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Writing and good language teachers

Introduction

As language teachers we may find ourselves teaching writing in many different and wide-ranging learning contexts. We may find ourselves teaching writing to beginner level learners in a private language school in Spain, teenagers in a secondary school in China, adult learners in evening classes in London. We may be teaching students to write stories, blog posts, emails, business communications, academic essays and PhD theses as well as poetry and examinations. Whilst it is not possible, or indeed desirable, to discuss each and every aspect of writing here, this chapter seeks to explore what might constitute ‘good’ practice in teaching writing. The chapter begins with an overview of what we mean when we talk about writing before moving on to look at some of the ways in which teaching writing has been conceptualized within the field. We then draw on interview data collected from ten experienced writing teachers, to explore the idea of what makes a good writing teacher, ending with a discussion of the implications of these findings as well as offering some suggestions for future research.

What do we mean by writing?

Writing is known as a complex and multi-layered process that develops gradually with instruction, practice and reflection. From a production perspective, researchers such as Kellogg (1996) propose that three main processes are central to writing: *formulation*, *execution* and *monitoring*. While the processes function in association with working memory and the central executive phonological loop¹, they are different in nature and in what they aim to fulfil:

- *formulation* involves planning and translating idea units and propositions to text
- *execution* involves the creation of the text by writing it out
- *monitoring* involves reading and editing the text to ensure the language forms employed convey the intended meaning.

There are two features of this process that make writing a demanding task:

¹ The central executive is the most important component of human’s working memory. It oversees and controls the flow of information and coordinates the sub-systems that help the brain to process information and relate them to the long-term memory (Baddeley & Hitch, 1974). Phonological loop, one of the three sub-systems in operation under the central executive, is responsible for storing verbal content while information processing (and in the case of writing and speaking language production) is taking place.

- First, the three processes run simultaneously and the working memory and attentional resources available to writers are naturally affected by the parallel processing demands of the writing task in hand.
- Second, given that for less proficient users these processes are rather controlled and not automatic, particularly at lower levels of proficiency, writers are challenged during the execution and monitoring processes.

These processing challenges are then combined with a range of intricacies related to cultural and social norms of literacy practices in different domains to shape the process of writing (Hyland, 2013). In addition, learners may not have had sufficient exposure to target language input, which can lead to limitations ‘...in their knowledge and control of lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical tools to express their ideas effectively’ (Ferris, 2012, p. 227). Griffiths (2016, p. 85) also notes that in both L1 and L2 “writing is usually the last skill to be developed, after listening, speaking and reading, and it is often the skill which learners find the most difficult”. These are some of the complexities involved in the writing process that teachers face when teaching writing. What we know then, is that writing is not simply a straightforward mechanical process of transferring what is in the mind onto the page. Writing involves all kinds of different cognitive, linguistic and social functions and the task for teachers and students is how best to hone and develop these skills and practices in and beyond the classroom.

Approaches to teaching writing

The field of English language teaching (ELT) has seen much discussion of writing pedagogy and how individuals learn to write in a second and/or additional language. Much has been written about the ways in which writing in a second/additional language differs from first language writing (Silva, 1993), but equally increasing attention has been paid to the ways in which all writers learn how to write, regardless of the language they are learning to write in (e.g., Silva & Matsuda, 2000) with commonalities instead of differences highlighted and captured.

There are a number of approaches that have characterised the teaching of writing (both first and second/additional and language writing) with which readers are likely to be familiar. Traditionally target-language (TL) writing has been associated with the end product, that is, writing teachers would focus only on the final piece of written work to see how effectively the student had mastered the linguistic, grammatical and organisational styles needed to produce this work (Brown & Lee, 2015). Hyland (2016) identifies four different stages in this approach:

- familiarisation with the linguistic structures of a text
- controlled writing based on these structures
- guided or imitative writing
- free writing in which the students adopt the patterns they have learned to use in their own writing.

This product view of writing can build confidence, particularly for those beginning to write in a second language but it may also be seen as overly prescriptive, decontextualized and inauthentic.

