Blending Varied Concepts: Is it Effective in ESL Writing Class?

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Abstract— Writing has been a difficulty in ESL education. According to Weigle (2002), there have been various approaches to teach writing that have led to numerous changes and subsequent development of writing models. The present study which is a part of a larger study, attempted to improve the skill of writing in ESL, blending different notions drawn from varied concepts. It adopted the Flower & Hayes Model of L2 Writing, an element of process approach and some effective elements from product approach to writing and strategy instruction were amalgamated into it. The action research which comprised of two cycles spanned over a period of six months, seventeen days of eighty minute sessions were carried out with a sample of 16 immature writing learners drawn from a Type 2 school in the Colombo South Zone. It used multiple data collection instruments: pre-test, activities, assignments, students' reflective journals, field notes by the researcher and post-test. The on-going evaluation was made through the comparison of marks of portfolio writing - first draft and final draft, the analysis of the in- class written assignment marks and the analysis of the field notes by the researcher. The effectiveness of the intervention was measured through the comparison of the scores of the four portfolio writing – final drafts , comparison of the four in-class written assignment marks and the comparison of the pre-test and post-test marks. There was a remarkable progress recorded in the majority. Thus , it proved the effectiveness of blending varied concepts as a way of improving writing skills in ESL learners.

Keywords— **English as a second language, Flower and Hayes Writing Model, Product approach to writing, Process approach to writing, Strategy instruction**

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing has always been a difficulty in English education. As stated by Richards & Renandya (2002), writing is the most difficult skill for language learners to master. Many teachers do their best but receive little effect; students hardly achieve the expected levels of mastery.

As per the G.C.E.(O/L) Examination 2016: Evaluation Report- English Language, the skill-wise analysis of the achievement levels, achievement of writing skill remains as low as 19%. It is further proved in studies conducted by NEREC , University of Colombo. As recorded in the National Report – National Assessment of Achievement of Students

Completing Grade 4 in Year 2015 in Sri Lanka and the National Report– National Assessment of Achievement of Students Completing Grade 8 in Year 2016 in Sri Lanka , achievement of English Language has been recorded as the lowest and writing skill indicates the lowest achievement contributing to the overall low performance in English.

Thus, achievement of the skill of writing in English as a second language has become a challenge. As stated by Berg (1999) written language must be filtered through some sort of system, this system can be phonemic, structural , representative, etc. The individual must not only learn to recognize the meaning of words orally, but also go through a process of transcribing these sounds. The process of transcribing sounds requires the learning of other rules and structures thereby cognizing a previously unconscious process. As stated by Weigle (2002), the ability to write effectively is becoming more and more important and writing instruction and training the learner in the use of writing strategies are assuming an increasing role in L2 language education. Further , according to Kroll (1990, teachers should be dedicated to fostering growth in writing by providing a sequence of lessons to move students beyond their entering skill level, and enabling students to acquire skills and strategies needed to perform well in written communication.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The overall purpose of the study is to improve writing skills of the ESL learners through the adoption of the writing model formulated and the research objectives are as follows:

- Formulate a tentative writing model to improve ESL writing skills

- Carry out an intervention to improve writing skills in ESL learners adopting the writing model

- Measure the effectiveness of the writing model

- Develop a model to improve writing skills in ESL learners

3. THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Informed by the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed and based on the data collected using multiple instruments, the researcher proposed the tentative model of writing which is supposed to be effective in the context of the study in which the sample includes immature ESL learners of a Type 2 school which records low achievements in ESL. The proposed model attempts to minimize the difficulties faced by the ESL writing learner by adopting an eclectic approach in which facilitation of the writing task is promoted through blending of varied concepts drawn from product approach , process approach and strategy instruction.

3.1 The proposed model of writing

Informed by the literature and the analysis of the data collected through a survey,

the proposed Model of Writing was formulated as follows in figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1   Proposed Model of Writing

3.1.1 The underline principles of the proposed model of writing and its components

The proposed model reflects an integration of varied approaches and concepts related to writing and the following section explains its components and rationalizes the amalgamation.

The Flower and Hayes Model as the basic structure

The present study adopts the Flower and Hayes model of writing as the framework which systematized the cognitive processes involved in writing namely planning, translating, reviewing and multiple drafting into a model.

