

Teaching efl writing in Vietnam: Problems and solutions - a discussion from the outlook of applied linguistics

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Abstract. Applied linguistics is defined as a discipline that uses a variety of methods to address language-based problems, one of which is that of language teaching and learning. Based on this definition, the article will define and tackle the problem of teaching EFL writing in Vietnam which has, for a long time, been considered a challenge for language teachers. Specifically, this article will explore three main areas of the problem: (i) How to raise students' awareness of why they should write in English, (ii) How to teach students to write in English, and (iii) How to assess students' writing skill. The article will be concluded that the problem of teaching EFL writing can be solved thanks to different methods such as psycholinguistics, SLA, syntax, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics, and that the solutions will help developing the students' English writing skill in particular and communicative competence in general.

1. Introduction

In the traditional view, applied linguistics is for language teaching. Nonetheless, Bardovi-Harlig [1], Davies [2], Grabe [3], and Cook [4] all contend that applied linguistics looks at language-based problems in a variety of areas, which include but are not limited to language teaching and learning. They also admit that to address such language-based problems, applied linguistics resorts to a wide range of methods which can be found in second language acquisition (SLA), psycholinguistics, syntax, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, among others.

The above-mentioned definition implies that language teaching and learning is one area to be exploited in applied linguistics. Based on

this definition, this article will address one problem related to EFL teaching and learning in Vietnam, and then provide some suggested solutions to deal with it.

The problem chosen for discussion in this article is that of teaching EFL writing skill, which places a lot of demands on any teacher and learner of EFL. Actually, according to Grabe and Kaplan [5], academically oriented second language (L2) learners need to develop L2 writing skill, and L2 teachers also need to know how to teach L2 writing. Nonetheless, most of EFL teachers in Vietnam find writing a complicated skill to teach, which, more or less, affects the students' learning outcomes. The problems of teaching EFL writing can be found in such questions as how to make EFL students aware of why they should write in English, how to teach students to write, how to give feedback to students' writing, and how to assess students'

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writing skill. It is hoped that the solutions provided in this article will be of use for later improvements in the teaching and learning of EFL writing in Vietnam.

2. Defining and Tackling the Problems of Teaching and Learning EFL Writing

Generally, as Grabe and Kaplan [5] discuss, language teachers in a writing course should be motivated to explore the connections between writing and language theories, psycholinguistics, SLA, formal linguistics, sociolinguistics, and applied linguistics. The teachers also need to consider the connection between a writing course and other courses in their students' total curriculum.

Particularly, the teachers should be aware of building an appropriate theory of language in teaching writing (Grabe & Kaplan, [5]). In the context of teaching and learning EFL writing in Vietnam, this theory of language can be developed based on Halliday's [6], that is, language use only occurs in social contexts, and meaning is instantiated through language use.

Grabe and Kaplan [5] also emphasize that only teachers who understand theory and make a transition from theory to practice can make the most appropriate decisions for a successful and meaningful writing course. It is, therefore, necessary for language teachers to build a theory of writing at first and foremost. As suggested by Grabe and Kaplan [5], current theories of writing need to represent a theory of motivation or attitude, some combination of the psycholinguistic processing in which writers engage, and a theory of social contexts that influence writing at any point.

The above-mentioned guidelines could be seen as having laid the foundation for the following suggested solutions.

2.1. How to Make EFL Students Aware of Why They Should Write in English

As Ur [7] puts it, language teachers should explain the function of writing as self-

expression and communication before having students practice writing skills. The function of writing can be exemplified as narrating, describing, reporting, and so on. The teacher's mission is certainly beyond that, however. Teachers should also explore students' motivation for writing, which, according to Kellogg [8], includes achievement motivation, intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic motivation. This will help the teacher design meaningful and purposeful writing tasks in accordance with students' motivation. For example, if students need to write research papers, reports, abstracts, memos, professional letters, project analyses, and proposals in English, the writing tasks should be closely related to such task types, thus making students realize the meaningful purposes of their writing.

2.2. How to Teach Students to Write in English

At present, the approach of teaching process-writing is being emphasized. This writing approach can be briefly summarized as a process of planning, writing and reviewing (Flower and Hayes, [9]). In this article, the discussion on the process approach will, however, focus on explaining how to provide input for students before writing, how to develop students' understanding of social contexts, and how to give feedback to students' writing since these seem to be the most serious problems that EFL teachers in Vietnam often encounter.

