

L2 Writing Instruction Approaches and Their Impact on Composition Studies in Morocco

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Abstract: *The present paper aims to discuss the historical trajectory of the developments in writing instruction research. It also seeks to show that composition studies in Morocco evolved in response to changing currents in writing research at the international level. Broadly speaking, the history of composition research has witnessed rivalry between two competing orientations viewing the writing activity as either a product or process. The product-based approach emphasized the formal and grammatical aspects of the written text. From within this orientation has emerged two views with different foci. While the controlled composition approach stressed the necessity of engaging learners in writing activities confined to the sentence level, the current-traditional rhetoric called for attention to discourse-level issues in the writing process. The limitations of the product-based approaches have led to the recognition that writing is best viewed as a process. Other researchers' interests have been geared towards genre-based approaches addressing questions of how particular genres come into being. The evolution of writing research in Morocco has been strongly influenced by these developments. This is clearly reflected in studies conducted within the Moroccan context with characteristics situating them within one approach or the other.*

Key Words: *Controlled composition, current-traditional rhetoric, process, genre, writing research in Morocco*

1. Introduction

The present paper offers an account of the evolution of the approaches to writing instruction with special reference to the characteristics that distinguish each approach from the others. The paper begins by presenting one of the earliest trends in writing pedagogy known as controlled composition, appearing in the 20th century. Having done this, the paper turns to discuss current-traditional rhetoric with its emphasis on discourse-level issues in the teaching of writing. Next, the discussion shifts to the process-based orientation that came in response to the limitations of the first two approaches, both being situated within the product-based camp. Following this will be a description of the genre-based approach, which has recently been gathering momentum. The paper concludes with a snapshot of the evolution of composition research in Morocco with a view to showing that the developments in composition research at the international level have had a conspicuous influence on Moroccan researchers' thinking.

2. Controlled composition

The history of writing instruction has been a site for several developments resulting in a spectrum of competing approaches to writing instruction. Under the joint influence of structuralism and behaviorism in the 1960s, there emerged a trend that viewed writing as a product (Hyland, 2009; Hyland, 2003; Silva, 1990). This trend placed the emphasis on the formal and grammatical aspects of written texts. Hyland describes this approach in the following terms:

A basic premise of this approach is that texts are autonomous objects which can be analyzed and described independently of particular contexts, writers or readers. Texts have a structure, they are orderly arrangements of words, clauses and sentences, and by following grammatical rules writers can encode a full semantic representation of their intended meanings.

(Hyland, 2009, p. 8)

On this view, human communication becomes reduced to the mere transfer of ideas from one mind to another through the use of language (Hyland, 2003). The writing activity becomes devoid of any concern for writers' and readers' personal experiences so essential in shaping their perception of reality. This leads to the understanding that the written text is an encoded message that needs to be decoded by a reader with a common linguistic background (Silva, 1990). This position assumes that meaning is inherent in words and thus there could be no conflicts of interpretation (Hyland, 2009). However, this approach has been viewed as flawed because it did not consider the readers' diverse beliefs and knowledge backgrounds that may have an impact on the text interpretation (Hyland, 2003). Although this approach emerged in the 1960s and was severely criticized by the advocates of the process-based approach, it is still operational in several educational systems (Hyland, 2009; Silva, 1990).

The concern with the formal aspects of the text has caused an upsurge of research aimed at uncovering patterns and regularities in written texts (Hyland, 2009). With the advances in technology, it has become feasible to analyze large corpora of texts with a view to identifying the underlying structural principles that writers employ to construct their messages. Preoccupation with the structural features of the text has also opened up new avenues of research into writing development. Writing development was understood to be reflected in the increase of students' command of more complex features of texts such as relative clauses, modality and passive (White, 2007). For instance, in their study of students' writing development in an English for academic purposes course, Shaw and Liu (1998) found that the participants' moved from a style typical of spoken language to a style sensitive to formality issues such as impersonality, passive, and nominalization.

