

Being an Effective Writing Teacher: Understanding Writing Theories behind the Product, Process, and Genre Approaches

Pariwat Imsa-ard

Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand

pariwat.i@ru.ac.th

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Abstract

Writing takes part in everyday life, such as taking notes and writing emails. In learning, passive knowledge on students' minds can be transformed into their own language through writing. Moreover, the ability to write in a second language, English for instance, is considered as a crucial tool nowadays. Students who want to pursue their higher education are required to take an English language proficiency exam, such as IETLS and TOEFL, which constitutes the assessment of writing skill. Consequently, it is important that a writing teacher should possess the ability to teach writing effectively and to help students enhance their writing skills. As there are a number of different approaches to the teaching of writing, this paper begins with an overview of teaching writing and explores three main approaches—product approach, process approach and genre approach. In each approach, the strengths and limitations of such an approach in teaching practice will then be analysed. Subsequently, this paper will discuss and examine how an understanding of such theories regarding teaching writing helps a writing teacher to be most effective in the classroom and how it can support their teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the most essential skills that second language students need to learn. Writing is a skill that takes part in everyday life, such as taking notes and writing emails. In learning, passive knowledge on students' minds can be transformed into their own language through writing. Furthermore, the ability to write a second language, English for example, is considered as an essential tool nowadays. To illustrate, students who want to further their education in higher level are required to take an English language proficiency exam, such as IETLS and TOEFL, which includes the assessment of writing skill. However, Yan (2005) demonstrates that certain problems in teaching and learning writing have been arisen among second language teachers and students. Consequently, a writing teacher should possess the ability to teach writing effectively and to help students better their writing skills.

Hyland (2003) points out that the main responsibilities of writing teachers comprise “conceptualizing, planning, and delivering courses” (p. 1). This seems to be true in supporting that writing teachers should first understand the different concepts of writing and how each concept influences and supports L2 classroom. Clearly understood, planning is of the utmost importance in view of the fact that any practice without planning can lead to the failure. According to Harmer (2009), “writing (as one of the four skills of language) has always been constituted in the syllabus in English language teaching” (p. 31). Despite the significance of teaching writing, writing is regarded as a tedious and boring task for students in Thailand. Students who learn writing still have a number of writing difficulties that need to be addressed (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013). For instance, some students in my writing classes had

low scores of writing tasks they were assigned to do and reflected that it is a tedious and difficult task to master. Thus, it is necessary that second language teachers look for better teaching approaches to help improve students' problems.

During the last few decades, a number of approaches to teaching writing have been emerged and developed. In fact, there is not the best and the most appropriate approach to teach writing. The best and most appropriate approach depends on what students need to learn, the types of students and what a writing teacher needs to provide their students. Hyland (2008) illustrates that "different approaches are more accurately seen as complementary and overlapping perspectives, representing potentially compatible means of understanding the complex reality of writing" (p. 91). According to the aforementioned statement of Hyland (2004), it is clear that each approach is regarded as another piece of a whole jigsaw which completes one another to elucidate what students need to study and how teachers should conduct an effective writing lesson.

As there are a number of different approaches to the teaching of writing, this paper will begin with an overview of teaching writing and explore three main approaches—product approach, process approach and genre approach. In each approach, the strengths and limitations of such an approach in teaching practice will then be analysed. Subsequently, this essay will discuss and examine how an understanding of such theories regarding teaching writing helps a writing teacher to be most effective in the classroom and how it can support his/her teaching. Finally, there will be a conclusion in the last section.

2. TEACHING WRITING – A NEGLECTED SKILL

2.1 The Importance of Teaching Writing

Writing is considered as the most difficult skill for language learners when compared with other fundamental skills, such as listening, speaking and reading, because writing learners require some of second language background knowledge about vocabulary or language use which they would like to convey their messages with readers as stated by Fikrins, Forey, & Sengupta (2007). As required considerable amount of both lexical and syntactic skills for students which is likely to cause boredom and negative attitudes towards writing, writing activities in classrooms are less often found than those other skills in my country.

