

Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing Pedagogy: An Action Research

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Received for publication: 07 November 2014.

Accepted for publication: 16 February 2015

Abstract

Writing is an essential human communication which has, however, proved to be complicated and difficult and school pupils' written discourse is usually below the required levels. This action research was carried out at Solusi High School in Zimbabwe using 2013 form three pupils as participants of the study. Two composition approaches, namely the Product Focused Approach and the Process Oriented Approach were administered unto the participants who wrote two sets of compositions (products of the approaches); these were marked and analyzed by means of descriptive statistics. Findings revealed that application of the Process Oriented Approach as a composition instructional pedagogy has shown better composition quality when compared to the Product Focused Approach. It was also discovered that learners could generally write meaningful compositions and the majority were likely to pass their "O" level examinations regardless of the approach used in composition writing. This is because other factors, other than the teaching approach, also affect composition writing output.

Keywords: Product Focused Approach, Process Oriented Approach, pedagogy

Introduction

The language I have learnt these forty years,
My native English, now I must forgo.

–Richard II: Act One, Scene Three

The above quotation from Shakespeare spoken by Thomas Mowbray of Norfolk when banished from England by King Richard shows an emotion experienced by many who have to forgo a native language and acquire a new one. This is the case with learners of English as a foreign and official language worldwide.

In Zimbabwe, all learning and official communication is done in English. Ndamba's study in 2008 revealed that both parents and school pupils in Zimbabwe prefer English language to vernaculars as medium of instruction. Mugore and Maireva (1995) also believed that since English is the working language of the government, business, and industry in Zimbabwe, an English-only policy seems to be a practical means to prepare students for higher education and the workforce. This policy is reinforced by the growing position of English as an international lingua franca worldwide.

Teaching and learning of English in Zimbabwe has a colonial history; Zimbabwe became a British colony in 1890. Since then, colonial education was introduced. At political independence in

1980, the country embarked on massive reforms in the education system in terms of planning, efficiency, quality and curriculum (Kanyongo 2005). Zimbabwe post-independent “Education for all Policy”, which makes education available for all, is one of the greatest achievement of Zimbabwe’s post-independence government as pointed out by Ndlovu (2013).

The Zimbabwe school curriculum is nationalized under the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESCC) English based objectives. The curriculum is also examination driven under the Zimbabwe School Examination Council (ZIMSEC) which was created in 1996 by an act of parliament when it dismissed the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate (UCLES) of the United Kingdom (USAP 2012).

Zimbabwe's education system consists of two pre-school years (grade zero A and Zero B) then seven years of primary education which is concluded with a national examination (USAP 2012). Passing of this examination is mandatory for entrance into secondary education, a level that comprises six years: four years for Ordinary Level (“O” Level) and two years for Advanced Level (“A” Level). The Zimbabwe academic year runs from January to December with three month terms each separated by one month holidays. The third term is associated with national examinations which commences in October, with "O" level and "A" level subjects also offered in June (Mano 2001). Passing “O” Level is key for entry into “A” Level, a highly competitive entrance. The majority of “O” Level holders either enter the workforce or proceeds to tertiary institutions like nursing and teacher training colleges.

In order for one to receive an "O" level pass, one needs to have passed a minimum of five subjects including English Language with a mark of "C" or better; thus the importance of English Language. The English "O" level examination therefore serves as a gateway for students who cannot proceed without it despite their other exam scores (Mano 2001). This is a great challenge since quite a number of students pass 5 “O” Levels without English Language. Kanyongo (2005) blamed the reforms that took place in Zimbabwe which did not focus on outcome assessment; indicators of quality education being reading and writing achievement which, he argued, failed to achieve sufficient attention during the reforms.

The English “O” Level examination comprises two compulsory papers (Paper One and Paper Two). Paper One is a one and half hour paper with mark allocation of 50; 30 marks for free composition while the other 20 are for a guided composition. On the other hand, paper two is a 50 mark paper on comprehension and language items. This study is focused on English Language Paper One which has the following writing skills objectives as stipulated in the syllabus (ZGCE “O” Level syllabus 2013-2017):

At the Ordinary Level examination, candidates should be able to:

- write a continuous narrative, an argument and a piece of descriptive or informative writing such as that of a process, of a character, a scene or of an event;
- write letters, both formal and informal, and a report from notes, diagrams, statistical data, pictures;
- write in a style and register appropriate to the subject matter, displaying a range of vocabulary and idiom appropriate to that subject matter;
- organize their work satisfactorily into paragraphs and show a sense of cohesion /coherence within paragraphs;
- show an awareness of discourse markers that include ‘however’, ‘moreover’, ‘on the other hand’, ‘first’, ‘thus’;

- write with grammatical accuracy, spell accurately and punctuate their work correctly. In particular, in punctuation, they should be able to mark sentence boundaries and direct speech.

