

## Teaching Composition Writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the Tertiary Level *A Balanced Curricular and Instructional Approach*

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*Abstract: This study resulted from concerns about teaching composition writing in English as a foreign language (EFL) at the tertiary level at the universities in Bangladesh since the learners at the level appear to have disappointingly low proficiency in composition writing. It was conducted among 135 undergraduate students, and revealed two major problems in the subjects' EFL composition writing: linguistic errors and structural anomalies. To solve these problems, the researchers suggest utilizing a balanced curricular and instructional approach, that is, an amalgamation of the product and the process approach to teaching composition writing. Based on the blend of the two approaches to teaching composition writing, this paper advocates some guidelines which can be employed to help improve instruction in and enhance effective learning of EFL composition writing.*

### Introduction

The science and technology universities in **Bangladesh offer** a Foundation English Language Course to all the first year students who are enrolled in the four-year B.S.S./B. Sc. programme in different disciplines. The purpose of the foundation course is to prepare students to comprehend and communicate knowledge in English and to become **efficient** readers and writers of academic and workplace texts. The Foundation English Language Course Constitutes an integrated skill-based syllabus which encompasses review and practice of essential grammar items, writing paragraphs, essays and letters, reading comprehension passages, listening and speaking activities.

However, it is the writing skill which is given paramount importance in the foundation English language course., The course is of **one**

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semester duration and offered in four classes per week. The method of teaching this course is consistent with the product approach. Grammar is taught explicitly in the traditional way through definitions and examples, and the students are asked to memorize the rules. In composition (paragraphs, essays, letters, reports, etc.) writing instruction, the teacher typically begins with presentation of linguistic knowledge and organizational principles such as the usage of transitional words, providing formats of different genres and showing different ways of developing paragraph, essay and letter (both formal and informal) writing, which is followed by practice. The practice stage is usually in the form of providing topics by the teacher. Students write paragraphs or whole texts, which are either evaluated in a skimpy manner or not evaluated at all by the teacher. Thus, teaching composition writing is limited to mere discussion and inadequate practice in the classroom. Due to the limited duration of the course and traditional teaching-learning situation, greater emphasis is laid on grammatical accuracy than on communicative competence. And at the end of the course, students sit for a written examination. In short, all writing activities are conducted for the sake of examinations because students' writing needs are presumed to be writing answers in English in examinations only.

Therefore, the present study was designed to address the problem in teaching and learning EFL composition writing at the tertiary level by executing the following tasks:

Firstly, the study endeavoured to examine the two approaches to teaching composition writing: the product approach and the process approach.

Secondly, it investigated the linguistic and structural errors committed by the learners in EFL composition writing at the tertiary level.

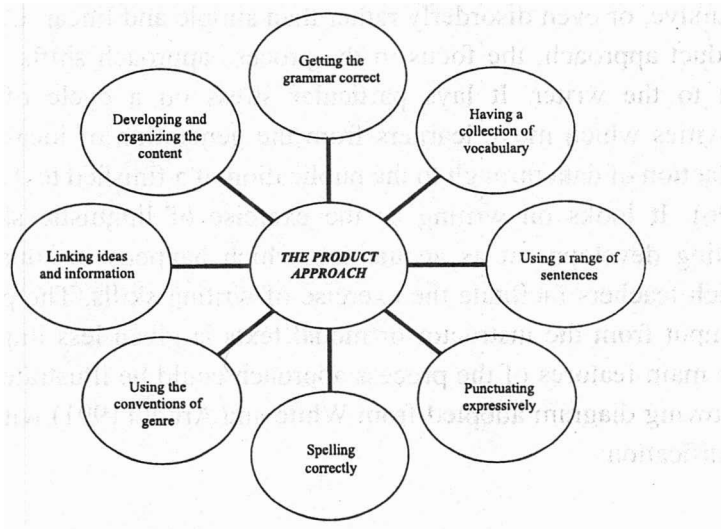
Thirdly, it helped the researchers advocate a number of pedagogical measures to be taken to improve instruction in and enhance effective learning of EFL composition writing.