This orientation in writing pedagogy conceived of writing as a demonstration of the writer's knowledge of the linguistic and rhetorical devices that enable him or her to produce acceptable written texts. The implication for writing instruction is to train students in accuracy. This is the

main reason why writing has been regarded as an extension of grammar teaching for so many years (Hyland, 2009). Kroll (1990) argues that the influence of behaviorist habit-formation principle, students' were immersed in controlled composition and substitution exercises without the need for any context except the classroom. The teacher's role was that of an expert in writing who transmitted knowledge to novice writers while the students' role was to pattern their writing on the models presented by the teacher (Silva, 1990).

Several researchers argue that syntactic complexity can hardly be an indicator of writing development (Hyland, 2009). In this regard, it has been observed that though students can form syntactically complex sentences, they cannot produce appropriate written texts with a clear understanding of target audience and purpose. In addition, small amounts of error in students' writings can be construed as ongoing progress but they can also result from students' resorting to avoidance strategies whereby they eschew structures of which they are unsure. This practice can have serious consequences on students' potential for progress as they would not take the risk of reaching beyond their current level of performance (Hyland, 2009).

3. Current-traditional rhetoric

Another strand of the product-based approach is termed the current-traditional rhetoric. While accepting that writing necessitates the mastery of grammar and vocabulary, adherents to the current-traditional rhetoric approach believed that writing involves more than simply constructing error-free, syntactically complex sentences (Hyland, 2011; Hyland, 2009; Hyland, 2003; Silva, 1990). This came in response to the awareness that students needed an instructional method that would enable them to produce extended written discourse (Kroll, 1990). It was also the outcome of the observation that L1 interference goes beyond the sentence level to affect larger structural patterns. Kaplan (1967) argues that because ESL learners "employ a rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader", the need was urgent for "more pattern drill ...at the rhetorical level rather than at the syntactic level" (as cited in Silva, 1990, p.13).

The focus in this approach was on the coherent and logical organization of discourse forms (Silva, 1990). The unit of analysis therefore became paragraph structure with special attention to its constituent parts, namely the topic sentence, supporting details and the concluding sentence. Concern with paragraph constituents did not exclude other issues related to paragraph development such as illustration, comparison, contrast, definition and classification. Besides, being an extension of paragraph structure, attention was also directed to essay structure and text types such as narration, description, and argumentation. The instructional procedure characteristic of this approach was to present the students with different alternative sentences, some of which could serve as topic sentences while others as concluding sentences, and ask them to choose the one that fits within a larger context such as a paragraph.

4. The process approach

The emergence of the process approach has come in response to dissatisfaction with controlled composition and current-traditional rhetoric (Silva, 1990, Matsuda, 2003; Clark, 2011). This composition movement appeared in the 1960s under the guidance of Bruner's and Piaget's influential ideas on learning theory (Clark, 2011). These theorists believed that learning should be learner-centered in the sense that the learner should actively participate in the learning process and meaningfully engage in discovery learning. In process approaches, the focus has shifted from the analysis and evaluation of textual features to the identification of the processes that writers engage in as they compose text (Hyland, 2009). The assumption behind such quest for writing processes is to design tasks to help learners develop writing skills by modeling the stages that a piece of writing goes through until it becomes ready for publication. According to Zamel (1983), writing is a "non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (as cited in Hyland, 2011, p. 18).

The process-based approach is deeply ingrained in cognitive psychology (Clark, 2011). Clark argues that cognitive psychology is premised on the assumption that "to understand an observable behavior (such as writing), one must understand the mental structures that determine that behavior" (2011, p. 10). By implication, for researchers to grasp how students learn to write, they have to study the development of students' cognitive structures as they increasingly mature and acquire more and more knowledge of the world. Studies probing the unfolding of the cognitive processes along learners' developmental trajectory found that linguistic and intellectual ability develop in a sequentially fixed manner (Clark, 2011). This was extrapolated to classroom practices with teachers focusing on students personal, reflexive experiences in writing activities before they embark on presenting their students with abstract concepts to align learning with cognitive development. While it was agreed on for some time that the stages of the writing process occur linearly, scholars such as Flowers and Hayes reached results to the effect that the writing process stages are non-linear and iterative with writers moving forward and backward among stages until they compose a polished and finalized piece of writing (Clark, 2011).

