A synthesis of approaches to teaching writing:  
A case study in an Australian primary school

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Abstract:  
This paper reports on the result of a case study, aiming to investigate the teaching of writing in a grade 5 Australian primary classroom. The paper will report data from three sources: classroom observations over six weeks, in which the researcher acted as a non participant observer, samples of students’ texts and an interview with the teacher at the end of the process of data collection. Data from the classroom observations, samples of students’ texts and the interview indicate that the teaching of writing in this class could be considered eclectic. Despite a strong emphasis on the implementation of the process approach, the teaching practices also drew on the systemic functional linguistic genre pedagogy (the SFL GP).

Key Words: Writing; the process approach; the SFL genre pedagogy (the SFL GP)

I. Introduction  
The study reported in this paper was undertaken in the course of a program of work in Australia a couple years ago on the teaching of writing. The interest to do the study emerged as the curriculum of English for secondary schools in Indonesia, since 2004 has given a great proportion of the teaching of writing and stipulated that students should be taught to write different text types, including Narrative, Recount, Procedure, Description, Report, Explanation, Exposition, Discussion. However, the writers observations (see Emilia et al., 2008) and informal talks with teachers in different forums indicate that there is much confusion among Indonesian English teachers about how to help develop students’ writing skills.

This led to the writers interest in learning from Australian teachers in helping students learn to write in English. In Australia, there are two major approaches to teaching writing which have currency and have been influential. These are the process approach as developed by Graves (1996), Hill (2006), and Hornsby & Sukarna (2007) and the SFL GP (Feez, 2002; Joyce & Feez, 2012; Derwianka & Jones, 2012; Rose & Martin, 2012).

Thus, the study aimed to investigate approach(es) to teaching writing that Australian teachers use, to what extent the approach(es) can help students learn to write
successful texts, and the benefits and challenges the teachers find in implementing the approach(es).

**Theoretical framework: The process and SFL genre-based approaches to teaching writing**

As mentioned above, there are two approaches to teaching writing that have been implemented in Australian schools: the process approach, and the SFL GP. A summary of basic principles and issues of the process approach and the SFL GP can be summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. A summary of basic principles and issues of the process approach and the SFL GP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Process Approach</th>
<th>The SFL GP</th>
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<td><strong>Basic principles</strong></td>
<td><strong>1. Language learning as a social activity (Joyce &amp; Feez, p. 2012).</strong> This theory parallel to Vygotsky’s view that “learning awakens a variety of internal development processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with peers” (1978:90).</td>
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<td>1. Writing as a process. Students go through the process of writing, such as prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, proofreading and publishing (see Goldstein &amp; Carr, 1996, cited in Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2006).</td>
<td>2. Explicit teaching about what is expected of students, about the language demands of the curriculum, so all students have access to the linguistic resources needed for success in school and to the powerful ways of using language (Derewianka &amp; Jones, 2012, p. 4; McDonald, 2013). Students should learn different genres, including Recount, Report, Explanation, Exposition, Discussion, Procedure, Narrative, News Story (Martin &amp; Rose, 2008; Rose &amp; Martin, 2012).</td>
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<td>2. The conference between the teacher and students and between student and peers at any stage (authorial, secretarial and editorial conferences) (see Hornsby &amp; Sukarna, 2007).</td>
<td>3. Apprenticeship in the process of learning (Macken-Horarik, 2002).</td>
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<td>3. Free choice of topics to enable the students to write what they know and what they are able to (see Graves, 1996).</td>
<td>4. The teaching/learning process takes place in four stages: Building Topic Knowledge, Modelling, Joint Construction and Independent Construction of the Text. These stages “do not work as a lockstep sequence for the whole class” (see Callaghan &amp; Rothery, 1988, p. 4); Macken-Horarik, 2002, p. 26). The approach runs in line with the students’ condition and context (Rose &amp; Martin, 2012, p. 17).</td>
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<td>4. Writing as a daily activity (see Pritchard &amp; Honeycutt, 2006).</td>
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Issues with the process approach include:
1. Free choice of topics may lead students to write the same topic again and again.
2. Process writing tends to be mainly story writing.
3. The teacher cannot just act as a facilitator. Explicit teaching is needed to develop students’ meta-language and mastery of a certain types of texts (Christie & Dreyfus, 2007).

