

From Process Writing to Genres: A Bridge to Meaningful, Real World Communication

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ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on second language (L2) writing – specifically how a process-oriented approach is foundational for authentic communication via genres (e.g. letter to the editor, movie review, business documents, etc.). In other words, the aim is to show how teachers can connect the classroom to students' lives outside of it through meaningful, real world written work. Towards this end, it begins by stating what L2 writing is or should be, as well as highlighting overall goals and principles. After this, the focus shifts to process writing, to include the series of steps, common forms (i.e. paragraphs and essays), and patterns of development (e.g. illustration, process, cause and effect, etc.). Genres are then defined, and the research behind them, benefits, and what teachers need to do are presented before wrapping up with some examples of different types.

Keywords - second language writing, process writing, genres, authentic communication

I. SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

Writing, in all of its forms, is a series of contrasts. In other words, it's a physical and mental act, its purpose is to both express and impress, and it's both a process (i.e. a cyclical series of steps) and product (i.e. final version) [1]. It's an often times slow, challenging, arduous, recursive, non-linear (involving constant reformulation), "messy" process that requires patience, flexibility, innovation, risk-taking, self-assessment, and faith, which, ideally will lead to clarity (i.e. it's certainly much more than a mere transcription of speech) [2]. Additionally, writing is problem-solving (i.e. writers use invention strategies and extensive planning to resolve rhetorical problems that each writing task presents), generative (i.e. writers explore and discover ideas as they write), recursive (i.e. writers constantly review and modify their texts as they write and often produce several drafts to achieve a finished product), collaborative (i.e. writers benefit from focused feedback from a variety of sources), and developmental (i.e. writers should not be evaluated only on their final products but on their improvement) [3].

Writing is also a very powerful instrument of thought and public performance wherein writers learn and communicate about themselves and their world, and communicate ideas and insights to others, which leads to personal growth and the possibility of effecting change in their communities (Burke, 2003). In other words, all writing is personal, in that it is an extension of who we are, a record of the process by which we create our identity and discover our ideas – that is, it is a performance of ourselves for others (i.e. readers) [4].

Second language (L2) writing is a complex process that involves the cognitive process of second language acquisition, as well as genres, purposes, culture, and values of students [5]. This is a process in which the writer imagines the audience, sets goals, develops ideas, produces notes, drafts, revises and edits, all in an effort to meet the audience's expectations (i.e. writers use language to help an audience understand something they know about the world; to anticipate what an imagined reader wants or needs to know and at which point in the message they need to know it, making it an important part of the meaning negotiation process) [6].

There are many different types of second language writing – by *audience* (e.g. self, classmates, teacher, friends, community, nation, world, etc.), *context* (e.g. school, work, home, etc.), *development* (e.g. illustration, narration, process, etc.), *genre* (e.g. advertisement, editorial, product review, etc.), *medium* (e.g. print or electronic), *purpose* (e.g. inform, entertain, persuade, etc.), *text type* (e.g. letters, reports, memos, emails, etc.), and *writer* (e.g. student, employee, employer, colleague, etc.) [7].

There are several reasons why people learning a second language write: *acquisitional* (to enable exploration and reflection on language in a conscious way), *assessment* (to check progress and/or proficiency), *creative* (to foster the development of self-expression), *educational* (to contribute to intellectual development and bolster self-esteem and confidence), *emotional* (to express a wide range of different feelings), *pedagogic* (to learn the system of language), *professional* (to survive and thrive in the workplace), *reinforcement* (to

strengthen and build upon what is already known), and *social* (to interact with one another). In addition to these, teachers may find that some second language writers don't have any identifiable needs, present or future, for written English, but who simply enjoy the process of practicing and improving their language skills [8].

