Abstract. This paper will discuss three approaches: product, process and genre used in EFL writing classes and grammar instruction driven by each approach. Then it will present a hybrid approach termed as process and genre approach which combines the strengths of the process and of genre approach. This hybrid approach aims to raise the students’ awareness of the relationship between the purpose and the writing standards when they employ a recursive process in writing. The paper will also address the role of grammar instruction and how to deal with grammar issues in Vietnamese EFL writing classes, which are often characterized as being oversized, and suffering a lack of practice time and of exposure to language use.

Keywords: ESL (English as a second language), EFL (English as a foreign language), product approach, genre approach, focus on form, focus on forms, focus on meaning, grammar instruction.

1. Introduction

Writing in a foreign language is often seen to be such a difficult skill that many learners consider it unachievable. In the university degree curriculum, Vietnamese English-majored students have five semesters to learn writing with two credits in each semester. Such limited time practically causes difficulties for both teachers and students in achieving the goals defined in the Unit Description. During two hours per week in class intended for learning both theory and practice, teachers often “struggle” to organize the class and balance learning and practice so that students can benefit more from the teacher’s instruction. This paper will present the current approaches used in teaching ESL and EFL writing classes, discuss how important the role of grammar is advocated in each approach and relate these concepts with the situation of EFL writing classes at Hue College of Foreign Languages.

2. Approaches used in ESL and EFL writing classes

2.1. Product approach

The product approach was once dominant in ESL/EFL writing classes. In this approach, writing activity is considered as linear and its goal is a writing product. The
grammar translation method is often the choice for this approach. In class, teachers use samples or models for students to learn how to use grammatical structures and vocabulary, then students are engaged in writing their own papers. This approach neither focuses on the purpose of writing and the sense of audience nor encourages creativity. Instead, it leads students to imitation and memorization of good samples with elaborate grammar structures because “learners are engaged in imitating, copying and transforming models of correct English” (Nunan, 1995, p. 86). Teachers grade the final products basing on how well students use vocabulary, grammar, spelling, punctuation, content and organization and students expect their papers returned with meticulous correction from teachers. This approach is often criticized for not giving students a context and for focusing too much on grammar correction.

2.2. Process approach

Proponents of the process approach try to address the weaknesses of the product approach. According to Mucie (2002, p. 181), this is the “most influential theory of writing instruction at the moment.” Different from the product approach, this one puts the content in the center and leaves grammar at the end of the writing process, the editing stage where the teacher feedback provides grammatical input for learners. In addition, understanding of the topic and knowing how to relate the topic with personal experience is what learners are taught to think first to make their writing interesting to the readers. Writing is seen as a process with four main stages: prewriting, drafting, editing and revising, in which techniques like brainstorming, free writing, outlining and proofreading are used. While the product approach is linear, this one is nonlinear or recursive. This means that learners can repeat stages to revise ideas and focus on developing ideas, not in ways of expression. Interactions between students and teachers are encouraged for negotiation of meaning (Yalden, 1987). In the editing stage, grammatical accuracy and correctness of forms are addressed in the teacher’s feedback (White and Arndt, 1991, p 113). The strong point of this approach is that it shows students steps to write and makes them understand that writing is a process that can be improved. However, the weaknesses of this approach are that it views the process as being the same for all learners without a regard to the social context and purpose of writing (Badger and White, 2000) and that the repetition of stages may cause constraint of time for practice in the classroom.

2.3. Genre approach

With the development of text studies and discourse analysis, in 1980’s the genre approach was developed with the key concept that learners could benefit from learning different genres/text types in different social contexts and situations. The key concept is that each genre has its own conventions. According to Dudley-Evans (1989) and Paltridge (2001), the genre approach helps incorporate discourse and contextual aspects
of language use with regard to structures, functions or vocabulary. Different from the product and process approaches, this one places focus on the grammatical peculiarities of each genre, not on general grammar. However, this approach is still a new concept in the EFL writing classes and even a neglected issue as a result of the lack of the needs of using various genres in communicative situations outside the classroom. To achieve this, students need to be exposed to a wide variety of sample texts within a particular genre and these samples should be authentic and suitable for them.

3. Grammar in EFL writing classes

Grammar in the classroom in general and in writing classes in particular are instructed under the influence of the three approaches focus on forms, focus on meaning and focus on form.

