

FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

**STUDENTS' ENGLISH WRITING STRATEGIES:
A CASE STUDY AT BAC LIEU UNIVERSITY****NGUYEN VAN UT***

ABSTRACT: This article focuses on exploring the English (L2) writing strategies used by students at Bac Lieu University in Vietnam, with a particular emphasis on the product-based and process-based approaches. The product-based approach tends to prioritize grammatical accuracy and language structure, whereas the process-based approach prioritizes the learning process itself. The results show that both approaches can be effective in improving writing skills in L2, but the choice depends on learners' needs and goals. The article also highlights the implications of both approaches and suggests that the integration of both strategies is necessary for effective L2 writing instruction.

KEY WORDS: process-based approach; product-based approach; writing skills; L2 writing strategies; integration.

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1. Introduction

There is no denying that writing is an essential component of language development as well as one of the critical language skills for acquiring and understanding second languages. Kroll (2003) points out that writing is a complex process which relates to the proficiency of various skills that add to the difficulty of writing. Thus, writing is considered as one of the most difficult language skills for people to learn and understand. Another research reported by Nunan (1989, p. 12) shows that "it is easier to learn to speak than to write no matter if it is a first or second language" because writing requires practice a great deal and to follow lengthy steps. Learners must not only be aware of vocabulary and ideas but also have a deep understanding of rhetorical organizations and language use. In the same vein, Richards and Renandya (2003, p. 303) argue that "there is no doubt that writing is the most difficult skill for second language learners to master". However, despite having incredible significance, writing is seldom given enough attention in language instruction. It can be challenging and time-consuming for many learners unless they have strategies to help them improve their writing skill. Therefore, it is essential for human beings to find efficient writing strategies to progress the acquisition of skilled writing.

2. Literature review

This section gives a look at English language (L2) writing strategies, presents some prior scholars' perspectives on L2 writing strategies, and offers some approaches to writing in English as a foreign language context.

2.1. L2 Writing strategies

Cohen (1998) defines writing strategies as actions or behaviors that writers use to make their writing more efficient. These assist writers in structuring and conveying their texts logically and effectively. Successful writers usually draw on previous approaches of writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to find good ways to improve their writing skills. These approaches can be called writing strategies which are considered useful tools to help writers to complete their task easily. Moreover, writing strategies help writers save writing time and not get confused when outlining and organizing ideas. Nevertheless, it takes L2 learners much time to improve their writing; especially, when they do not know which strategies are conformable to their wishes, they cannot choose the most effective method to apply in their writing.

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In addition, Sengupta (2000) declares that the more the strategic training is applied, the more the writing skills develop. When learners receive strategic training, they are taught specific techniques, tools, and approaches that they can use to plan, organize, draft, revise, and edit their writing. These strategies can help learners to overcome common writing challenges, such as writer's block, poor organization, and weak coherence. Furthermore, writing strategies can help learners to become more proficient in various aspects of writing, such as grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and style. In so many words, the strategic instructions have positive influence on the learners' writing. As a result, during the last decades, various methods to teaching L2 writing have emerged and drawn a clear account of the nature of L2 writing, with product-oriented and process-oriented approaches being two notable ones described in this article.

2.2. A review of studies in l2 writing strategies

For decades, L2 writing strategies have been consistently concerned by Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) researchers and educators. Studies into the teaching of writing skills has shown that there exist certain teaching approaches that enrich learners' proficiency in L2 writing. The author comes across numerous interesting research that are pertinent to L2 writing strategies in this article. Followings are summaries of some previous studies:

Mohite (2014) conducts a study called '*An Investigation into the English Language Writing Strategies Used by Polish EFL Secondary School Learners*'. This research explores the L2 writing strategies used by Polish secondary school learners. The results reveal that good language students used different writing strategies. They show the causes resulting in struggling with their English writing. Besides, the results express the learners are short of the understanding of the compositional aspect of the English writing and they do not consider their English written text as a means of communication.

Alnufaie and Grenfell (2012) carries out a study namely '*EFL Students' Writing Strategies in Saudi Arabian ESP Writing Classes: Perspectives on Learning Strategies in Self-Access Language Learning*'. This study aims to find out the writing strategies of one hundred twenty-one second year undergraduate Saudi student writers who are studying English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) in Jubail Industrial College. The writing strategies in this research are classified into two categories: product-based writing strategies and process-based writing strategies. The results of the study show that a variety of participants combine the two kinds of writing strategies and the top five writing strategies used by them follow the process-oriented approach.