The process view of writing, on the other hand, sees writing as ‘...thinking, as discovery’ with students ‘...learning to write through writing’ (Hedge, 2000, pp. 301-302). This means that there is more focus on how students write rather than only on what they have written and includes an emphasis on such things as pre-writing tasks, multiple forms of both drafting and editing, as well as allowing students to better understand what they want to write about as they write (Brown & Lee, 2015; Hyland, 2016). One main disadvantage with this approach is that teachers may not always be clear when the process should lead on to the final product itself (Brown & Lee, 2015).

There are other different approaches to writing that teachers might draw on in the writing classroom (see Hyland, 2016), including a *genre* approach (e.g., Flowerdew, 2000; Swales, 1990), which aims to raise awareness of the conventions of different types of writing for particular contexts. With genre known as “abstract, socially recognized ways of using language’ (Hyland, 2013, p. 21), proponents of a genre-based approach to writing (e.g. Paltridge, 2001; Swales, 1990) argue that writing is a social and cultural practice, and as such writing inevitably involves the context in which it is taking place and the conventions that the target language discourse community use. For this reason, when adopting a genre-based approach to teaching writing, it is necessary to focus on the particular genres, e.g., particular texts and contexts and the discourse features the students need to master in order to be socially and communicatively successful.

What we have also seen in the field of ELT is a recognition that the age of ‘best-method’ and ‘one size fits all’ are very much over and that good teaching is that which responds and adapts to the needs and requirements of the specific teaching and learning context. Good teaching, in what Prabhu (1990) described as the ‘post-methods era’, is informed and insightful and not simply implemented by rote. This also means that teachers are crucial in terms of understanding what works in classrooms and how theories and approaches are taken up in classrooms. It is with this in mind that we now turn to discuss the data collected from the writing teachers who participated in this study.

A study of writing teachers’ perspectives

The data discussed here is taken from a larger pilot study which aimed to investigate how teachers respond to the challenges posed in writing classes and what these teachers feel are important features of good writing classes and teaching. The study aimed to begin to find out what experienced writing teachers feel are important characteristics for teaching writing. The broader aims of the pilot study were to develop a better understanding of what teachers feel are the most important aspects of their practice and how their understanding of writing and teaching writing has changed during their careers. The more specific aims of the pilot were to develop an understanding of what the teachers felt were the qualities and training that successful writing teachers needed to have and develop. Whilst the pilot study was done in the context of EAP/academic writing, much of the data speaks to issues and challenges that will resonate with all writing teachers. The ten experienced writing teachers who were

interviewed (3 males and 7 females) had all been teaching for between 13 and 35 years. All of the teachers had international teaching experience and they held a broad range of qualifications. All of them had the CELTA (Certificate in English Language Teaching) and/or DELTA-level (Diploma in English Language Teaching) teaching qualifications and Master's degrees in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) or related subjects. In addition to these qualifications, three of the participants had, or were in the process of gaining, their PhDs. All of the participants were, or had recently been, working in different universities in the United Kingdom.

Data collection and analysis

Each of the teachers was invited to an interview, during which a number of questions were asked about perceptions and experiences of teaching writing. Seven of the interviews were done face-to-face with the participants. These were audio recorded and lasted between 17 and 48 minutes. In three cases teachers were not able to attend a face-to-face interview and so in these instances the questions were sent to them, and they subsequently returned their written responses electronically. The data collected from the interviews were transcribed and analysed in response to each of the questions. The transcripts were then read by each of the researchers separately, noting themes and patterns in the participants' answers. The readings of the transcripts were then compared and contrasted, and the identified themes were discussed. From this, overall patterns and themes in the data became evident. The discussion below focuses on the responses to three key questions that emerged from the interviews and these are:

- *What qualities do you think a good writing teacher needs to have?*
- *What do good writing teachers do?*
- *What advice would you give teachers interested in moving into teaching writing?*

The emerging themes for each of these questions are presented and discussed below. The discussion of the responses is interesting in that it not only provides an insight into what the teachers who participated in the pilot study think and do in their classrooms, but also in terms of how their responses mirror and reflect the approaches to writing we discussed earlier.