Despite some arguments noted towards teaching writing above, there are a number of important reasons why it is necessary to teach writing. A notable importance of teaching writing, by far, is the fact that writing is a fundamental skill as important as other skills. In point of fact, writing activities incidentally occur in students' daily life, such as writing essays, and taking notes. Accordingly, students need to know how to report their thoughts into texts appropriately and accurately. In addition, Hashemnezhad (2012) demonstrates that written products are practically used for academic assessment.

To address such problems arisen and to enhance students' writing skills, the role of a writing teacher is very important in developing students' writing performance (Perry, 1998). A writing teacher needs to provide instructions of what students should do in writing task. On account of this reason, it is necessary for a writing teacher to understand writing theories and approaches for an effective practice. Therefore, the quality in teaching writing and theories behind teaching writing will be discussed in the next section.

2.2 Effective Writing Instructions

At the close of the importance of teaching writing part, the role of a writing teacher, which is very important, has been mentioned. In order to conduct the effective writing instructions, it is necessary that a writing teacher have a comprehensive understanding of the role of a writing teacher, the writing theories, and how theoretical concepts of teaching writing have been merged and implemented in classrooms. In this section, the role of a writing teacher

and an overview of writing theories are discussed respectively.

It is clear that a writing teacher has a number of roles in conducting a writing lesson. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), some noticeable roles of a writing teacher include “a motivator, an interpreter of the task, a designer of meaningful [and interesting] tasks, an organiser, a resource, a support person, an evaluator, and a reader for information” (p. 254). To be more specific, it is essential for a writing teacher to motivate students with positive attitude, believing that they have capabilities of doing tasks at first. Furthermore, students have different learning styles so that a writing teacher should be able to create meaningful, interesting and flexible tasks that are suitable for students. Therefore, understanding the theories behind approaches to writing can help a writing teacher to plan and implement a suitable writing lesson for students which can lead to an effective writing classroom

Hyland (2003) demonstrates that “a number of theories supporting writing teachers have been developed over a few decades” (p. 1). According to Hyland (2004), there are three main aspects of writing. The first approach focuses on language structures and the products of writing, called a **product approach**. Instead of focusing on texts, the second approach concentrates on the processes of preparing and creating texts, called a **process approach**. Attempting to communicate with readers, the third approach focuses more on the communicative purposes of the genre and the viewpoint of the reader, called a **genre approach**.

In order to conduct an effective writing lesson, a writing teacher is suggested with three aforementioned approaches: product, process and genre approaches. However, in his review article, Hyland (2008) demonstrates that no approaches can replace one another but support each other to make a complete whole. Indeed, Hasan and Akhand’s (2010) empirical study of balancing approaches in writing class revealed that the combination of approaches has a propensity to facilitate the students in developing writing tasks. Therefore, there may not be the best one approach to writing. To elaborate, the best writing lesson will depend on what its purpose is, what competence level of the students is, and what the type of the texts is being studied. In the next section, each approach as well as its advantages and limitations will be discussed. Also, how such approaches are combined into a teaching context will be scrutinised.

3. APPROACHES TO TEACHING WRITING

3.1 Product Approach

It is generally agreed that a “product approach encourages students to mimic a model text” (Gabrielatos, 2002, p. 5). Harmer (2015) also indicates that a product approach focuses on how the end product is constructed rather than the process. To elaborate, a writing teacher provides a text model and students need to follow the model to build their written products. In this approach, accurate use of grammar, correct and consistent spelling, and good organisation are seen as evidence of the student’s ability to write (Nunan, 2003).

According to Steele (2015), a product approach to writing constitutes a four-stage process.

Stage 1 - Familiarisation: Students are encouraged to learn model texts, and certain grammar and vocabulary are taught through a text. For instance, students pay attention to paragraphing and language use in the model texts, and focus on what techniques are employed in the model texts.

Stage 2 – Controlled Writing: In this stage, students are asked to manipulate highlighted features or fixed patterns of the model texts, such as from substitution tables. To illustrate, students may be asked to make polite requests by practising the ‘Would you mind if ...?’ structure (Adapted from Steele, 2015).

