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UNDERSTANDING WRITING: EXPLORING TEXTS, WRITERS AND READERS

Abstract

This paper explores the main approaches to teaching and researching writing. Making a broad distinction between theories concerned with texts, with writers and with readers, I will show what each approach offers and neglects and what each means for teachers. The categorisation implies no rigid divisions, and, in fact the approaches respond to, critique, and draw on each other in a variety of ways. I believe, however, this offers a useful way of comparing and evaluating the research each approach has produced and the pedagogic practices they encourage.

Keywords: process writing, genre, social construction, discourse communities, writing pedagogy.

1 Introduction

Writing has been a central topic in applied linguistics for well over half a century and is a key area of teaching and research. Its complex, multifaceted nature seems to constantly evade adequate description and explanation, and many forms of inquiry have been summoned to help clarify both how writing works and how it should best be taught. An important factor is, of course, the overarching significance of writing in all our lives, its roles in social, professional and academic contexts, and the importance it has in determining our life chances. Writing is central to our personal experience and social identities, and we are often evaluated by our control of it. The various purposes of writing, then, the increased complexity of its contexts of use, and the diverse backgrounds and needs of those wishing to learn it, all push the study of writing into wider frameworks of analysis and understanding.

I also want to explore the teaching of writing because this is perhaps the most difficult skill for students to acquire and the most difficult for teachers to teach. One reason for this difficulty is that we need to have some knowledge of five things before we sit down to write:

- Content knowledge – what are you going to write about?;
- System knowledge – how to put it together (spelling, punctuation & grammar);
- Process knowledge – constructing the text through drafts and revisions;
- Genre knowledge – how the content is organised as a message;
- Reader knowledge – how to anticipate the readers attitude and what they need to know.

All these are important, and expertise requires a combination of several of them.

In this paper I want to offer a brief survey of the frameworks and approaches to teaching and researching writing, focusing on three main orientations (Hyland, 2022). Each focus assumes a different idea about what writing is and implies different ways of teaching and researching it:

- The first approach concentrates on the products of writing by examining **texts**.
- The second focuses on the writer and the **processes** used to create texts.
- The third approach emphasises the role that **readers** play in writing, showing how writers think about an audience in creating texts.

These three approaches have become blurred as teachers and researchers have drawn from each and combined them, to both learn more about writing and to provide better teaching and learning methods. In any classroom, then, a teacher may draw on a combination of these. But I think it is helpful to separate them to see clearly what we are doing when we make teaching decisions. We need to know the theories, assumptions and research which support our teaching practices.

2 Text-oriented research and teaching

First, text-oriented approaches consider writing as an outcome, a noun rather than a verb, viewing writing as the words on a page or screen, and here we see texts either as *objects* or as *discourse*.

2.1 Texts as objects

First of all, seeing texts as objects means understanding writing as the application of rules. Writing is a 'thing' independent of particular contexts, writers, or readers – and learning to become a good writer is largely a matter of knowing grammar. So this view sees texts as arrangements of words, clauses, and sentences, and its exponents believe that students can be taught to say exactly what they mean by learning how to put these together effectively. In the writing classroom teachers emphasise *language structures*, often in these four stages (Hyland, 2019):

1. *Familiarisation*: learners study a text to understand its grammar and vocabulary;
2. *Controlled writing*: then they manipulate fixed patterns, often from substitution tables;
3. *Guided writing*: then they imitate model texts – usually filling in gaps, completing texts, creating topic sentences, or writing parallel texts;
4. *Free writing*: learners use the patterns they have developed to write an essay, letter, etc.

But while this has been a major classroom approach for many years, it draws on the now discredited belief that meaning is contained in the message, and that we transfer ideas from one mind to another through language. It assumes that a text says everything that needs to be said with no conflicts of interpretations, no reader positions, no different understandings, because we all see things in the same way. Accuracy is just one feature of good writing and does not on its own facilitate communication. Even the most explicitly written contracts and legal documents can result in fierce disputes of interpretation. So our goal as writing teachers can never be just training students in accuracy because all texts include what writer's assume their readers will know, and how they will use the text. The writer's problem is not to make everything explicit, but to make it explicit for particular readers, balancing what needs to be said against what can be assumed.