### Theoretical Background

**The Product Approach:** The product approach to writing is in line with the audio-lingual ideology, that is, with a structural linguistic view that language is a system of structurally related elements for the encoding of meaning, and a behaviorist view that language learning is 'basically a process of mechanical habit formation' (Richards and Rodgers 2001, p.57). The product approach observes writing development as mainly the result of imitation of input in the form of texts provided by the teacher. It considers writing as being primarily concerned with linguistic knowledge stressing the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax and cohesive devices. The input from the teacher and model texts that provide important source of imitation becomes the major driving force of language learning. Writing tasks mostly encourage learners to imitate texts and transform models provided by teachers or textbooks. Thus, the final product which reflects the learner's linguistic knowledge is highly valued. In this perspective, the teacher plays a primary role as an examiner (Zamel, 1987).

The product approach involves building up a list of skills that are needed to acquire before producing texts. This can be illustrated by the following diagram:

Figure 1: The Product Approach to Writing

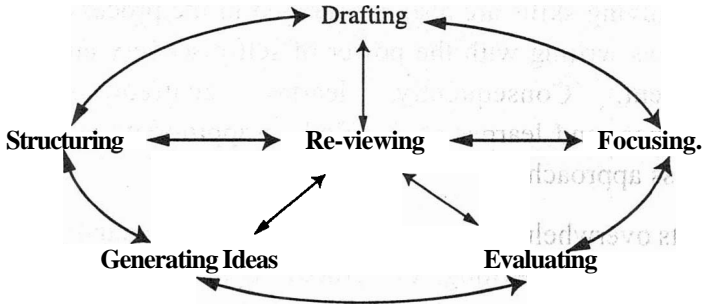


From the above figure, we can elucidate that the product approach lays special emphasis on accuracy and perfection. Acquiring grammar rules and conventions, accumulating large vocabulary, learning various types and functions of sentences, punctuating sentences appropriately, spelling accurately, learning the conventions of different genre writing, coordinating ideas and opinions, and organizing and developing content are the salient features of the product approach.

However, the product approach is always criticized of attaching more importance to the final products than the procedure of writing. If the final product is evaluated only on the basis of preconceived and fixed notions about good writing, then learner's skills and knowledge which they bring from outside the classroom as social individuals will be undervalued (Badger & White, 2000); and they would then feel out of place. Hence, such an approach pays less importance to learners' strategies of writing, his/her previous experience and knowledge and social context in which texts are produced.

***The Process Approach:*** The process approach emerged as a reaction to the product approach. Originated in L1 writing instruction in English speaking countries, the process approach gained popularity until 1980s in the ESL/EFL profession. This approach views writing as a complicated cognitive process (Zeng, 2005) which is cyclical, recursive, or even disorderly rather than simple and linear. Unlike the product approach, the focus in the process approach shifts from the text to the writer. It lays particular stress on a cycle of writing activities which move learners from the generation of ideas and the collection of data through to the publication of a finished text (Tribble, 1996). It looks on writing as the exercise of linguistic skills and writing development as acquisition which happens in situations in which teachers facilitate the exercise of writing skills. The provision of input from the instructor or modal texts is given less importance. The main features of the process approach could be illustrated by the following diagram adopted from White and Arndt (1991) with a little modification:

Figure-2. White and Arndt's (1991) diagram of process writing (arrows added)



The above diagram provides a framework to teachers, and emphasizes the recursive nature of writing. A writer, first of all, ponders on what to write on the topic; that is, he/she generates ideas. Next, he/she focuses on the purpose of writing. In structuring, the writer organizes and reorganizes a piece of text in order to present it to readers. Drafting involves **putting** down the ideas into the text for readers. A number of drafts can be produced after feedback from the teacher as well as fellow students. Feedback primarily pinpoints content and organization, and provides guidelines for amendment. Reviewing stands apart in the centre as reviewing the drafts is continuously performed during their production stages in order to modify and produce the final text. The overall aim is to create meaningful and purposeful writing tasks that develop the writer's skills over several drafts.