The increasing scholarly attention that has been allocated to the process movement has led to the emergence of several distinct process-oriented positions (Hyland, 2009, Casanave, 2007; Hyland, 2003, Silva, 1990, Johns, 1990). The first appearance of the process approach came in the form of an emphasis on the students' expressive potential (Hyland, 2009, Clark, 2011). Being named as Expressivism, this position rejected narrowly defining writing as an exercise in demonstrating mastery of grammar and vocabulary. Moffett (1982) argues that Expressivist adherents assumed that "thinking precedes writing and that the free expression of ideas can encourage self-discovery and cognitive maturation" (as cited in Hyland, 2009, pp. 18-19). For this reason, the teacher's role has changed from a knowledge provider to a facilitator who creates a space for students to express their personal thoughts and feelings with minimal interference (Hyland, 2009; Johns,

1990). Classroom practices informed by this position have tended to engage students in writing essays on personal experience and self-reflection (Clark, 2011).

After a while, researchers' interest has begun to shift away from concern with writing creativity and self-expression to the cognitive compositional processes (Hyland, 2009; Clark, 2011). Matsuda (2003) explains that the introduction of the notion of process in composition studies can be attributed to Zamel (1976), who argues that L2 writing instruction can benefit from important insights derived from the study of the cognitive processes and strategies employed by proficient L1 writers. Rather than draw on literary creativity, viewing writing as a cognitive process necessarily situates research in the field within cognitive theories of psychology (Hyland, 2009). The rationale behind this orientation has been to raise students' metacognitive awareness to empower them to generate and revise written texts as well as to deal with feedback more effectively (Hyland, 2011).

An influential model in the history of process writing is the one proposed by Flowers and Hayes (1981). The model starts with extensive planning including the definition of a rhetorical problem, situating it within a particular context, operationalizing it, exploring its constituents, examining several solutions and eventually reaching a well-grounded conclusion (Hyland, 2009, Johns, 1990). The planning stage is followed by translating the writer's ideas and thoughts into prose. The process does not end here but continues to include stages of revising and editing until the writer feels that the written product meets the goal that he or she set out to fulfill. Flowers and Hayes (1981) built their model on the basis of research using techniques such as think-aloud protocols, which revealed that the writing process is not linear but rather recursive. The implication for classroom practice is to encourage students to plan extensively, to use multiple drafts, to exchange feedback, and delay sentence-level correction until the final stage of editing (Hyland, 2009). Cognitivists employ classroom techniques such as "cooperative writing, teacher conferences, problem-based tasks, journal writing, group discussions, and mixed portfolio assessments" (Hyland, 2009, p. 24).

So far, two related conceptualizations of process-based writing have been identified: writing as self-expression and writing as a cognitive process. A third strand of the process movement has viewed writing as a situated social act (Hyland, 2007; Clark, 2011). This tradition has been associated with social constructionist views, which argue that the first two incarnations of the process approach fall short of recognizing the social situatedness of the writing act (Clark, 2011). Writing has been considered as not occurring solely inside the writers' mind but it conforms to a set of regulatory socio-cultural influences that shape any written material. Writers are not independent individuals, distinct and cut off from the outside world, but rather their consciousness is shaped by culture through language (Clark, 2011). No matter how personal a piece of writing might appear, it is basically molded by inner speech (Vygotsky, 1978), which is in turn shaped by the culture within which individuals operate. From a social constructivist perspective, writing is therefore socially constructed as it necessarily responds to the conventions

and expectations of a given discourse community. Bruffee (1986) succinctly puts this in the following terms: “reality, knowledge; thought, facts, texts, selves, and so on are constructs generated by communities of like-minded peers” (as cited in Johns, 1990, p. 27).