Ouma (2005) performs a study entitled '*Relationship between Achievement Motivation and Performance in English Composition Writing among Secondary School Students in Nyando District, Kenya*'. The findings show that learners with intrinsic motivation do better than those with extrinsic motivation. Learners who have a genuine interest in the subject matter and a desire to learn for the sake of learning tend to perform better than those who are driven solely by external rewards such as grades or recognition. The findings also report that students who apply process-based approach in their writing, which focuses on the writing process and the development of ideas, achieve better results than those who apply the product-based approach, which prioritizes the final written product over the process of writing.

A study carried out by Eyinda and Shariff (2010) is '*Teaching of Writing in a Kenyan Secondary School: A Case Study of a Public Secondary School in Kenya*'. The aim of the research is to investigate the teaching of writing in an ESL classroom in a secondary school in Kenya. The findings of the study show that most teachers dominate in the classroom interaction. The findings also expose that teachers play a main role in the class proceedings although they use a great number of teaching and learning activities in their writing lessons. Moreover, teachers face challenges such as lack of

knowledge and skills, deficiency of interest to teaching writing, shortage of teaching and learning resources, large classes, and insufficiency of learners' interest in writing.

From the foregoing, it is evident that writing is one of the most important language skills that learners are required for their academic advancement. Writing allows learners to communicate their ideas effectively, engage in critical thinking, and demonstrate their understanding of course material. In addition, students' learning strategies have an effect on their learning of writing skills in L2. Learning strategies can help learners to develop their writing skills by improving their ability to organize their thoughts, use appropriate vocabulary and grammar, and develop coherent and well-supported arguments. Besides, researchers in L2 writing have paid attention to the role of feedback on learners' written essays, assessment practices in essay writing, and use of teaching and learning resources as the ways to enhance learners' writing skills.

2.3. Approaches to writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context

In the early 1960s, the audio-lingual method was very common and in the majority. It called attention to practice, punctuation, and grammatical structure. In the 1970s, learning writing had changed a little till the early 1980s with language-based writing. During the 1980s, teaching and learning writing developed to another way - the process method. With this way, writing was considered as a process of self-study. Writers were encouraged to express their feelings as much as possible. Gardner and Johnson (1997) claim that the writing process is either a well-structured procedure or a constant movement between various phases of the writing model. From that day onwards, most teachers and researchers have taken the process-oriented writing approach into account as an effective way. Since the mid-1980s, the genre-based approach has gradually known worldwide. It is considered as "a framework for language instruction" (Byram, 2004, p.234). This framework helps student writers to build meaningful texts based on several logical principles. In a word, to employ strategies in L2 writing, linguists as well as English Language Teaching (ELT) practitioners suggest some approaches into writing teaching such as product-based and process-based approaches for effective writing in classrooms. The word "approach" concerns "the theories about the nature of the language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language learning" (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p.16).

2.3.1. Product-based approach

Product-based approach is viewed as one of the most practiced approaches in the world. It concentrates on producing a final product based on a model paragraph or essay. In this approach, writing focus must be directed towards linguistic knowledge based on the use of vocabulary, grammar, and cohesive devices. Steele (2004) argues that the product-based approach to writing focuses on mechanical aspects of writing such as grammatical and syntactical structures, and imitating models. Learners are engaged in mimicking, copying, and transforming models of correct language. This approach is fundamentally related to correctness and form of the final product.

In product-based approach, modeling plays a central role, and it is considered as a beneficial source for supplying feedback to students as well as an effective teaching tool (Saeidi & Sahebkhair, 2011). The product-based approach chiefly concentrates on the final product rather than the process of producing a written text. Therefore, the learners will generate a lot of errors in their writing unless they are approached the sample texts. They need these samples to imitate the sentence structures and focus on the relevant features to produce their final product.

All in all, the product-based approach can be an effective way to teach writing, especially for learners who are just starting to develop their writing skills. It provides a clear goal and framework for the writing process, which can help to reduce anxiety and improve motivation. However, some critics argue that this approach may place too much emphasis on the final product at the expense of the writing process and the development of critical thinking and creative expression.

2.3.2. Process-based approach

According to Hyland (2002), the process-based approach calls attention to the progression that the text is produced rather than the final product. He indicates that this writing approach accentuates the roles of writing process such as pre-writing, drafting, evaluating, and revising. In this approach, after learners identify and engage in the topic, a variety of drafts of a task is written out. Then the learners sit back together to discuss and receive feedbacks from other learners. Finally, they revise their drafts based on the comments from other members in group or in class to have an outcome. With the process-based approach, L2 learners are not required to copy the spelling conventions or grammatical rules but are expected to produce ideas and associate them together properly instead of aiming at building a good piece of writing. It mainly concentrates more on the various classroom activities to help students develop their language use and they are expected to cooperate during writing progression.