Issues with the SFL GP are:
1. Explicit teaching of the identification and description of the conventions of particular genres is unnecessary (see Freedman, 1994, p. 196).
2. The teaching of genre rules limits students’ creativity and free expression (see Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995).
3. SFL GBA emphasises the product, rather than process and is considered as a revival of transmission pedagogy (see Cope & Kalantzis, 1993, p. 2).
4. The genre approach sees learners as passive (see Badger & White, 2000, p. 157).

Table 1 shows that the process approach and the SFL GP are similar in terms of the emphasis of the following aspects:

i. the importance of students’ knowledge about the topic they write;
ii. the principle that learning as a social activity where children need to interact with the teacher and peers;
iii. the teaching of writing as a process.

The differences between the two approaches are mainly on the role of the teacher as a facilitator and free choice of topics as upheld in the process approach and explicit teaching as emphasised in the SFL GP. Thus, the two approaches should be complementary.

Issues in the process approach, as the study will reveal, can be less justified today as over the past 30 years, the elements and definition of the writing process have been reinterpreted. The process approach now also emphasises the necessity of explicit instruction and the teaching of different genres to students (Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2006, p. 279; see also Campbell & Green, 2006; Hill, 2006).

Similarly, concerns with the SFL GP cannot be justified. Explicit teaching, as Emilia’s (2005), Emilia et al.’s (2008) studies and this study found out, is important to help students gain a shared understanding of the different genres. The teacher reported in this paper, as will be described later, also valued this principle. The issue on the teaching of genre rules, cannot be justified either. “Making rules and expectations explicit to students does not limit their freedom and autonomy. On the contrary, it gives them the tools to be creative and autonomous. Once students are aware of the conventions of any of the text types, they will be able to manipulate them for their own purposes” (Gibbons, 2002, p. 68). Moreover, with respect to the issue on the emphasis on the product, the SFL GP does put a strong emphasis on the process of writing, as shown in the basic principles and the stages of the teaching cycle, which can lead to students’ awareness that writing is a recursive process. Finally, regarding the issue on the learners’ passivity, the SFL GP requires students’ active participation in the learning process that should lead to
their independence in writing. Therefore, it is common today, as found in this study, that classroom writing tends to be eclectic, as Hyland (2003, p. 33) says that in today’s writing classrooms, including ESL ones, there is typically a mixture of more than one approach. Hyland further suggests that methodology for teaching writing, especially second language writing, should incorporate and extend the insights of the main orientations, emphasised by both the process and genre pedagogy (2003, p. 24). This suggestion indicates that a synthesis between the process approach and the SFL GP is possible.

Method

Upon Ethics Clearance for research from the Australian Catholic University, the recruitment of participants and the signing of the consent form, this study was conducted in a grade five class in an Australian primary classroom in a suburb called Montmorency in Victoria, Australia. The class had 25 children who were all native speakers of English and the teacher had been teaching for 28 years, 23 of them in the USA and 5 in Australia. She was very familiar with both the SFL GP and the process approach and chose to use an eclectic mix of both traditions in her own teaching.

This study used a qualitative case study research design, as it “focused on one particular instance of educational experience or practice” (Freebody, 2003, p. 81), that is, the teaching of writing. This study employed “multiple sources of evidence – converging from the same set of issues” (Yin, 1993: 32) or “multiple data collections” (Freebody, 2003, p. 83), including observations, students’ texts analyses, and an interview with the teacher. This aimed to allow for “down to earth” study (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000), to enhance the construct validity of the study (Yin, 1993, p. 39-40), and to gain more rounded and complete accounts on approach(es) the teacher used in teaching writing, whether the approach(es) could help students develop their writing ability, and benefits or challenges the teacher encountered in implementing the approach(es). The data collections can be described in Table 2.

Table 2: Data collection techniques used in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Data Collection Technique</th>
<th>Aim</th>
<th>Procedure</th>
<th>Data analysis</th>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Classroom observation</td>
<td>To find out classroom practices as suggested by the process approach and the SFL GP, what was said and done by both the teacher and the students in the interactional setting (Allwright &amp; Bailey, 1991).</td>
<td>Three weekly sessions, each of 90 minutes over the six weeks. Four (4) sessions on the stages of Building Topic Knowledge, Modelling and the Joint Construction, Independent Construction and conferences between students and the teacher were videotaped for further analysis.</td>
<td>Data recorded in observation notes and video tapes were transcribed, categorised and analysed using a thematic analysis (Kvale, 1996) relevant to the research questions, including the principles, results, benefits and challenges of implementing the two approaches.</td>
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It is important to stress that the children in the grade 5 had been learning to write and read different genres from their earliest years of schooling. Even in the preschool they had begun to learn simple genres as Procedures and Recounts, while they had also learned Narratives and Descriptions. Some of the texts collected were written by the students prior to observation. The researcher assured the teacher and students that all students’ texts could only be accessed by the researcher and used for research and academic purposes.