When considering the above objectives, it can be seen that high quality composition standard is expected of the learner. However, writing skill is not naturally acquired but nurtured (Primadonnab 2010); it is learnt, usually from an instructor and most successfully in a formal academic instructional setting. The composition teacher therefore has a prominent role to play in students' writing ability. Writing involves composing; calling for an ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing (Myles 2002). Unfortunately, few "O" Level learners in Zimbabwe can be able to reach this degree of quality.

Secondary school teachers often complain of pupils' lack linguistic skills, use of poor registers and writing of incoherent texts when it comes to composition writing. Unfortunately, some teachers also lack pedagogical knowledge of writing; they can neither write nor teach composition properly, contrary to NCTE (2014) proposal that writing teachers should themselves be writers. The situation is worsened by pupils who are generally not interested in writing, a situation which might be worldwide; Colorado (2007) narrated her experience as a teacher in Massachusetts (USA) when her pupils of English as a Second Language could enjoy other school activities but were reluctant to write. All the above factors, especially in association with an examination oriented education system that undermines innovation, students' writing ability is heavily compromised.

Although a number of factors affect students' writing ability, a number of researchers (Badger and White 1999; Myles 2002 and Elashri 2013) proposed that the type of writing pedagogy employed affect pupils' writing ability. This research, therefore, wants to explore the two most employed composition teaching methods in Zimbabwe, that is, the Product Focused Approach (PFA) as Elashri (2013) put it across, and the Process Oriented Approach (POA).

In PFA, the conclusion of the learner's ability is given on the bases of the finished product (Zamel and Sternglass 1997). The teacher's task is on linguistic competency, that is, to provide drill work on specific language skills that are necessary in composition writing, for example, grammar rules and spellings; also decide on the topic, composition form and length of the composition to be written. Then it becomes the learner's task to follow instructions and conform to prescriptions so as to produce the required product ready for marking. During the marking process, the teacher then painstakingly concentrate on errors (usually in red ink in Zimbabwe) and may write some notes in the margins about the indicated composition error.

The PFA, therefore, concentrate much on the learners and the learning process and not the writing process (Badger and White 1999). This approach was the norm worldwide till the 1960s (Matsuda 2003) and is still widespread in Zimbabwe where composition writing is exam driven.

On the other hand, the POA, an approach that emanated after the 1960s as a reaction to dominancy of product centered pedagogy (Matsuda 2003), is an approach which considers that writing is a complex, recursive, dynamic process with a number of stages to follow which include: prewriting, drafting revising and editing (Brown 2001; NCTE 2014). Each stage of writing has its own form, rules, activities and displays. The pre-writing stage is characterized by planning, brainstorming, generating ideas and questioning by the writer (Graham 2003). This is when the topic is analyzed and decisions made on how it can be organized and written. Learners can find composition ideas from research and discussion with peers, among other sources.

When the pre-writing stage is over, the writing process begins and is usually associated with series of drafts which are meant to correct and refine the writing. Such type of writing, as propounded by The San Francisco School (2011) makes learners' critical skills develop equipping

them with evaluative skills. Graham (2003) pointed out that editing is the last stage before the final draft is produced.

The question of composition pedagogical approaches may not be new in some contexts, but this is not the case within the Zimbabwean situation where research is rather minimal. Of course some research has been done on the teaching aspect in Zimbabwe (Kahari 2014; Kanyongo 2005; Mano 2001; Ndamba 2008; Mugore and Maireva 1995); however, no one (according to the researcher's search findings) addressed composition writing, thus the need to fill in this gap. The study may be, therefore, of great importance in the English language fraternity, for example, Teachers Training Colleges (tertiary institution responsible for training teachers), who may get feedback on their English Teacher Training Programs so that they can make informed decisions and, when necessary, change accordingly. The researcher then wants to find out which of the two composition teaching approaches is associated with better results so that necessary and informed recommendations can be made to English Language teachers and educators in Zimbabwe and beyond its borders in a bid to find ways of improving pupils' written discourse.