2.2 Texts as Discourse

A second perspective sees texts as *discourse* – the way we use language to communicate, to achieve purposes in particular situations. Here the writer is seen as having certain goals and intentions and the ways we write are resources to accomplish these. Teachers working with writing in this way seek to identify how texts actually work as communication, regarding forms of language as located in social action. A key idea here is that of *genre*, which is a term for grouping texts together. We know immediately, for example, whether a text is a recipe, a joke or a love letter and can respond to it and write a similar one if we need to. We all have a repertoire of these responses we can call on to communicate in familiar situations, and we learn new ones as we need them. Some examples of school genres are shown in Figure 1 (Hyland, 2004a).

Figure 1

Some common school genres and their structures

Genre	Stages	Purpose
Recount	Orientation Record of Events (Reorientation)	provides information about a situation presents events in temporal sequence brings events into the present
Procedure	Goal Steps 1-n (Results)	gives information about purpose – in title or intro activities needed to achieve the goal in correct sequence final state or 'look' of the activity
Narrative	Orientation Complication Evaluation Resolution	information about a situation one or more problems for the characters to solve the major event sorts out the problems for the characters
Report	Problem Reason (Conclusion) Recommendations	identification of a problem possible reasons for or consequences of the problem Suggestions for solving the problem measures to be adopted as a result of the report

Genre reminds us that when we write we follow conventions for organising messages because we want our reader to recognise our purpose. Genre approaches describe the stages which help writers to set out their thoughts in ways readers can easily follow, encouraging us to look for organisational patterns and salient features. So, looking at texts as discourse can tell us a lot about how we create meanings: what writers are trying to achieve when writing and how they do it.

Genres encourage us to look for organisational patterns, and we find them in even the most apparently personal and expressive kind of writing. In an analysis of the acknowledgments in 240 PhD and MA dissertations written by Hong Kong speakers of English, for example, I found students used the structure shown in Figure 2.

As we can see, the acknowledgement structure consists of a main thanking move sandwiched between optional Reflecting and Announcing moves (Hyland, 2004b). So first the writer offers a brief introspection on his or her research experience. Then there is the Thanking Move where credit is given to individuals and institutions for help with the dissertation, and this can consist of up to 4 steps. First, a sentence introducing those to be thanked, followed by thanks for academic help. This was the only step that occurred in every single text, supervisors were always mentioned, and always before anyone else, but sometimes other academics appeared here too. Next there is thanks for providing resources such as clerical, technical & financial, and then thanks for moral support from family and friends for encouragement, friendship, sympathy, etc., and this occurred in two thirds of all texts. The final Announcing Move was uncommon, but here writers accept responsibility to show that the thesis is theirs and not the work of all the people they've thanked.

Figure 2

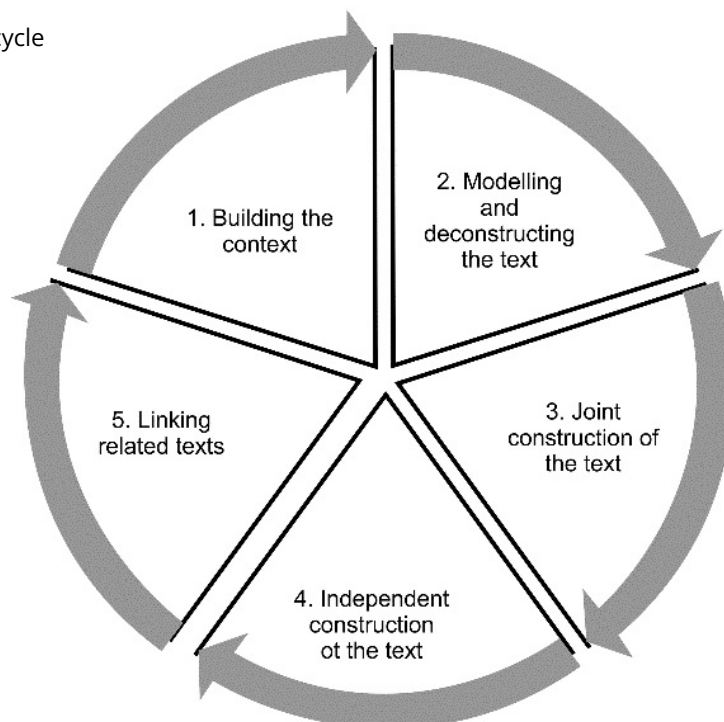
The structure of dissertation acknowledgements (Hyland, 2004b)

