



# Classroom Approaches to Advanced Second Language Writing

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This paper overviews current pedagogical approaches to teaching second language writing (SLW) in higher education. To do so, I first briefly overview history of the conversation on advanced SLW pedagogies and the fields that contribute to both the theory and the practice of teaching SLW. Next, I introduce the process orientation to SLW, as this orientation is incorporated into almost every current approach to teaching SLW. I then present three primary approaches to structuring SLW classes: portfolio, content-based, and corpus-informed SLW classes. Finally, I review several pedagogical tools that have been suggested as ideal supplements to the various process approaches: incorporating literature, translation, literary translation, and peer feedback. These approaches and tools all provide SLW teachers with practical advice on how to make the best use of a SLW course.

**Keywords:** pedagogy; second language writing; corpus linguistics

## Introduction

The field of second language writing (SLW) is a diverse one, as it incorporates insights from composition studies, rhetoric and intercultural rhetoric, applied linguistics, and second language acquisition (Silva, 1990). Similarly, it serves a diverse and multi-faceted population; even if we assume that the “second language” is English (a big assumption), the students might be studying English as a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (EFL). They could be in elementary, middle or high school, or higher education, or be adults outside the education system (Ferris, 2016). In this paper, we will concentrate on higher education; but even within this domain, students may be international visitors or first- or second-generation immigrants; they may have conducted their education partially or wholly in other languages; and they may or may not consider English one of their “native” languages (Ferris, 2016). Thus, any best approach to teaching SLW

must combine interdisciplinary insights with a thoughtful awareness of the specific situation in which the students are learning and working.

In the face of such diversity and possibility, the field of SLW has been a productive one in the last fifty years, recommending and refining a variety of pedagogical approaches. In this paper, I hope to delineate current optimal approaches to the classroom teaching of SLW in higher education. To do so, I will give a brief overview of the historically recommended approaches; this is necessary to understand why almost all approaches currently adapt some aspect of the process approach. Next, I will lay out three general process-based approaches. These approaches count as “general” in that they each offer distinct ways of structuring an entire course. This is followed by more specific practices and exercises that could be incorporated into any of the major approaches.

### **Historical Overview**

The history of pedagogies of SLW is intricate, given the number of fields and approaches it spans, and the interdisciplinary terminology it adapts. However, several histories of the field (Ferris, 2016; Lillis & Curry, 2016; Silva, 1990; Hedgcock, 2005; Raimes, 1991), highlight similar aspects of its development. In the 1940-60s, SLW developed out of the structural approach to second language (L2) acquisition recommended by structural linguistics. Students drilled patterns, starting at the most basic sentence level and working up to paragraphs and finally essays (Allen & Valette, 1977). The students’ first languages (L1) were ignored, as any evidence of the L1 in the L2 was seen as interference. In the 1970s, research on how writing happened led for the focus to switch from the product to the process. Steps like prewriting, organizing, rewriting and editing were explicitly taught, and fluency, rather than accuracy, became the goal; free writing exercises were more common. Then, in the 80s and onward, thanks to genre theory and the possibilities of corpus analysis, SLW developed the branches of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The idea here was that, as each disciplinary community has its own set of language norms and moves, students should learn those specific norms rather than general principles of good writing. However, sociocultural researchers pointed out that it was unfair to teach students to unquestioningly accept norms, and, along with a greater awareness of communities of practice, the fields of intercultural rhetoric and translanguaging developed within SLW. Finally, New Literacy Studies (Lillis & Curry, 2016) have emphasized how local knowledge is differently taught or valued in writing, specifically in what types of language are accepted in academic writing.

