

Product Writing for Better Linguistic and Cultural Acquisition by English Language Students

**Sanja Josifović-Elezović
Svetlana Mitić**

University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

Product writing is considered uncreative and unstimulating, as it trains students to model their output according to rules and patterns. The risk students might particularly be exposed to when taught such writing is their memorising complete phrases, the most common grammatical forms and lexis used, and leaving a false impression of having mastered the register and form of selected writing patterns, and improved their linguistic and writing ability in general. Teaching product writing to students whose native culture has proven hesitant in regard to adopting correspondence as standard in certain situations, e.g. when applying for a job, complaining about a faulty product or substandard service, or writing a report to an authority, may prove additionally difficult and the achievements of a course based on it unintended.

Most people's daily experience shows that the culture of cultivated writing is losing the battle with truncated correspondence via e-mail and other electronic media. In light of this, learning to write and utilize such basic forms as applications, complaints and reports may prove beneficial for students' writing, as well as their general linguistic competence and their adoption of the target culture. This paper presents the results of a writing course administered to first-year English undergraduates as part of a general English language skills course and analyses them in terms of the students' adoption of the grammatical forms and the vocabulary/register that are required, or most commonly used, in the selected forms. This shows the extent of their real progress, as well as changes in their attitudes toward such writing as representative of the target culture. It also reveals the role the course has had in developing the students' awareness of learning as a process and of formative assessment, or rather, specific assessment that focused on a product, while emphasising the relevance of teaching/learning as a process.

Keywords: product writing, teaching/learning writing as a process, linguistic acquisition, cultural acquisition, formative assessment

Introduction

The practice and benefits of formative assessment

Formative assessment refers to the gathering of information about student learning during a course or programme that is used to guide improvements in teaching and learning. Formative assessment can be performed in many forms (from simply posing a question in class or asking for a show of hands in support of different response options in order to guide further teaching, to various practice quizzes, one-minute speeches and papers, clearest/muddiest point exercises, various kinds of pair/group work during and after class, etc.). It provides students with opportunities to practice skills or test knowledge in a “safe” way. It usually consists of low-stakes or no-stakes, and/or ungraded (or peer- or self-evaluated) activities, and these can be combined to comprise all or part of a participation grade or all or a part of a pre-exam requirement.

Even though formative assessment is the kind of assessment that is said to improve learning, students do not seem to value it as highly as they do when it is conspicuously related to summative assessment. Our classroom experience has repeatedly proved that formative assessment serves manifold purposes if it is allowed to serve as a scaffold into summative assessment. The scaffolding would primarily mean that formative-assessment activities are being used to provide the teacher with student feedback about how the course is going, and to create a culture of self-reflection and assessment that is focused on learning rather than solely on grades. However, if formative-assessment activities are designed to scaffold into summative evaluation and are worth points, students are more likely to take the activities seriously and put forth the effort; they will be more aware of the value of formative assessment and will be more likely to participate in a more meaningful way. If done this way, formative-assessment activities deliver a number of benefits for both students and teachers. They inform the teacher about how well his/her students are learning the material, provide valuable feedback about how the course is progressing and offer palpable evidence of student engagement (or the lack thereof) and learning (or not). They encourage attendance, student self-reflection and self-evaluation, and allow even very shy students to earn participation grades. They allow all learners to demonstrate knowledge in multiple ways.

Process vs. product writing

Just as we need both formative and summative assessment, we need both process and product writing. In product writing, the focus is on usage and grammar, topic sentences, paragraphing and rhetorical patterns of moulding the text, i.e. formal accuracy and correctness. Rather than creativity and innovation, mechanical drilling is present, along with fill-ins, substitution, transformation, completion, identifying the topic sentence and reordering scrambled paragraphs. Writing is considered a multi-stage linear process that leads to the gradual evolution of the text: prewriting, writing and rewriting. The process approach, on the other hand, assumes that writing is neither a linear nor a mechanical process; rather, it is an exploratory, recursive and generative process. Thinking and conveying meaning through collaborative work is encouraged, and the writer is the centre of attention. The focus is on the process of writing, consisting of prewriting, drafting, rewriting and presenting. It is supposed to help students understand their own composing process, giving them time to write and rewrite in order to discover what they want to say as they write. The process of revision is of central importance. Students are given feedback throughout the composing process, both from the teacher and their peers.