In the second language classroom, the ultimate goal of writing should be to produce whole pieces of appropriate, informative, coherent, contextualized, purposeful, relevant and meaningful communication – ones that inform, entertain and/or persuade [9]. For this to happen, writing tasks that are properly representative of the range of tasks we would expect students to be able to perform should be set, and the tasks should elicit writing that is truly representative of the students' ability [10]. Put another way, the kind of writing that students should do depends on age, interests, level, motivation, and purpose for taking the course. The teacher's role in all of this is to help build and maintain communicative potential, which will necessitate giving students opportunities to practice various forms and functions of writing, and, within these, to develop the different skills involved in producing written texts. For this to happen, classroom writing activities need to be set up in ways that reflect the writing process in good writers (who have an awareness of different text types, are ever mindful of their audience and purpose, conform to recognizable patterns of organization, plan well, balance process and product, account for cultural and literary backgrounds, make strong connections between reading and writing, etc.), to include any needed scaffolding, peer review, and other sources of help (as well as how to use them effectively) along the way [11]. This will also involve plenty of time, choice, response, demonstration, expectation, and constructive feedback [12]. Additionally, a classroom community (i.e. an evolving, organic notion that describes how people relate to and work with each other) is vital, especially one that is participatory, supportive, inclusive, responsive, and committed [13], and makes students feel a sense of belonging, challenged, comfortable, safe, in control, nurtured, recognized, successful, independent, curious, and joyful [14]. All of this will allow students to blossom and become competent, confident, and fluent writers, especially when there is a clear sense that something constructive is going on, that something is always about to happen, and that each day is an occasion to which every member of the classroom community must rise because the work is important, time is short, and stakes are high [15].

In the end, however, the quality of the text and writing will be based on the judgment of the reader (i.e. the reader's own criteria become the key measure of quality) [16]. For this reason, in order to become a successful writer in a second language, students need four types of knowledge: *content* (background knowledge and topic selection), *system* (mastery of mechanics), *process* (a clear understanding of the writing process and series of steps), *genre and text* (academic and/or professional), and *context* (or culture awareness and understanding) [17].

To help students with these, there are some general principles for teaching second language writing. First of all, teachers need to have an awareness of contrastive rhetoric (i.e. the influence first language has on an additional language), which has a big impact on the organization and expression of ideas, as well as expectations a teacher from one culture has on students from different ones (e.g. individualistic vs. collectivist/conformist/authoritarian) [18]. Secondly, teachers need to understand their students' reasons and motivations for writing, as well as be clear about any expectations. In other words, they need to know what their goals are, what they want to achieve, what materials they want to use, what they don't want to do/learn, etc. In order to effectively design the course, plan lessons, choose materials and content, and select tasks and activities towards this end, a detailed needs analysis is absolutely essential (especially when there is diversity in terms of age, gender, proficiency, interests, learning experiences, personality, family, occupation, goals, etc.). Third, teachers need to teach strategies that students can turn into skills and use independently, which can be achieved by going through the steps of the writing process repeatedly. Fourth, teachers need to provide many opportunities for students to write. After all, writing requires lots of practice and variety (e.g. paragraphs and essays, responses to reading, journals, etc.). Fifth, teachers need to wear many different hats in the classroom (e.g. organizer, facilitator, model or expert, cultural informant, collaborator, supporter, motivator, audience, responder, assessor, investigator, problem solver, etc.) [19]. Sixth, teachers need to ensure that feedback is clear, consistent, non-contradictory, helpful and meaningful – that is, they have to explicitly tell students what they did well and what they need to work on or improve; what they need to focus on and where to direct their energies to in terms of structure, content, and mechanics. Correction codes, error logs, portfolios and teacher-student conferences can all be very helpful in this regard. Finally, teachers need to clarify for themselves and their students how their writing will be evaluated. It's essential to be crystal clear about criteria, points, and formatting.

One way for teachers to avoid subjective evaluation is to develop and utilize rubrics (i.e. scoring grids that explain how the elements of writing will be evaluated). These can be non-weighted (wherein they provide descriptions of writing quality by level different writing criteria), weighted (which breaks writing skills into categories and sub-categories, with a specific point value added to each one – e.g. topic sentence, supporting sentences, concluding sentence, etc.), and holistic (which describes in general terms the qualities of excellent, good, fair, and unsatisfactory assignments; a single grade based on an overall impression) [20].