The process approach incorporates the key principles of the communicative approach to **second/foreign** language teaching, and has the advantage of developing a congenial atmosphere in the classroom. Firstly, it activates the learner's schematic knowledge, the prior experience he/she brings to the writing classroom (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998), which the product approach fails to do. Secondly, it increases the learner's awareness of the process of writing, and draws his/her attention to the importance of writing skills. Accordingly, it can help abate the preoccupation with the accuracy of the final product, which may be the source of the learner's frustration. Thirdly, the process approach acknowledges writing as a social and collaborative

act (Bruffee, 1985), and encourages writers' interaction with other writers in peer response activities. Finally, critical thinking and problem-solving skills are also encouraged in the process of writing. This endows writing with the power of self-discovery and cognitive development. Consequently, learner centredness, learner independence, and learner choice find an appropriate application in the process approach.

Despite its overwhelming success in the history of pedagogical reform in the teaching of writing, the process approach has its negative influences. According to Badger and White (2000), the process approach considers all writing as being produced by the same set of procedures, and ignores the fact that certain kind of texts are produced for specific communication purposes. Strikingly, such an approach overemphasizes the psychological factors in writing. It gives little importance to **the** contextual, linguistic and organizational factors which define, shape and judge a piece of writing. In this way, this approach does not provide learners with enough input to **carry out the writing tasks successfully.**

### Methods

**Participants:** The subjects of this study were students of Genetics, Statistics, Chemical engineering and Polymer Science and Sociology at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST), Sylhet. They were all first year second semester students of the academic year 2004. A total of 135 students, all of whom were 20-21 years of age, participated in the study. Like the undergraduates of the other science and technology universities in Bangladesh, these students studied a compulsory foundation English language course in their first year first semester programme. At the end of the semester, they sat the semester final examination which comprised a written examination and **viva voce.** The subjects were homogenous in terms of their linguistic and socio-economic background, educational system and field of study.

**Instruments:** As the study aimed to investigate the subjects' linguistic competence in and organizational ability of writing compositions in EFL, they were asked to write two types of composition: a free composition entitled "Your future plan" and a controlled composition entitled "An interesting film that you have recently enjoyed". Investigations show that controlled compositions are error-provoking while spontaneous or free compositions are error-avoiding (Maniruzzaman 2003a). Hence, in order to ascertain the subjects' linguistic deficiency, both types of compositions were tested.

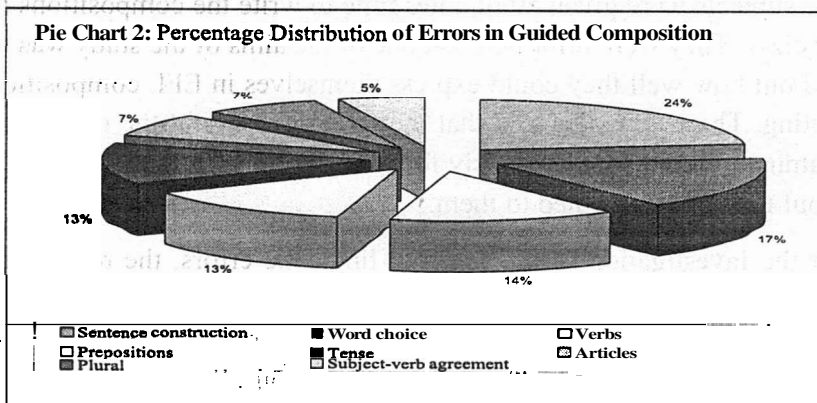
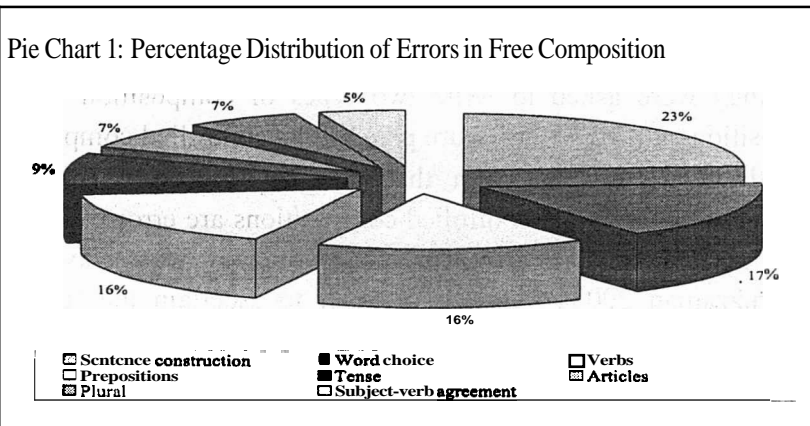
#### Data Collection and Analysis