Table 1. A substitution table

There are		types		: A, B, and C.
The	Y	kinds	of X	. These are A, B, and C.
		classes		are A, B, and C.
		categories		
consists of				
X	can be divided into	Y	categories	. These are A, B, and C.
			classes	: A, B, and C.
			kinds	
			types	
classes				
A, B, and C are	kinds		of X.	
	types	categories		

(Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 1987, p. 23, as cited in Hyland, 2003)

Stage 3 – Guided Writing: Students imitate the model texts. This stage is the most important as this approach is believed that the organisation of ideas and the control of language are mainly focused (Badge & White, 2000).

Stage 4 – Free Writing: Students individually free-write by using the patterns they have been taught to write the written product.

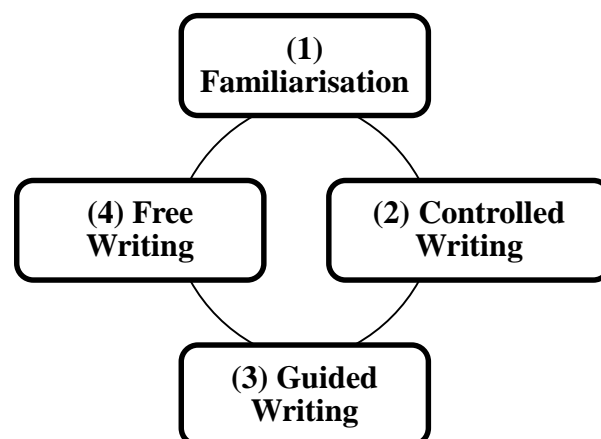


Figure 1. A four-stage process (Adapted from Steele, 2015)

3.1.1 Example of writing task using a product approach

Theme: Writing a postcard

Dear **Andrew**,

How are you doing? I hope everything goes well. Now, my friends and I are in **Singapore**. We have a great time visiting **National Museums, Merlion and Sentosa Island**. The weather here is **nice and chilly**. I wish you could be here with us.

If you come with us, I'm sure we will have a good time together, and I hope that we will be able to meet soon.

Love,

Peter

- (1) **Familiarisation:** A writing teacher provides students a model postcard. In this stage, there could be more than one model text that contain the same pattern and

organisation. Then students are asked to analyse the text by looking at the language use and organisation.

- (2) **Controlled Writing:** A writing teacher has students do controlled activities to practise the highlighted features from a model postcard.
- (3) **Guided Writing:** Students start to mimic the model postcard by organising a set of ideas. This stage, the model texts are used to help students write a postcard they would like.
- (4) **Free Writing:** A writing teacher has students do the writing task by using vocabulary and language structure they have practised to construct the written text.

As clearly stated in free writing stage, the final written product (postcard) made by students can be any countries or places they would like to write about by using structures or organisation they have practised from the model postcard.

3.1.2 Advantages of a product approach

Although this product approach is considered as a “traditional approach” (Gabrielatos, 2002, p. 5), there are a number of strengths and advantages in teaching writing.

- (1) It is easy to use in a classroom with a huge number of students. It is claimed that product approach is a teacher-centred approach (e.g., Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hyland, 2003). However, in his empirical study of analysis of product approach, Palpanadan (2014) demonstrates that “teacher’s response as a central role in the classroom is the only way to reach students owing to time-constraint and classroom size”. This provides students an opportunity to learn sentence structures from teacher’s marking.
- (2) It is useful for students at lower level. Tangpermpoon (2008) demonstrates that “students at lower level can learn how to write systematically from using pattern-product techniques” (p. 3). According to my own experience of teaching writing, this approach seems to be helpful and spoon-fed for young students who know little grammar and have a small vocabulary bank. Hyland (2003) also notes that a product approach is widely used to scaffold writing development and increase lower level students’ confidence.

3.1.3 Limitations of a product approach

Despite a number of advantages noted above, product approach has some limitations.