A good example of a non-weighted rubric is one that uses the 6+1 traits (or key ingredients) of writing, which is rooted in over 50 years of research. These are: *ideas* (i.e. content of the piece and heart of the message which clearly captures the main idea of a piece through relevant and informative detail), *organization* (i.e. order or internal structure that helps move the reader through the text; the thread of meaning, logical pattern of ideas, how all of the ideas fit together in a cohesive, coherent way), *voice* (i.e. the soul of the piece; the singular vision and unique style of the writer, to include personality, individuality, and an engaging, unique point of view that permeates the piece but does not detract from the genre or message and respects the audience and purpose for writing), *word choice* (i.e. precise, rich, colorful, robust, economical lexis that helps convey the message in a precise, interesting, and natural way), *sentence fluency* (i.e. the flow, rhythm, smoothness, and cadence of well-built sentences that help create strong and varied structure), *conventions* (i.e. proper and effective use of mechanics to enhance readability), and *presentation* (i.e. the attractive form and layout that enhances the ability for the reader to understand and connect with the message)[21].

II. PROCESS WRITING

In the second language classroom, the primary focus will be on process writing. This is an approach to teaching that allows the teacher and the students to go through the process of producing a text (e.g. paragraph or essay) together[22]. Although the number of steps differs depending on the source(s) teachers check, there should be agreement on the following eight (in this order): *exploring* (consider the topic, audience, and purpose), *developing* (narrow the topic, use a prewriting strategy, select and discard ideas, and make a plan or outline), *drafting* (write the first draft), *sharing* (get feedback from classmates via peer review), *revising* (check unity, support, organization, and style), *editing* (proofread for grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.), *publishing* (write the final draft), and *assessing* (see what was done well and what needs to be worked on)[23].

The building blocks of process writing are paragraphs, a series of sentences about one central idea and potentially comprised of six key parts. The first part is the hook or lead-in. This should attract the reader's interest. Effective examples include a question or questions, quotation, surprising fact, etc. This is followed by the topic sentence, which clearly states the main idea of the paragraph via topic and controlling idea. The latter is the writer's attitude, feeling, or opinion about the subject being presented. After this, supporting sentences contain key information that expounds on the topic and key point being made. With these are minor details, or examples, facts, statistics, etc. that help flesh out the important details. To ensure a smooth flow throughout the paragraph (i.e. to help guide the reader between points), transition signals (e.g. *first*, *next*, *after that*, *finally*, etc.) are helpful. And, to wrap up, a concluding sentence can restate the topic sentence and bring the paragraph to a satisfactory close.

Similarly, essays, a series of paragraphs about one central idea, are made up of at least three parts. The first is an introduction, which contains a hook or lead-in, possibly limiting sentences or connecting background information, and thesis statement that is comprised of a topic and controlling idea, as well as a possible plan of development (i.e. preview of the main points). Following this are three or more body paragraphs that include transition signals, topic sentences, and plenty of rich and relevant support. To close, a conclusion is required, which generally restates the thesis, summarizes the main points, and ends with some final, memorable thoughts.

In many writing textbooks or series, these two basic academic forms are accompanied by the following nine patterns: *illustration* (to illustrate or prove a point using specific examples), *narration* (to tell a story about a sequence of events that happened), *process* (to inform the reader about how to do something, how something works, or how something happened), *description* (to describe using vivid details and images that appeal to the reader's senses), *definition* (to define/explain what a term/concept means by providing relevant examples), *classification* (to classify or sort a topic to help readers understand qualities about it), *comparison and contrast* (to present information about similarities or differences), *cause and effect* (to explain why an event happened or what the consequences were), and *argumentation* (to argue or take a position on an issue and offer reasons for your position).

