

# ESOL TEACHER EDUCATION AND WRITING: THE CINDERELLA SKILL?

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## BACKGROUND

A lot of ESOL teacher education focuses on manipulating the speaking skill in the classroom. This is to be expected as most learners want to learn how to speak English, and teachers in training require adequate preparation in this area. Nonetheless, I sometimes wonder if this happens at the expense of writing which is in danger of being seen as the Cinderella skill in ESOL teacher education.

Dominance of the speaking skill may only be partly to blame. Do training teachers find the terminology associated with the writing skill confusing and contradictory? Or perhaps trainers are sending out unconscious messages in the way they timetable and approach the writing seminar? Are trainers reluctant to give a model of a writing lesson that appears overly prescriptive given the move to a more process-orientated focus of this skill in recent years? Whatever the reason, none of the above augurs very well for training teachers and their students.

In the context of pre-service and in-service ESOL teacher education, I have evolved a way of dealing with the writing skill which training teachers' feedback indicates is working in terms of strength of focus, clarity and usefulness. In doing so, I was attempting to resolve some grey areas associated with this skill.

## ISSUES

The first concerns the relationship between process and product orientation in writing. In giving an in-service seminar focusing on the process of writing, how could I make this relevant to a teacher with a Cambridge First Certificate class where there is a very clear need for students to be able to manipulate a variety of "written products"?

The second point concerns the way in which teachers define texts for the purposes of analysis with learners. In other words, is it appropriate to look at text in terms of "text type" or "function" or "form" or all of these together? Should training teachers emphasise the "real purpose" of texts to their students? This being the case, what is the "real purpose" of a narrative? It may be written for a variety of motives, such as "for interest's sake" or the more pedagogically focused "practice of past verb forms". Are both these approaches valid?

## THEORETICAL BASE

White and Arndt (1991) make a pertinent point in the process versus product debate by stating that process writing is not:

a repudiation of all interest in the product (i.e. the final draft). On the contrary, the main aim is to arrive at the best product possible. (p. 5)

This is in line with the current shift in ESOL away from seeing process writing as a free and unstructured activity. White and Arndt's view, in some way rehabilitates process writing back into a context where there are more stringent pedagogic demands. One of these demands concerns the usefulness of clarifying the nature of the kinds of texts teachers and learners will work with.

I found the work of Biber (1988) helpful in the area of text analysis. He makes a distinction between "genre" and "text type" stating that:

genres characterise texts on the basis of the external criteria, while text types represent groupings of texts which are similar in their linguistic form, irrespective of genre. (p. 217)

In this way narrative, descriptive or discursive writing is viewed as a "text type", while a business memo, a letter of invitation or a poem can be defined as a "genre".

Associated with the notion of genre has been the idea of having a communicative purpose. If the communicative purpose of a particular text is easily perceived, as in the case of a letter of complaint, it is very easy to conceptualise it as belonging to a genre and identify salient features of the genre. These features are often connected with layout and paragraphing, and can be considered extra-linguistic. However this becomes more problematic if the texts belong to other genre categories such as academic essay or answer to English language examination question. While the external criteria and communicative purpose of these texts are easy enough to establish, they will not necessarily lead to a fruitful enough analysis of these texts. It is more useful to view them as belonging to a particular text type and search them for linguistic features such as rhetorical patterning or discourse markers.

Paltridge (1996: 239) shows how texts can be defined according to both categories, and how different genre may belong to the same text type category. For example an advertisement and a police report both belong to their own genre, while at the same time they fit the description text type category. Paltridge gives a detailed analysis of how genre and text type can interconnect.

