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USING THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH TO DEVELOP WRITING SKILLS AMONG ENGLISH LEARNERS

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Abstract

It is precisely in the area of writing that learners of English most commonly stay dependent upon formulaic approaches, and traditional teaching has always regarded writing as an imitation of sentences rather than an attempt to communicate. This paper aims to investigate the implementation of the communicative approach in teaching English learners to write. First, the history of the concept of communicative competence and its development from the ethnography of communication to its well-known four-component model will be reviewed. The next part of the paper will reveal the principles of communicative writing and will describe nine methods by which they can be realized in the classroom and will review empirical evidence related to the impact of those methods. Findings revealed consistently positive results of their application in terms of organization, content development, coherence, and learner motivation, whereas their influence on grammatical accuracy is somewhat more controversial. The controversy is caused by the methodological problem in determining the effect of correction on learner writing. The author will claim that the most justified position is the one based on the integration of process and genre models of writing.

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Keywords: Communicative approach, communicative competence, writing skills, process writing, genre-based instruction, EFL.

Introduction

Writing has been subordinated in language teaching for much of the twentieth century. In audiolingual and structural approaches, its primary function was that of reinforcement whereby students copied examples, did substitution exercises, and wrote compositions in order to show mastery of the structures learned. The reader was the teacher, the purpose was evaluation, and the criteria were based almost entirely on the absence of errors (Raimes, 1983). The consequence of such an approach is students capable of producing accurate sentences but unable to create a text that does anything for anybody.

The communicative approach challenged this notion by establishing communicative competence as the new objective for learning languages, not mastery of grammar rules. Hymes (1972) posited that speaking a language meant not only being able to speak something syntactically well-formed but also knowing whether this speech was appropriate, possible, and carried out in a certain situation. The ideas of Canale and Swain (1980) made Hymes' thoughts practical, and the distinction was introduced by Widdowson (1978) between using language forms correctly (usage) and using them to communicate successfully (use). When applying this concept to writing, it becomes important: a piece of writing is evaluated according to the success in communicating the idea to the target audience, while accuracy is merely one of the means towards this success. (Hyland, 2019).

Statement of the Problem

There are two main challenges associated with applying the communicative approach to writing. The first challenge is theoretical. This approach was developed mainly for speech, and the initial focus of communicative teaching on

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spontaneity and fluency did not easily apply to the activity that is deliberate, revisable and written for absent readers. According to critics, learners taught with the help of this approach lack skills to cope with formal written styles and examinations based on these (Qasserras, 2023). The second challenge lies in the practice of teaching writing. Several survey studies prove that even teachers who support communicative ideas do not apply them completely and stick to teacher-centered correction (Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak, 2021; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999).

Purpose and Research Questions

This paper critically assesses the appropriateness of applying the communicative approach to develop writing abilities among English language learners. Specifically, this paper focuses on answering four questions:

- How does the concept of communicative competence redefine writing as a teaching subject?
- Which procedures are used in the class that make these principles come alive in the writing class?
- What are the outcomes of these procedures according to the empirical evidence on different aspects of writing performance?
- What are the limitations of this approach?

Significance of the Report

This document is meant to assist teachers in overcoming the false dichotomy of communicative freedom versus formal correctness. In fact, the most convincing interpretation of the evidence would not support either approach to the exclusion of the other, namely that of a totally process-oriented class or a reversion to model-and-imitate approach, but rather one of a design whereby intention and audience determine the task and explicit knowledge of genre and form is taught where needed.

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Conceptual Background

The Nature of Second Language Writing

Some distinctions exist between writing and speaking, which influence the way writing needs to be taught. Writing is displaced in time and space in relation to its reader, depriving the writer of the instant feedback regulating conversation, and demanding the writer to anticipate the needs of the reader. Writing is also permanent, thus more susceptible to closer examination. Finally, it is also revisable, which means planning, reflection, and restructuring are possible – hence, the models of writing as a process have characterized it as recursive, rather than linear (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Furthermore, in the 1990s, Silva (1993) summarized extensive research into comparative approaches, confirming the systematic difference between writing in the second language and in the native language in terms of planning, transcription fluency, and revision behavior. The frameworks of assessment, however, break down the process of writing into distinct components, listed in Table 1 below. The distinction is required by the argument presented later, since the results of empirical studies show that communicative teaching affects writing dimensions to a different extent. (Weigle, 2002).

