

Genre Process Writing and Testing

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Abstract

The testing of writing and the various standards has been around for some time. Researchers have delivered comments on the teaching and research professions because of poor writing by students. This experiment, in the area of writing, is proposed against this background of uncertainty of testing methods. The objective of this research is to establish whether there is a relationship between different factors and scoring by the student. Whilst there may seem to be little difference between students from the same country, the differences (if any) should be clarified with this experiment.

Keywords: genre process writing, testing, writing styles

1. Introduction

“Conventional teaching methods are usually considered valid until proven otherwise, whereas the effectiveness of innovative methods must be amply demonstrated before they receive the support or approval they deserve.” Greenblat Cathy S (1975).

Genre process writing is relatively new to the teaching methodology. Tribble, C, (1996) cited in Frith J,(2009) stated that it is through the mastery of writing that the individual comes to be fully effective in an intellectual organisation, not only in the management of everyday affairs, but also in the expression of ideas and arguments. The effective use of genre process writing gives the teacher the opportunity of using all the four major skills in a lesson. The students write the article (after discussing it with their pair partner – speaking), they read it to their pair partner (after writing it) and through all of this is that each of the students have unknowingly participated in a listening exercise.

Caudery T, (1995) noted that the advent of process writing came about because teachers in the late 1980's wanted to display the students ability to write without being concerned about the form. Donald Murray who was a professional writer and a teacher of writing analyzed his own writings and determined that his message was not produced until he had written numerous drafts.

The focus was on the writing and not the end product.

The opening comment was made in 1975 and some 35 years later some teachers are still using traditional methods of writing and testing.

2. Current Situation

Monk C (1997) states that the issue of the low standard of writing among University students is not restricted to any one country. Whereas Combe C (2010) states “the cyclical relationship between teaching and assessment can be made entirely positive provided that the assessment is based on sound principles and procedures. Both teaching and assessment should relate to the learners’ goals and very frequently to institutional goals”.

Gabrielatos, C (2002) states that the following framework defines the outline of a writing skills program:

1. What is taught is not necessarily what is learned.
2. Recycling is essential for learning.

3. Learners need to be involved actively in the learning process.
4. The more individualized the teaching, the more effective it is.

(Shulman 1987, Prabhu 1990) believe that due consideration should be given to the experience of teachers. They suggest that the theorist's views should not be blindly accepted but instead we should question the theorists about their teaching, how, where and to whom they taught writing.

(Richards and Nunan (1990) cited in Raimes A (1991)) have suggested that teachers should become researchers and have less reliance on the theorists and researchers.

Coombe C, Evans J(2000) have stated in the paper that "the field of writing assessment has always been at the forefront of measuring second language performance, only now there is a much greater need for accountability, in terms of validity and reliability". The perceived parameters of the stakeholders have expanded considerably to include industry and international institutions (McKay, 1991 cited in Coombe, C, Evans J(2000)). What is being stated by Coombe and Evans and previously alluded to above by Brown is that writing is now a part of life. It is now becoming an indispensable part of living and as a result the testing and analysis of it must be consistent.

Farr R, (1991) believes that a series of conditions should be in place for a test by students. These are:

- "1. Assessment information provided by the test.

The tests should be so much like good instruction that a teacher would want to administer the test for its instructional value even if there was no assessment information provided. Value beyond assessment means tests will take no instructional time since the test is good instruction.

2. Require students to construct responses rather than merely recognizing correct answers.

Perhaps the greatest concern with multiple-choice tests is that students are not required to develop responses. Rather, they merely have to select an answer choice from several that have already been constructed for them. Educators have long recognized that it is a far different matter to write a complete sentence with correct punctuation than it is to answer a question that asks which of four punctuation marks should be placed at the end of a sentence.

3. Require students to apply their knowledge.

Many tests provide students with a structure for the expected answers. Performance assessment is open-ended and allows students to apply their knowledge. Student responses to performance assessment should reveal ability to understand a problem and apply his/her knowledge and skills. This means, of course, that a variety of responses will be acceptable.

4. Pose problems for students for which they have to use multiple resources.

The solution to real problems necessitates the use of multiple resources. The writing of a report, for example, is based on the use of various source materials, reference aids, and the writer's background knowledge. Assessments which attempt to replicate those situations will provide information about students' abilities to use multiple sources. Such assessments should also determine if students are able to select pertinent information from the available resources and put the selected information together in a way that solves the problem posed by the assessment.