It therefore becomes evident that the social constructivist position has come to compensate for the limitations of the Expressivist and Cognitivist views of writing by anchoring the strategies writers deploy and the decisions they make to a context fraught with beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, expectations and much besides (Hyland, 2009; Casanave, 2007). Research paying allegiance to this line of thought has focused on features and cues of context that influence the ways in which the writing process occurs (Hyland, 2009). On the features of context that need to be examined by researchers, Prior (1998) offers the following description:

Actually writing happens in moments that are richly equipped with tools (material and semiotic) and populated with others (past, present and future). When seen as situated activity, writing does not stand alone as the discrete act of a writer, but emerges as a confluence of many streams of activity: reading, talking, observing, acting, making, thinking and feeling as well as transcribing words on paper.

(As cited in Hyland, 2009, pp. 26-27)

Research of this kind has utilized ethnographic methodology to produce thick and minute descriptions of writing contexts. Ethnographic methodology has been known to adopt a holistic approach to investigating phenomena using miscellaneous methods and techniques with insider participants to avoid researcher bias (Denscombe, 2010).

Social constructionism has been associated with collaborative learning theory (Clark, 2011). The significance of collaboration in writing classes lies in empowering learners to be in charge of their own learning instead of relying on the teacher’s lecturing and knowledge transfer. With the teacher’s assistance, learners begin to increasingly assume responsibility for their learning by fully being engaged in the learning process. In light of the numerous problems that may arise during group work, the teacher’s job becomes no less difficult as it requires that the teacher makes extensive planning, deliver clear instructions and continuously monitor the students’ work (Clark, 2011).

5. The genre approach

Debates over writing pedagogy continue unabated with new developments arising along the way to further advance the understanding of the writing skill and how it can best be learnt. Such debates not always necessarily bring about completely innovative ways of how to view writing but they sometimes resurrect old traditions and support them with the current research-based understanding. Such has been the case with the genre approach to writing instruction (Casanave, 2007; Hyland, 2003; Clark, 2011). The genre approach shares with the current-traditional

rhetoric a concern with the linguistic and discursive features of texts but it also broadens the conceptualization of writing to view it as a purposeful act of communication (Hyland, 2003). Genre becomes understood as a “typified social action” that recurs in response to a given social situation (Clark, 2011, p. 242). Devitt (2000) argues that “people use genres to do things in the world (social action and purpose) and that these ways of acting become typified through occurring under what is perceived as recurring circumstances” (as cited in Clark, 2011, p. 242). In this sense, the discourse patterns of genres are not an arbitrary selection of conventions and norms but rather they result from typical, rhetorical interactions situated within social contexts. This view of genre is succinctly phrased by Devitt (1993):

Genres develop...because they respond appropriately to situations that writers encounter repeatedly. In principle, that is, writers first respond in fitting ways and hence similarly to recurring situations; then the similarities among those appropriate responses become established as generic conventions.

(As cited in Clark, 2011, p. 243)

Systemic functional linguistics originally developed by Halliday (1994) has been the main theoretical foundation on which much research on the genre approach has been carried out. This theory deals with the relationship between language and its social function by investigating how language users make choices from the linguistic system to express meaning (Hyland, 2003). Halliday’s central argument is that over the years language users have developed diverse ways of using language to achieve certain goals. This means that texts are tightly related to the social contexts that have caused them to emerge in the first place as well as to other similar texts (Casanave, 2007). Hyland (2003) argues that if a group of texts are written to accomplish the same purpose, they will share the same organizational structure and they will therefore belong to the same genre.

As regards the implications of the genre approach for classroom practice, opinion is polarized into two conflicting views. The advocates of the first view believe that students’ writing skills can improve by raising their awareness of genre through the direct teaching of linguistic forms (Hyland, 2003). This goal can be achieved by providing students with opportunities to analyze model texts so that they can begin to appreciate the distinguishing features of different genres. For example, Swales (1990), one of the staunch proponents of the genre approach, argues that exposing students to the characteristic features of a given genre would empower them to understand how the genre has developed in order to reproduce it successfully (Clark, 2011). However, another line of thought within the genre approach contends that it is impossible to explicitly teach genre (Hyland, 2003; Clark, 2011). Scholars adhering to this view argue that knowledge of genre develops only through immersion in the target discourse community leading to the mastery of the rhetorical moves and social language of the discipline.