Writing cannot be merely considered as an act of getting grammar, structure , vocabulary etc. right. It should definitely be regarded as a cognitive process of planning , translating and revising. But, in most of the ESL and EFL contexts, writing is viewed as a practice of its linguistic features of grammar , vocabulary etc. and as identified by many researchers, this misconception has been the main cause for the problem of writing in L2. Thus, the need to get the learner go through the process of writing becomes the most significant aspect of the present study and it adopts Flower and Hayes model of writing which structuralizes the process as planning , translating and revising.
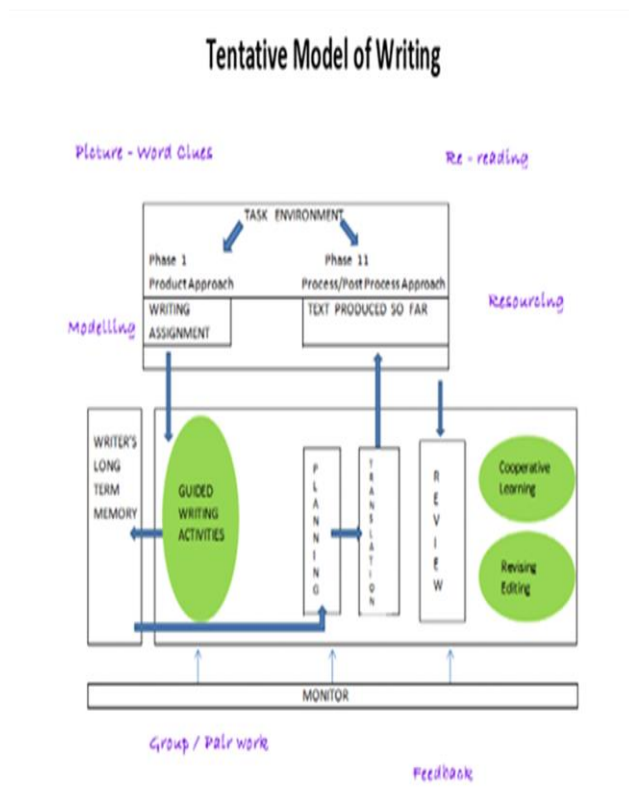
Flower and Hayes (1981) which is composed of four main components namely the task environment, the writer's long term memory, the general writing process and the monitor strategy mainly focus on what writers do when they compose and they view composing as a cognitive process.

The task environment comprises all that is outside of the writer which can influence the performance. This environment is composed of the writing assignment ; topic and the audience to write to and the text produced so far to be used as a reference for the writer, in order to progress as well as to revise the already written text.

The writer's long term memory contains three knowledge areas: knowledge of topic , knowledge of audience and linguistic knowledge about specific text plans.

The general writing process is composed of three processes that transform domain knowledge into a linguistic product. These processes are as follows : the planning process with three sub-processes of generating, organizing and goal-setting, the translating process and the reviewing process with the sub-processes of reading and editing.

The monitoring component plays a vital role in controlling the writing process - deciding when enough content has been generated, when revision is necessary, and so forth. It is present for the triangulation of the general writing process as well as for the facilitation of the interaction among the three main parts of the model namely the task environment, the writer's long term memory and the general writing process as presented in the figure 3.1a below.
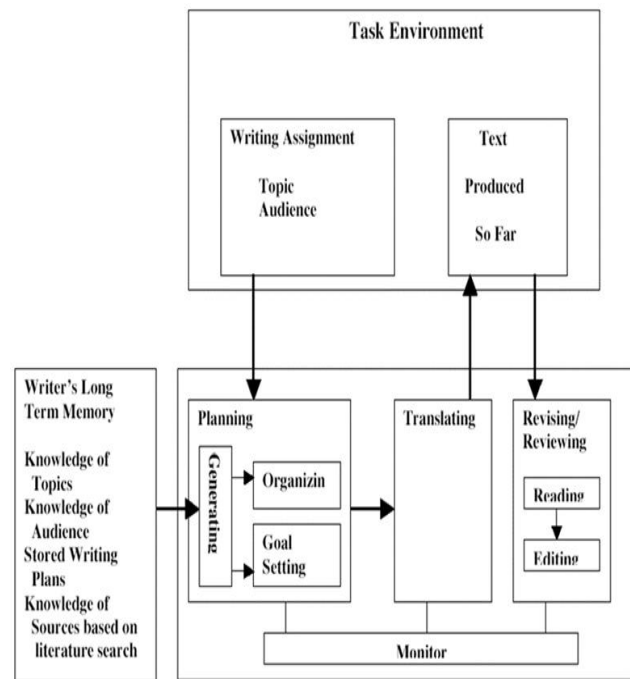