Move	Example
1 Reflecting Move	The most rewarding achievement in my life, as I approach middle age, is the completion of my doctoral dissertation.
2 Thanking Move	
2.1 Presenting participants	During the time of writing I received support and help from many people.
2.2 Thanks for academic help	I am profoundly indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Robert Chau who assisted me in each step to complete the thesis.
2.3 Thanks for resources	I am grateful to The Epsom Foundation whose research travel grant made the field work possible and to the library staff who tracked down elusive texts for me.
2.4 Thanks for Moral support	Finally, thanks goes to wife who has been an important source of emotional support.
3 Announcing Move	However, despite all this help, I am the only person responsible for errors in the thesis.

In the classroom genre teaching means attending to grammar, but this is not the old disembodied grammar of the writing-as-object approach but a resource for producing texts. A knowledge of grammar shifts writing from the implicit and hidden to the conscious and explicit to allow students to effectively manipulate language (Hyland, 2004b). In writing classes this means getting students to notice, reflect on, and then use the conventions to help them produce well-formed and appropriate texts. One approach widely used in Australia is the teaching-learning cycle (Figure 3).

Figure 3

The teaching learning cycle



The cycle helps us plan classroom activities by showing genre learning as a series of linked stages which scaffold, or support, learners towards understanding texts. The key stages are:

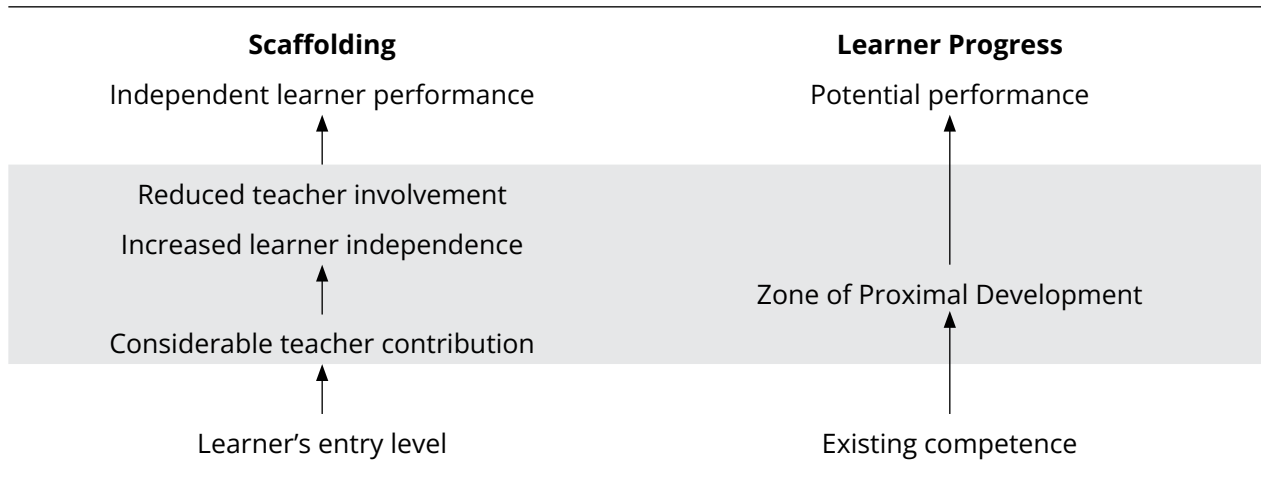
1. First understanding the purpose of the genre and the settings where it is used: So, how it fits into target academic situations. Who writes it, with whom, who for, why, etc.? What is the relationship between the writer and reader? What degree of formality is involved? This might involve presenting the context through films, site visits, guest speakers, etc. or using simulations, role plays or case studies to bring the context to life.
2. The second stage involves modelling the genre and analysing it to reveal its stages and key features (what are the main tenses, themes, vocabulary, and so on). Possible activities here are getting students to sequence, re-arrange and label text stages, asking them to re-organise scrambled paragraphs or re-write unfinished ones, or getting them to complete gapped sentences or write an entire cloze from formatting clues.
3. The third stage involves the joint construction of the genre with students, either in groups or individually, supporting students in their writing as they collect information through library or internet research and interviews, as they create a parallel text following a given model or as they work in small groups to construct texts for presentation to the whole class.
4. Fourth is independent writing, with students working alone or in groups while monitored by the teacher. Possible activities are outlining and drafting a text based on pre-writing activities, rewriting a text for another purpose by changing the genre from an essay into a news article or notes to a report, or revising a draft in response to others' comments.
5. Finally the teacher relates what has been learnt to other genres and contexts. This can be done by showing how a genre fits into a chain of genres to achieve a purpose such as the interview which follows a job advert, application letter, etc., or comparing written and speech genres in the same context.