Thus, depending on the focus of the research and the recommended strategies, each theory has differently emphasized what Silva (1990) names as the five key pieces of SLW: the L2 writer, the L1 reader, the L2 text, the context of L2 writing, and the *interaction* between the first four variables in authentic ESL settings. In general, new approaches arise when researchers focus on a previously understudied element; for example, translanguaging stresses the local context, as it encourages students to view their classmates as their audience (Canagarah, 2013). However, after overviewing the history, Silva (1990) concludes that we do not yet have a research-based, unified theory of L2W that leads directly to good pedagogical practices. While the intervening 15 years has been full of productive research, Hedgcock AGAIN (2005) echoes Silva’s conclusion. He says, “With a number of exceptions... the L2 literature offers a dearth of extensive discussion of, and explicit guidelines for, the practices and processes of teaching L2 writing.”

The remainder of this paper will focus on those “number of exceptions” Hedgcock (2005) found to the dearth of explicit SLW teaching guidelines. While the field of SLW continues to debate and re-construct its interdisciplinary theoretical underpinning, we can still identify practical

suggestions for better classroom teaching of SLW. These suggestions come from a variety of disciplines, but they all explicitly or implicitly incorporate the values of a process-oriented approach. Thus, we will begin with an explanation of the benefits of a process orientation before outlining the general classroom approaches it leads to.

### **The Benefits of a Process Approach**

The process approach began in earnest in the 1970s (Raimes, 1991), as scholars and teachers researched what students did while writing, and accordingly shifted their focus to content, rather than form. Practically, the process approach to pedagogy meant that students usually wrote and received feedback on multiple drafts throughout a class, and that they received explicit instruction on the steps involved in writing, rather than on what the final draft should look like. There was an increased awareness of and encouragement of student creativity and personal expression in writing. Raimes (1991) sees both the content-based and audience-based teaching that came after it as somewhat protesting this emphasis on the writer, as researchers like Horowitz (1990) pointed out that ultimately, students needed to be able to produce the types of products that would allow them to be successfully incorporated into their academic communities of discourse.

However even when the focus is not primarily on the writer expressing their thoughts, the process approach is still widely adapted. Even when focused on acquiring genre norms, or entering an academic discourse community, the value of process is now established across SLW fields (Raimes, 1991). Raimes concludes that most writing teachers now “teach two types of writing in our classes: writing for learning (with prewriting, drafts, revisions, and editing) and writing for display (i.e., examination writing).” Whatever other perspectives they incorporate, they realize the importance of understanding and developing their students’ writing processes. Raimes sees this process-based pluralism of teaching methods as positive.

One finding in particular points to the need for teaching that includes instruction on the writing process. Kroll (2000) compared timed and untimed essays written by ESL students in an American university. She tallied both errors and accuracy features of the essays, in addition to overall scores that the essays received, and found that there was no significant difference between the essays that the students wrote at home, untimed, and the ones they wrote in class under a time limit. This reveals that students were not familiar with or were not employing effective prewriting or editing strategies, and that they would benefit from instruction in those skills.

Canagarajah’s (1993), however, responded harshly to Raimes’ statement that SLW pedagogy should include a plurality of approaches accompanied by a focus on process. He said that the pluralism is “too easily achieved and not based on sound principles” (p. 301). A better approach to SLW pedagogy, he says, would be one where the teachers “adopt interests that are emancipatory, and negotiate with a wider range of available discourses” (p. 305). However, even though he sees Raimes’ approach as inadequate, he does not argue with her assumption that process is a key component of excellent SLW pedagogy. And the emancipatory interests would not inherently be opposed to any of the pedagogies, as, given his lack of examples to the contrary, they seem to be more a matter of attitude than of choosing lesson plans.

To better understand the diversity of approaches within process writing, Homstad & Thorson (2000) distinguish between two types of process writing: intensive and extensive writing. For them, the extensive writing is that which focuses on quantity. They recommend several types of dialogue journals (between students and students, or students and teachers), where the main focus is on encouraging students to simply put pen to paper and express their thoughts. Intensive writing, in contrast, is oriented towards a final product and involves multiple stages of preparing

and editing. They give the example of writing a short mystery story through a series of steps that include reading stories, writing dialogues in class, explaining characters to class members, and receiving teacher feedback. What makes these process-oriented is that, for both, “negotiation of meaning takes center stage” (p. 143). Whether responding to another person’s journal entries, or incorporating teacher feedback, students are actively engaged in using their writing to communicate.