Figure 3.1a Hayes and Flower's Model , adapted from Hayes and Flower (1980)

Guided writing activities

Guided writing activities are a concept drawn from the earliest approach to writing namely product approach. It stands in contrast with the Flower and Hayes model based on process approach to writing. Guided writing is meant for giving controlled practice in grammar, word order , mechanics etc. The present study which adopts Flower and Hayes model and attempts to get the learner goes through the process of planning, translating and revising identifies that the major difficulty the learner faces as cognitive overload. Cognitive overload, arising from the fact that a complex set of processes has to be carried out in a limited capacity of the working memory. In particular, the demands of translating ideas into well - formed text may consume resources required for higher level planning. Although this is particularly true to novice / inexperienced writers,

for whom even the basic mechanics of forming letters may be resource consuming. It is a pervasive problem stemming from the nature of the process itself. The main implication of this general line of research is that it is important for other components of the writing process to be carried out as automatically as possible. Writing learner being equipped with mechanics and sub skills of writing prior to the writing process of planning, translating and revising would reduce cognitive overload and facilitate more fluent retrieval of content from long term memory.

This is especially true in ESL writing context. There is a conflict in the novice writer in dealing with the demands of the writing process. Low proficiency of sub skills of writing affects free expression. They try to ignore or shut down parts of the process which do not seem to fit. This can tempt them to refuse to revise and review. That prevents their monitor from consulting their larger purposes in writing and the logical shape of the paragraph or whole text.

Thus , the present study which attempts to build up a model that would equip the writing learner with necessary sub skills such as grammar , syntax, vocabulary in order to reduce cognitive overload through the application of guided writing activities and get the writing learner subsequently go through the process of planning , translating and revising for a production of creative piece of writing. Thus, in this model , the

incorporation of guided writing into Hayes and Flower model can be regarded as an amalgamation of product and process approaches to teach writing.

Strategy instruction

Strategy instruction has been regarded as a must in ESL writing. Improving writing skill which is viewed as the most difficult skill in language learning , should be facilitated in every possible way in one's search for a solution to the problem of ESL writing. Thus, the present study considers strategy instruction as crucial and based on the literature reviewed and data collected and analyzed, the researcher incorporates some important strategies in ESL writing into the proposed model of writing.

As research suggests , revising and producing several drafts before the final product has not been a reality in ESL/EFL writing. It has been hindered due to the very fact of cognitive overload in which writing is made confined to a reproduction of some previously learnt structures. Teacher feedback and peer feedback can be integrated into the model and the writing learner can be made to revise the drafts accordingly which in turn would facilitate the process of revising as structuralized in Hayes and Flower model of writing.

Thus, the present study attempts to get the learner revise the text produced so far through teacher feedback and peer feedback , thus getting the learner revise and produce several

drafts before the final product. Thus, portfolio as a writing strategy is incorporated and amalgamated into the model, thus the learner is given practice of revising in carrying out a writing task. It may not be viewed as an impossibility , because cooperative learning minimizes the difficulty. Thus, the writing learner is eventually made used to the process of revising.

Thus, the tentative writing model was formulated combining three main components ; product approach , process approach and strategy instruction approach.

4. METHODOLOGY

The study was an action research carried out with a sample of 16 grade seven students drawn from a Type 2 school in the Colombo South Zone. The study utilized multiple data collection instruments: pre-test , assignments and post -test for quantitative data and activities, field notes and reflective journals for qualitative data. The intervention was executed over a period of six months which consisted of 17 days of 80 minute sessions. The effectiveness of the intervention was measured through the comparison of the scores obtained for portfolio writing- four final drafts, comparison of the four assignment marks and the comparison of the pre-test marks and the post -test marks.

5. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The effectiveness of the intervention was measured through the comparison of the scores of the four portfolio writing – final drafts , comparison of the four in-class written assignment marks and the comparison of the pre-test and post-test marks.