- (1) It does not create creativity as heavily relied on the imitation of model text. It is believed that students fail to think critically and write creatively since they learn by replicating and duplicating model texts (e.g., Hashemnezhad, 2012; Li, 2007; Tong, 2007). Consequently, Palpanadan (2014) revealed that the practice may lead students to plagiarise in the future as they are used to taking others’ work or model texts. Also, Tickoo (2003) found that “In most cases such classroom writing denies the learner an opportunity for self-expression” (p. 63).
- (2) It makes writing unreal in real-life context. It is widely claimed out that this approach helps students enhance their accurate use of grammar and correct spelling (e.g., Hyland, 2003; Nunan, 2003; Steele, 2015). To illustrate, the final product is more important as it requires correct forms of structures and spelling. However, the patterns of writing in real life are not fixed as they vary. Hyland (2003) also demonstrates that the goal of writing instruction can never be just training accuracy because written texts are always a response to a particular communicative setting.

3.2 Process Approach

Apart from product approach which primarily focuses on form and written product with attention concentrated on the appropriate use of linguistic knowledge, this approach focuses on the procedures of drafting and redrafting a piece of written product (Nunan, 2003). More

emphasis on the actual writing process in process approach thus helps to improve quality of student writing work (Hedge, 2005). Contrary to product approach, “there is less weight on linguistic knowledge as linguistic skills is mainly focused in process approach, such as planning and drafting, are more dominant” (Badger & White, 2000, p. 154).

According to Seow (2002), a set of planned instructions to writing aims to get students accustomed to the processes of writing including planning, drafting, revising and editing. To elaborate, classroom activities and teaching procedures to promote and advance the language use are more focused in process approach. However, each stage of process writing does not seem to be a neat linear sequence but recursive and interactive as Zamel (1938, as cited in Hyland, 2003, p. 11) demonstrates that writing is seen as “[a] non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning”. In fact, process writing is a method of writing that “facilitates students’ analyses and organization of ideas, develops cooperation among students, provides the opportunity to manage and control writing, and allows for varied activities” (Bayat, 2014, p. 1134).

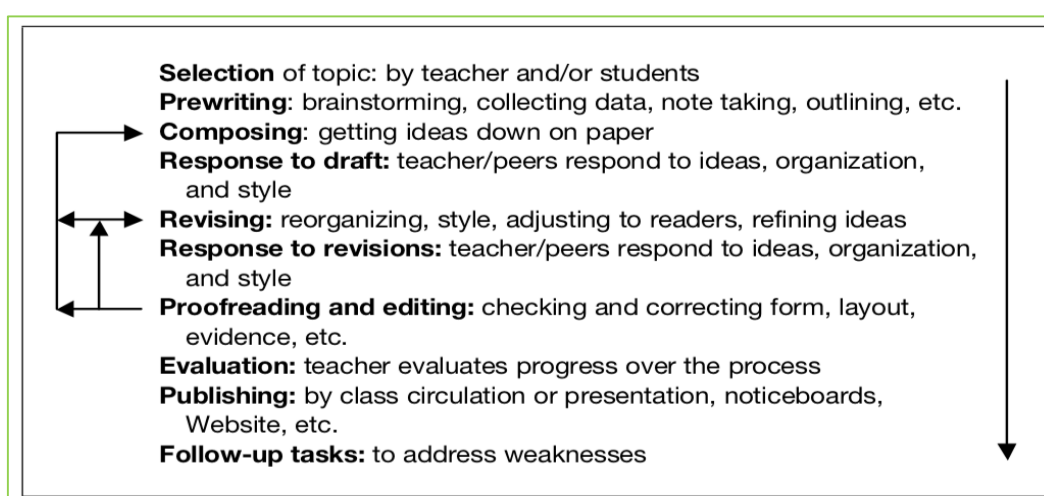


Figure 2. A process model of writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981 as cited in Hyland, 2003)

As Figure 3.2 shown, the process is not arranged in step by step. In fact, a writer can move to any of these steps; for instance, prewriting for brainstorming more ideas after revising. According to Hedgecock (2005), the essence of process writing is described as “one that engages learners in *meaningful* writing, encourages stages of multiple drafts and revisions, and provide formative feedback through conferencing” (p. 604).

3.2.1 Example of writing task using a process approach

Topic: Write a 200-word paragraph narrating your favourite moment from your childhood. You should include the following information:

- What happened on that day and where;
- Who you were with;
- What impressed you; and
- What you learned from that day

This section discusses how process approach is implemented in a writing class through the aforementioned example of writing task, as follows.