The extensive writing is an example of what the original process purists favored, while the intensive writing bridges the gap between the focus on the act of writing and writing for specific, pre-determined academic goals. In the next section, we will see how three approaches blend process approaches with unique concerns and tools. They each tend more to intensive than extensive process writing, as they balance teaching the process with honing the product.

### **General Process-Based Approaches to Teaching SLW**

The first process-based approach to consider is the portfolio approach. This innovative approach grew from the process approach and emphasizes the role of student growth through self-reflection and self-regulation (Lam, 2015). Students write multiple drafts of key assignments over the course of the class, and they collect these in their portfolios. They also reflect on what changes from draft to draft, and on their own writing growth trajectory. The strengths of this approach are that it encourages meta-learning as students learn how they work best, provides room for student creativity, and, when the teacher is familiar with the approach, can be engaging and rewarding for the teacher (Brauer, 2000). Lam (2015) explains how this approach works well for East Asian students who come from product-oriented backgrounds. Because they can see their growth through their portfolio, they are more likely to adapt to the novel reflection and rewriting components of the process approach. It also is an ideal format for encouraging the classroom community’s feedback, as students can use their portfolios to document peer feedback and explain how they did or did not incorporate it in their writing.

One major benefit of the portfolio approach is that the final portfolios seem to present a better indication of a students’ writing skills and their abilities to work in mainstream writing classes than standardized timed writing tests. Specifically, a study by Song & August (2002) found that students who were passed from ESL to mainstream classes based on their portfolio score at the end of the course, passed at nearly twice the rate as those who were passed based on their timed writing scores. The two groups of students had equivalent grade averages and passing rates in the mainstream course, thereby indicating that not only did the portfolio approach lead to more students matriculating into mainstream classes; it also was equally accurate at predicting their future performance. In addition, with training, teachers were able to grade portfolios with 0.82 inter-rater reliability in 12-15 minutes per portfolio (Song & August, 2012). Thus, this approach was not prohibitively time-consuming.

However, the danger of the portfolio approach is that without adequate scaffolding and explanation from the teacher, student buy-in might be low, and the portfolio may become instead a writing folder, “where learning artifacts are haphazardly collected without a clear goal, e.g., self-reflection for text improvement” (Lam, 2019, p. 299). Song & August (2002) also note that, the benefits of portfolio in changing students’ writing skills has not been proven through extensive comparative study.

The two other general approaches to structuring SLW classes do not come as directly from process approaches. In fact, they were partially reactions against it, although they both use process elements. The first is content-based instruction, or CBI (Shih, 1986). There are multiple ways that

content-based instruction can happen in a classroom setting, but in all of them, the class focuses on a particular academic subject and students read and write primarily on that subject. The course can focus more on the writing side or the academic subject. For example, some CBI SLW courses are composed of modules, and each module focuses on a different content area, so that the bulk of the work is on the writing processes and the subject matter is generally based on teacher or student preference. On the other extreme, some CBI SLW courses are adjuncts to a mainstream subject course in which all the students are concurrently enrolled (Shih, 1986); what students write for the SLW course is then submitted and graded in the mainstream subject course. Either way, one major benefit is the wholistic approach to language skills. Students are reading and discussing English sources on the subject before they begin writing on that subject, and they are processing new content as well as improving their writing.

This approach was a reaction to process writing in that student personal experience was de-emphasized in favor of writing in specific disciplines, and that more attention was given to the content of student writings rather than the style of them (Shih, 1986). However, its proponents claimed that it did a better job educating students in the writing process. For example, because the pre-writing stage consisted of research in the academic subject, organization and synthesis of research sources and personal creativity and planning, students were better equipped for future “real world” pre-writing.