5. Present students with tasks that have a realistic focus.

3. Formation of Tests

Tests should look like the tasks that students have to perform in every-day life and should focus on developing responses to realistic situations."

Tests often ask only for right answers. Even when tests ask for written responses, the questions posed are "teacher-type questions" that have as their goal an assessment as to whether students have a basic understanding of a story (e.g., main events, compare and contrast). A question with a more realistic focus might ask students to write a letter to a story character suggesting how that character might deal with a problem. This presents a realistic focus to which a student can respond, and the responses will reveal how the student has understood the materials on which the response is based.

4. Intuitive Era of Testing

During the intuitive era, according to Marsden (1983), teachers, who were untrained, tested students in a variety of ways. Much of the testing was as a result of the repetitive teaching process where the students were required to memorize various lists of grammatical words and/or phrases.

5. Scientific Era

The scientific era followed and many changes happened. This was the time when the linguistic testing experts entered the field. This also introduced the concept that careful linguistic description could be tested scientifically. The objective tests, which were made, consisted of long lists of unrelated sentences which were incomplete or had errors in grammar or usage. There was also the need to develop a method of measuring the performance and recognition of sounds. Subjective written tests were replaced by objective tests that could be scored by untrained people.

The specialists developed these tests to evaluate statistically and be able to ascertain a level to ensure that the tests maintained the reliability and validity.

6. Communicative Era

The communicative method of testing followed the scientific method. In this method the best tests were those that combined the various sub skills to determine how a person can use the language. In this period a new test was developed. This test was called a 'cloze' and in this test there were a number of words removed from a paragraph or essay and the student had to fill in the missing words.

7. Learning Strategy

The book, by Magoon R (1973), which is a collection of papers by some eminent educationalist and psychologists has indicated, that there is a learning process that needed to be resolved by the teacher before the teacher would be able to teach effectively (my italics) and then assess the student. (Thyne, 1966 cited in Magoon R (1973)) says that it does not matter what the teacher teaches "the intention is the same, that his pupils will learn it: the primary purpose of all teaching is the promotion of learning". Thyne goes onto say that all of 'the procedures, methods and techniques, are not enough, for the most 'effective teaching requires a knowledge of learning itself.'

8. Student's Objective

Most of the students in the ELT industry are there because they wish to improve their English language skill level to undertake studies in a Masters or Doctorate Degree. It makes academic sense that if one is to review testing procedures, or tests, then the start point must be in the class room and what the student has been taught. 'Taught' is used rather than 'learned' because a teacher may present the best ever lesson in a subject and the student may still not learn anything. It also makes academic sense that a teacher must have an understanding of learning before he/she is able to teach.

9. Learning Expectations

Classroom research (motivating learners, 2010) demonstrates the role of learning strategies in effective language learning:

1. Good learners are able to identify the best strategy for a specific task; poor learners have difficulty choosing the best strategy for a specific task.

2. Good learners are flexible in their approach and adopt a different strategy if the first one doesn't work; poor learners have a limited variety of strategies in their repertoires and stay with the first strategy they have chosen even when it doesn't work.
3. Good learners have confidence in their learning ability; poor learners lack confidence in their learning ability.
4. Good learners expect to succeed, fulfill their expectation, and become more motivated; poor learners: expect to do poorly, fulfill their expectation, and lose motivation.”

(Motivating Learners, 2010) goes onto to say that “the teacher should be able to tap into the students learning strategy and encourage them to recognise and use their strategy to develop their thinking process”. This may be possible at ‘normal’ schools however in a situation like a language school where the main reason for being, is to learn enough English language to go to university, the opportunities to be ‘at one’ with the students are limited.

(Clapham 1996 cited in Alderson J, and Banerjee) states “that students scoring less than 60% on a test of grammatical knowledge appear to be unable to apply their background knowledge to understanding a text, whereas students scoring above 80% have sufficient linguistic proficiency to be able to overcome deficits in background knowledge when understanding texts”.

Abberton M (2010) makes the point that students who wish to attend the Northern Consortium UK (NCUK) universities must achieve an IELTS score of 5.5 (compare this with some universities which require the IELTS score of 3.5). He goes onto state that “the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)..... fails to take into account the fundamental differences between EAP and EFL. Indeed, the relevance of an analysis of basic communicative ability like the CEFR to academic English is questionable.” Abberton M (2010) further states that “ a sound grounding in English for academic purposes and study skills may help international students, whose language ability is relatively low, to succeed”.