Teaching process writing may take a lot of time because students need to learn the concept (peer editing, planning, stages); we may also encounter a loss of student focus or interest, since it may not be suited to some personalities and may restrict spontaneity. However, the benefits of implementing it outweigh the drawbacks in the long run. After all, the process ends with a creation of a product. Moreover, writing is understood as a communicative and purposeful activity; students learn to plan, research and collaborate.

Examples of good practice should be incorporated into process writing and a balance between product and process writing should be reached (Brown, 2007). It is not a question of whether to use one approach or the other, but rather one **and** the other.

Contrasted rhetoric and its implications for teaching writing

When teaching writing skills in a foreign language classroom, the differences between cultural writing traditions around the world should be taken into consideration and should be made to work for the students, not against them. Some knowledge of contrasted rhetoric could be shared with students at English faculties from the outset, i.e. their first year of study. From the beginning, students would be made aware that, together with linguistic acquisition, some sort of cultural acquisition is necessary, and that this does not deny their own culture, but enriches it.

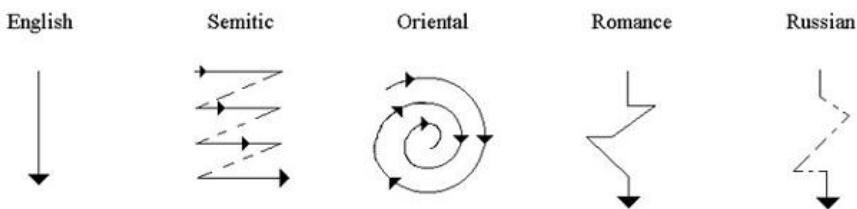
It is well known that each community in the world consists of members who share similar experiences, beliefs, values, ways of working, and ways of speaking and communicating with each other, reflecting their beliefs and what they see as

valuable. The same community system works in academia. In different countries and cultures, the way academics communicate with others in their community reflects their shared assumptions and values. Clearly, it is not possible to put all of this down to culture, as different genres of writing and disciplines (sciences, humanities, etc) have their own specific features. Indeed, as technology makes cross-border communication easier, the similarities between two academics from different cultures writing in the same discipline are becoming closer than the similarities between two academics from the same culture writing in different disciplines.

Still, one should not forget that culture plays a large role, too. At English faculties throughout the world students write in English, and through their written work, they may be trying to join the Anglo-American academic community. This means following the conventions and styles that this community has developed over the centuries, which it sees as reflecting its values. Students learn some of these conventions. To meet the expectations of this community, they receive advice on how to structure their work and how to use other authors' work in their writing. It is hoped that they take advantage of this help, because not only will it increase their chances of successfully completing their courses, but also of getting published in the wider English-language academic community.

However, the Anglo-American tradition is just one tradition in the world. When writing in our mother tongue, we write to satisfy the requirements of our community. These traditions are in some cases very different from what we encounter in the Anglo-American tradition. From examining texts written by authors of different nationalities, Robert Kaplan (1966) identified thought patterns and structures specific to those languages (pp. 1-20).

Figure 1. Kaplan's models of contrastive rhetoric



It is suggested that Russian writing, similar to Roman, contains digressions from the main theme of the text to give extra information that may be relevant, but is not central to the central thesis of the text. In oriental rhetoric it seems we reach the

conclusion in a somewhat roundabout manner. Semitic languages seem to include repetition and backtracking, involving colourful and flowery language to engage the reader. In comparison, English is seen as linear, in that it identifies its main theme and follows it through without deviating to the end.

One practical use of being aware of these differences is that it can help avoid misunderstandings and reduce frustration. Students may write in English with few grammatical mistakes and even have a strong command of the jargon of their discipline, but still their work may not seem “English”. This may be because they are using a structure or thought pattern from a different culture. Undoubtedly, this is not necessarily wrong, and may at times add colour to a dry text, but the writing community they aspire to join has its ways of doing things and these need to be respected.

Making product writing more process-like: A case study of Banja Luka English undergraduates

Course structure and requirements

The writing course analysed was part of an integrated English language skills unit conducted with the first-year students of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Philology, Banja Luka University. The contents of the writing course were only partly related or completely unrelated to the contents of the unit. The goal was specifically to teach the students how to write job applications, reports and complaints, all of them closely related to perceived young adolescent/student experience gained in the local context of Republic of Srpska/Bosnia and Herzegovina/the former Yugoslavia. The idea was to deal with the need to do guided writing on specific, familiar issues by amalgamating them with standard application/report/complaint forms in English, as demanded at CEFR B2 Level, which is also the level of competence expected of English students after the first two years of study.