II. Results and discussion
Approaches and strategies used in the teaching of writing

Regarding the approaches used by the teacher in teaching writing, data from observations and interview indicate that the teacher used a synthesis of the process
approach and the SFL GP. This goes with Hyland’s (2003), and Pritchrad & Honeycutt’s (2006) argument that today, writing classrooms typically reveal a mixture of more than one approach. Moreover, the results of students’ text analyses indicate that the teaching learning process could lead to students’ ability in writing different text types with appropriate schematic structure and linguistic features. This is relevant to the aim of the SFL GP and the result of writing taught as a process.

The influence of both the approaches, based on data from observations and interview can be seen from two main aspects below.

The first aspect is the physical environment, especially sources and visual aids in the classroom. The influence of the process approach can be observed from the posters on the principles of conferences suggested by Hornsby and Sukarna (2007), covering authorial, secretarial, and editorial conferences. An example of the posters is presented in Picture 1 on authorial conference.

Similarly, a strong influence of the SFL GP was evidenced by the availability of visual aids on the social function and the schematic structure as well as models of different genres (such as Narrative, Recount, Exposition, Procedural, Explanation, Discussion).

Regarding the availability of visual aids, the teacher stated:

I think I use the chart and the examples of work and I keep them around the room because I think children may need them, they need a visual reminder... I’ve got here what we should be aiming for.

This goes Derewianka & Jones’ (2012, p. 48) position on the importance of the provision of a model text to help develop students’ conscious knowledge of language and how it works. The statement also coincides with the argument that “with the available model, students can have a clear concept of the desired goal, be able to compare their work with the model and to decide how to close the gap between the two,” (Barnes, 1999, p. 263, see also; Gracia, 2009).
The implementation of conferences was obvious from the trays (Picture 2), containing students’ texts. The tray on top level was labelled “Please Read Me” indicating that the texts should be read by the teacher, the lower trays were respectively labelled “I have revised my writing” meaning that the texts have been revised by the students, and “I have edited my writing” that the texts have been edited.

The tray suggests writing taught as a process, consistent with the process approach (Graves, 1996; Hill, 2006) and actually the SFL GP () where the students go through the process of writing, starting from drafting, revising, editing, proofreading.

The second aspect is pedagogy. Regarding this, this paper unfortunately cannot provide a complete picture of the teaching learning process from the beginning up to the end, as the observation was conducted in the regular class and the writer observed what was going on when she was present. Other activities continued over the six weeks, which were not observed.

The influence of the process approach and the SFL GP was obvious and can be seen from the following activities:

First of all was to do with writing taught as a process. The students wrote several drafts before they came up with a final neat one as detailed above.

The second activity, relevant to the first, was the conferences between the teacher and the students, when the teacher gave feedback to the students’ writing both in groups and individually, in line with the stage of the writing process. At the initial stage, the teacher’s comments, emphasised on the organisation of the text, asking the students to organise ideas relevant to the text type.
At the editorial stage, the teacher’s comments concern grammar, spelling and other mechanics of writing, as in:

Check “Know”, “No”, “Tense –ed past tense (Observation Notes August 20, 2007) Self corrected punctuation and spelling but no work on content. She used words beyond her spelling ability, which is good (Observation Notes, August 28, 2007)

At the editorial stage, the teacher also showed the students some grammatical mistakes, like incorrect prepositions, spelling and mechanics of writing, and finally, at the proofreading stage, the teacher asked the writer to do a peer conference.

The comments given at different stages of the writing process are appropriate and beneficial to allow the students to understand that they can concentrate on different aspects of writing at different times in the process, which makes the writing task nonthreatening (achievable) (Peregoy & Boyle, 1993, p. 71-73, see also Callaghan & Rothery, 1988 about what the teacher should do in conferencing). These activities also indicate the teacher’s understanding of the theory and her capacity to translate the theory into practice. Moreover, the teacher’s suggestion to peer conference to help others also reflects a classroom practice relevant to both the process approach and the SFL GP, which acknowledge the value of peer conferences.

**Regarding feedback, the teacher said:**

I use visual aids to help the children stay focus, then the feedback, I think they need the feedback, otherwise why do it... I want the feedback to be positive and let them know that I hear what they are saying and I like what they are saying. But I also want to say “you could do better or why didn’t you mention this, or you could go further”. So, I think that’s a part of being a teacher.