The first concept is Focus on Forms, which draws attention to discrete grammar points in isolation based on linguistic complexity without focus on meaning (Long, 1991). The two common Focus on Forms task types include discrete point exercises such as fill-in-the-blanks tasks to measure the learner’s accuracy in the use of the target structure, and free-production tasks such as composition writing on a topic chosen to elicit the target structure (Corbail, 2005). Focus on Form has significant influence on the product approach since it emphasizes the role of grammar and accuracy in teaching writing.

Second, Focus on Meaning is based on Krashen and Terrell’s theory of the Natural Approach (1983), which lowers the role of conscious learning of grammar arguing that language learners can acquire the language best when full attention is paid to meaning, not to the linguistic forms. This approach turns away from grammar translation and consciousness-raising method and put more emphasis on the learners’ interaction with language learning materials termed as comprehensible input to help them acquire the language naturally. Under the influence of this view, writing has become a process of natural generation of ideas with focus on meaning and communication without concerns about form and grammar (Adewumi, 1992). However, language teaching researchers (Ellis 1993, Long 1991, Richards 1984, Ruthford 1987, cited in Baleghizadeh 2010) show that focus on meaning without any emphasis on form would not ensure success in acquiring a language. Moreover, such instruction which ignores the role of corrective feedback results in the fact that learners do not how to use the target language correctly.

The third approach, Focus on Form (FonF) first proposed by Long (1991), is an attempt to integrate form and meaning to draw learners’ attention to specific linguistic forms within meaningful interaction. Grammar in Focus on Form includes any term such as spelling, vocabulary, grammar and discourse. Long (1991) and Long and Robinson (1998) asserts that occasional focus on discrete-forms of the language via
correction and direct explanations can help students become aware, understand and acquire the forms in the end. Focus on Form in their view maintains a balance between Focus on Forms and Focus on Meaning. One problem of this approach is how to deal with grammar issues in oversized class. Therefore, suggested form-focused activities such as class discussion, question/answer session, addressing to students’ problematic forms, evaluation of students’ essays, in-class writing tasks, and journals/diaries seem practically inapplicable in EFL writing class (Poole, 2005)

4. Suggested grammar instruction approach for EFL writing classes

In his study “Finding a place for grammar in EFL composition classes,” Muncie (2002) asserts that there is a strong belief in the value of grammar in foreign language learning and thus it seems not easy to change students’ perception of the role of grammar instruction. He suggests that the grammar for an EFL writing class should be limited, applicable and recycling, meaning-oriented and related to discourse function. Fotos (1998, p.131) identifies that the major problem of EFL classes is not “the lack of instruction on grammatical features” but is “the lack of opportunities for communicative language in use.” Therefore, a shift to the focus on form helps to keep the communication of meaning as the central concern, and tackle with grammar when it arises is necessary (Muncie, p.184, 2002).

Tribble (1997), Badger and White (2000) and Muncie (2002) consider that there should be a combination of the process and the genre approaches in the EFL composition which is termed the process genre approach. This combined approach allows students to see the relationship between purpose and form of a particular genre and the recursive processes of prewriting, drafting, revision, and editing (Yan, 2005). However, Muncie argues that because an encounter with the English language discourse community is not the need for the majority of these learners, writing courses should contribute to the general language improvement rather than to concentrate on a genre-specific grammar.

As regards grammar issues, correction is better linked with the editing stage with the use of consciousness-raising techniques to facilitate learners redraft better compositions if such use provides explicit knowledge of the oriented grammar for their practice (Ellis, 1992). Similarly, Thornbury (1999, p. 117) claims that “a focus on form includes giving learners clear messages about their errors” and that errors should be dealt with according to priorities and intelligibility. Nunan (1998) further proposes the use the “organic approach”, which pays attention not only to the discrete items of language but also to the discoursal environment to raise the learner’s awareness and understanding of the systematic relationship between lexis, grammar and discourse.
5. Implications for the Vietnamese EFL writing classes

At Hue College of Foreign Languages, teachers are familiar with the process approach since most of the course books used in writing classes are constructed under this approach. Students can learn the stages and techniques through the main course books and references from the first two semesters with *Paragraph Writing- From Sentence to Paragraph* (Zemach & Rumisek, 2003), *Steps into Writing* (Bonner, 2004) and *Write up* (Burleigh & Sanders, 1995); in the third and fourth semesters with *Writing Handbook For Esol Students* (Noji, 1996), *Writing to Communicate: Paragraphs and Essays* (Boardman & Frydenberg, 2002), *Refining Composition Skills* (Smalley, Ruetten & Kozyrev, 1998), *Process of Composition* (Reid, 1982) and *Writing Academic English* (Oshima & Hogue, 1993).