Russel (1995) holds a similar position from the perspective of activity theory regarding the effective approach to the teaching of genre. He maintains that “from the activity theory perspective I am developing here, there is no autonomous, generalizable skill, or set of skills called ‘writing’ which can be learnt and then applied to all genres/activities” (Russel, 1995, p. 61). The idea that he is driving at is to underscore the necessity of disciplinary immersion for the mastery of the particularities and the dynamics of the genre in question.

6. Evolution of writing research in Morocco

Writing pedagogy has attracted the attention of the academia in Morocco over the years. Mars (1989) is one of the earliest studies arguing that Moroccan university students experience major difficulties in composition assignments. The researcher contends that Moroccan students do not have as much trouble with grammatical issues as they do with the rhetorical aspects of text production. However, he attributes the students’ lack of rhetorical knowledge to the teachers’ lack of appropriate training in academic writing. He also alludes to the inadequacy of the assessment practices of the teachers which are confined to comments on grammatical errors to the neglect of textual coherence. It is worth pointing out that Mars belonged to the school that promotes product-oriented writing instruction. This fact is evident from the emphasis he placed on the importance of textual issues in the students’ written products and also from his focus on the teaching rather than learning of writing.

Sadiqi (1989) describes how daunting and challenging the task of learning writing skills is for Moroccan students owing to the complexity of this language skill. One of the ways in which the teaching of writing can be rendered more accessible, Sadiqi argues, is through underscoring the relevance of discourse analysis to composition instruction. She emphasized the importance of elements of discourse analysis such as topic, thesis and outline. Her contention is that discourse analysis principles can be placed at the service of writing instruction by encouraging teachers to explicitly expose students to such principles. It is nonetheless clear that Sadiqi adopts a text-oriented approach to the teaching of writing, which is in line with the ideas proposed by Mars (1989). Both scholars lay too much emphasis on the exclusive role of the teacher and hence overlooked the role of the learner in the learning process.

The process-oriented approach to the teaching of writing began to gather momentum in Moroccan research in the 1990s. Some researchers attempted to strike a balance between product and process approaches in the Moroccan educational system. As a case in point, Bouziane (1999) argued that the decision to adopt either type of approach to writing instruction would require an evaluation of students’ needs informed by research-based evidence. On the basis of both solid and action research, he concludes that first-year university classes should constitute the threshold that demarcates the use of either the product or process approach. Below this threshold, secondary education students should be exposed to the product-oriented approach. The argument

is that these students still lack the linguistic competence that would enable them to deal with the strategies of process writing.

However, recent research does not advocate such a threshold and indicates that process writing can just as well be implemented in secondary as in tertiary education (Hyland, 2003). Other research studies have shown that the problem lies in the inadequacy of the implementation of process writing and suggested that it can produce the desirable outcomes if it is blended with collaborative learning (Haoucha, 2005). Moreover, students in secondary education do not come to English language classrooms as blank slates but they must have been exposed to process writing in other school subjects such as philosophy, history and geography and other language courses. The skills that these students acquire in these contexts should not be underestimated but rather they should be capitalized upon to facilitate the learning of composition skills in secondary education.

Rather than call for the preponderance of the product-oriented approach for writing instruction in secondary education as Bouziane (1999) does, Abouabdelkadir (1999) ascribes the difficulties that students experience in acquiring writing skills to the inappropriate implementation of process writing and a lack of theoretical understanding on the part of teachers. Among the findings of the study is the inconsistency in the participants' beliefs and hence how these beliefs are translated into action in the classroom. The views that the researcher collected were arranged into three categories. One group of teachers focuses on the cognitive aspects of writing; another group sees in writing an occasion in which the students experiment with the structures they study in grammar lessons; and the third group emphasizes the rhetorical issues of the writing endeavor. The study fails to construe this categorization of the teachers in relation to writing instruction as marking a transitional phase from older practices relying on product-oriented principles into a new era of writing pedagogy based on process-oriented practices and learner-centered methodology. Process writing was in its first decade of implementation and surely the teachers at that time needed more time to familiarize themselves with the principles of the this new pedagogy (Bouziane, 1999). This explains why the researcher observes a discrepancy between the teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices.