Each stage therefore has a different purpose and so draws on different classroom activities. The main features of the cycle are that students can enter it at any stage depending on what they know about the genre, and genres can be recycled at more advanced levels of expression. Perhaps more importantly though, it provides scaffolded learning for students. As I show in Figure 4, the kind of scaffolding provided by the cycle supports students through what Vygotsky (1978) called the 'the zone of proximal development', or the gap between student's current and potential performance. As we move round the circle, direct teacher instruction is reduced and students gradually get more confidence and learn to write the genre on their own. Their autonomy increases as they gain greater control over the genre.

Genre teaching has been criticised for stifling creativity by imposing models on students. Obviously teachers might teach genres as recipes, so students get the idea that they just need to pour content into ready made moulds. But there is no reason why providing students with an understanding of discourse should be any more prescriptive than providing them with a description of parts of a sentence or the steps in a writing process. The key point is that genres *do* constrain us. Once we accept that our goals are best achieved by, say, writing a

Figure 4

Teacher-learner collaboration (Based on Feez, 1998, p. 27)



postcard or an essay, then we will write within certain expected patterns. The genre doesn't 'dictate' that we write in a certain way nor determine what we write; it enables choices to be made to create meaning. Genre theories suggest that a teacher who understands how texts are typically structured, understood, and used is in a better position to intervene successfully in the writing development of his or her students

3 Writer-oriented research and teaching

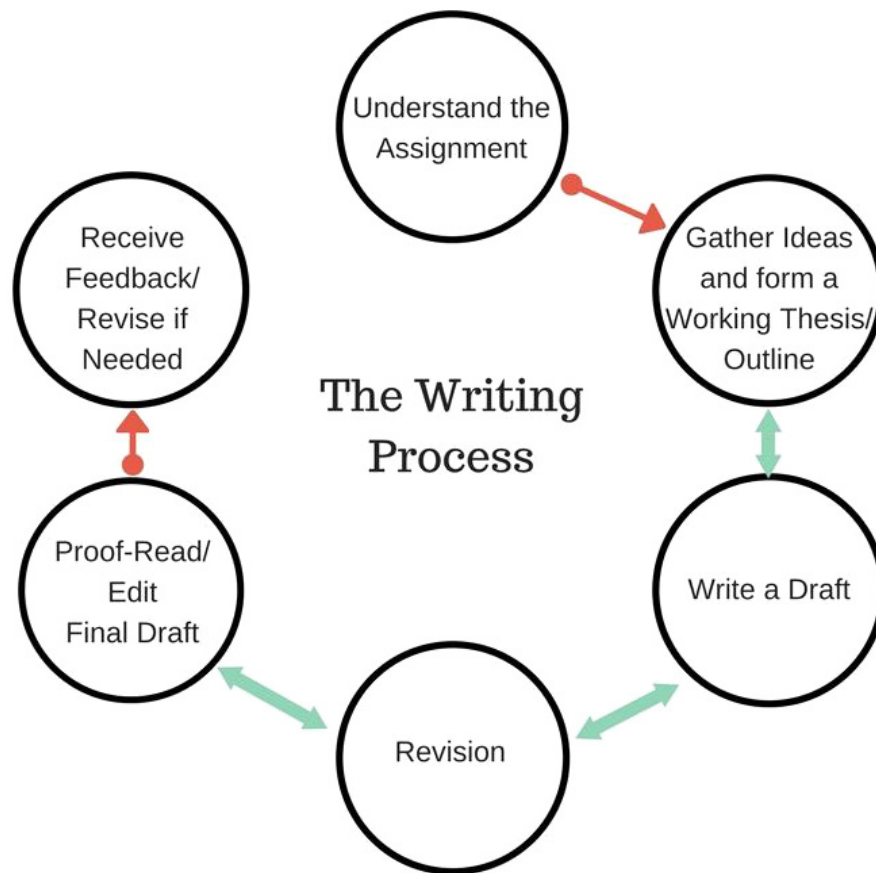
The second broad approach focuses on the writer, rather than the text. Interest here is on what good writers do when they write so that these methods can be taught to L2 students. Most teachers are familiar with process writing techniques and make use of brainstorming, peer and teacher feedback, multiple drafts, delaying corrections until the end, and so on. Writing is seen as a process through which writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to create meaning. It is more of a problem solving activity than an act of communication – how people approach a writing task as the solution to a series of problems. Essentially, process theorists explain writing using the tools and models of cognitive psychology and Artificial Intelligence. In the model there is a memory, Central Processing Unit, problem-solving programs, and flow charts. The flow chart in Figure 5 is well known to teachers. It shows that writers don't create texts by thinking → writing → editing, but keep jumping between these stages.