Findings and Discussion

1. What qualities do good writing teachers need to have?

Two main themes emerged in relation to participants' responses to this question. The first theme that was identified relates to the idea of the personal characteristics and dispositions participants identified as being typical of, or desirable in, a 'good' writing teacher. Overall, teachers' flexibility, resilience, patience and being approachable were discussed as key qualities. Several teachers contended that a willingness to learn in general and a willingness to learn from other teachers in particular were crucial qualities that can help teachers to develop knowledge and skills in their profession. Six of the participants suggested that being prepared to see things from the students' perspective and having a sense of empathy with the students was a crucial attribute. These teachers felt that experience of the writing challenges that students face would enable teachers to have a much more realistic understanding of how the students feel, what they can do and what they may find challenging. In addition, some teachers felt that it was important for teachers to understand from personal experience how

difficult it is to learn and use a new language. The following quote from Jane successfully captures the views held by the teachers:

“It is very good for them to learn different languages themselves.”

Many argued that it is essential for teachers to recognise what is perceived as valuable in certain disciplines but may not be so in others. This, in turn, should help teachers broaden their students’ perspectives about the standards and expectations of writing in their discipline. The awareness of the range of disciplinary styles and practices also means that teachers needed to be aware of falling into a trap of ‘one size fits all’ and this sentiment is captured in the following comment from Billy:

“A good writing teacher needs to be aware of the differences between and across fields and disciplines. Be prepared to be tentative and unsure and you need the confidence to say to the student ‘I don’t know. I don’t have an answer to that question, and I will try to find out and let you know’.”

What we see in this quote is that a crucial part of good practice is not necessarily ‘knowing everything’ but knowing how to know and knowing how to find out.

2. *What do good writing teachers do?*

The first theme emerging from the data for this question is that the teachers all felt that a general knowledge of and interest in how writing skills develop is also an integral trait of being a good writing teacher. While a reliable understanding of all other skills was naturally expected, a specific knowledge of the writing process and how it develops was perceived as highly important. Knowing the English language writing system, its different components and genres, as well as having a good grasp of how language is processed and produced were mentioned as key sources of knowledge that can help teachers in their everyday practice. As Ava stated, a good teacher:

“needs to be interested in language and discourse and have a feel of language and needs to spend more time with text.”

Skills in analysing the language into its component parts, identifying issues and problems and providing useful feedback to students were other skills considered a necessary part of a good writing teacher’s toolkit. As Kirsten suggests, a good writing teacher is:

“able to be a discourse analyst who can translate that into a practical teaching situation. Discourses are tools and their functionality determines their characteristics. Language is an activity and not a separate vessel that carries content. Language and content go together.”

All of the interviewees talked about how, through teaching writing, they had come to be increasingly more and more interested in how texts work both at the word and sentence level as well as at the overall text level. In particular the participants talked about the importance of understanding how different types of texts use language in different ways to create meaning

and how effective writing teachers had to engage in “*genre analysis and understanding of genre*” (Sandra).

All of the teachers talked, in some way, about the importance of their own understanding of the ways in which different genres work in order to be able to effectively communicate this understanding to students, whether this is in terms of the types of tenses and sentence patterns used, how texts are organised and ideas are sequenced, or who the intended audiences are and how this influences the choices that writers make. One strategy a number of the participants had developed to achieve this was to study a range of model texts in order to identify different textual features particular texts made use of. They highlighted the need for students to also be able to learn these skills, and stressed the importance of giving the students lots of examples of the written texts they are learning to produce. This is summed up well by Ava who said that good writing teachers need to “*use authentic source materials/.../ [and] should have a process approach to writing which looks at multi-drafting*”.