As process writing has become the established practice of writing instruction in secondary education classrooms, research has begun to shift the focus towards how process writing can produce the predefined learning outcomes. For instance, Haoucha (2005) conducted a study investigating the effects of process writing as individually implemented as opposed to the implementation of process writing through collaboration among students. The participants in the study were exposed to four types of feedback: self-monitored feedback, peer-feedback, teacher-written feedback and taped feedback. The results showed that self-monitored feedback with annotations is a valuable aid for identifying areas of difficulty with which the students usually grapple. Peer-feedback was reported to be not only useful in encouraging revision of the drafts but had other linguistic, cognitive and affective benefits. The results also indicated that little

improvement was detected from the first to the second drafts after the revision phase while there was a noticeable improvement from the second to the third drafts. The major finding was that a multiple-draft process approach for writing instruction is more beneficial than a one-draft approach.

Being an exploratory study using case study methodology, Haoucha (2005) brought up important findings about the significance of feedback and revision practices. However, by focusing only on one sub-process, namely feedback and revision, it failed to produce a comprehensive understanding of process writing. Process writing should be approached in its entirety in order to evaluate more fully its effects on the writing performance of students. Moreover, despite announcing that the use of different types of feedback is meant to make writing activities more interactive, the objective was not achieved more effectively as the focus was rather on each individual case progress from first to final drafts. The collaborative aspect of the study was not underscored as much as to show its contribution to the improvement of the students' written products.

Sporadic as it is, research on writing instruction and pedagogy continues to capture the attention of researchers and educators in Morocco to the present. Using a cross-sectional research strategy, Hellalet (2013) investigated EFL learners' use of coherence relations at three levels of language learning. She found that rhetorical concepts such as cause, interpretation, justification, condition, solutionhood, elaboration, purpose, evidence and evaluation develop as a function of the development of the students' language proficiency. Macro-level coherence relations that contribute to the text quality such as elaboration, evaluation, evidence and sequence were found only in third-year students' writings. Given the descriptive nature of the study, Hellalet (2013) provides an account of the development of coherence strategies in the students' written texts from one university level to the next. However, the study fails to explain why there was such a development or to pinpoint the factors that are associated with the growth in the students' ability to use macro-level coherence devices.

A similar line of research was pursued by Fati (2013), who investigated the effects of English writing proficiency on the type and amount of errors produced by secondary education students. The researcher divided the participants into three groups of writing proficiency: high, middle and low. She found that students who made punctuation mistakes largely belonged to the low proficiency level and the number significantly decreased in the high proficiency rank. Capitalization errors were also frequently made by students situated in the low proficiency group and tended to decrease in the other levels of proficiency. The same observations were applicable to tenses, articles, word order and vocabulary. Therefore, the study concludes that writing proficiency is tightly associated with the type and amount of errors made by the participants. This study is useful in identifying the kind of errors students make in secondary education in their composition assignments but it fell short of providing solutions to eliminate these errors and improve the students' writing skills development. It is also based on error analysis which has

long been revealed to include several deficiencies and hence researchers have lost interest in its potential in helping students' learning.

7. Conclusion

The present paper discussed the developments in writing instruction and their effects on Moroccan composition researchers. The paper began by describing controlled composition with its emphasis on the sentence-level aspects of writing instruction. This was followed by a description of current-traditional rhetoric which drew attention to larger units of discourse. Subsequently, the paper moved to deal with the cognitive orientation in composition studies that viewed writing as a process rather than a product. The philosophy of the genre-based approach and the different emphases that it has placed on the teaching of genres were presented. Finally, the paper offered an evaluation of a few studies that reflect the impact of international trends in composition research on Moroccan researchers.

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