Chow.V.F (2007) makes the point that the standard of English among Malaysian students is deteriorating and that students are accepted into Universities regardless of their proficiency in English. Chow.V.F. (2007) goes onto say that many academics and educationalist acknowledge that something urgent has to be done to stop the deterioration of the English standard.

10. Teaching Product Writing

As a generalization, teachers are language teachers and therefore the main emphasis in their work is to ensure that the student “understands” enough language to move to the next level of education. Teachers are not, generally, teachers of writing.

The issue here is that the student is being ‘fed’ words (it is called ‘teaching vocabulary’) which do not necessarily relate to their situation. The obvious direction that the student will take in responding is to please the teacher and describe their situation using the same type of words and phrases. There is no advantage for the student to be innovative in their writing in these types of exercises. The product content is more important than the process of learning to write. In this type of example there is no learning or development of ideas; it is just following a book product. This form of genre limits the creativity of the students. Whilst the product method can be suitable for students who are only learning English for social requirements, it is not suitable for students who aspire to be University graduates. As noted in Jariah (1996) cited in Chow.V.F. (2007) once students reach the tertiary level of study they are required to express themselves clearly and in their own words and “many of the students are at a loss’. These types of exercises do not assist the student in reaching this goal.

Chitravelu N, Sithamparam S, Choon T.S, (1995) say of the product approach “the student never gets an opportunity to learn the various processes that successful writers use in the production of a written document. This kind of writing is demotivating because it is boring and does not cater to the students need for self-expression.”

11. Conditions for a Valid Test

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12. Management of the problem

Chow.V.F. (2007) states that “research on writing instruction has indicated that there is a need for teachers of writing to integrate both process-oriented and product-oriented knowledge in their instruction”.

He goes on to say that both methods are important to a balanced approach to students writing and that the addition of the 'genre' will give an added bonus to the interest of the students.

Normah Othman (2009) came to the same conclusion about Malaysian students stating that "students could not produce good continuous writing because they had difficulty in expressing ideas, had limited vocabulary, lacked ideas, and lacked interest in writing."

Yeats R, et al (2010), go on to say that good academic writing is indispensable. Academic writing is written for a specific audience and attempts to put forward a well balanced view about the topic under investigation. It constantly refers to published work (with appropriate referencing), theory and results (White, 2000, p. 133 cited in Yeats R, et al).

The Writing Centre at the University of Birmingham has produced research on 'Writing Centres' within Universities (Wynn 2002) cited in Tipton R.L. et al (2006), claims that the students who are experiencing a drop in grades after the transfer believe that the University faculty is not trying to help them understand the material presented in class. If this is true, why are these students allowed to graduate to University? Is it the University lecturer's role to teach the student how to understand the material?

In addressing this problem within a language school, there are a number of options in the research work. Tipton R.L, Bender P (2006) believes that students who transfer to a University degree course should undertake an English course that not only requires them to pass the course, in both English and the degree specific subject, but also to undertake instructions in research. It is recognized that there are students who learn English for reasons other than academia. This poses another issue of what to do and how to treat the learning and teaching process for these students. Clearly, it is a pointless exercise for them to learn "academic writing". This would also require a change to the business plan and in particular how and the level of assessment of both of types of students. For the students who intend to pursue an academic career, the pass rate must be higher than 50%, (www.talkingincircles.net2008) whilst this pass rate of 50% could be maintained for those students who are not following an academic career.

The students should be separated at placement level into academic students and non-academic students. This will ensure that the students receive the appropriate type of teaching with the skills class. The book class (ie learning of grammar) would remain the same for both classes.

The language school should ensure that its 'skills' program gives the 'academic' students three weeks of academic writing/research work (the alternate week should be devoted to speaking).

Different genre should be practiced in these three weeks as well as research practice with the aid of a librarian.

'Academic' students should not graduate to university or foundation until they have passed IELTS 5.5 level.

'Academic' students should not go up levels unless they have passed 80% in grammar and 60% in writing (using the performance assessment method testing with rubrics). The grammar tests should have the students construct sentences from a series of words given by the teacher.

All students from outside the language school must pass the IELTS level at 5.5 before being accepted into foundation courses or degree courses.

All teachers should be given instructions on how to use the rubric for writing.

Non- academic students proceed through in the current manner with 50% passes.

Non- academic students who wish to follow an academic line (ie they have changed their options – for whatever reason) have to go back to the level where they can pass the writing and grammar levels at the required pass level.

Academic students can pass at the 'non- academic' level if they wish to change study strands and they do not wish to follow an academic path.

Research from many areas of the world and within different faculties has shown that the issue of students writing is a problem and needs to be addressed.

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