Through case-studies and think-aloud protocols, process approaches tell us that writing is about discovering and formulating ideas as we create personal meanings. The flow chart shows us that:

- writers have goals and plan extensively;
- writing is constantly revised, often even before any text has been produced;
- planning, drafting, revising, and editing are recursive and potentially simultaneous;
- plans and text are constantly evaluated by the writer in a feedback loop.

Figure 5

A flow chart of the writing process



For some teachers the model helps explain the difficulties their L2 students sometimes have because of the writing task and their lack of topic knowledge and we cannot deny that the quantity and impact of the research into the writing process has been enormous. This advises teachers to:

- set pre-writing activities to generate ideas about content and structure;
- encourage brainstorming and outlining;
- give students a variety of challenging writing tasks;
- require multiple drafts;
- give feedback on drafts and facilitate peer response;
- delay surface corrections until the final editing.

Writer-oriented approaches are influenced by cognitive psychology rather than applied linguistics, emphasizing what people think about when they write rather than the language they need to do it. For me this creates some serious problems for teaching writing (Hyland, 2003).

First of all, by over-emphasising psychological factors it neglects the importance of how context influences writing. Process tends to represent writing as a decontextualised skill as it focuses on the writer as an isolated individual struggling to express personal meanings. There is little understanding of the ways language is used in particular domains or what it means

to communicate in writing. In fact, we rarely just write, we write for a purpose in a particular context, and this involves variation in the ways we use language, not universal rules.

Second, this is a discovery-based approach which doesn't make the language students need explicit when they need it. Feedback is withheld until towards the end of the process and even then teachers are often concerned about much intervention. Students are not taught the language structures of the genre they are writing but are expected to discover them in the process of writing itself or through the teacher's feedback on drafts. This might be sufficient for L1 students, but L2 writers find themselves in an invisible curriculum as Delpit (1988, p. 287) points out:

Adherents to process approaches to writing create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them. Teachers do students no service to suggest, even implicitly, that 'product' is not important. They will be judged on their product regardless of the process they utilized to achieve it. And that product, based as it is on the specific codes of a particular culture, is more readily produced when the directives of how to produce it are made explicit.

Third, a writer-oriented model assumes that making the processes of expert writers explicit will make novices better writers. But not all writing is the same; it doesn't always depend on an ability to use universal, context-independent revision and editing practices. Exam writing doesn't involve multi-drafting and revision for instance, and academic and professional writing is often collaborative and time constrained. Different kinds of writing involve different skills.

Finally, process models disempower teachers. This is a model of learning based on personal freedom, self-expression and learner responsibility, all of which might be stifled by too much teacher intervention. This reduces us to well-meaning bystanders who just assign tasks and give feedback. Because language and text organisation tend to be tacked on to the end of the process as "editing," rather than the central resources for constructing meanings, students are given no way of seeing how different texts are written for particular purposes and audience. So while a process approach will help novice writers to become more effective at generating texts, this cannot help them understand what their readers expect to find in those texts.