Kroll (2001) expresses that the process-based approach is considered as an umbrella term for many writing types, which engages learners to do their writing tasks through a cyclic approach rather than a single approach. Student writers are required to go through stages of planning, drafting, receiving feedback, and revising their texts. They are expected to pace back and forth in cyclical movements of the stages. Throughout the activity, students can go back planning stage or any other stages if necessary though they are in the final stage; and the teacher plays a role as a facilitator who takes care of the students during the activities.

In summary, with process-based approach, it is concentrated on the writing process rather than on the final product. It also reveals that this approach impacts on learners' learning and their performance in L2 writing. However, this is a teaching approach, not a teaching method, so it is not officially recognized although many researchers have applied this approach in their experimental studies. This process-based approach may be useful in certain educational contexts, but its effectiveness compared to traditional teaching methods is still a matter of debate among educators and researchers.

3. Application

Writing strategies refer to the techniques that students use to plan, organize, and write effective pieces of text. The application of writing strategies in the classroom context in Vietnam has been a crucial area of focus for educators, given the challenges that students face in developing their writing skills in English, which is a second language for many Vietnamese students.

3.1. Applying product-based approach in Vietnamese L2 writing classroom contexts

Steele (2004, pp.27-28) shows that the product-based approach model is presented as four stages:

Stage 1. Familiarization: In this stage, students try to study model texts, and pay attention to the features of the genre. For example, "if studying a formal letter, students' attention may be drawn to the importance of paragraph and the language used to make formal requests. If students read a story, the focus may be on the techniques used to make the story interesting, and students focus on where and how the writer employs these techniques". The purpose of this stage is to make student writers aware of specific features of a certain text.

Stage 2. Controlled writing: The highlighted features are practiced under control in this stage. For example, "if students are studying a formal letter, they may be asked to practice the language used to make formal requests". In this stage, students have a chance to practice the skills with high freedom till they become ready and capable to write without restraint.

Stage 3. Guided writing: In this stage, the ideas are organized. This is also the most significant stage in this model. The fans of product-based approach believe that "the organization of ideas is more important than the ideas themselves and just as important as the control of language". The same as controlled writing stage, students have opportunity to practice the skills without restraint till they become ready and capable to write freely.

Stage 4. Free writing: The writing product is produced in this stage. This is the final product of the writing process. To manifest their language competence, “students individually use the skills, structures, and vocabulary they have been taught to produce the product”. In this stage, learners usually use their own words as well as their own skills to state what they want to write as part of a real activity such as an essay, a story, or a letter, etc.

The product-based approach for L2 writing can be applied to learners who are studying a second language. This approach is commonly used in language learning contexts where the goal is to develop students' ability to write in the target language. In addition, this approach can be applied to learners at different levels, from beginner to advanced, and across different age groups. It can be used in a variety of educational settings, such as in formal language classes, language learning programs, and language schools. The product-based approach can also be used for learners who are studying a specific type of writing, such as academic writing, business writing, or creative writing. The specific goals and expectations for the final written product will depend on the type of writing being taught. Besides, the approach can be applied to learners at different levels, from beginner to advanced, and across different age groups. It can be used in a variety of educational settings, such as in formal language classes, language learning programs, and language schools. Moreover, the approach can be used at any point during the language learning process. It can be used to teach specific types of writing, such as academic writing, business writing, or creative writing, or to teach writing skills more generally as well as to teach different types of writing, depending on the goals and expectations for the final written product. Furthermore, the product-based approach for L2 writing involves providing students with a clear goal or target for their writing, and then guiding them through the process of producing a final written product. This can be done by providing models of well-written texts, teaching writing conventions and strategies, providing opportunities for practice and feedback, and evaluating the final written product using rubrics or checklists.

Benefits and drawbacks of applying product-based approach in Vietnamese L2 writing classroom contexts

According to Ngo and Trinh (2011), when it comes to teaching English to Vietnamese learners, the product-based writing approach can have both advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, this approach emphasizes the importance of accuracy in writing, encourages students to develop language skills, and reduces errors. Additionally, this approach can help students organize their ideas more effectively and produce more coherent writing by encouraging them to plan their writing. Teachers also have better control over the writing process and can closely monitor progress. Furthermore, standardized evaluation criteria make it easy to compare and evaluate students' progress over time. However, Ngo & Trinh (2011) also assert that there are potential drawbacks to this approach. Students may not fully engage in the writing process and may feel overwhelmed by the pressure to produce a final product. Moreover, a product-based approach may not encourage experimentation and risk-taking with language, and writing tasks may not reflect the complexity of real-world writing contexts. This can create anxiety and stress for students, especially if they view writing as a high-risk activity. Therefore, teachers should consider the advantages and disadvantages and assess the needs and goals of their students and the context when deciding on the most appropriate approach to use in their L2 writing classes. Effective implementation of the product-based approach includes clear instruction, opportunities for practice and feedback, and evaluation of the final product through text.