The statement of the problem can be as follows:

Well written discourse is essential in the life of a pupil at school and equally important after school. However, in Zimbabwe, pupils perform poorly in composition writing, both in class and in public examinations. There is, therefore, need to find possible solutions so as to improve the pupils' performance in composition writing.

The following research questions will be answered:

1. What is the pupils' performance in composition writing when exposed to
 - a) Product Focused Approach (PFA)
 - b) Process Oriented Approach (POA)?
2. Is there any significant change in pupils' performance from the PFA and the POA approaches?

Materials and Methods

For this research all form three pupils, 129 in number at Solusi High School, Zimbabwe participated at the beginning of the study. However, 83 took it to the end of the study. The 46 who dropped along the course of the research were due to various reasons, for example, 5 blind pupils' braille compositions could not be trans-written because the school responsible specialist was busy. Some participants dropped because they were busy with homework and preparation for end of year examinations during the night study when most of the research was carried out.

Research Procedure

Product Focused Approach. Solusi Secondary School form 3pupils participated in the research during 2013 third term when students had covered most of the language topics in their syllabus (since this approach has emphasis on grammar aspects). The researcher checked with the English Language teacher, through the Scheme Book (a record book of syllabus coverage) in order to find out the language topic coverage. When satisfied with the coverage, the research procedure began.

Prior the research, after getting research permission from the school authorities, form 3pupils were asked to participate in the research which purpose and procedure were explained to them. They agreed. On the first day of research for each class, pupils wrote a composition (in accordance to Zimbabwe "O" Level requirements, that is, 350-400 words within a period of one and half hours). The topic, *Write a story based on the following words: She never thought that her father could be so caring* has been extracted from one of the past O" level public examination Paper One. After writing, the scripts were collected for marking.

Process Oriented Approach. The following session, the POA began. Another similar composition topic, *Write a story based on the following: In the middle of the night I heard screaming and a sound of breaking glass* was extracted from 2010 “O” level public examination paper one. Using the topic, the researcher exposed the participants to the Process Oriented Approach of composition writing, working with each class for an hour, three times a week for a month. The classes went through the writing stages; from the first draft until they produced the final draft of the composition. In the first stage, the pre-writing phase, I aided individual participants to plan, brainstorm and generate ideas. In the second phase, the individuals grouped together their ideas into meaningful composition units, that is, the introduction, body and the conclusion; the body being further divided into several paragraphs, each having a topic sentence, developers and a terminator.

When the first draft was successfully produced, the researcher encouraged the participants to revise their work concentrating on the composition organization, style, word choice and sentence construction. Participants wrote several drafts perfecting their work. Finally, everyone edited her/his work for the last time and when satisfied, they then wrote the final drafts and handed them for marking.

Marking: The researcher marked both sets of compositions concentrating on errors, putting a line and a symbol for each error on the following composition items: sentence structure, spellings, punctuation, repetition, tenses, articles, prepositions, adverbs, adjectives, pronouns, use of figure where words are appropriate, omissions, wrong use of the caret, number of words, discourse markers, paragraphs, word choice, subject-verb agreement, capitalization and word division. The above errors were selected basing on the ZGCE “O” Level syllabus 2013-2017 writing skills objectives.

Mark allocation was made on the bases of linguistic competency as Zvavanhu (2010) proposed, hence, an objective measure. Objective measures are moderately correlated with subjective measures of writing quality (Espin, Shin, Deno, Skare, Robinson and Benner, 2000) quoted in Graham (2009). Error count was done and all errors of more than one count were recorded ready for computations.

Data Processing

The obtained data from the Product Focused and the Process Oriented Approach was analyzed using descriptive statistics to show means, ranges, standard deviations and other variations of both sets.

Results

1. What is the pupils’ performance in composition writing when exposed to:
 - c) Product Focused Approach (PFA)
 - d) Process Oriented Approach (POA)?

