<Brief Article> Genre-based Tasks and Process Approach in Foreign Language Writing

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Abstract

This paper reviews the use of writing task genres in foreign language teaching in respect to their individual benefits and the appropriate level of language proficiency in students.

The role of L1 use in the L2 composing process and the effect of reformulation in the writing process will be looked at in detail. Furthermore, writing composition with descriptive, narrative and expository task prompts, and dialogue journal writing will be introduced and examined in respect to efficient application in the classroom. It will then be attempted to draw conclusions for the pedagogical practice.

1. Introduction

Early research on writing in a second language (L2) focused on analyzing the final product but not the actual process of how the end-product was generated. Since the 1980's many studies have considered this approach insufficient to understand all the significant aspects of writing in language learning and therefore ineffective to improve language teaching. Researchers became concerned with everything that goes on in the learner's mind from the time the task is set to the final presentation of the completed task. Aspects of monitoring, revising and checking were all considered to play a part in the writing process (Myers 1997). An initial model of three separate phases of planning, translating and reviewing (Hayes and Flower 1981) was extended to account for the lack of boundaries in between writing phases and the non-linearity of the writing process (Wang and Wen 2002). Numerous elements in the process such as translating, backtracking, restructuring and formulating were examined. This paper will review the L2 composing process and genre-based writing tasks (composition tasks with prompts and dialogue journal writing) that focus on the process of writing. In particular,

their effect on improving learner's skills in terms of accuracy, fluency and the quality of contents, with a view to the learner's proficiency levels, will be examined. Finally, it will be attempted to draw pedagogic implications for the use of the discussed L2 writing techniques in the classroom setting.

2. Examination of the writing process

2. 1. The role of L1 use in the L2 composing process

It was found that the writer's native language (L1) often influences the process of writing and that L1 use is a fairly common strategy among L2 writers (Krapels 1991). The use of L1 may occur throughout the L2 composing process and writers can use both languages for cognitive operations (Wang and Wen 2002).

According to Uzawa and Cumming, Canadian students taking an intermediate Japanese class reported writing rough drafts or notes in English before transposing them into Japanese or to mentally prepare their ideas in English before directly writing them into Japanese. Thus, it is likely that intermediate writers are apt to use L1 to generate ideas, develop concepts and organize the information, and then to transpose them into the foreign language (Uzawa and Cumming 1989). It was also found that the level of L1 use tends to decrease with higher-level proficiency in students (Kobayashi and Rinnert 1992). In a comparison between direct composition and translation, their study showed that especially lower-level students could benefit from translation tasks whereas higher-level writers did not benefit very much in terms of quality of content, organization or style. According to results based on percentages of writers' self-perception of mental Japanese (their L1) use during direct writing in English, a large majority of low-proficiency Japanese English writers reported using more than 50% Japanese, and 27% of the writers even reported using their L1 more than 75%. In contrast, a majority of higher-level English students reported using less than 50% Japanese. The percentage of students who used L1 more than 75% decreased to 12%. Overall, syntactic complexity was greater in translation than in direct writing. In terms of accuracy, higher-level students tended to make more errors that interfered with intended meaning in translation than in direct writing. However, lower-ability students did not show any difference. Another study which employed a think-aloud method found that Chinese ESL/EFL writers would apply L1 more frequently in a narrative writing task with a picture prompt than in an argumentative writing task with a written L2 prompt. Higher-level writers tended

to depend less often on L1 than the lower-level writers (Wang and Wen 2002).

2. 2. The effect of reformulation

According to Qi and Lapkin (2001), a key function of reformulation is to provide an opportunity for noticing and raising awareness of unknown information as an important cognitive process in L2 composing. They conducted the following 3-stage reformulation task and found the task was effective in improving the quality of writing.

3-stage reformulation task

Stage 1 [Composing]: Participants write L2 texts in response to picture prompts (30min).

Stage 2 [Comparing]: They are asked to compare their written L2 drafts with the reformulated versions, followed by an immediate retrospective interview intended to clarify what they had noticed.

Stage 3 [Revising]: Their original texts are returned for revising.