Table 1 Dimensions of Writing Performance and Their Assessment Indicators

Dimension	Description	Assessment Indicator
Content	Relevance, development, and adequacy of ideas for the stated purpose	Depth of support; task fulfilment
Organisation	Global structure, paragraphing, and logical sequencing	Presence of clear thesis and progression
Coherence and cohesion	Semantic connectedness and the linguistic signalling of relations	Use of cohesive devices; topical continuity

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Dimension	Description	Assessment Indicator
Vocabulary	Range, precision, and register-appropriateness of lexis	Lexical variety; collocational accuracy
Grammatical accuracy	Correctness of syntax, morphology, and mechanics	Errors per hundred words; error gravity
Rhetorical appropriateness	Fit between text, genre conventions, and intended readership	Genre-move realisation; register control

Note. Adapted from the frameworks described in Weigle (2002), Hyland (2019), and Ferris and Hedgcock (2014).

The Communicative Approach Defined

Rather than being a rigid approach, communicative approach is more of a philosophy about the nature and process of language learning. The core of communicative approach theory is that language learning is achieved through usage for communicative purposes rather than acquisition of prior formal knowledge (Littlewood, 1981; Savignon, 1997). Canale & Swain (1980), further developed by Canale (1983), identified communicative competence as comprised of four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. Grammatical competence relates to mastery of the formal system; sociolinguistic competence – appropriateness of language use to the situation and to participants; discourse competence – coherence of a text; strategic competence – compensatory actions that maintain the flow of communication in situations where language resources may be insufficient.

When considered in the context of writing instruction, this approach provides an extremely useful framework. It specifically defines the aspects which have been overlooked in traditional instruction. Discourse competence is equivalent to organization and cohesion; sociolinguistic competence is equivalent to register and audience awareness; strategic competence is equivalent to paraphrase and

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circumlocution strategies which allow the writer to move on without finding the right word. The only component which corresponds to what has been measured before is grammatical competence. (Savignon, 2002).

The following guidelines emerge from the principles discussed above for a writing class. Tasks must have a communicative function in addition to a display of linguistic proficiency; the texts must be written to a specific audience; the information to be conveyed in the text must come from the learner and not from a model that is to be emulated; errors must be regarded as indicators of developing proficiency and not mistakes to be eradicated immediately; and the writing process itself must be made into a learning process. (Harmer, 2004; Hedge, 2000).

Theoretical Foundations

There are four main theories that form the basis for the teaching of writing as communication. They concern, respectively, competence, the connection between texts and context, actual composition processes, and reasons for which writing facilitates acquisition.

Communicative Competence

The concept of communicative competence was formulated by Hymes (1972) as a criticism of a grammatical approach to the description of language ability, in that he argued that the use of rules was as important for competence as the knowledge of grammar rules. The implication for writing education is that a text can be perfect from a grammatical point of view but still be communicatively incompetent, as it can be inappropriate in register or structure.

Language as Social Semiotic and Genre Theory

According to Halliday (1978), the linguistic form is determined by the social function, which implies that the choices that writers make are systematically linked to the field, tenor and mode of the context. Genre-based writing instruction

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theory draws its strength from the above assertion because the recurrent social functions lead to recurrent text forms, and such forms can be taught explicitly (Hyland, 2004). This branch offers a cure for a shortcoming in earlier communicative writing instruction because authentic function alone could not lead to correct texts. Students who are required to write an unfamiliar genre need to see its conventions made explicit.

Cognitive Models of Composing

In their description of writing as recursive processes involving planning, translation, and review, controlled by a monitor, Flower and Hayes (1981) do not see writing as a linear process from outlining to drafting. In her study of advanced L2 learners, Zamel (1983) noted the recursiveness in writing and that the better the writers, the more they revised at the level of meaning and the worse, the more they revised at the level of surface structure. The process approach to teaching writing is derived from this research. (White & Arndt, 1991).

Output, Interaction, and Writing to Learn

The creation of language, as opposed to its comprehension, compels learners to carry out syntactic processing and to recognize the difference between their intention and linguistic capacity. This process was described by Swain and Lapkin (1995) in terms of the learners' own corrections; attention to form thus identified was suggested to be a potential means of acquisition. Writing, being slower and allowing for corrections, provides particularly favorable opportunities for such noticing. Manchón (2011) makes the corresponding distinction between learning to write and writing to learn, noting the latter to have been consistently undervalued in language instruction.

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Communicative Procedures in the Writing Classroom

The process is achieved through procedures and not through a set curriculum. Nine such procedures are listed in Table 2 below, along with the aspect of writing proficiency that each serves.