Either integrated into the chapters of the textbook or series, or featured in the back section, are explanations and exercises for mechanics, which will help students fine tune their revising and editing skills (which is absolutely essential in addition to going through the steps of the writing process repeatedly for the different forms). These can include work on adjectives and adverbs, determiners, fragments, modifiers, parallel structure, past participles, prepositions, punctuation marks, run-on sentences, sentence variety, and subject-verb agreement among others.

Once teachers have selected a textbook or book from a series that is appropriate to the age and level of their students, previewed the steps in the writing process, clearly identified the parts of the forms (i.e. paragraph or essay), analyzed models or examples (and provided more for additional support), worked through exercises for all of the different parts, encouraged substantial revising and editing, and reviewed, recalled, and recycled by being very step-by-step, systematic in a cyclical, spiral way, students should be able to display a certain degree of mastery. This is the base that will help students begin to develop a wider repertoire of writing strategies for an

ever-broadening range of authentic situations (whether academic, vocational, technical, or personal) and real audiences [24].

III. GENRES

Genre is a term used to classify types of spoken or written discourse. It is a recurring and recognizable form of communication with a clear purpose and features to accomplish it. Genres are normally classified by content, language, purpose and form, all of which help people in various communities interact and work with one another. Moreover, and very importantly, genres, through strategies for analyzing and interpreting the world around us, help writers and readers make meaning together [25].

Since the mid 80s, there have been several advances in genre research and theory. First of all, genres serve purposes, which means that every text is meant to do something for someone (e.g. advertisements are used to convince people to buy things or nutrition labels inform us about what a food product contains). Secondly, genres are part of larger social conversations. As language is largely social in nature, genres develop and function to enable and facilitate social interaction [26]. In other words, genres are inherently dialogic as they arise from some past communications and are used to anticipate future responses [27]. Third, genres comprise all texts, particularly ones we see all of the time in everyday life, whether it's at the grocery store, mall, restaurant, etc. Additionally, genres can be oral (e.g. presentations, TED talks, university lecture, etc.) or visual (e.g. websites, picture books, graffiti, etc.). Finally, genres evolve within cultures. Clearly, genres constantly change and evolve, and new ones are regularly emerging [28]. Just think of the impact that cable news, the Internet, and smart phones have had on cultures worldwide.

There are many benefits of teaching second language writing through genres. To begin with, they will help teachers make use of the needed conventions of academic writing as detailed in the previous section and extend into meaningful situations with purpose, ones that give students an opportunity to convey information on a specific topic to an audience for whom they generally want to explain or clarify it, as well as compare to those who have more expertise (e.g. newspaper columnist or magazine writer). In other words, it's not just about typical, routine classroom assignments at that point (even though they need that foundation first), but what exists and is important in the real world. Put another way, genres can act as bridges between paragraphs, essays, and the different patterns of development and writing that we encounter daily. With a wide variety, there's so much to choose from, work on, develop, and learn about. Moreover, authentic communication is incredibly motivating and engaging for students, especially if they know it's not just an assignment but a piece of writing that can have impact at a local, national, or even international level (e.g. community newsletter, letter to the editor, newspaper comment, etc.). Just think about how much more research and work that students will do; how much more interested and on task that they'll be. This type of engagement will also result in a deeper level of retention and understanding as language is best learned when it is being used to make and negotiate meaning. Furthermore, the quality of the work (especially clarity and mechanics) will likely increase if students know that their work is not being shared with just the teacher and their classmates but with people in the community and possibly in positions of power and influence. Finally, as teachers, we can help students use genres for their own purposes, which can be supportive, transformative, and valued as they move forward in their lives.

To effectively teach genres, there are some important guiding principles. First of all, teachers need to design compelling, communicatively meaningful environments, ones where there is an audience that students really want to connect with and tasks that involve issues or topics they really care about. Secondly, students need plenty of exposure and experience via model texts (e.g. classroom materials, library, Internet, print resources, etc.) as these (as noted earlier) are powerful tools for language development. Third, teachers need to focus on the features of each genre, which will help students develop an ability to think about text as text (i.e. metatextuality). In doing so, students can think about content and the message the author is trying to convey or impart. Fourth, teachers need to explicitly teach genre-specific or genre-sensitive strategies as reading comprehension and writing strategies do not equally apply to all texts nor work equally well for them either. Finally, and very importantly, teachers need to provide ongoing support and feedback so that they know what they're doing well and need to work [29].