3.2. Applying process-based approach in Vietnamese L2 writing classroom contexts

According to Steele (2004, pp.32-33), the process-based approach model consists of eight essential stages before language writers finish the final product as follows:

Stage 1. Brainstorming: It provides a starting point for building field knowledge by identifying what is clear about a topic and what new information needs to be explored and organized in

preparation for effective writing. Besides, this stage allows learners to hear and share knowledge and ideas.

Stage 2. Planning: Learners exchange ideas and decide to choose suitable and necessary ideas for the topic.

Stage 3. Mind mapping: Learners arrange the ideas into a diagram, a mind map, a linear form, etc. This stage categorizes involved ideas, which supports learners to structure their texts.

Stage 4. First draft: Learners begin to write the first draft based on the chosen ideas and their hierarchical relationship presented in the *mind mapping* stage.

Stage 5. Peer feedback: Learners exchange the drafts and then correct, give comments for their first drafts each other. When students give feedback to other students' writings and vice versa, they receive benefits from that work. As a result, they can improve their own drafts.

Stage 6. Editing: After receiving feedbacks from partners, learners begin to edit their draft based on the comments received. At the time, their draft becomes much better.

Stage 7. Final draft: Based on the content which is edited in the *editing* stage, learners complete their own writing.

Stage 8. Evaluation: Teachers evaluate learners' writing and give feedback on it.

The process-based approach for L2 writing can be applied for a wide range of learners who are studying a second language and want to improve their writing skills. This includes learners of all ages and proficiency levels, from beginner to advanced. The approach can be used in a variety of educational contexts, such as language schools, language learning programs, and formal language classes. In addition, the process-based approach is particularly useful for learners who struggle with writing, as it focuses on the process of writing, rather than just the final written product. It helps learners understand the various stages of the writing process and the different skills and strategies required for each stage. It also encourages learners to reflect on their writing, receive feedback from peers and teachers, and revise their writing based on this feedback. Moreover, this approach is beneficial for learners who want to develop their critical thinking skills and learn how to express their ideas and opinions in a clear and coherent manner. By focusing on the process of writing, learners can develop their writing skills more holistically and are better able to understand the nuances of language use and how to communicate effectively.

Benefits and drawbacks of applying process-based approach in Vietnamese L2 writing classroom contexts

In Vietnamese L2 writing classroom environments, according to Ngo and Trinh (2011), the process-based approach can have both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, the process-based approach places a strong emphasis on the writing process, encouraging students to engage with pre-writing, drafting, revision, and editing activities. These activities can help students develop their writing skills and creativity. In addition, this approach can help students improve their fluency, writing speed, interaction, exposure to real-world writing tasks and materials, and overall positive affective experiences. On the other hand, Ngo & Trinh (2011) claims that the process-based approach can be difficult to evaluate, less accurate, reduce teacher control, lack standardization, and neglect the importance of producing a final written product that meets certain standards. Therefore, when choosing the best strategy to apply in their L2 writing classes, teachers should carefully assess the needs, goals, and context of their students to ensure the most appropriate and effective method is used. Ultimately, the process-based approach is still a flexible and versatile approach that can be applied for learners of all ages and proficiency levels who want to improve their writing skills in a second language.

All in all, it is important to use writing strategies in education in order to help students develop their writing skills, organize their ideas, and effectively communicate their thoughts. They can use

these strategies to become more confident and proficient writers, which can benefit them both academically and professionally.

4. Implication and conclusion

4.1. Implication

In recent years, the application of writing strategies following product-based and process-based approaches has gained significant attention in L2 writing instruction at universities in Vietnam, including universities like my place of teaching - Bac Lieu university. Writing is an essential skill that students need to master to succeed in academic and professional contexts. Instructors have been looking for effective ways to teach writing to students in a way that helps them develop their writing skills and produce high-quality written products.