2.2.1. How to provide input for students before writing

It is obvious that language teachers need to provide learners with certain input before asking them to write. Input drives acquisition, which should be put ahead of teaching in any approach of language instruction that wants to be successful (VanPatten, [10]; Bardovi-Harlig, [1]). Therefore, how the teacher provides input for students and what kind of input to be provided are worth-concerning issues. As VanPatten [10] asserts, to facilitate the process

of turning input into intake, the instruction should be psycholinguistically motivated. For instance, the input provided prior writing can be given through reading since reading and writing go hand in hand. Learners will be motivated to write when they obtain necessary vocabulary, grammar and writing style through reading passages. Particularly, as suggested by Beck [11], authentic reading texts often contain different levels of adequacy in formal linguistics, that is, observational adequacy, descriptive adequacy, and explanatory adequacy. Consequently, students will develop their understanding of these three levels simultaneously, thus being able to present descriptive adequacy and explanatory adequacy in their writing, which, in fact, seem to be neglected in most grammar textbooks today. The combination of writing with reading also satisfies the requirement that language teachers need to consider the connection between the writing course with other courses in the total curriculum (Grabe & Kaplan, [5]).

2.2.2. How to develop students' understanding of social contexts

Grabe and Kaplan [5] claim that language is produced in contexts of use, and writing does not escape this constraint. For example, the student's writing style in a letter to his close friend will differ from that of the letter to his lecturer. In other words, the stylistic variation in communication largely depends on the contexts. (The concept of stylistic variation was strongly supported in Hartford's [12] and Davies' [2] contentions about how the context of communication affects the speaker's use of communication style.) It is, therefore, essential to help students develop writing styles appropriate for specific contexts, and make them aware of how contexts of language use can influence their writing. In general, this can be done by providing a context for students to write, in which the audience and the purpose for writing are made clear right in the instruction.

Grabe and Kaplan [5] also argue that students need to consider cultural/social

variation between L1 and L2 if they want to develop an understanding of social contexts. They contend that cultural aspects of the L2 writing setting can also create difficulties for learners coming from a different academic culture. For instance, Vietnamese students tend to present their ideas inductively and indirectly in L2 since inductive and indirect presentation is frequently conducted in their L1 as one popular culture practice. This means Vietnamese students may produce Vietnamese English, a variation of the English language, in their writing. Language teachers, therefore, need to ponder on this issue to understand their learners' behaviors (Hartford, [12]) in order to instruct learners to practice the direct writing style or make them aware of who they need to sound like. As English in the Inner Circle is considered the standard English, one possible way to familiarize learners with the direct writing style is getting them exposed to the English texts written by native speakers. Thanks to this, learners will know to what extent the Vietnamese cultural/social factors are proper for EFL writing.

Interestingly, learners' awareness of social contexts in EFL writing makes them become conscious of language variation in general and stylistic variation in particular. They will come to know that their Vietnamese English is one variation of the English language, and that Vietnamese English belongs to them as they are the owners of English in the Expanding Circle (Brown, [13]). More importantly, their awareness of social contexts is a crucial condition for developing their pragmatic competence in EFL learning (Kasper, [14]). When language teachers consider language as a means of communication in social contexts, and pragmatic function as the primary function of language, they will find it essential to develop pragmatic competence for themselves and for their learners. Consequently, as Kasper [14] denotes, language teachers should see the relationship between pragmatics and language instructions in order to make appropriate pedagogical decisions.

2.2.3. *How to give feedback to students' writing*

The issue of giving feedback to students' writing is related to the notion of being correct in English. According to Davies [2], correct writing is effective writing in its context because language is embedded in social life. Davies' viewpoint [2] largely affects the way of treating learners' errors that will be presented below.

There is a long-standing assumption that learners' errors are mainly resulted from the interference of their first language. Many EFL teachers in Vietnam also regard this as a vital reason when analyzing their learners' errors. Nonetheless, as Savignon [15] puts it, the analysis of learners' errors by means of contrastive analysis developed by Corder [16] is more direct but simpler than the contemporary approaches to error analysis, which analyze learner language as an evolving, variable system. Actually, SLA research has brought about more things for language teachers to consider rather than just looking at learners' errors in terms of how their L1 interferes their L2 learning. In analyzing learners' errors, EFL teachers need to understand SLA so as to be aware of learners' acquisition process and development stages. The knowledge of SLA will help EFL teachers assess learners' linguistic development in an insightful manner (Bardovi-Harlig, [1]). In the examples, (1) Mary is talking to a man. The man is Mary's father, and (2) The man who Mary is talking to him is her father, we can see that (2) suggests a higher linguistic development than the error-free production of (1). This means between the starting point and the end point, there may be a series of stages that are prescriptive incorrect, but that indicate progress.