The results showed that learners with a lower level of L2 proficiency had more difficulty in noticing the gap between their inter-language and the target language provided in the model texts. It has been also reported that reformulation tasks seem to benefit in particular learners at intermediate levels and above (Cohen 1983, Mantello 1996). In a classroom which employed the reformulation approach, selection of vocabulary, syntactic structures, overall organization and markers of cohesion were improved (Sanaoui 1984). Reformulation may be helpful for non-native writers to move closer to native-writer norms, whereby a discussion of the reformulated text within the class may be even more influential than the reformulation task itself (Allwright 1998). Since the quality of noticing in reformulation tasks seems to be crucial for improvement of L2 writing, writers should be encouraged to work cooperatively with the teacher or with peers so as to increase opportunities for noticing as well as to improve the quality of noticing (Swain and Lapkin 2001).

3. Genre-based tasks as a process writing approach

3. 1. Writing composition with descriptive, narrative and expository task prompts

Many teachers feel comfortable in providing a daily prompt rather than letting students write freely (Hopkins 1999). These prompts for writing composition can be categorized into different discourse genres, such as descriptive, narrative and expository or argumentative.

Descriptive tasks may be more suitable for lower-proficiency students as they allow the students to use familiar language and therefore let them feel more confident about the content they want to communicate (Qi 1998). Narrative tasks, instead, involve more demanding linguistic processing than the descriptive discourse (Koda 1993). Koda investigated 25 American university students learning Japanese (L2), and gave them two writing genre-based tasks as a part of the instructional activities. The first task was describing a family place (descriptive task) and the second writing task was to describe a happy incident they had recently experienced (narrative task). The result of her research showed that narrative tasks require more difficult linguistic processing at different stages (e.g. lexical, morphosyntactic and discourse) than descriptive discourse. For instance, over 90 percent of the verbs used in the descriptive task were stative verbs in their non-past form, whereas the narrative task had a variety of process verbs. It was found that a high correlation existed between this aspect of grammatical knowledge and quality of the narrative, but not descriptive quality. Vocabulary knowledge was the best predictor of composition quality. Her findings indicated that a learner's vocabulary knowledge correlated highly with the overall quality ratings in both tasks (descriptive: r=75, narrative: r=70). Therefore, it is considered that vocabulary knowledge may be one of the most significant elements to improve L2 writing.

Expository tasks require a relatively high-level knowledge of the L2. They challenge the student to deal with unfamiliar topics, problem analysis and increased cognitive processes using L1 as language-switching (Qi 1998). Similar observations about the relative difficulty of descriptive, narrative and expository prompts were also made in a study by Way et al (2000). In the research, the descriptive tasks required the students to describe themselves, their families, or their classes. The narrative tasks asked about their typical days and routine life-style. The expository tasks asked about American teenagers in general, explaining

their roles in society, or their goals for the future. Sample texts were found to be the longest and most accurate for descriptive writing and shortest for expository writing. However, the syntactic complexity was greater for expository than for descriptive writing. These findings replicate the studies by Qi (1998) and Koda (1993) discussed above. The type of prompt also had a significant effect on the L2 writing. A bare prompt written in L1 with a L2 vocabulary list, with definitions in L1, usually produced writing with the poorest overall quality, the least fluency and the least syntactic complexity. On the other side, a prose prompt, in this case, a part of a letter written in L2, produced writing samples with the best overall quality, the greatest fluency, the greatest syntactic complexity and the highest accuracy, regardless of the task types (Way et al 2000).

3. 2. Dialogue journals

A dialogue journal is a written conversation between a teacher and an individual student. Students regularly write into a notebook, in the target language, about any topic they like (Fazio 2001). The teacher answers without grading or correcting. The comments and the feedback by the teacher provide a 'hidden' task prompt. The teacher acts as "a conversational partner, who accepts what is written and responds as directly and openly as possible, while keeping in mind the student's language ability and interests" (Baudrand-Aertker 1992).