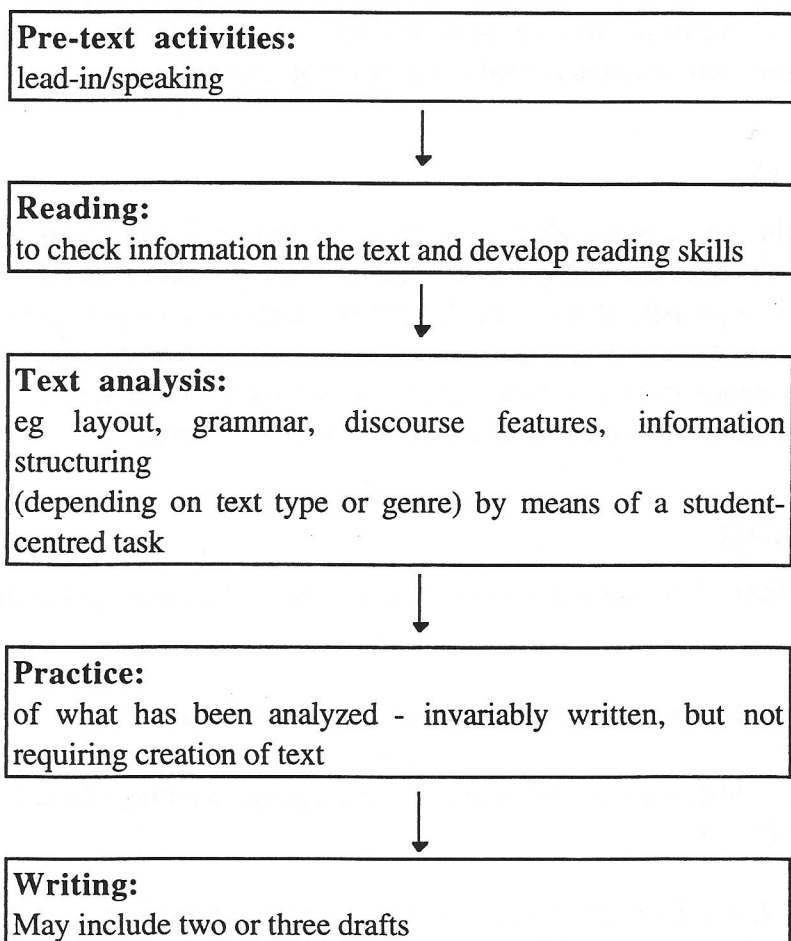
The central issue in terms of pedagogic application is that genre and text type can be seen as tools that will allow for an analysis of text that is profitable for learners. This in turn, has consequences for teachers in training. When preparing a writing lesson, I suggest to training teachers that they make a choice between defining the text in terms of either genre or text type rather than try and fit it into both categories. That decision should be based on

what linguistic or extra-linguistic features of the text are most pedagogically relevant and useful. Some of these features will be highlighted with learners in the classroom at the text analysis stage of a writing lesson.

## THE SEMINARS

It usually takes two seminars of an hour and a half to cover these issues. In the first seminar, we examine 'real world' writing and explore the idea of basing a writing lesson around a model text. I introduce Biber's concepts of text type and genre and then ask trainees to analyze a variety of texts from course books according to one or other of these criteria.

In groups, trainees focus on one text and decide how they would exploit it in the classroom. Their feedback on this task invariably contains a lot of variations from which I build up a possible procedure for a writing lesson similar to the following:



I indicate that there is a degree of flexibility with this procedure and it is possible to begin with writing and then introduce a model text, or, in some cases, leave out the model text altogether. I also emphasise this process may take some time, particularly the planning and drafting of the writing.

In the second seminar, I explore issues to do with process writing by means of a series of statements that favour a product-orientated approach (for example, "It is a good idea for students to start writing sentences and build these into a text"). This exercise leads into establishing some important tenets of process writing such as:

- written text is not merely a series of sentences strung together
- students should plan their written work
- writing means drafting and reworking
- a lot of writing can be done in groups or pairs to beat the loneliness of the task, and give speaking practice at the same time
- a first draft can be submitted to the teacher for comment and/or correction
- teacher feedback on written work should focus on content as much as language
- it is a good idea to indicate student errors (location and/or type) rather than correct them

I often direct trainees to the introduction of Hedge (1988, pp. 5-14) for a fuller discussion of these issues. We then return to the procedure established in the first seminar to indicate that these issues can be implemented at the "writing" stage.

## COMMENTS

Without doubt, this is a reasonably prescriptive procedure for a writing lesson. However, training teachers have invariably found it a useful springboard for developing writing skills with learners, especially if they are having to teach examination classes early in their careers. Further, it is a way of ensuring that newly-trained teachers focus on writing at text rather than sentence level, while encouraging them to teach some salient linguistic or extra-linguistic feature of written text that is pertinent to their learners.

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