The final point to be made on the importance of understanding the ideas of discourse and genre is from Farah. Her words have been chosen as they are representative of the views expressed by the other participants. For Farah, the reasons for such a focus are clear and it is because:

“the language (formality, vocabulary, style, grammatical structure) and style are different from what students are used to. Trying to show them examples of what is expected of them as well as providing instances of what is acceptable or not”.

The second interrelated and overlapping theme to emerge from the data is that good writing teachers not only pay attention to the idea of how writing develops at the whole text or discourse level as discussed above, but also at the word and sentence level as well. All of the teachers felt that it is important in teaching writing effectively to pay attention to teaching language and vocabulary in order to make sure that students have the lexico-grammatical resources they need to complete the task. As Jessica highlights below, completing the task not only means being able to re/produce the required language but also being able to understand the language of instruction. It is essential for teachers to ensure that

“students have enough language to understand the meta-language and be able to put into practice the techniques and approaches we are recommending”.

A key challenge that was highlighted in this regard is that good writing teachers (and good teachers more generally) cannot realistically ‘teach’ everything in their classes, and this is particularly the case with respect to the language, vocabulary and grammar of writing. An important point that four of the participants raised is that good teachers are able to identify and ‘target’ specific language, vocabulary and grammar that students need to learn. In this sense good writing teachers encourage students to be strategic about what they focus on and how/why they will deploy the resources they have learned in their writing. These points are important, not only as it helps teachers and students to set achievable learning goals, but it also helps students to become independent and critical language learners and users.

The third and final theme that emerged from the data is in relation to the idea of opportunities for writing. A crucial point raised by Farah is that “*Writing in EFL classes is really rare*”. In the interviews, all teachers suggested that organising writing activities, whether this is

individual or group work, is a crucial part of the process of scaffolding students' learning as it is through the activities both inside and outside the classroom that we can provide the opportunities for learners to practise developing the writing strategies we are trying to teach. As the following points from Ava's interview shows, in the writing classroom it is important to, "*create an atmosphere to allow students to work independently and be autonomous /.../Use group work tasks to engage them with other students to boost their confidence /.../ [and] use the tasks that give them a sense of achievement to increase their self-esteem.*"

All of the participants recognised that writing is a complex and complicated activity and that writing can take many forms. As a result, it is important for teachers to think carefully about what they set out to achieve in their writing classes and to think critically about what writing tasks are asking students to do. Good writing teachers need to pay attention to what skills and knowledge different writing tasks require of the students and recognise how writing practices are not consistent or static across time, space and cultures. As Jane comments below

"it's very difficult for them (students) to suddenly jump from one culture to another The most important thing is understanding the students' experience."

3. *What advice would you give teachers interested in moving into teaching writing?*

When asked what advice should be given to teachers who are moving into teaching writing, the teachers provided a range of different suggestions and tips. Some of the main pieces of general advice the teachers gave were as follows:

- Be flexible and patient with the students
- Understand that writing is not homogenous, and neither are students
- Have empathy for students' varying abilities in the classroom
- Be selective in feedback, prioritise and provide students with a clear focus
- Remember to help students to translate or adjust to new writing practices

The piece of advice that was perhaps most emphatically given in the interviews is that good writing teachers need to get as much exposure to writing as possible, whether this is through talking to other experienced teachers and writers, observing writing classes and/or actually participating in writing themselves. All of the teachers felt that such activities were necessary in order to develop

"the ability to assess what is important for your students in terms of what they need to learn" (Farah).

Ava added a further step here by highlighting specific areas of professional knowledge and development that she felt were important preparation for anyone interested in wanting to become a writing teacher when she said:

"I would advise them to read about genre, disciplinary discourse and...literature to start thinking about principles and theories."

Overall one of the most powerful pieces of advice came from Sandra who said:

“I think they [teachers/tutors] need to be learning number one that they need to be on the same /.../ journey that the students are. If they are not, I would say it’s very hard for them to put themselves in the students’ shoes. I don’t think it is very easy for them to motivate or excite the class”.

Again, in Sandra’s words we see the focus on the teacher being part of the process as key to understanding what it is that the students need to do. This does not mean that writing teachers know everything in order to ‘transmit’ knowledge to students, it is more a case of developing an understanding of what it is like to put together texts and create meanings in the same ways the students are required to do.