IV. STEPS AND TYPES

In order to develop an effective genre piece, students need to follow a series of basic steps. First, they need to analyze the rhetorical situation by defining the topic (to include exploring the boundaries or scope), figuring out the right angle (or what is new about the topic from their perspective or point of view), stating a clear purpose (i.e. what they want to accomplish), analyzing potential readers traits, characteristics, and values (by using the investigator's six questions – who, what, where, when, why and how) and characteristics, and examining the contexts in which the text will be read or used (i.e. the external influences that will shape how the readers interpret and react to the piece). Second, students have to invent ideas via inquiry and research, especially in an effort to discover what others already know about the topic. Third, they have to organize and

draft their piece, which entails arranging and composing ideas into familiar patterns that readers will recognize and find useful. Fourth, students will need to choose an appropriate style to help clarify the piece and make it more compelling. Fifth, they need to carefully consider the design of the document, to include page layout and any visual or audio features (especially for pieces that will be published online) to help make the ideas more accessible and attractive to readers. Finally, students have to improve their writing by regularly revising and editing the piece[30]. In short, it's a clear form and extension of process writing that needs to be tailored based on the genre type.

Speaking of types, there are several oft-used ones that will allow students to write in authentic and meaningful ways, all of which share some structural similarities, yet differ in significant ways, too. The first of these are first-person or third-person narratives (e.g. dealing with racism while traveling in a foreign country or observing a terrible car accident and the aftermath), or factual stories about someone's life (which tend to be rich in detail and provide new insights about life). In terms of organization, there are five parts (in this order): introduction, description of the situation, evaluation of the situation, resolution of the situation, and conclusion (which states the lesson learned). Much like the beginning of the introduction of an academic essay, students need to capture the reader's interest or set the scene with an engaging hook or lead-in in an effort to help set the scene. Following this, a clear description of the situation is needed, which is usually in the form of a complication that must be resolved in some way (i.e. a tension or conflict between people's values and beliefs, or a personal inner conflict). From this point, students need to focus on the plot (or series of scenes or stages), which needs to be presented in chronological order and contain specific, rich, vivid, sensory, imaginative, and/or impactful details. At some point the complication comes to a head and needs to be resolved, which students will have to clearly express how. To wrap up, students must relay what they learned from the experience (i.e. a new understanding or revelation; a moment of growth, transformation, or clarity).

Another type of genre is profiles, which describe interesting people (e.g. a local hero), places (e.g. an historical site), and events (e.g. an unusual crime). Given a student's unique perspective or angle, these reveal something essential like an insight, idea, theme, or even a social cause, and are generally symbolic of larger issues. The organization for these is as follows (in this order): introduction, subject description, background information, anecdotes, and conclusion. In the introduction, it's important for students to clearly, yet briefly, identify the subject and reason why it is being showcased (i.e. why it is significant). In the second part, students will need to provide a detailed description of the subject, which will allow readers to easily visualize and imagine it in their mind's eye. This will necessitate, afterward, background information that describes the setting and/or social context. Next, anecdotes will help reveal the character of the subject through actions and dialogue. Finally, to conclude, students can state the central theme about the subject, which should move beyond the surface and factual details (already written about) to address some larger question(s).

A third, and very common, type of genre are reviews. These can be about TV shows, movies, plays, music, books, restaurants, products, services, etc. Whatever the subject that is being focused on is, the point is to express thoughts on whether it was successful or not (which should be based on common expectations students share with their readers). In terms of organization, the piece should begin with an introduction, and then move into a description or summary of the subject, strengths and weakness of it before wrapping up with a conclusion. The introduction needs to clearly identify the subject being reviewed, to include any essential background information. Additional details will need to be provided in the description or summary of it. Next, a discussion about whether or not the subject, meets, exceeds, or falls short of common expectation is detailed. Once these are addressed, the conclusion offers an overall judgment of the subject, whether positive or negative.