The subjects were given 50 minutes time to write the compositions in the class. They were informed that one of the aims of the study was to find out how well they could express themselves in EFL composition writing. They were also told that they should not treat the task as an examination, but should quickly focus on writing down their feelings about the topics assigned to them.

For the investigation of the subjects' linguistic errors, the researcher examined the compositions of each subject thoroughly in order to detect the errors committed by them. The errors were firstly identified, secondly classified, thirdly counted, and fourthly categorized by applying Norrish's (1983) 'Let the errors determine the categories' approach. And the structural/organizational anomalies were investigated in terms of the topic sentence, modulator, strategies for developing ideas, and terminator.

#### Presentation of Findings

**Linguistic Errors:** A number of linguistic errors were detected in both, the types of compositions produced by the subjects. The eight major grammar points where the highest proportion of errors was manifested were analyzed for the present study. The categories included sentence construction, word-choice, verbs, tenses, articles, plurals, prepositions and subject-verb agreement. The percentage distribution of the errors detected in the free composition and guided composition could be demonstrated in the following pie charts:



The findings displayed in the pie charts above reveal wrong construction of sentences is the highest frequent error category that occurred in both the compositions of the subjects. Wrong choice of words and wrong use of verbs occupied the second and the third place respectively.

One of the uncontrolled variables that may affect the results was the length of the compositions. Kwok (1998) maintains that more errors could be detected in longer essays. The present investigation found a similar context in the writing of the compositions. The guided composition had more words than the free composition, and thus more errors were evidently found in the guided composition.



However, these findings are consistent with those of Lin (2002) who examined 26 essays produced by Taiwanese EFL students at the college level. The study indicated that the four highest error frequencies were sentence structures (30.43%), wrong verb forms (21.01%), sentence fragments (15.94%), and wrong use of words (15.94%).

**Structural Anomalies:** The subjects made innumerable errors at the organization level of the compositions that they were asked to write. They could not generate ideas and develop them accurately and systematically. They could not construct their ideas into meaningful sentences. They seemed to be ignorant of the norms of organization of ideas in compositions or texts. Their compositions were loose texts with no thesis statement, topic sentence, introduction, body and conclusion. There was lack of intra- and inter-sentential cohesion as well as coherence in their compositions. The subjects failed to put into words what they exactly meant to say. There were lots of fragmented and run-on sentences as well. They were not punctuated correctly. Hence, the compositions were poorly organized, insufficiently developed, grammatically awkward, devoid of sentence variety and weak in vocabulary usage. Only a small percentage of the students showed satisfactory organizational skills in their compositions.

### Discussion of Findings

Grammar occupies a distinctive place in the foundation English language course offered to all the first year students at the science and technology universities in Bangladesh. However, most of the grammar is taught in a decontextualized manner. As a result, the students fail to find a close relationship between grammatical form and function. Their knowledge of grammar does not support their ability to write connected sentences or compositions. In addition, even if the students have developed a large vocabulary, which can be enough to express their ideas while writing, their vocabulary cannot be applied to real communication owing to the product oriented approach to teaching. The sources/causes of the linguistic errors that are detected in the present research could be attributed to certain psycholinguistic factors,

and the errors can then be classified as interlingual, intralingual and induced ones. The sources/ causes of these errors lend support to the sources/ causes of errors disclosed by Mahmud (2008) and Maniruzzaman (2003b).

Due to the short duration of the foundation English course and pressure of overloaded classes, the English teachers at SUST mainly concentrate on the correction of grammar and spelling, and ignore the organization of the texts produced by the students. The teachers merely deliver lectures on the format of composition writing (essays, paragraphs, reports and letters) show a few model compositions, and finally give some topics for preparations for the final examination. Composition writing is hardly practiced in the classroom.