Table 2 Communicative Procedures for Developing Writing and Their Principal Contribution

Procedure	Description	Principal Contribution
Process writing cycle	Planning, drafting, response, revising, and editing treated as distinct taught stages	Content development and meaning-level revision
Genre-based instruction	Modelling, joint construction, and independent construction of a target genre	Rhetorical appropriateness and organisation
Process–genre integration	Genre awareness supplied within a recursive drafting cycle	Combines structural knowledge with composing skill
Authentic tasks with real audiences	Letters, proposals, reviews, and posts written for readers beyond the teacher	Purpose, register, and audience awareness
Collaborative writing	Pairs or small groups jointly produce a single text	Languaging about form; improved accuracy and content
Trained peer response	Learners give structured feedback using agreed criteria	Reader awareness; critical reading of one's own text
Information-gap writing	Writers hold information their readers lack and must supply it explicitly	Explicitness, cohesion, and reader accommodation
Dialogue journals	Sustained written exchange between learner and teacher on self-chosen content	Fluency, confidence, and writing volume
Project work and portfolios	Extended multi-draft work collected and reflected upon over time	Autonomy, revision skill, and self-assessment

Note. Procedural descriptions follow Harmer (2004), Hedge (2000), Hyland (2019), Tribble (1996), and Ferris and Hedgcock (2014).

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The link between the process and genre traditions merits discussion, as they are sometimes treated as opposing approaches. In Badger and White's (2000) view, a synthesis of process and genre traditions was required because they complemented one another in certain ways: the former enabled the development of composing ability, but did not equip learners with the conventions expected of their texts, while the latter furnished such conventions, but had the danger of treating writing as merely a mechanical copying of forms. The synthesis has come to dominate subsequent applied research and is the embodiment of the communicative approach. (Alabere & Shapii, 2019).

Review of Empirical Evidence

Table 3 summarises a selection of studies chosen to represent variation in setting, procedure, and design.

Table 3 Selected Studies on Communicative Writing Instruction

Study	Context	Design	Principal Finding
Zamel (1983)	Advanced ESL	Case studies	Skilled writers revise for meaning; weaker writers revise only surface form
Storch (2005)	Australian ESL	Comparative	Collaboratively written texts were shorter but more accurate and complex
Elola & Oskoz (2010)	US university L2	Mixed methods	Collaborative wiki writing shifted attention toward global text features
Bitchener & Knoch (2010)	ESL, ten-month study	Longitudinal experiment	Written corrective feedback produced durable accuracy gains

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Study	Context	Design	Principal Finding
Wigglesworth & Storch (2012)	Tertiary ESL	Experimental	Pairing benefited accuracy; feedback effects varied with task condition
Janenoppakarn (2016)	Thai university EFL	Doctoral study	Process-genre instruction improved writing across proficiency levels
Arteaga-Lara (2017)	Colombian primary EFL	Action research	Process-genre work improved paragraph organisation and content
Alabere & Shapii (2019)	Nigerian tertiary EFL	Quasi-experimental	Process-genre group outperformed controls on academic writing
Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak (2021)	Thai secondary EFL	Survey and observation	Teachers endorsed communicative principles but implemented them partially
Cao et al. (2022)	ESL/EFL, multi-study	Research review	Online peer feedback yielded consistent gains in writing quality
Booth Olson et al. (2023)	US secondary EL students	Experimental	Cognitive-strategies instruction improved argument writing significantly
Algouzi & Hazaea (2023)	Saudi tertiary EFL	Discourse analysis	Teamwork practices shaped the quality of the writing communicative event

Note. Studies are ordered chronologically. Designs are reported as characterised by the original authors.

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Patterns in the Findings

There are three trends to notice. First, communicative and genre-based teaching approaches consistently lead to positive effects on higher-order aspects of writing. Positive results concerning the improvement of the content, organization, and cohesion of texts are found in studies conducted in various environments such as Colombian primary schools, Nigerian universities, and Thai secondary schools (Alabere & Shapii, 2019; Arteaga-Lara, 2017; Janenoppakarn, 2016). It is not surprising because it is just what the attention to purpose and audience can make a writer concentrate on.

Second, positive impacts on the aspect of grammatical accuracy are not automatic but depend on some additional conditions. When accuracy increases, there is always an explicit aspect of teaching – whether it is corrective feedback, which is seen in the longitudinal study done by Bitchener and Knoch (2010), or the discussion of form when two students work on one formulation together (Storch, 2005; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012). Communicative tasks do not always bring grammatical accuracy. (Qasserras, 2023).

Moreover, affective and behavioral outcomes are always positive. The genuine purpose and audience motivate students to write more and revise, while peer feedback helps develop reading awareness which is very hard to cultivate otherwise. (Cao et al., 2022; Hyland & Hyland, 2006).

Methodological Limitations of the Evidence Base

These are several limitations. Interventions are usually brief in nature; therefore, their effectiveness over time remains unknown apart from the ten-month long study carried out by Bitchener and Knoch (2010). The outcome measure is highly diverse in nature, ranging from rubric-based assessment to number of errors per t-unit, making comparisons across studies in terms of effect sizes hard. Comparison groups are poorly described. And the literature mostly comes from tertiary institutions.

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Mechanisms of Effectiveness

Five mechanisms plausibly account for the observed effects.