1) Prewriting and Planning

In this stage, a teacher only provides language support if required, remaining in the background. The question asked to write is clear and includes what students should

write in their writing task. A teacher has students plan their work prior to writing in order to help students generate ideas and plot what will be written sufficiently. Moreover, according to Herman, Manfred and Marie-Laure (2010), wh-questions are to help student in their narrative writing.

From the aforementioned example, students are asked to write about their favourite moment in their childhood. A teacher has to encourage students to come up with the ideas and then think of the answers of the guided questions. The students have to gather ideas and prepare for their writing. Gabrielatos (2002) illustrates that “this stage involves making decisions about content and coverage (relevant ideas and/or required information), language (level of formality, style and attitude), layout (type of text), type of organisation, and sequence” (p. 6).

2) Drafting

From the previous stage, students need to get their ideas down on paper quickly. According to Gabrielatos (2002), students need to expand on the notes by adding more information on the draft. Hedge (2005) suggests fast-writing (or free-writing) technique in order to write by concentrating more on content rather than on form. In fact, this technique helps students avoid vague statements.

3) Responding

After they have done the draft, they need to have their first draft responded, evaluated and reviewed by their teacher or peers. The comments students receive help them get back to the point where the text is shaped and restructured.

4) Revising and editing

In this stage, students will reorder arguments or review scenes in a narrative, reorder supporting details, and refine the ideas according to the evaluated and reviewed version of the first draft. Gabrielatos (2002) also mentions that this stage involves adding, removing, re-arranging, splitting or combining paragraph. Moreover, correcting spelling, grammar, punctuation and mechanics and organisation of the text are concerned.

According to Hedge (2005), he demonstrates that revising is part of the writing process which entails assessing what has already been written and is an important source of learning. In my opinion, this stage is one of the most significant steps for the students.

5) Evaluating and post-writing

In this stage, a teacher will evaluate the writing pieces according to rubric score he/she sets. A teacher needs to evaluate on overall impression whether the text is overall effective or not. In addition, a teacher needs to evaluate on specific points in accordance with the criteria.

After finishing the final draft, sharing writing with classmates via presentation or online showing that their writing is valued can motivate students in writing (Peregoy & Boyle, 2013).

As clearly seen in the stages of process writing, process writing may be more effective as it enhances students' writing ability by having them focus on the process of creating texts through steps. However, this approach is still facing some limitations.

3.2.2 Advantages of a process approach

As this process approach is considered to be more effective (Hedge, 2005, p. 50), there are a number of strengths and advantages in teaching writing.

- (1) Students have occasions to concentrate on the process of writing at a time. As students need to go over step by step, this would help enhance the ability to produce a better writing piece. Students are allowed to self-express, discuss and share their writing through each step. This approach emphasises on the skills in writing (brainstorm, drafting, review and editing).

- (2) This approach supports the cooperative and collaborative learning. The students have opportunities to gain cooperative assistance from peers through revision stage. In addition, publishing stage at the end promotes motivation in collaborative work as other students will read their work and come up with other ideas for their further writing.

3.2.3 Limitations of a process approach

Despite a number of advantages noted above, process approach has some limitations.

- (1) It is difficult to ensure whether students can acquire crucial writing skills and processes. Graham and Sandmell (2011) illustrate that the instruction provided in a process writing classroom is not powerful enough especially for those students who experience writing difficulty.
- (2) The classroom activity is time-consuming, as it requires much time to implement and conduct the lesson. Since a teacher has limited time, only limited time is used to explicitly teaching students strategies for completing each process in order that a teacher can have a lesson finished by the time. Moreover, a teacher requires lots of grading and would not have sufficient time to arrange writing discussion for individual students in large classes.