5.1 Comparison of Marks Obtained for the Portfolio Writing – The Four Final Drafts

The intervention consisted of four stages and each stage had a Portfolio Writing activity and the comparison of marks obtained for the four final drafts by the students can stand a test of the effectiveness of the intervention . Thus, the scores of the Portfolio Writing – the four Final Drafts can be presented as follows in graph 5.1 .
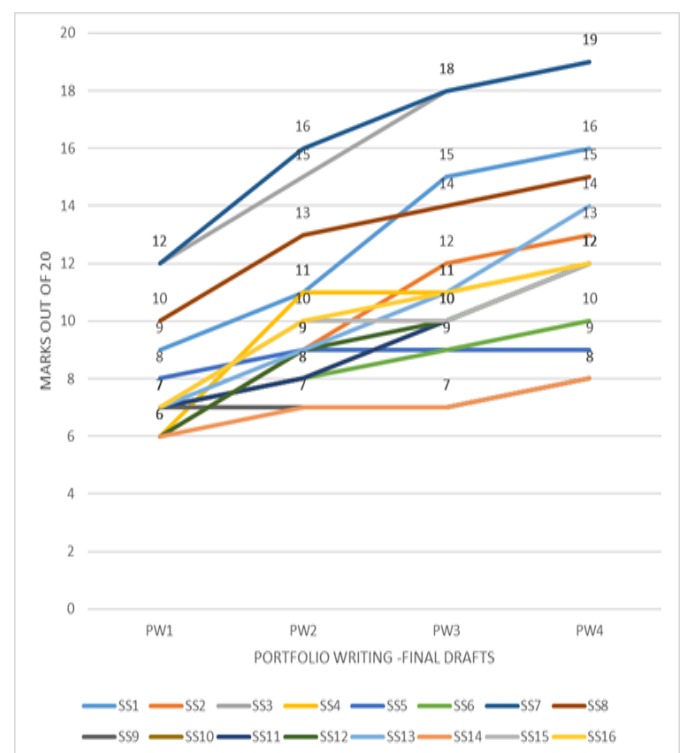

Figure 5.1 Comparison of the Marks of the Portfolio Writing – Four Final Drafts

As presented above all the students in the sample showed gradual improvement in the marks obtained for the Portfolio Writing – Final Drafts. It was an indication of the effectiveness of getting the learner to revise , resource, review and multiple drafting. It was only two students , only SS5 and SS9 recorded very slow progress. Thus, it could be evaluated as an effective intervention carried out to improve writing skills in ESL learners and very specifically by getting the learner to produce several drafts through the introduction of portfolio writing as a strategy.

5.2 Comparison of Marks Obtained for the Four Assignments

The intervention comprised of four stages and each stage consisted of an In-Class Written Assignment administered for the purpose of evaluation of each stage and comparison of marks of the four In-Class Written Assignments as a measure of the effectiveness of the intervention. The marks of the four assignments of each student in the sample is presented in figure 5.2 as follows.
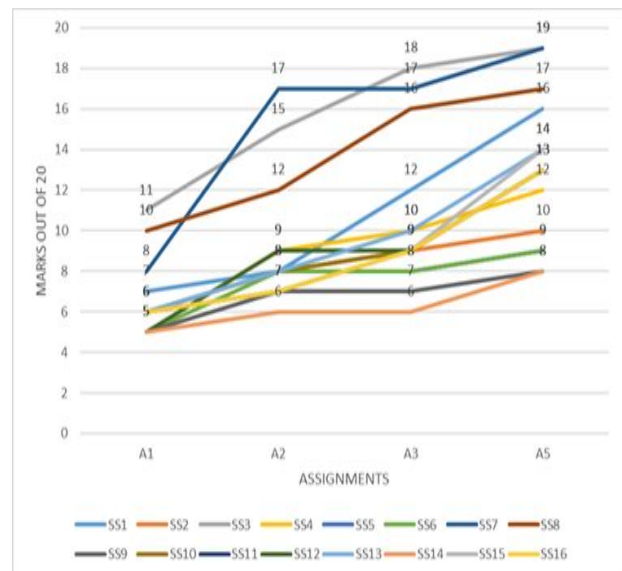

Figure 5.2 Comparison of the Marks of the Four Assignments

The student-wise analysis of the marks obtained for the four assignments indicated the gradual progress recorded by students and in turn proved the effectiveness of the intervention. All the sixteen students in the sample showed gradual but significant improvement.