The instruction was strictly controlled in that the students were presented with patterns and asked to model their own writing on them. In preparation for the writing task, they did a number of related exercises that tuned them in to the structure, most common phrases, grammatical structures and discourse used in each of the genres taught. The total workload was 12 writing assignments, six original drafts and six revisions (a diary entry, general informal and formal letters as preparatory forms, an application, a complaint and a report). Each first draft was checked by the tutor, who marked the students’ mistakes for them to correct in their second drafts (agreement, use of tenses, use of words/vocabulary, use of prepositions, spelling, word order).

The students tried to make corrections based on the tutor's input. Finally, the second draft was corrected by the tutor.

At the start of the unit, the students were informed that the completion of the tasks would count towards the fulfilment of one formal requirement (one written test automatically passed, without taking account of the student's actual writing ability as demonstrated during the semester) and their writing would not be marked. The students were told that at the end of the semester, they would take a written test and choose between three tasks, each corresponding to one of the genres taught during the semester. The mark they earned on this test was their total writing mark. It was hoped that this approach would help the students realise that real work was expected of them during the semester and that the quality of this work would not affect the final mark. The tutoring was expected to truly help them master the genres and improve their overall language proficiency.

It was hoped that amalgamating local content with imported genres would aid cultural approximation in students coming from a culture whose political, social and economic interchange is largely verbal. The students are rarely, if ever, asked to use the taught genres in the local culture. In formal contexts, complaint writing is institutionalised and left to professionals (lawyers, public notaries, filling in forms used by specific institutions). Complaining is often perceived as impractical and impracticable in the 'crude' local service and trade market. The practice of writing job applications only takes place at foreign companies, which are few. There is no developed culture of written interaction that the students could be expected to have adopted at home, school or beyond.

Questionnaire findings

To make the achievements of the writing course measurable from the student perspective, a questionnaire was developed, consisting of 30 open-ended and closed-ended questions. The students were asked to fill in the questionnaire after they completed the course and sat the final exam, which requires that they take a dictation test, write an essay, do two translation tasks and a grammar test, and take an oral exam. The questionnaire was drawn up to show the extent to which the students were aware of distinctions and appreciation of the culture of writing in their local culture and the target culture, and whether they perceived the conducted activities as instructional and, specifically, as helping them to bridge the gap between some supposedly distinctive elements of the two cultures. Also, it probed the students' awareness of the nature and consistency of the marking procedure, on its own as well as in the wider context of the unit, and their perception of their linguistic progress, as directly attributable to the writing course.

The questionnaire was answered by 40 of the 55 students who took the course, of whom four repeated the year. Most of the questions addressed the students' meta-cognitive ability, and some were specifically concerned with their perception of the purposes of the course and evaluation of its appropriateness in regard to their linguistic and cultural improvement, and to the unit and course as a whole. The answers showed that in some cases, the students were not even aware of the objectives of the writing course and commented on other elements of teaching, such as dictation, practicing pronunciation etc.

Relevant for this paper is the group of questions related to the structure and contents of the writing course, its purpose and how motivating the activities were. It was assumed that making the tasks motivating would increase the students' intrinsic motivation and reinforce the benefits of the prospect of formative assessment. Of the 40 students who answered the questionnaire, 23 found the writing course motivating, and 15 somewhat motivating. Still, most of them said it was both the process and product of the writing activities that the final writing mark reflected (23; for 10, it was the product, and for five, the process), which must be seen as a positive achievement of the course.

Defining literacy, most of the respondents said it was an issue of using grammar and vocabulary, and only very few were aware of functional literacy. Thirty respondents found the course relevant for their improvement of English, but fewer than half said it contributed to their literacy in English. This reflects their assessment of their improvement in the use of the English grammar and lexis: Most of them gave both aspects a 3 on a scale of 1 to 5. The fact that half of the respondents did not consider functional writing a significant life skill might lead to an essentialist conclusion that the local culture indeed largely depends on verbal communication and social relations are still significantly verbally organised.

Conclusion

Whereas the formal limitations do not allow this paper's authors to more closely examine the types of mistakes and the progress of individual students following the completion of the presented course, it is possible to conclude that for the students appreciating the general method of work at the Department, the writing course has meant general linguistic improvement in English and better approximation to the target culture, which in itself again points to the relevance of affective factors. The practiced forms are generally no longer perceived as strange, and if required, the students would be capable of using them. The procedure of formative assessment used in the course has only partly amended the students' perception of assessment as necessarily summative, with some students being able to distinguish between the

various elements integrated in the assessment practice as formatively and summatively relevant for their progress and studies.

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