In addition to reviews, literary analysis (i.e. book report or reader response) is a very familiar genre form. These begin with an introduction that identifies the literary work that is being analyzed, to include any pertinent background details. Additionally, it needs to clearly state the interpretive question about the text and main point that answers it. From there, summary and analysis of different parts of the text in time order are required. They should focus solely on the events or features that play a key role in the interpretation, as well as show how the interpretation makes sense and offers fresh insights into the interpretive question. Then, a discussion of the significance of the interpretation brings the piece to a close.

Rhetorical analysis, or a means to determine why some arguments (e.g. Web sites, marketing materials, presentations, etc.) are persuasive and why some are not, is yet another genre possibility. The introduction for this form is very similar to that of an academic essay: begin with an attention-grabbing hook or lead-in, provide key background details, and state the purpose and main point, to include stressing its importance. This is followed by an explanation of the rhetorical concepts that will be used to analyze the subject. After this, a summary of the text situated in a historical context is needed. This paves the way for analysis through the selected rhetorical concepts. To end, the conclusion circles back to the introduction by restating the main points(s) and looks to the future.

In an effort to discuss current events from a unique personal perspective, commentaries (e.g. newspaper articles, editorials or letters to the editor, social media posts, etc.) are very common, and can be quite

powerful and illuminating. These allow students to add something new to an ongoing public conversation, with the goal of trying to convince readers to agree with or understand a particular angle on the subject in a quick and memorable way. To kick-start this form, the introduction must immediately engage the reader by explicitly announcing the issue under examination, the main point, and angle that will be taken. After this, an explanation that reviews what happened and the ongoing conversation about it is needed. This helps set up the arguments that include plenty of rich and relevant reasoning, evidence, examples, facts, and observations, to include any necessary qualifications. The conclusion offers an overall assessment of the issue, highlights its importance to readers, and looks to the future.

For business purposes, proposals (e.g. descriptions, pitches, suggested improvements, etc.) are an essential genre form as they help students explore problems via strong reasoning, examples, and appeals, and then devise plans for solutions. The introduction helps define the problem, emphasizes its importance, and offers a description of the proposed solution. After that, a detailed analysis of the problem is required, to include addressing the major causes and effects and any supportive evidence. This, of course, if followed by a plan for solving the problem. Before concluding and stressing the importance of taking some type of action, a cost-benefit analysis is helpful to illustrate the feasibility of executing the plan.

Finally, in an effort to analyze local, national, and international problems and trends, reports (e.g. research, recommendation, scientific, etc.) are a critical genre form for all fields of study, particularly as they provide students with an opportunity to closely examine a subject's features and state what was discovered and learned from the information that was collected. These pieces begin with an abstract that summarizes the major sections of the report. Then it moves on to an introduction that defines a research question or problem, explains why it is important to the reader, provides key background information, and states the purpose and main point. After this, the methods section describes how the research was carried out. Next, the results or findings section presents the results of the research objectively. Following this, the discussion section analyzes the results and explains what they mean. Finally, reports end with a conclusion that restates the main point of the report and offers specific recommendations[31].

This is certainly not a comprehensive list of possibilities as resumes, application essays, arguments, blogs, reflections, and even wikis are considered genres, too [32]. But, it does showcase some of the most commonly used in academia, business, and the world at large. Moreover, the examples provided here are all forms of real world, authentic, richly purposeful communication that effectively help bridge the classroom and the outside world in a motivating and contextualized way, which is what teachers should always strive to do in order to make language teaching and learning compelling, engaging, reinvigorating, and meaningful[33].

V. CONCLUSION

If you know your learners, create the right conditions for learning, design quality lessons for language enhancement, adapt or modify lesson delivery as needed, monitor and assess student language development, and engage in a community of practice, then meaningful, memorable language learning can take place both in and outside the writing classroom, especially with genres at the fore.

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