3.3 Genre Approach

In the past decade, genre approach has been growing in English language classroom. Hasan and Akhand (2010) define genre approach as a social and culture practice. The purpose of this writing involves the context where the writing occurs, and the conventions of the target discourse community. It is clear that the genre approach focuses on the language and discourse features. However, in Munice's (2002) statements, genre approach concentrates more on the readers. To elaborate, certain social conventions are followed for organising messages because the writer wants the readers to recognise his/her purpose. The central belief is that it is not just written, but it is written to achieve some purposes such as writing letters of complaint, describing a technical process and telling a story.

As concentrated on the readers, the writing products and the way social purposes are expressed effectively; students need to have rhetorical understanding of texts (Munice, 2002). The writing instructions look beyond subject content, processes and forms and regard writing as endeavours to transmit the messages with readers. Like a product approach, a "genre approach emphasises that writing varies with the social context in which it is produced linked with different situations" (Flowerdew, 1993, p. 307). Badger and White (2000) also demonstrate that "there are similarities between product approach and genre approach, which genre approach can be seen as an extension of the product approach and can be considered as predominantly linguistic" (p. 155). However, according to Hyland (2003), a teacher needs to take an authoritative role to scaffold and support students by giving models to students to observe and then asking them to deliberate about and analyse structure and language use.

3.3.1 The Genre approach: The framework for teaching writing

The demand of the application of genre approach can be mostly found in English for Specific Purposes, or ESP, classroom, as the ESP students learn English based on the context they need. There are main four stages conducted in genre approach as seen in the figure 3.3.

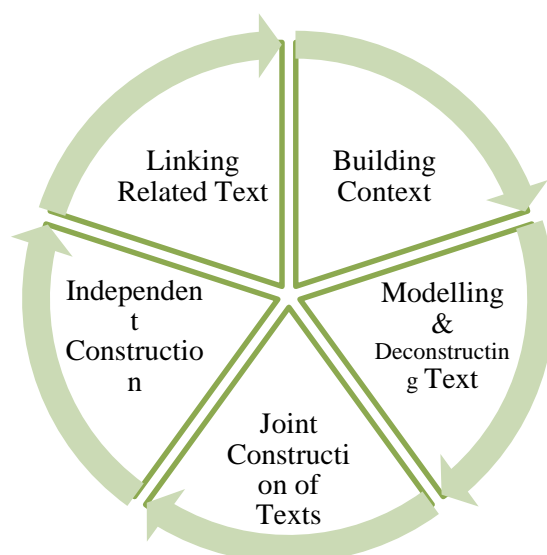


Figure 3. The Teaching-Learning Cycle (Feez, 1998, p. 28)

3.3.2 Stages of a genre approach

- (1) **Building Context:** revealing genre purposes and the settings in which it is commonly used. In this step, a teacher asks some questions about the topic, enhancing the students' background knowledge about this topic.
- (2) **Modelling and Deconstructing Text:** analysing typical samples of the genre to identify its stages and key features and the variations which are possible. In this stage, a teacher gives the model of the genre to better the understanding on text-type chosen.
- (3) **Joint Construction of Texts:** guided, teacher-supported practice in the genre through focusing on particular functions of the text. In this stage, a teacher encourages and motivates students to construct the text related to the social function.
- (4) **Independent Construction:** independent writing by students monitored by the teacher. In this stage, students are expected to produce the text individually.
- (5) **Linking Related Texts:** relating what has been learned to other genres and contexts to understand how genres are designed to achieve particular social purposes.

3.3.3 Example of writing task using a genre approach

Genre: Advertisement Poster

Topic: Selling any products.

Stages:

- (1) **Modelling Phase:** At first, a teacher starts with focusing on developing students' background knowledge on genre. A teacher should have students realise the social purpose of the target genre (in this case, it is to persuade readers to buy things). After that, students will be looking at different kinds of resources regarding the topic such as posters and video clips. Also, a teacher helps students by asking a few questions of how to deliver the argument. Then the focus moves to language use and terms related to the assigned topic, for example, connectors or the organisation.
- (2) **Joint Construction Phase:** After students have a good understanding, a teacher and students construct the target texts together. Students research and collect information they need, and start to create a poster. A teacher is like a facilitator, as he/she helps shape appropriate language use in writing.

- (3) **Independent Construction Phase:** It is necessary to repeat the previous-phase activity before moving to having students construct the text independently (Ahn, 2012). A teacher is like a consultant in case that some students need advices and feedback instead of giving direct comment to them.