Table 1: Participants’ mark computation

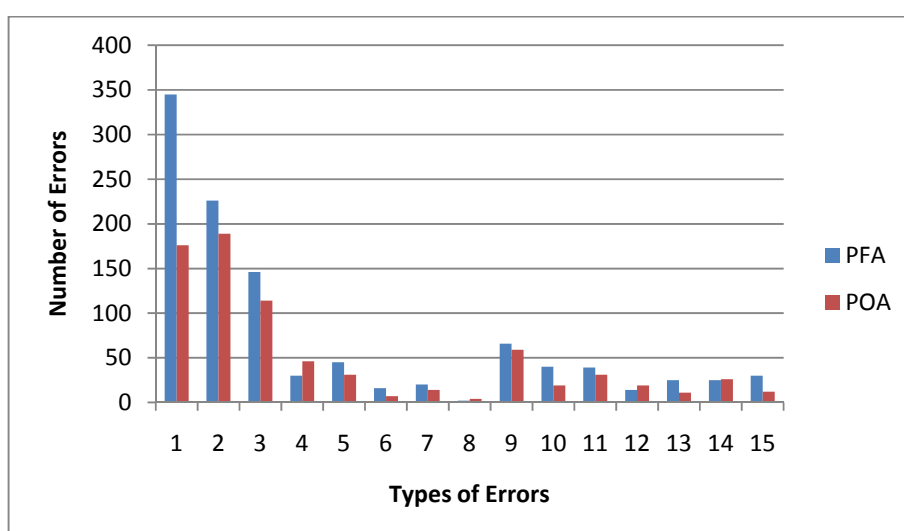
Description	PFA	POA
Total marks	30	30
Pass rate	53.75%	58.75%
Mark range	16	16
Mean	15.2	16.4

Learners’ performance was based on marks as well as quality of the written discourse. The compositions were marked out of 30, which is a Zimbabwe School Examination council (ZIMSEC) standard. For the PFA, learners’ marks had a wide range of 16, a mean of 15.2 and a 53.75% pass

rate as shown by the table below. This performance can be said to be an average one since it is very close to 50%.

For the POA, learners' marks had also a wide range of 16, a mean of 16.4 and a 58.75% pass rate as shown by the table above. This performance can, likewise, be said to be an average one, just like that for PFO.

When considering the quality assessment of the compositions, the bar chart below summarizes the learners' errors. Wrong sentence structure, wrong spellings and wrong punctuation were among the worst learners' errors as the table shows. These findings are similar to those by Al-Khasawneh (2010) who worked on Writing for Academic Purposes centering on the problems faced by Arab post-graduate students of the college of business at University Utara, Malaysia and found out that the students faced problems in vocabulary, organization of ideas, grammar, spellings and referencing.



Bar chart 1: PFA and POA number of errors

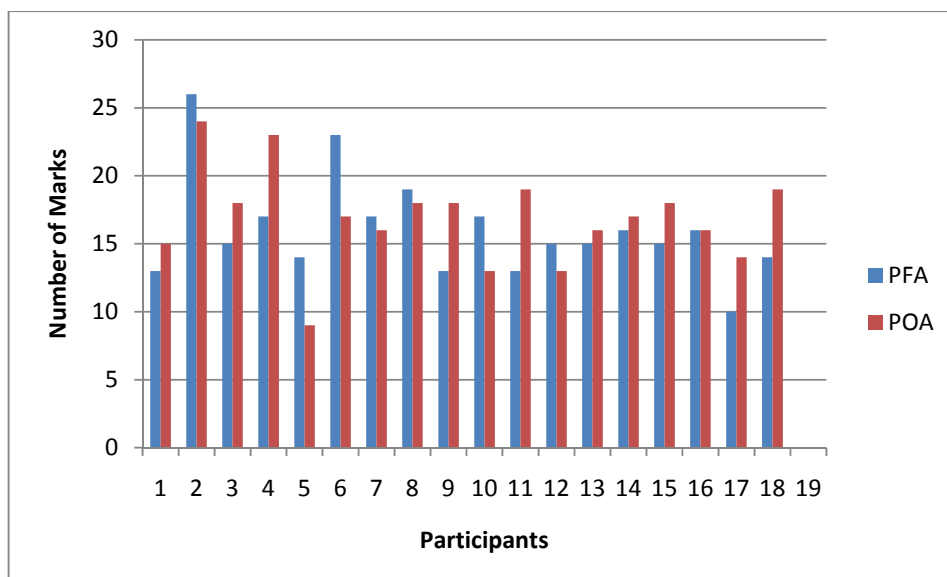
Key for types of Errors

Error Number	Error Description
1	Wrong sentence structure
2	Wrong spellings
3	Punctuation (wrong or/and omission)
4	Repetition
5	Wrong tenses
6	Unnecessary article
7	Wrong prepositions
8	Figures instead of words
9	Wrong word
10	Omission (word or/and phrase)
11	Wrong use of the caret
12	Wrong capitalization
13	Incomplete sentences
14	Word division
15	Too many words

For the quality of compositions, it can be argued that although the learners' errors remain multiple with POA (as was when exposed to PFA), with wrong sentence structures, wrong spellings and poor punctuation still dominating, there has been a remarkable improvement in the number of errors for most of the categories as the bars show. This is in line with Graham and Perrin (2007) who realized that POA improves students' quality of written work. It can be argued that the POA gives learners opportunities to eradicate errors that might not be addressed in "one draft" PFA procedure.