Practical implications

From the small pilot study described in this chapter we can identify ten complementary dimensions of knowledge, skills and practice that we suggest underpin the practice of all good writing teachers.

Good writing teachers know how to:

1. Create productive spaces and opportunities for writing both inside and outside of class
2. Select and develop appropriate tasks and approaches
3. Make use of individual as well as group knowledge
4. Build on learners’ prior knowledge and experience of writing
5. Provide effective, supportive and targeted feedback
6. Scaffold and support language, grammar and genre knowledge and accuracy
7. Analyse texts to identify target language, grammar and structural devices
8. Analyse texts to identify voice, authorial identity and sociocultural patterns
9. Identify the genres the students need and understand the genre demands of different texts
10. Engage in writing and try to experience writing alongside their students

Areas for future research

The findings of our study indicate some future avenues for researching the teaching of writing and characteristics of good writing teachers. Our discussion above has suggested that good writing teachers need to understand and experience the process of writing. In addition, the data analysis strongly implied that good writing teachers needed to be, or have been, engaged in the process of writing themselves. For example, if the teachers are setting their students an essay writing task, their own experience in writing essays would be a valuable source of knowledge that ensures their familiarity with both the genre and key components and elements of writing in that genre. Future research should examine whether teachers’ personal experience and skills in the tasks they set their students has any impact on their practice and whether this can be considered as a key characteristic of successful writing teachers.

The second complementary implication arising from the study is the need for writing teachers to understand the contexts and purposes their students are writing for, as well as the audiences they are writing for. For the teachers in our study, understanding that writing

practices and conventions are not static but shift and change and are dependent on context was felt to be a crucial part of their professional development as writing teachers. Future research can investigate the extent to which this is something that other writing teachers take into account when preparing or assessing writing texts for their own students, and whether this helps promote writing teaching.

Another area and the one which perhaps offers the most opportunities for further research is the need for writing teachers to engage as much as possible with other teachers. The participating teachers in our study felt that working with a wide range of colleagues and asking questions about what writing means/does/looks like is crucial. For our teachers this was important, not only in terms of professional and pedagogical development but also in terms of understanding writing as a social practice. There are several comments in the teachers' interviews that suggest taking a Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) perspective to teaching writing is a key characteristic of good writing teachers. Community of Practice (CoP) is a social constructivist model of learning that considers learning as a situated social practice that allows participants to construct and define knowledge. In this model, CoPs are 'groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger, 2006: 1). Previous research (Johnson, 2009; McIntyre, 2005; Tavakoli, 2015) has shown that teachers have a strong sense of CoP particularly when it comes to defining their teaching experience, knowledge and learning as participation. In line with this body of research, we understand that the teachers in our study rely on their CoPs for not only building relationships and exchanging experiences in teaching writing, but more importantly for developing ways of addressing and solving problems in this area. Future research will undoubtedly benefit from studies to investigate which areas of teaching writing would more effectively benefit from a CoP perspective to learning.

Finally, from a teacher development research perspective, there is a clear need to understand more about such areas as the beliefs and practices (Borg, 2006) of writing teachers, and how teachers prepare writing materials and offer feedback on student writing in order to better understand the effects they have on the process of teaching writing. There is also a need to understand more about how, and to what extent, writing teachers are able to work with other colleagues in the process of understanding and teaching writing and how these collaborations help to build awareness of the differences between and among different types of writing (Campion, 2016).

Conclusion

What we begin to see from this pilot study is that for all of the teacher participants, becoming a good writing teacher was to understand it very much as a process. It is a process of development and learning, which requires teachers to have not only an interest in classroom practice but also an interest in and enthusiasm for writing, and for learning about writing. Rather than simply adopting the position of an instructor, a good writing teacher will be able to adapt to different genres and disciplinary requirements, and to take the position of a researcher, facilitator and experienced guide in order to lead students through their writing process.

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