As the foundation course is based on the product approach, instruction as direct source of input is given a big role. Thus, the undergraduate EFL learners find direct instruction in linguistic knowledge essential and economical. Because of the product approach to writing, they are ignorant of the concept of generating ideas, drafting, editing and revising. Consequently, they show little flexibility in changing their original ideas. Their lack of competence in composing texts is partially because of emphasis on the final product, and their insufficient knowledge of writing strategies. Due to emphasis on the final product, the interaction between the teachers and the students or between the students themselves does not occur.

The undergraduate students are traditionally accustomed to receiving specific instruction and authoritative feedback from the teachers only. Thus, the students write for the teachers, not for themselves; and as a result, the teachers are the only audience for whom they gain experience of writing for. One result of this is that the teachers are often overwhelmed by the task of giving feedback and correcting the students' writing. Due to the fact that the students are passive in the classroom, they naturally feel uncomfortable with cooperative interaction that requires them to take an active role. Consequently, the teacher-led assessment makes writing meaningless and unproductive. Moreover, owing to the product approach to writing, teacher feedback

focuses more on grammatical and lexical errors than on meaning-oriented exploration.

Suggestions:

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers have advocated a number of pedagogical suggestions which could be considered to address the issue of the linguistic and organizational errors the undergraduate students commit.

*An Amalgamation of the Product and Process Approach . . .*

The product and process issues should be seen as 'both/and' rather than 'either/or' entities (Raimes, 1991, p. 415). Raimes (1991) practices two types of writing with her students: writing for learning (a process approach) and writing for display (a product approach). The concept is a combination of the features of the product approach such as grammatical accuracy, following conventions of writing different texts, developing content and organizational precision and the characteristics of the process approach such as writing skill development through practice, teacher-learner interaction and diverse feedback. Thus, a blend of the product and process approach could help develop not only learners' creative thinking but also their knowledge of linguistic and organizational skills.

Writing in the examinations is the immediate need of the undergraduates, which they have to acquire and the teachers need to assess. The product approach will assist them to acquire grammatical knowledge and organizational precision which are essential for composition writing. On the other hand, the process approach will encourage students to write and revise text drafts again and again. It will assist students, whatever their ability level is, improve their writing. Once they internalize the linguistic features of the target language and understand the process of writing, the ability to write will improve dramatically. Viewing the writing needs of the undergraduates, an amalgamation of the product and process approach could be deemed to be suitable for the undergraduate students in Bangladesh.

*Balancing Form and Language Use*

Overemphasis on linguistic accuracy and grammatical rules could be abated by a more balanced approach between linguistic form and function. Batstone (1994) emphasizes the importance of the product and process approach to teaching grammar. In the product perspective, grammar is regarded as essentially a formal framework. On the other hand, in the process perspective, grammar is considered as dynamic, as a resource which language users exploit as they navigate their way through discourse. Thus, the strategy for teaching could be integration of the formal aspects, of writing and the writing process. That is, careful control of the language for the learner (as in the product approach) and the creative use of the language by the learner (as in the process approach) (Batstone, 1994 cited in Kim and Kim, 2005) might result in expected outcome.

*Diverse Feedback on Writing Assignments*

It is important that detailed feedback be given on students' written assignments. To give meaningful and productive assessments, teachers might consider applying various types of assessment that will help students' interaction in the classroom and encourage much active learning. Students should practice writing in the classroom and teachers should score their assignments regularly and provide corrections and suggestions to them individually. It is necessary to correct salient and serious errors promptly and systematically, probably a few at a time Hendrickson (1978, p. 392).

A well-constructed error feedback accompanied by cautiously delivered strategies, training and inductive grammar lessons is not only highly acceptable to students, but may also be of benefit to their development as writers and to their overall second/foreign language acquisition (Ferris, 2002 as cited in Kim, 2005). However, due to the large English classes and teachers' heavy workload, regular writing assignments and feedback are not always possible. This type of inconvenience could be compensated by applying alternative forms of feedback such as peer feedback, teacher-student conferencing, in-class grammar instruction (chiefly the difficult areas in writing), and

preparation and maintenance of errors or logs in class (Ferris, 2002, as cited in Kim and Kim, 2005).