Studies that applied the dialogue journals method reported highly noticeable progress in students' written expression and greater fluency. Especially weaker and more passive students appeared to benefit from a dialogue journal. An important finding was an increased ambition in students to use the target language and to expand their knowledge on their own to keep the journal interesting (Hopkins 1999, Oxbrow 2000). There was frequent evidence of students using dictionaries to look for unfamiliar vocabulary and recycling of recently learned language (Oxbrow 2000). Although dialogue journals seem to be at odds in terms of accuracy and grammatical aspects with the accuracy-based, objective task of controlled composition writing, major growth was also observed in these areas (Hopkins 1999). Apart from fluency and accuracy in language use, dialogue journals also promote an improvement in the communicative competence of students (Baudrand-Aertker 1992, Carlsmith 1994, Oxbrow 2000). They give students the role of communicator by allowing them to marshal their own linguistic resources in their own real world beyond the classroom (Carlsmith

1994) and hereby they offer to the student a real audience, conversational practice and valuable individualized attention (Oxbrow 2000). The students gain sufficient knowledge to be aware of accuracy and appropriate function in the target language (Baudrand-Aertker 1992).

4. Pedagogic implications for L2 writing tasks in the classroom setting

It may be natural and effective to assign L1 rather than L2 tasks to less experienced writers in order to achieve higher quality writing (Kobayashi and Rinnert 1992, Uzawa and Cumming 1989, Wang and Wen 2002). Educational benefits through tasks with translation differ depending on whether dictionaries are permitted and, if so, what kinds of dictionary are available. Narrative tasks may be more challenging for students as they require more L2 thinking and more grammatical and complex structural knowledge (Koda 1993, Wang and Wen 2002).

Intermediate and higher-level writers gain a lot through reformulation. It appears to be effective in improving their proficiency in terms of precision in the use of vocabulary, grammatical rules, overall cohesion and structure (Qi and Lapkin 2001, Sanaoui 1984, Cohen 1983). The quality of the writing model should be based on native-writer norms. It is necessary for teachers to organize other awareness-raising activities in reformulation tasks such as collaborative works with peers or native instructors. The reformulation approach is more effective than simply providing feedback corrections on completed writing products as a large number of students may only sometimes or never check teacher's corrections unless the corrections are combined with commentaries on the contents (Fazio 2001).

As writing improves in combination of formal and informal practice, it may be most effective to apply dialogue journal writing in combination with writing composition tasks in the classroom settings. A dialogue journal is an efficient task to improve learner's writing fluency and vocabulary through constant practice. Some of the greatest advantages of dialogue journals are the promotion of students' autonomy beyond the confines of the classroom (Oxbrow 2000) and the encouragement they provide to weak and passive students. One of the drawbacks of dialogue journal writing is that, even though it may not be very difficult to introduce journals into the classroom, dialogue journals require frequent

reminding of the student to update their journal and regular attention by the teacher (Carlsmith 1994).

For composition writing tasks, it is important for teachers, in order to provide effective L2 writing instructions, to take into account the effects of different task types and prompts. They need to choose an appropriate combination of task types and prompts depending on the level of learners and the purpose of the lessons. Descriptive tasks are considered the easiest and the expository tasks the most difficult. However, when it comes to a combination with a vocabulary prompt, descriptive writing ranked the lowest in terms of accuracy for novice L2 learners (Way et al 2000). Narrative writing tends to demand good grammatical knowledge and there is a strong relationship between vocabulary knowledge and the ratings of writing quality (Koda 1993). Here it may be useful to incorporate writing composition tasks with vocabulary exercises as linguistic scaffolding for the given task.

5. Conclusions

Writing is a complex process and a number of variables determine every learner's writing ability. The teaching of writing has to account for the level of knowledge in the students and writing tasks have to be carefully selected to provide the right amount of challenge and the maximal benefit according to the level. The task types also have to be chosen depending on the target skills they intend to improve. The writing tasks presented in this paper are only a small selection of possible tasks and there may be others (e.g. email exchange, collaboration writing, composition task with picture prompt), that are more suitable for individual classes. When selecting a writing task, it is also important for teachers to consider the appropriate combinations of writing task with different types of prompts and the method of feedback they are going to use. A constant writing practice through a combination of formal composition tasks with journal writing is an effective way to achieve fluent writing skills and communicative competence. Dialogue journals also may help to improve lexical and grammatical competence depending on the content of the topic and the characteristics of the task types presented.

In the future, it would be interesting to apply the findings from these empirical studies to classroom practice and to further investigate the suitability of different writing task genres for practical application.

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