This statement suggests the teacher’s awareness of feedback as a key component of teaching writing, as “Feedback is to a teacher as swimming is to a fish” (Macaro, 2003, p. 238) says, and the teacher’s feedback during the composing process is critical to whether students revise, as Beach and Friedrich (2006) argue. Moreover, the teacher’s statement on the role of the teacher to assist students to go further goes with Vygotsky’s (1978) theory on the zone of proximal development, as outlined above.

The third classroom practice relevant to the process approach is the implementation of free choice of topics (Graves, 1996) and the genres the students wrote. This, as the discussion on the students’ texts will reveal, led to the creation of different text types by the students.

In addition, the influence of the SFL GP can be seen from the following aspects. The first aspect concerns activities in the classroom which can be considered to follow the model of the SFL GP (Rothery, 1996; Hertzberg, 2012; Joyce & Feez, 2012) and can be categorised into the following:

i. Building Topic Knowledge when the students were given materials, related to the topic they wrote and relevant to what was going on at school and the society.
ii. Modelling, or Building Text Knowledge when the teacher shows the poster of the social function, the schematic structure, and linguistic features of an Exposition on the board.

iii. The Joint Construction of Text, when the teacher acted as a scribe, writing a text on the board together with the students, and

iv. Independent Construction of Text, when the students wrote the text individually, going through each stage of the writing process. Samples of the students’ texts were collected in this study.

About the stages of the SFL GP, such as Building Knowledge of the Field, the teacher argued:

I think if I don’t spend time developing their ideas, then what they write is shallow....

This statement is relevant to the purpose of the stage, that is, to build the students’ knowledge about the topic they are writing (see Hertzberg, 2012; Derewianka & Jones, 2012). Regarding other principles of the SFL GP, such as explicit teaching, the teacher mentioned that explicit teaching reminded her and the students of “why we’re doing it and what it means to be giving them.” This comment coincides with the suggestion that the teacher should make the language demands for the curriculum explicit (Derewianka & Jones, 2012).

The use of a synthesis of the process approach and the SFL GP was confirmed by the interview data, when the teacher, explained:

I like whole language, ... in the senior and the middle section of the school, the grade five, I think we should concentrate on the content. ... We do use the SFL GP in our instruction and the children are expected to learn how to do Narrative and Recount and Exposition and Procedural and Explanation.

That the teacher taught using a mixture of more than one approach is not unusual in writing classrooms today as reported in previous observations (Hyland, 2003; Pritchard and Honeycutt, 2006). Her statement regarding the concentration on the content for grade five students also shows her understanding of the necessity and urgency of students writing in the content area. This is an appropriate way to avoid the criticism of earlier process writing classrooms where there was an over emphasis on Narratives or Recounts (see Cope and Kalantzis, 1993). Moreover, the statement to do with the SFL GP suggests her belief and consciousness of the value of teaching different types of genres as suggested by genre theorists as mentioned above.

The description above demonstrates the teacher’s capability to address the concerns with both the process approach and the SFL GP. On the issue of creativity and prescriptivity in the SFL GP in particular, the teacher stated:

... I don’t dictate. Some times I might, I might dictate it has to be a Recount or a Procedural text, but usually they select because for grade four and five they have been taught different genres and the idea is they use them and they apply what they’ve been learning in the younger grades ...
This was supported by the data from students’ texts, that students wrote different text types, on different topics. Analyses of students’ texts will be presented subsequently.

**Students’ texts as the results of the teaching learning process**

In this study 15 texts were collected, representing different text types which can be used as a model for Indonesian children, written by the students grouped into low, mid and high achievers, identified by the teacher in the class. The samples of genres included:

i. Recounts (4),
ii. Narratives (2),
iii. Descriptions (3),
iv. Personal Response to Literature (1),
v. Information Reports (2),
vi. Explanation (1), and
vii. Letters (2).

The major findings from the results of the analyses may be summarised as follows:

First of all, regarding text types or genres, there were no examples of Expositions or Discussions. The students seemed to start to write an Exposition on the last day of the observation and thus unfortunately the sample could not be collected.

Secondly, with respect to the overall purposes of the genres, most students showed a reasonable control of the overall schematic structure of the target genre: i.e. they understood the various stages in the target genre and had made an effort to achieve some control of them (some were of course better than others). This showed that students broadly understood the purpose of the genre, and this was commendable.