(i) Implication for Product-based Approach in L2 Writing

Through my experience, using this product-based approach in writing just focuses much on grammatical forms, syntactical structure, and mechanics, but forgetting the purpose of writing. Because teachers value the correctness of language structures, students are worried in doing their writing tasks. They are afraid of making many mistakes, so they lose the inspiration to write. Therefore, teachers need to use product-based writing approach as a part of the integrated approach to help students improve their writing skills. This approach does not get the audience's attention because it just concentrates more on the importance of mechanics, grammar, and syntax of the text. The process skills like pre-writing, drafting, revising, and evaluating are not appreciated in the writing progression. These aspects cause students inactive and uninterested in their learning and make them stressful when writing their texts because the accuracy of the language structures is mainly emphasized in the assessing process in their schools (Nyang'au, 2014). In summary, to apply the product-based approach effectively in L2 writing instruction, teachers should define clear learning goals, provide models of good writing, use guided writing activities, provide feedback on the final product, encourage self-evaluation, scaffold the writing process, and encourage collaboration among students. These practices help students understand what is expected of them, develop their writing skills, and take ownership of their writing development.

(ii) Implication for Process-based Approach in L2 Writing

My colleagues and I, who have often used the process-based approach in teaching L2 writing, comment that, besides the positives, this approach brings certain difficulties as reported in Horowitz's (1986) research, process-oriented approach causes teachers difficulties in identifying what they use to teach their students and what suitable levels will be applied to progress their students' writing. Because the process-based approach is an educational strategy that emphasizes the learning process itself, rather than the final product, to effectively apply the process-based approach, teachers need to take several steps. Firstly, they should define clear learning goals and objectives that align with the curriculum and learning standards. Secondly, teachers should carefully plan the learning process by considering the steps, resources, and timeline for completion. Encouraging collaboration among students is also essential for the process-based approach as it fosters teamwork, communication, and cooperation throughout the project. Additionally, teachers should provide ongoing feedback and support to help students reflect on their progress, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary adjustments. Finally, celebrating the learning process is important for recognizing the achievements and progress made by students throughout the project, regardless of the final outcome. By taking these steps, teachers can effectively apply the process-based approach and ensure that students are engaged in the learning process and achieving their learning goals.

4.2. Conclusion

From the 1960s and 1970s, the writing learning approaches were primarily based on the texts given before; then the student writers read the texts and reproduced them in their writing. In this

period, the teachers attach special importance to the correctness, clarity, and authority of the text frequently. They are hardly ever concerned with the process of writing in addition.

Until the 1980s, with the appearance of the process method, teaching and learning writing developed to another way, and writing was considered as a process of self-study. That means the process approach tended to change the attention from the text given to the process of producing the new text. This approach encourages students to express their feelings as much as possible and emphasize on the creative process as well. It also helps writing teachers have a fresh perspective about their teaching career.

It is also realized that writing teachers face a lot of challenges in teaching writing skills. Besides, they need to integrate the positive aspects of the two teaching approaches (product-based, process-based) to achieve the best result and advance their students' writing competence because the limitation of each teaching approach may prevent learners' writing development. Students should be provided academic texts and encouraged to collaborate with other people who familiarize with the discourse to stimulate them in writing for academic foundation. Once learners are interested in L2 writing, they will have a positive look about learning to write and then increase their level of proficiency.

In conclusion, exploring students' writing strategies at Bac Lieu University is an important topic for both educators and researchers. By understanding the various writing strategies that students use, educators can provide tailored support and guidance to help students improve their writing skills. In addition, research in this area can help identify effective teaching practices and inform the development of new pedagogical approaches. As writing is a key component of academic success and professional development, continued exploration of students' writing strategies is crucial to ensure that students are equipped with the skills they need to succeed in their academic and professional endeavors.

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Chiến lược viết tiếng Anh của sinh viên:

Khảo sát trường hợp tại Trường Đại học Bạc Liêu

Tóm tắt: Bài viết này tập trung khám phá các chiến lược viết tiếng Anh (L2) mà sinh viên của Trường Đại học Bạc Liêu đang áp dụng, đặc biệt nhấn mạnh vào hai cách tiếp cận sau: phương pháp tiếp cận dựa trên sản phẩm (có xu hướng ưu tiên độ chính xác về ngữ pháp và cấu trúc ngôn ngữ) và phương pháp tiếp cận dựa trên tiến trình (có xu hướng ưu tiên chính quá trình học tập). Kết quả cho thấy rằng, cả hai cách tiếp cận đều có hiệu quả trong việc cải thiện kỹ năng viết tiếng Anh, nhưng sự lựa chọn phụ thuộc vào nhu cầu và mục tiêu của người học. Bài báo cũng nhấn mạnh ý nghĩa của cả hai cách tiếp cận và gợi ý rằng việc tích hợp cả hai chiến lược là cần thiết cho việc viết tiếng Anh một cách có hiệu quả.

Từ khóa: cách tiếp cận dựa trên tiến trình; cách tiếp cận dựa trên sản phẩm; chiến lược viết tiếng Anh; kỹ năng viết; việc tích hợp.