2. Is there any significant change in pupils' performance from the PFA and the POA approaches?

When comparing the two approaches overall, in terms of learners' composition marks, there is a slight difference of 5% in pass rate in favor of the PFA. The marks mean decreased by 1.3 from the PFA to POA while the marks range remained the same, that is, 16. However, individual marks indicated noticeable changes as shown by 18 randomly selected participants' marks shown below.



Bar chart 2: Randomly selected individual marks for both approaches (PFA and POA)

The bar chart above shows that of the 18 randomly selected learners, 10 improved their marks, 1 maintained the mark and 7 had a decrease in marks. There is therefore inconsistency in mark improvement bringing in a possibility of other factors influencing marks other than the teaching approach. Findings are similar to those by Leibowitz (2009) of Stellenbosch University, South Africa carried out a similar study that focused on a linguistic assignment written in English, given to a sample of 37 students at the University of Western Cape. The sample was dynamic. The findings indicated that proficiency in the dominant language is necessary but not enough for successful written performance; learners' socio-education background (since every topic has a social aspect) also affected students' performance in each particular composition topic.

On composition quality, there was a general remarkable improvement in learners' quality of writing in terms as in sentence structure, spellings, tenses and other linguistic aspects as shown by the bar chart below.

Table 2: PFA and POA number of errors

Error Description	PFA	POA
Wrong sentence structure	345	176
Wrong spellings	226	189
Punctuation (wrong or/and omission)	146	114
Repetition	30	46
Wrong tenses	45	31
Unnecessary article	16	7
Wrong prepositions	20	14
Figures instead of words	2	4
Wrong word	66	59
Omission (word or/and phrase)	40	19
Wrong use of the caret	39	31
Wrong capitalization	14	19
Incomplete sentences	25	11
Word division	25	26
Too many words	30	12

The table above shows decrease in number of errors in all of the categories above, serve two; repetition which increased by 53.3% and wrong word division that increased by 4%. For the rest of the categories, number of errors decreases by large margins, for instance, 78% and 51% in wrong punctuation and wrong sentence structure respectively. Even the error of writing too many words was rectified by the majority as shown by the decrease from 30 to 12 on the table.

These findings have similarities with those by Carstens and Fletcher in 2008 who worked on a 14 week essay writing module for second year History students in order to measure the effects of intervention through analytic scoring of pre- and post- test essays. Their findings were that students' writing abilities improved significantly between the pre- and the post- test. The improvements also tally with findings by Hall and Grisham-Brown (2011) who found out that creative opportunity and process-oriented teaching strategies provide the most meaningful writing experiences among learners.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that participants could generally write meaningful compositions and the majority were likely to pass their "O" level examinations regardless of the approach used in composition writing. This can be explained by the widespread use of English language in Zimbabwe's education system.

Application of the POA as a composition instructional method has shown a general improvement in learners' composition quality when compared to the PFA. Although large class sizes in most of Zimbabwe's schools makes it a challenge for some teachers to employ the POA, skilled and dedicated teachers who are liable to overcome dominant educational traditions and change according to learners' needs can bring in the improvement that are long overdue.

However, although these finding favours the (POA), it cannot be concluded that this is the "best Approach"; there might be nothing like a better or best approach due to other factors like suitability. Thus, a synthesis of approaches can be called for as proposed by Badger and White (1999).

It can also be argued that both approaches in question are limited in their own capacities since they leave out the valuable contextual social aspects of writing which Sinor and Huston (2004) advocate for in order to make writing more meaningful and relevant to the needs of the day. A more complete conceptualization of language performance, acknowledges personal characteristics, topical and real-world knowledge as well as affective schemata, among other factors related to the social and cultural context are essential (Brown, 2000).

It was also noted that, composition writing decency on a number of factors, for example, in Zimbabwe, English is learnt as a second language with the learners using, as Davies and Elder (2004) put it, two kinds of background knowledge, that is, the native language knowledge and the knowledge of the second language (English). Hence, other factors, other than the teaching approach, affect composition writing output.

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