4 Reader-oriented research and teaching

Writer-oriented research sees context as the site of writing, where the writer is, what he or she is thinking of, and so on, but a final approach expands the idea of context beyond the local writing situation to the reader's context and what writers do to address the reader. When we write we choose our words to connect with others and present our ideas in ways that make most sense to them. We try and draw readers in, to influence, persuade, inform or entertain them by a text that sees the world in similar ways to them, and we do this by using the words, structures and kinds of argument they will accept and understand.

So a reader-oriented view of writing emphasizes the *interaction* between writers and readers: The process of writing involves creating a text that the writer assumes the reader will recognise and expect. And the process of reading involves drawing on assumptions about what the

writer is trying to do. Mike Hoey (2001) says this is like dancers following each other's steps, each building sense from a text by anticipating what the other is likely to do. This is one of the reasons why writing in English is so difficult for speakers of other languages because what is seen as logical, engaging, relevant or well-organised in writing, and what counts as evidence, irony, conciseness and coherence, are likely to differ across cultures.

It is the unfamiliarity of these expectations that often makes writing in a foreign language so difficult. Some cultures, for example, favour deductive forms of writing, setting out the main point then adding support, while others prefer an inductive approach, getting to the point eventually; some are more formal than others, some more impersonal. Culture isn't the only explanation of course – we can't simply read off the ways students are likely to write on the basis of assumed cultural preferences or vice versa – we can't, for example, identify a Japanese writer by his or her linguistic choices in English. But it is clear there are different ways of organising ideas and structuring arguments in different languages and this can have implications for teachers of Japanese to English speaking students.

Research suggests, for instance, that compared with many languages, texts in English tend to be more explicit about their structure and purposes with constant previewing and reviewing of material, to be less tolerant of digressions, and to use more sentence connectors (such as *therefore*, *in addition*, and *however*). For Clyne (1987) this is because English makes the writer rather than the reader responsible for clarity and this is very different from German, Korean, Chinese, and Japanese where the reader is expected to dig out the meaning. The writer compliments the reader by not spelling everything out and the text is more complex with less explicit signalling, but in English the onus is on the writer to set things out so they can be easily understood. So by looking at large numbers of samples, we can see the ways that texts are typically expressed by particular groups based on their usual ways of relating to readers. This shows us that writing is **NOT** individual but social.

Considering readers means looking at the ways writing is used by social groups and the concept of a *discourse community* is important here as a way of joining writers, texts and readers together. Discourse communities have been defined in different ways, so that Swales (1990), for instance, sees them as having collective goals, while Johns (1997) suggests they have common interests, rather than goals. Barton (2007) takes a middle way and sees them as loose-knit groups engaged in either producing or receiving texts:

A discourse community is a group of people who have texts and practices in common, whether it is a group of academics, or the readers of teenage magazines. In fact, *discourse community* can refer to the people the text is aimed at; it can be the people who read a text; or it can refer to the people who participate in a set of discourse practices both by reading and writing.

Discourse community continues to be a problematic idea, often laying too much stress on what people share rather than the disputes and differences that occur in all communities. People have different commitments, stakes and statuses in a community and these are not accounted for, nor is it clear how 'local' such communities are. Are all writing teachers a community? All teachers? Members of a university department, a discipline, or just a specialism? But discourse community has been very influential in researching and teaching writing, particularly in EAP and ESP, showing us how writing works in different disciplines and why,

for example, the kinds of essays we need to teach physics students look very different from those needed by students in history.

For teachers this means that different disciplines value different kinds of argument and set different writing tasks.

- In the social sciences, for instance, synthesising multiple sources is important, while in science, describing procedures, defining objects, and planning solutions are required.
- In post-graduate programmes, engineers give priority to describing charts, while business studies faculty require students to compare ideas and take a position.
- In undergraduate classes, lab reports are common in chemistry, program documentation in computer science, article surveys in maths, and project reports in social sciences.

These issues have yet to be explored in other languages as far as I know, but they have serious implications for teachers of foreign languages: we need to be clear about the purposes, genres and readers that our students will need to communicate before we begin to teach them.

