Chapter 6

Process vs. Product: Arabic and English Writing Classrooms in Oman

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ABSTRACT

Learning how to write has long been perceived as an extremely complex and demanding task. Perhaps as an acknowledgement of this complexity, writing instruction in the Arab world in both English and Arabic has traditionally occurred in teacher-centred classrooms where product-oriented approaches dominate. However, recent reforms in many countries in the region, including in Oman, have favoured a more process-oriented approach to writing instruction in both languages. Despite this, much of the current research raises questions about whether more process-oriented approaches to writing are actually being implemented. This chapter, therefore, examines whether more process- or product-oriented approaches are being employed in English and Arabic writing classrooms in Omani schools. Results indicate that, despite the Basic Education curriculum in Oman stipulating a process approach to writing in English and Arabic, instruction in both languages tends to be more product-oriented, especially in English classrooms.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is often considered one of the most complex human activities (Flower & Hayes, 1980, 1981). It is a demanding intellectual and cognitive process that requires much effort, knowledge, determination, perseverance, and concentration. It is also a creative process and one of discovery that can serve to formulate and shape ideas. Writing differs markedly from spontaneous speech because it deals with style, register and rhetoric, and lacks the contextual clues found in face-to-face conversations, such as tone, gesture and intonation. Essentially, a reader is confronted with
squiggles on a page. So, how does the writer make sure that the reader can decode these squiggles and understand what was meant or at least glean some message from them?

Even well-known native speaker writers find writing very challenging. They often speak of its complexity and difficulty and the huge effort that goes into it. If this is the case with native speaker writers, what about second and foreign language speakers? The task of writing in a foreign or second language must be harder, more formidable, and sometimes even forbidding. This is due to a number of reasons, though one of the most significant is the fact that L2 writers have two simultaneous composing systems as points of reference as they write. They also lack native-like intuition about grammar and vocabulary and their linguistic repertoire is often limited. Moreover, they may also lack knowledge about the foreign language culture, associated ways of thinking, arguing and organizing a written text, which often results in an inadequate grasp of the rhetorical patterns specific, for example, to English writing.

For these reasons, the role of the teacher is crucial in learning how to write in a foreign or second language. The methodology the teacher adopts might have a profound and lasting effect on how the L2 learner perceives writing and develops as a writer. Two main approaches have traditionally dominated instruction in L2 writing: the product approach and the process approach. In Oman, writing classrooms in both Arabic and English have often been characterized by an almost exclusive reliance on the product approach. This has been the case for a number of reasons, including a tendency towards hierarchical teacher-centred classrooms in which memorization and reproduction dominate. Here, learners are often more interested in committing to memory a model of writing that is appropriate for a given exam task in order to gain high grades than in learning about the process of writing itself.

However, recent reforms culminating in the introduction of the Basic Education system have highlighted the importance of learner-centred classrooms where process writing is central to the development of students’ writing skills in both English and Arabic. Despite this newly-placed focus on process, a number of studies have questioned whether the kinds of learner-centred environments promoted by the Basic Education curriculum are actually being realized in Omani classrooms, with factors such as textbooks, class sizes, and a lack of teacher training in learner-centred methods being cited as possible contributing factors (Abdenacer, 2006; Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi, 2010).

For these reasons, the current study sought to investigate whether more process-oriented approaches to writing are being implemented in the Arabic- and English-language classrooms of Omani government schools. In doing so, a 51-item Likert response key questionnaire was administered to 88 graduates of the Omani government school system currently attending a public university in the country.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Product Approach

The product approach has traditionally dominated writing in the language classrooms of the Arab world (Al-Hazmi, 2006). This approach can be characterized as follows:

1. Emphasizing the final product
2. Considering writing as a linear process
3. Emphasizing form and grammatical accuracy
4. Being teacher-centred
5. Using controlled and guided writing as dominant teaching techniques
6. Not fostering creativity and idea discovery
7. Not following the communicative approach
8. Asking students to write to one audience: the teacher
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