Another issue in dealing with learners' errors lies in the way of correcting learners' grammatical errors. It is true that many EFL teachers tend to focus on correcting grammatical errors and that EFL learners also expect teachers to do this. Nonetheless, by giving both empirical reasons and theoretical

reasons, Truscott [17] proves that grammatical correction does not work. Truscott [17] also points out that grammatical correction may even be harmful. As a result, grammatical errors should not be seriously judged if they do not affect the transformation of meaning in the writing. In case grammatical correction must be provided, the teacher should specify what the error is, and explain why there is such correction, all of which aim to provide learners with an explanation for the acquisition of structural knowledge, thus equipping learners with explanatory adequacy.

Besides deciding how to treat learners' errors, language teachers should cooperate with students by sharing the correction workload with them. For example, the teacher can let students do the peer correction, which sensitizes students to the problems in their own paper, and gives them the sense of ownership in learning.

2.3. *How to assess students' writing skill*

The assessment type that EFL teachers in Vietnam often make use of to test students' writing skill is essay tests, which, according to White [18], cannot test all aspects of the learning process, let alone its hindering students from writing effectively under test conditions. To solve this problem, this article will conduct a discussion on portfolio assessment, which meets the two most important characteristics of a test, that is, validity and reliability (Bachman, [19]), as well as reduces the pressure of testing that students are likely to suffer.

Portfolio assessment is valid because it can measure all attributes of writing that have been taught. Indeed, the portfolio allows a collection of many different kinds of writing that students learn during the whole writing course (White, [18]). This comprehensive record gives the teacher a thorough idea of how students can make progress in the writing process, what they can achieve at each stage and how they evaluate their own and their peer's work.

Portfolio assessment is also reliable because it has specific and clear criteria as well as

assessment guidelines. Specifically, there should be checklists for students to do the peer review, self-edition, self-evaluation, and there should be a grading schema for the teacher to do the final evaluation. The teacher will make the checklists understandable to students by training students to use them. All of these can facilitate teachers and students to work in a collaborative effort (Fearn & Farnan, [20]).

3. Conclusion

The above-discussed solutions reveal that the problems in teaching and learning EFL writing can be addressed by a variety of methods such as psycholinguistics, SLA, syntax, sociolinguistics, and pragmatics. Language is viewed as being embedded in social contexts when the problems are defined and tackled.

The aim of such solutions is to better the teaching and learning of EFL writing in Vietnam. Additionally, the ultimate goal is to develop EFL learners' communicative competence, which includes grammatical competence, sociolinguistics competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence (Savignon, [21]). In accordance with Davies' contention [2], it is hoped that EFL learners in Vietnam have the same degree of language proficiency as native speakers', but the competence is not necessarily native-like.

The suggested solutions are not static, however. They are open to be questioned since there are still other issues that have not been addressed, one of which is the problem of curriculum design.

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Giảng dạy kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ: Vấn đề và giải pháp - bàn luận dưới góc nhìn của ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng

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Ngôn ngữ học ứng dụng là một khoa học sử dụng nhiều phương pháp khác nhau để giải quyết các vấn đề về ngôn ngữ, trong đó có vấn đề về dạy và học ngôn ngữ. Dựa trên cơ sở của định nghĩa này, bài báo nêu và giải quyết vấn đề về giảng dạy kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ, một kỹ năng được xem là khá thách thức đối với giáo viên từ bấy lâu nay. Bài báo sẽ chuyên sâu vào ba vấn đề chính: (i) Làm thế nào để giúp người học ý thức được lý do phải viết bằng tiếng Anh, (ii) Dạy cho người học viết tiếng Anh như thế nào và (iii) Đánh giá kiểm tra kỹ năng viết của người học ra sao. Bài báo kết luận rằng vấn đề về giảng dạy kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh như một ngoại ngữ có thể được giải quyết dựa vào các khoa học khác như tâm lý ngôn ngữ học, tiếp thụ ngôn ngữ thứ hai, cú pháp, ngôn ngữ học xã hội, và ngữ dụng học... Bài báo còn kết luận rằng những giải pháp nêu ra nhằm phát huy kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh lẫn kỹ năng giao tiếp của người học.