declared, applying the process approach in writing leads to collaborative group work between learners and increases their positive attitude toward writing. Nunan (1991) believes that this enhances their skilled language use and also the emergence of different classroom techniques, such as 'conferencing' is the result of applying this approach in writing.

Although process-based writing is widely used in ESL/EFL composition, it still has some limitations. It takes a long time of the class for the learners to complete a particular piece of writing. Badger and White (2000) stated that learners have not a clear understanding of the characteristics of writing and they are given insufficient linguistic input to write in L2.

Considering the strengths and weaknesses of each writing approach, it is concluded that the three writing approaches complete each other. In other words, a combination of process and product approach is needed to be used by language teachers. This combination is called "integrated approach" (Dyer, 2003). Comparing the three different approaches, the researcher concluded that the learners were more successful in writing by using synthetic approach. The findings of the present study were in agreement with Brokes (2005), and Kumaravadivelu (2006) who stated that the unbalanced L2 writings are the results of teaching the writing approaches separately. Consequently, using an integrated approach enables Iranian learners to naturally transfer their learned skills from each approach and produce efficient writings.

As Fulkerson (2005) and McComiskey (2000) stated, over the last thirty years, which is called post-process era, an integration of product and process theories in writing have been developed. The result of this integration is that in post-process era, less emphasis is given to distinctions between the approaches and the strengths of each approaches is emphasized.

7. Conclusion

The findings of the current study lead to the conclusions which are indubitably very important. Iranian students have different purposes from attending writing class, and among them, getting a good academic grade is the most important one which can be useful for them to get better job. Regarding EFL/ESL contexts where English exposure is very influential, more useful approaches to teaching writing should be applied. According to Gao, neither the product, nor the process alone is the best alternative for EFL/ESL students if we take the learning habit of our students into consideration (Gao, 2007). What the researchers suggest is using the synthetic instructional and curricular approach for teaching writing. After the emergence of synthetic approach, the need for an integrated approach to teaching ESL / EFL writing was felt (Kim & Kim, 2005). Both process and product approach have benefits and shortcomings. Therefore, using a complementary approach helps the students gain knowledge from the model text and experience whole writing process. Such a complementary use of both approaches would help students to be 'authors' rather than 'copiers', and thus have the potential benefit of integrating critical thinking into their academic writing. Although the present study is a local one and is conducted in an specific country which has specific norms and conventions, it can be conducted in countries with similar situations of learning and teaching of writing, countries that teach English as a Foreign/ Second language and consider English as an important international language (Kachru 1992). Therefore, Asian countries that have common cultural, social and economic situations may face similar issues in teaching English as ESL/ EFL. Indeed, in the present study the researcher have advocated the synthetic or integrated approach to teaching. Using this approach can enhance the English writing and the proficiency of Iranian English learners.

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