Purpose and Audience as Organising Constraints

When a text has something to accomplish with an identifiable audience, then choices regarding content, structure, and style have a criterion by which to judge them. When there is no criterion for judging these decisions, learners fall back on the one available criterion – grammatical accuracy (Widdowson, 1978).

Recursive Revision

Separating writing into stages enables the separation of the production of ideas from the shaping of those ideas. It takes the strain off the process of writing and frees up meaning-focused revision of the sort that Zamel (1983) associates with good writers.

Languageing in Collaborative Composition

Jointly produced texts require learners to make their decisions overt. This reflection makes the choice salient in the pursuit of meaning, which is precisely when noticing is at its most productive (Storch, 2013; Swain & Lapkin, 1995).

Feedback as Communication, Not Correction

Peer and teacher feedback presented as the response of a reader tells learners whether what they've written has accomplished anything, not whether it is correct. Hyland and Hyland (2006) point out that feedback is most useful when learners know its purpose and have another draft to write.

Genre Knowledge as Enabling Constraint

The knowledge of the expected moves within a genre lessens the need for planning and allows more attention to the content, which is why genre study

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should be included within the process writing cycle and not be opposed to it. (Badger & White, 2000; Hyland, 2004).

Criticisms and Constraints

- There are many principles and problems in the communicative approach to writing.
- Accuracy debate. The major theoretical problem lies in error correction. According to Truscott (1996), correcting grammatical errors in writing classes is not effective; Ferris (1999) disagreed saying that there was not enough evidence and that feedback on errors was still justified. The results of further research have been in favor of the latter position (Bitchener & Knoch, 2010).
- Ignoring formal genres. It is noticed that excessive concentration on communicative skills may make the learners ill-prepared for the genres needed in examinations (Qasserras, 2023).
- Shallow teaching. The teachers use communicative terms but remain product oriented and correct the final products without providing revision opportunities. (Pitikornpuangpetch & Suwanarak, 2021; Sato & Kleinsasser, 1999).
- Fit within the context. Littlewood (2007) describes the problems associated with implementing communicative methodology in the large, examination-oriented classroom of East Asia, while Bax (2003) suggests that context, not methodology, should serve as the basis for instruction design.
- Ongoing misconceptions. The work of Thompson (1996) points out a number of misconceptions associated with the approach, including the idea that it bans grammar instruction – a misconception that has caused significant harm to its interpretation among educators.
- Workload and evaluation. Multi-draft writing accompanied by substantive feedback is a resource-intensive activity, especially in cases when examinations value correctness only.

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Implications and Recommendations

For Classroom Teachers

All writing tasks should define a purpose and an addressee, real or imagined, because these are precisely the variables that make higher order dimensions of writing learnable. The teaching of writing can be best carried out through a process-genre cycle, that is, looking at sample texts of the desired genre, co-constructing a text, and then having students produce individually, get feedback, and revise. The feedback on their early drafts should concern both content and structure; correction of grammar should be done later, selectively, and after that come revision based on this feedback. Peer feedback needs to be taught along with clear criteria, otherwise it turns into praise. Collaborative writing should be carefully employed where accuracy is the goal because it is precisely this kind of writing where learners discuss form.

For Programme and Curriculum Designers

The methodology needs to be consistent with the assessment. If there is an assessment that focuses solely on sentence accuracy, then any kind of teacher training cannot support a communicative writing lesson. The criteria for assessment need to consider the aspects of content, organization, and rhetorical effectiveness along with accuracy and can include portfolio assessment as a way of assessing revision. The training of teachers needs to focus on this specific gap.

For Future Research

There are three distinct priorities. There needs to be a longitudinal study in order to show if improvement is maintained and transferred to other genres. Effect size could then be calculated because a comparison can be made using standardized criteria. Finally, studies need to be carried out in elementary education settings, vocational schools, and in large classes in order to see if the method works outside the tertiary setting.

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Conclusion

The communicative approach has revolutionized the way writing is taught. Through the establishment of communicative competence as the learning objective, as opposed to grammatical correctness, the communicative approach brought to the fore aspects of writing ability such as purpose, audience and organization, which previous approaches were neither capable of assessing nor fostering. Indeed, empirical evidence shows that learners using communicative and process-genre instruction generate texts that are more developed, well-organized, and properly leveled than those generated in model-and-imitate instruction, and that learners write with more enthusiasm and produce longer texts.

The empirical evidence equally demonstrates a limitation. Communicative purpose is not sufficient for producing grammatically accurate texts and knowledge of unconventional genre conventions; both of these require direct focus, provided through selective correction and modeling and co-construction in genre pedagogy. The lesson drawn from all this is not that the communicative approach is to be fully embraced or abandoned, but that its tenets must be best realized in a comprehensive process-genre framework that is sufficiently implemented to allow for response and revision, along with an evaluation scheme that rewards what can be taught through this approach.

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