While the primary focus of advocates of CBI approaches was that it prepared their students best for future classes and work, there has also been research on the benefits of this approach outside writing. Pally, Katznelson, Perpignan & Rubin (2002) recount two studies they conducted in CBI SLW classes, one in Israeli universities and one in New York City universities. At the end of the classes, they asked students to name what the class taught them, both in terms of writing abilities and other, unrelated byproducts. In both the ESL and EFL contexts, students named learning how to learn, developing critical thinking skills, positive affective outcomes (such as their confidence in English and their enjoyment of the language), and increased knowledge of the particular subject. While some of these benefits seemed to be the result of excellent teaching and a healthy classroom atmosphere, and thus not directly tied to a CBI approach, it is clear that this is an approach that students often value, especially when they can see how the skills transfer to their specific area.

Critics of this approach, however, find that because the class essentially has a dual focus, it sometimes ends up not fulfilling either focus perfectly. Masters (2000) conducted a survey of CBI textbooks and found that none of them covered advanced grammatical concepts in detail. They only introduced them when relevant to the material, and usually gave brief rather than thorough explanations. Babbit & Williams Mlynarczyk (2000) also found that one constant struggle reported by new CBI teachers was that the students were often not interested in the subject that was picked or were only involved when the subject was relevant and accessible. For example, one course started with a section on “Sociology” that the students found frustrating, but then when the subject changed a few weeks later, they were much more receptive. One possible solution to this is to allow students to each pick their own topic and read and write exclusively on that throughout the semester (Pally, Katznelson, Perpignan & Rubin, 2002). While they do not have the benefit of discussing their subject extensively with their classmates, they will have the experience of researching and writing in one area and slowly developing expertise in that area.

The third approach to process-based writing is corpus-based EAP/ESP courses. These are similar to CBI in that they focus on a particular knowledge area and instruct students to write for success in that area. However, they depend on corpora and research on genre norms to establish

what writing practices should be taught and what norms foregrounded. In this aspect, they hearken back to the formal structural approach to writing from the 1940s-60s. And if most frequent patterns are held up at the gold standard, this approach can fall into the same trap of squashing creativity in favor of mimicry. However, when done well, the corpus approach assures that rather than teach whatever the teacher thinks is best, the students are instead taught to observe real writing, extract patterns, and manipulate them in their own writing. This corpus approach is especially effective when teaching writing in niche genres or more advanced discipline writing, as corpus approaches can educate students not only in general writing skills, but in the norms and practices of a specific community (Flowerdew, 2017).

Corpus can shape SLW courses in two ways. First, students can study existing corpus findings on their discipline to learn about the norms of their discipline, and, if appropriate, incorporate those norms into their writing. For example, Hyland (2008) delineates specific corpus-based characteristics of writing within electrical engineering, biology, applied linguistics and business studies. Flowerdew (2004) provides vocabulary analyses of business letters in addition to academic papers, which are useful for students who are interested in English for business. Coxhead (2000) and Simpson-Vlach & Ellis (2010) created lists of the most frequent words families and most frequent phrases, respectively, in academia across disciplines for EAP students to learn. Swales & Feak (1994) provide a higher level of analysis, as they study and teach the rhetorical moves writers employ, rather than specific words or phrases. However, like Flowerdew & Hyland, they research and explain discipline-based differences in moves. In all these cases, their findings are meant to directly or indirectly shape SLW courses.

The second of use of corpora in SLW courses is to allow students to compare novice student writing with expert student or professional writing to identify what areas are most worth concentrating on. Some studies (like Chen & Baker, 2010, or Perez-Llantada, 2004) have used this approach to identify grammatical structures that novice students tend to either avoid or misuse. Alternatively, courses can be designed so that the students are the ones working with the corpora, identifying patterns, and if they wish, even comparing the findings with a corpus of their own writing. Flowerdew (2012) explains how students looked for patterns in a corpus of business letters and applied them to their writings. Lee & Swales (2005) demonstrates a semester-long course where PhD students built both their own and target corpora and used their findings on the differences between the two to develop their writing.