Peer feedback is an alternative to teacher feedback. Peer feedback helps learners engage in a discourse community and create an authentic social context for interaction and learning (Mittan, 1989, cited in Kim and Kim, 2005). Besides, students gain from criticism of the readers (who, are their fellow learners) and acquire the skills to critically analyze their own writing (Leki, 1990; Zhang, 1995). For cultural and traditional reasons, like in some other Asian countries, in Bangladeshi contexts too peer review is not welcomed by students. Students prefer receiving written or oral feedback from their teachers because they are accustomed to reviews **from** teachers and also tend to feel uncomfortable when to share their unsuccessful or unfinished writing with their peers. Additionally, they might feel threatened by receiving feedback from their classmates, as well as being as distrustful of feedback from other students (Moon, 2000), they have a tendency to focus on surface forms rather than ideas and organization, and their comments may be vague and unhelpful (Leki, 1990).

Self-correction strategy could be applied. Self-assessment is also necessary part of the writing process. A self-report checklist would help to promote students' motivation, raise consciousness of writing skills and strategies, and strengthen their positive attitudes to writing (Mesana, 2004). Students could be trained to identify major error types and prepare error charts. Finally, they could be encouraged to do free writing with more emphasis on fluency than accuracy.

Another alternative type of feedback could be teacher-student conferencing, which refers to face to face interaction between the teacher and the individual student (Kim and Kim, 2005). It could be applied as a supplement to written feedback, where the teacher and the student discuss the points of **difficulty** and try to find out remedial measures.

Song (1998) suggests an integrated written feedback which focuses mainly on meaning but not subtracting grammar corrections. It is more

effective than either particularly surface-error correction or semantic corrections. In Bangladeshi context, where teachers feedback is valued most, such an integrated feedback would be suitable.

### *Enhancing Students' Motivation*

Writing in English is boring and discouraging to very many students. It is important to know students' attitude and motivation towards learning English language. The learner's attitudes relate immediately to the language-learning situation and the environment as a whole. Since English language course is offered only in the first year, it is observed that the students do not want to spend much time for this single course because they are very much concerned with their respective bachelor's programme courses. They attend language classes and sit for the **year/semester** final examination only for the sake of passing the course.

It is necessary to inform the students of the importance of English in building their academic as well as future career. They should be given **positive motivation to develop their English language skills**. They should be encouraged to write and express themselves on subjects of their interest. It is always helpful to encourage students to use different activities and strategies, for example, keeping a diary, reading dailies or journals, getting a pen-friend, preserving copies of everything **he/she** writes, using word processor, and corresponding through e-mails, etc, to improve their writing ability.

They should be helped to develop their ability to evaluate and correct their own errors. Error analysis and cooperative learning can play a positive role in this case. A totally different view of writing **instruction** should be held to make the course interesting. It may help them to identify grammatical errors in their own and other students' writing samples.

### *Extending the Language Curriculum*

The English language course, which is offered only in the first year of the 4-year Bachelor's degree programme in the different disciplines at SUST, should be extended to other years too. In the final year of the Bachelor's programme, the students should get an opportunity to write book reviews, research papers, dissertations and so forth. Therefore, it is essential that an academic writing course be incorporated into the programme of their respective disciplines.

#### Conclusion:

Writing is a productive skill which requires individual effort and practice on the part of learners. EFL learners are expected to create written products that demonstrate their ability to generate, organize and present ideas to be comprehensible to readers as well as exhibit their linguistic ability that make their ideas get expression.

Notwithstanding, due to limited duration of the course and traditional teaching learning situation, greater emphasis is laid on grammatical accuracy than on communicative competence in **teaching/learning** the foundation English language course offered to all the first year students enrolled in the 4-year **B.S.S./B. Sc.** programmes in the different disciplines at the science and technology universities in Bangladesh. The present study then endeavoured to investigate the **difficulties** that the students at the tertiary level usually experience in learning EFL composition writing. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers suggest implementing a blend of the product and process approach to teaching composition writing. They also recommend bringing innovative changes in the method of feedback, balancing form and language use, enhancing students' motivation and extending the language curriculum.

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