3.3.4 Advantages of a genre approach

As this genre approach is considered to have a connection to readers and society, there are a number of strengths and advantages in teaching writing.

- (1) This approach provides students the understanding on how writing takes place in a social situation and how writing is a reflection of any particular purposes. To elaborate, this approach activates students to take part in the world around them, and to realise how content writing can promote logical organisation.
- (2) This approach is supportive and empowering, according to Hyland (2004). A teacher plays a central role in scaffolding students' creativity and learning. Additionally, this approach provides access to the patterns and possibilities of variation in valued texts and increases a teacher's awareness of texts to confidently advise students on writing.

3.3.5 Limitations of a genre approach

Despite a number of advantages noted above, genre approach has some limitations.

- (1) This approach neglects students' self-sufficiency, according to Byram (2004). In fact, in Caudery's (1998) finding, this approach may make students be too dependent on teacher providing material as text models. Moreover, this makes students largely passive as it limits students' creative ideas about content.
- (2) This approach may undervalue the skills needed to produce a text. According to Badge and White (2000), this approach has been criticised in that it overlooks natural processes of learning.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Writing at a beginner level

It is clear that a **product approach** is an ideal approach for beginner level students, for their ability to write is still limited. Students are encouraged to mimic a model text provided by a teacher. From my own experience as a writing teacher for 3 years, product approach helps improve and better students at low level who know little grammar structures and vocabulary to be able to construct and produce their writing tasks. As the attention is placed on a 'model' text, it also helps boost the low-level students' confidence in writing. To elaborate, product approach will be appropriate in order to reach the classroom objectives if a teacher teaches students at low level or teaching in the big classroom.

4.2 Writing at an intermediate level

When students are more skilled in language use and need more freedom to write, a **process approach** seems to be an ideal approach for them. From my own experience, process approach helps students with fluency in writing, for it provides students more opportunities through the processes of developing a better final product of their writing piece which leads to students' satisfaction and confidence. To illustrate, if a teacher teaches students at higher level and wants them to be able to produce a better writing piece by going step by step over and over carefully, process approach will be appropriate to allow students to take advantages of the planned writing procedures so that students have chances to think as they write. Multiple drafts and revisions of writing allow students to think over and over so that their writing pieces become better and better.

4.3 Writing at a post-intermediate level

When students are proficient in language use and need more freedom to write in order to respond to their needs, a **genre approach** is an ideal and suitable approach for them. For instance, a teacher wants students to write an advertisement poster to sell their products, which can happen in their real life. Students can learn and study from a number of materials and discover facts about construction following traditions in certain regions and considering the readers and language use of that genre.

However, according to Hasan and Akhand's (2010) empirical study, they demonstrate that balancing approaches in writing class by combining approaches can facilitate and support the students in developing writing tasks and help reach the goal of the lesson more effectively. For example, students are asked to construct a global warming poster according to genre approach by following several steps in product approach. The aforementioned exemplar which is combined approach can respond to both a writer by and readers at the same time.

5. CONCLUSION

As stated by Hyland (2008) in the section two, he points out that no approaches can replace one another but support each other to make a complete whole. Indeed, no approaches are better than one another. Any approach is suitable for any particular situations depending on its purposes. To elaborate, product approach may be the best approach to teach low-level students in a big class; and process approach may be the best approach to teach a collaborative and cooperative learning activity.

To conclude this paper, different approaches serve different purposes as stated by Hyland (2008). Becoming a good writer requires good instructions and a number of opportunities to write in order to build and develop his/her competency. Providing meaningful tasks with appropriate approaches to students and thrusting them upon truly meaningful purposes with joyful and interesting activities are the ultimate objectives of writing instructions and can make writing classroom become most effective.

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About the Author

Pariwat Imsa-ard is a lecturer in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand. He holds an M.A. in TESOL from University of York, United Kingdom. Prior to his M.A., he obtained B.Ed. in Non-Formal Education and English from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. His research interests include Language Assessment, ELT Methodology, and EFL Teacher Education.