5.3 Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Marks

The researcher compared the Pre-Test and Post-Test marks in order to assess the effectiveness of the intervention programme. The comparison of the Pre-Test and Post- Test scores could stand as a test of the effectiveness of the intervention and the stem and leaf plot as given in figure 5.3a below graphically present the two scores converted into percentage.

Pre- Test			Post - Test
3, 3, 3	0		
0,0,0,3,3,8,8,8,8,8	1		
8,3	2		
	3	5	
	4	5,5,5	
	5	5,5	
	6	0,0,0,0,0,5	
	7	0	
	8	0,5,5	

Figure 5.3a Distribution of Scores of Pre -Test and Post-Test

The distribution of the Pre-Test and Post-Test scores presented in the above graph was a clear evidence of the vast improvements made by students as a result of the intervention. The modal value of Pre-Test scores was 18 out of 100 and the modal value of Post-Test recorded as 60 out of 100. The maximum values of Pre-Test and Post-Test stood as 28 and 85 respectively and the minimum scores of Pre-Test and Post-Test recorded as 8 and 35 respectively which in turn bore witness to the vast difference of the students abilities at the entry level and the exit level to the programme.

The graphical presentation of the comparison of the Pre-Test and Post-Test marks is illustrated in figure 5.3b
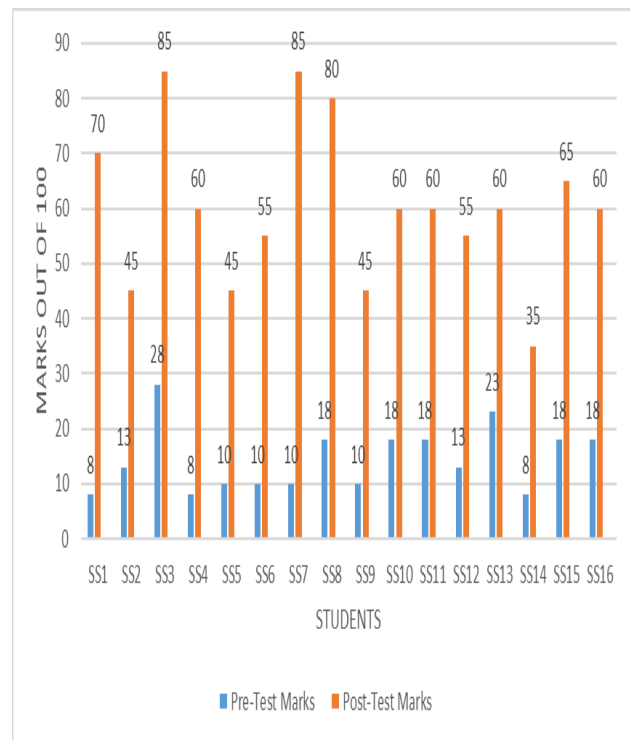

Figure 5.3b   The Comparison of Pre-Test and Post -Test Marks

The figure 5.3b compares the scores of the Pre-Test and the Post-Test and a remarkable improvement could be seen in all the students of the sample. The achievement levels of SS1, SS3 , SS7 and SS8 was significant. Out of them , SS1 and SS7 stood out as they only recorded very low achievements at the Pre-Test. Even the students who displayed slow progress scored commendably. Overall , the comparison proved the success of the intervention.

6. FINDINGS

• The major difficulties students face in writing , their lack of knowledge of grammar , vocabulary , word order etc. for translation could be facilitated through

guided writing activities such as model writing , translation, rearranging which are carried out prior to the writing activity.

• Students lack of ideas which is a difficulty faced by the writing learner could be facilitated through the use of picture clues and word clues , brainstorming activities etc..

• Training the writing learner in the use of strategies such as pair work / group work , getting feedback , resourcing , revising leads to the gradual improvement of their writing skills and it gives the learner a sense of satisfaction and motivation.

7. CONCLUSIONS

• Both linguistic knowledge and linguistic skills should be treated with equal importance in the ESL writing class. Thus, an eclectic approach in which varied concepts are drawn and blended to facilitate writing is more effective in ESL context.

• Writing activity should not be regarded as one single activity to be completed in one single period , but as a sequence of activities to be completed over a period of time.

• Writing learners should be trained in the use of strategies to overcome problems they face in the execution of writing in ESL.

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