However, the genre approach seems to be a new concept and has not been well applied so far. The process genre approach (Tribble, 1997; Badger and White, 2000; Muncie, 2002) helps learners to view writing as a process and as a means to convey messages in appropriate convention and norms. Time could be saved for practice if the convention and norms of a certain written genre could be introduced explicitly by comparing with that written in Vietnamese. Based on the syllabus, teachers could choose samples/models of a particular genre, for example *discussion* or *argument*, to make students aware that each genre has a particular grammar and that the texts they produce must meet the expectations of the readers regarding grammar, content and organization. In the EFL context, most of the samples come from the course books; therefore, it is the teacher’s preparation and responsibility to provide students sufficient materials from the real world.

With a view to grammar, instruction in the classroom should move from the focus on forms to focus on form Grammar is taught either implicitly or explicitly depending on the difficulty of the subject matter. Feedback on grammar errors/mistakes could be organized with the whole class participation and advocate just some selected grammatical points for every section with examples selected from students’ papers.

One thing that should be taken into consideration is that the immediate aim of Vietnamese EFL writing classes is to prepare learners to pass the written examination. Therefore, within two hours a week teachers should maximize chances for learners to grasp the modified grammatical input and then internalize it through students’ practice. It could be seen that each two-credit writing unit lasting for 15 weeks with two hours per week does not provide enough time for teachers to realize all what described in the writing course description in the classroom. Therefore, in the author’s opinion, the choice of a proper teaching approach and grammar instruction is very important in effectively developing the writing skills for students in such limited time.
References


APPENDIX
A SAMPLE USING PROCESS GENRE APPROACH IN WRITING CLASS
(Steps and activities suggested by Yan, 2005)

**Level:** Intermediate (second year student)

**Time:** 100 minutes

**Topic:** Discuss the advantages of disadvantages of living with a roommate. Give the reasons of your choice.

**Goal:** To teach students the purpose and structure of the discussion writing genre and the process of prewriting, drafting, editing and revising and have them use this knowledge to write a paper as a group or individually.

**Procedure:**

1. **Preparation (10 minutes)**
   
   Teacher introduces the situation that requires them to write within the specific genre-discussion which must include a thorough understanding of both sides of the topic. This helps students guess the structure of this genre.

   **Activity 1:**
   - Introduce the topic and the context.
   - Clarify the purpose of this genre: present the viewpoint from two sides.
   - Explain the type of genre they are going to learn is “Discussion”.

2. **Modelling and reinforcing (20 minutes):**

   Teacher gives a model of this genre, explain the purpose and the audience of this text. The purpose of the discussion genre is to persuade the reader to make a choice.

   **Activity 2:**
   - Give students a sample to read and ask them to answer the following question while reading.
     1. What do you think is the purpose of this text?
     2. Who do you think is the audience?
     3. Has the writer achieved his goal?
     4. Why do you think this is a discussion text?
   - Students read the text.

Activity 3: to check students’ understanding of the content.

- Ask students to review the four questions.
- Ask students to summarize the main points.

Activity 4: to make students familiarize with the structure of a discussion
- Ask students to reread the text and answer the questions:
  1. How does the text start and end?
  2. How do the arguments/reasons arrange?
  3. How many arguments/reasons does the text give?
  4. What is the function of each argument/reasons?

Activity 5: Students share their findings and ideas in groups.

Activity 6: To check students’ understanding of the structure of the discussion genre.

- Groups are asked to share ideas about the structure of the discussion genre.
- Groups highlights structures and vocabulary used to express the discussion genre.
- Teacher summarizes and gives overall structure and organization.

3. Planning (10 minutes)

Students are given the topic. In groups, they brainstorm, discuss and relate the topic with their experience.

Activity 7: Finding and developing ideas.

- Ask students to brainstorm using the spider web to write their ideas.
- Teacher elicits ideas from groups into two columns on the blackboard.

4. Joint-constructing (20 minutes)

At this stage the teacher and students work together to write the text using the elicited ideas on the blackboard. Teacher uses processes of drafting, editing and revising and students can contribute ideas to rewrite the draft.

Activity 8: to check whether the text has the structure of a discussion genre.

- Students use the questions in Activity 4 to check the final draft.

5. Independent constructing (25 minutes)

At this point students have studied a model text and taken part in a jointly constructed text. Now teacher gives a new topic and students write independently. Students can ask the teacher for help during the process. Students can complete the writing task in class or at home.

6. Revising (10 minutes)

Students can ask other students to check and evaluate each other’s texts. The teacher can collect some texts and give feedback. Then students rewrite their texts at home.