Thirdly, regarding the schematic structures of genres, some points can be made:

- Students have a relatively good understanding of overall textual organisation of the texts. They are able to order the sentences within each stage of the target genre, so that there was a clear sense of unity in the way the text progressed from each sentence to the next. This can be seen in the following sentences, taken from a text written by a low achiever about tree planting.

1. ..... My friend Mitchell and I were digging a hole to plant our tree.

2. When I went to get the watering can

3. I came back to Mitchell

4. and (I) fell over.

5. I heard water coming out of the watering can.

6. I looked at Mitchell

7. and he was soaking wet ...
The extract above suggests the writers’ capacity to employ a Thematic pattern which can help progress a text forward (I and Mitchell mentioned in different sentences). The writer successfully uses two types of Thematic progressions: the theme re-iteration (“I” becomes the Theme in Clauses 1-6) and the zig-zag pattern or a linear Thematic progression (“Mitchell”, part of the Rheme in Clause 6 becomes the Theme, he, in Clause 7) (see Eggins, 1994, p. 303-305).

i. Students can use references appropriately (i.e. ways information and/or participants in a text are introduced and then reintroduced later in the text), as in
   “I looked at Mitchell and he was soaking wet.” Reference helps build unity.

ii. Paragraphs were generally introduced in the genres and help to advance each stage of the genre.

Overall there was evidence of some understanding of the purposes of the different genres. This suggests that the teaching learning process, especially the teacher’s guidance regarding the structure of each genre was quite fruitful. The texts indeed often lacked detail, and the students needed more extensive knowledge of the field or topic for writing.

Finally, with respect to linguistic features, based on analyses of students’ texts using systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1994), several points can be made:

i. Language choices within the target genres to express experiential meanings (to do with the topic or field) and interpersonal meanings (to do with the relationship of writer to reader) were reasonably good. They showed students’ understanding of some relevant vocabulary and grammar.

ii. Sentences were generally properly punctuated: i.e. they used capital letters to commence sentences and full stops to complete them.

iii. Most students seemed to understand ways to combine and/or reduce sentences, sometimes by using dependent clauses linked with conjunctive relations, or by creating enlarged nominal groups in which meaning is expressed (Once upon a time there was a girl named Alice (enlarged noun group); When I went to get the watering can, I came back to Mitchell... (adverbial clause).

iv. Within the sentences, most students appeared to have a good control of tenses mostly used in each genre: e.g. a Personal Recount or a Narrative normally uses the past tense, while a Report or an Explanation normally uses the present tense, as in: Solar panels are big boards that catch the light from the sun to create solar power ... (from a Report collected in the study).

The evidence above suggests that the teaching-learning process in the classroom was to some extent successful. Students whose texts were analysed had a good understanding of the schematic structures that were required in writing genres, even if they did not always write them with equal confidence, some were more proficient than others.

Benefits and Challenges of the implementation of the process and genre-based approaches

Data presented above reflect the benefits of using a synthesis of the process approach and the SFL GP. Data from observations did not indicate any problem in the teaching learning process. However, in the interview the teacher expressed a challenge, especially regarding time allocation and the number of students involved in a group conference. The teacher said:
...Oh yes, it’s very challenging - the time, the number of children in the grade. At the moment I’ve got eight children in a group and that is too many. It takes me too long to get through their eyes. ... So, I am thinking if I make changes and I might only have four children in a group. ... 

Conferencing thus warrants further investigation, especially on the number of students involved in a group conference, time allocation for the conference with individual student, and aspects emphasised in each conference.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the results of a study of the teaching of writing in a primary classroom in Australia. The findings of this study, which may not be generalisable to other settings, support previous research on the teaching of writing, in that the teacher used a synthesis of more than one approach, namely the process approach and the SFL GP. This was evident from three aspects, including:

i. classroom physical environment, the presence of visual aids or reminders around the classroom (posters and visual aids, trays of students texts, and model texts of different genres);
ii. classroom activities, consistent with the theory of both the process approach and the SFL GP. These were the conference, writing taught as a process, explicit teaching on different aspects of a genre, building topic knowledge, building text knowledge (modelling), joint construction and independent construction of a text;
iii. samples of students’ texts.

The paper has also shown that a synthesis of the process approach and the SFL GP is possible and desirable and the teacher’s understanding of theoretical and practical matters regarding the two approaches was the key to an effective teaching to help students develop their writing ability and succeed in their learning.

Acknowledgements

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References