A reader-oriented approach, therefore suggests that instead of basing teaching on our impressions of writing, we need to study texts carefully and look for what features are used to engage different readers, helping them to understand that there are different patterns for different contexts and genres and how writing works in target contexts. This is called rhetorical consciousness raising, and I will mention just three ways which have potential for achieving these goals.

i. Writing frames

A frame is simply an outline to scaffold and prompt students' writing. It gives them a genre template to help them to start, connect, and develop their texts appropriately while concentrating on what they want to say. Frames provide a structure for writing which can be revised to suit different circumstances and can take many different forms depending on the genre, the purpose of the writing, and the proficiency of the students. Figure 6 shows a frame for an essay draft, providing students with both a skeleton of the genre and ways of connecting ideas to achieve a logical and coherent text.

Figure 6

A writing frame for first draft of a discussion (Based on Wray and Lewis, 1997).

There is a lot of discussion about whether *Smoking should be allowed in public buildings*

The people who agree with this idea claim that *people have rights and should be allowed to enjoy themselves*

They also argue that *there are too many laws stopping people to do what they like*

A further point they make is *Smoking is an addiction and people cannot stop easily*

However there are also strong arguments against this point of view. Most of our class believe that *people shouldn't be allowed to smoke anywhere they like.*

They say that *smoking is dangerous even for people who do not smoke*

Furthermore they claim that *it is a bad influence to children and creates pollution and litter.*

After looking at the different points of view and the evidence for them I *think smoking should be banned in public* Because *it is dangerous and dirty.*

ii. Genre portfolios

It is also important that students study a number of text examples to encourage reflection on similarities and differences. Ann Johns (1997) advocates using 'genre portfolios' which require students to write a range of genres and then collect them together in a folder for assessment. Essentially, the purpose of portfolios is to get a more accurate picture of students' writing, what they can do and how they can vary their language for particular purposes and readers. But they have a consciousness raising function by getting students to think about similarities and differences between genres as learners can be asked to write a reflection on the texts and on what they learnt. Figure 7 shows a mixed-genre portfolio for secondary school students in Singapore.

Figure 7

A genre portfolio with reflective questions

An argumentative essay.

'Why did you organise the essay in this way? What phrases or parts of the essay do you particularly like? Are you satisfied with this? Why or why not?

A research-based library project. (All notes, drafts and materials leading to the final paper).

What difficulties did you encounter writing this? What did you learn from writing it?

A summary

Why did you select this particular summary? How is it organised? Why is it organised like this? What are the basic elements of all the summaries you have written?

A writer's choice.

What is this? When did you write it? Why did you choose it? What does it say about you?

An overall reflection of the portfolio. (A letter to the teacher integrating the entries)

iii. Audience analysis

Finally, students can be encouraged to study real readers, interviewing proficient users of a genre about their own writing. Perhaps more practically in many situations, we can encourage them to think about who their readers are and what they need from a text.

A useful task here is to ask students to consider the likely response of readers to the content of their text. How, for example, will readers of a student newspaper react to an article arguing for higher tuition fees? Will they be immediately sympathetic to the idea or need persuading?

What arguments and rhetorical choices might best help them accept it? These kinds of issues also encourage talk around texts as students collaborate to consider their audience. Tribble (1997), for example, discusses this issue when considering a writing task which asks students to write a list of instructions on how to use the public transport service in their city or the rules of a game they are familiar with to an outsider.

Another method is to create a simple checklist to sensitize students to the importance of attending to shared knowledge. Figure 8 is an example from White and Arndt (1991) based on an example response to a letter of complaint.

Figure 8

An audience awareness prompt for a letter of adjustment

A	B	C	D
What do I know about the topic?	What does my reader already know about it?	What does my reader not know?	What is my reader's attitude likely to be?
Customer bought some biscuits. There was something hard in one of them.	As for A	What the company will probably do about it, e.g., apologise, offer refund, etc.	Customer is very annoyed. She will expect compensation.

5 Conclusion

I have tried to introduce and critique the major frameworks that are used to look at writing and at the same time to argue that writing isn't just words on a page or the activity of isolated individuals creating personal meanings. It is *always* a social practice, influenced by cultural and institutional contexts. What this means for writing teachers, whether we are teaching English or other languages is that we need to become researchers of the texts our students will need and the contexts in which are likely to need them. And then, through our classroom activities, to make the features of these texts as explicit as we possibly can.

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