As this approach was developed recently, its practitioners have incorporated process approaches into the design. Student-directed learning is actively encouraged (Gabrielatos, 2005). As students study their writing and identify novel patterns in expert writing that they could adapt, a good deal of rewriting and editing is generally assumed. However, as mentioned above, if there is too much emphasis on identifying and applying patterns blindly, it can lead to a too-unthinking acceptance of established norms.

In summary, portfolio, CBI and corpus approaches to SLW writing pedagogy all incorporate aspects of the process approach. Each one also focuses on product, as these approaches are all still concerned with providing students with transferrable skills and with end products that will give them a confidence in their writing skills outside the writing class. Canagarajah (1993) might find that some of these approaches are too focused on working within the system. Indeed, in many of them, the authors do not adopt an “emancipatory” approach to their students or content, or even take time to position themselves ideologically within the various SLW perspectives. However, they do provide valuable tools to SLW teachers looking for pedagogical models.

### Specific Recommended Practices

Three general approaches to SLW pedagogy have been outlined above; however, in reviewing the current literature on recommended classroom SLW practices, I found several articles that outlined innovative or fresh ways of engaging students in the writing process. Several of these describe specific activities teachers did in their classrooms; rather than being extensively researched, the authors presented these ideas as suggestions to help spark new ideas for teachers as they lesson plan. I am outlining them here because as I read the articles, I was impressed with the authors' dedication to their teaching and their innovative responses to sometimes challenging situations. The four practices that I found were incorporating literature into the classroom; incorporating translation into the revision process; using literary translation as a tool to engage in cultural issues; and finally, wise use of peer feedback. All of these approaches are examples of pedagogical activities that would only work in certain concepts, and so demands a special awareness of what Silva (1990) names as the fifth key element of effective SLW pedagogy: the *interaction* between the writer, reader(s), text and context of in an authentic SLW context. These are distinct from the general approaches above in that they are not big-pictures perspectives that will shape the whole course; rather, they are activities that could be combined with or supplement any of the approaches above.

The first of these is to use literature in teaching SLW writing. Belcher & Hirvela (2000) summarize the history of this approach. Historically in the United States, L1 writing was taught within the context of reading and responding to pieces of literature. While this was originally incorporated into L2 writing, there has been a series of debates both for and against its effectiveness. Horowitz (1990) is one of the best-known critiques of using literature. Horowitz argued that most students in SLW classes were not and did not want to be members of the academic discourse community that studied and discussed literature. Thus, it was more helpful for them to learn to write specifically in and for the communities that were germane to them. In addition, the long debate over what counts as canonical in literature studies has made picking a piece of literature a fraught topic. However, SLW scholars have suggested meaningful ways to incorporate literature. Vandrick (1997) recommends using literature by established authors for whom English is a second language, if possible by authors who share a linguistic or cultural background with the SLW students. By choosing literature that uses local or non-typical forms of language, the teacher legitimizes these forms of language (Kachru, 1980); in addition, the students might have a better cultural or contextual understanding of the material, and their insights will give them more confidence of the value of their insights and what they write in response to the literature.

A second innovative and often-debated approach is to actively incorporate the SLW students' L1 into their writing practice via translation exercises. I found two interesting proposals on how this might be done; either by asking the student write in their L1 and translate it to the their L2 (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992), or by writing in the L2 and then translating it back to the L1 as part of the revising process (Kim, 2010).

In Kobayashi & Rinnert (1992), the authors conducted a comparison study where they asked 48 Japanese university students to write a composition in English directly, and then to write an English composition by first writing it in Japanese and then translating it to English. In comparing the two sets of essays, they found that lower-level students benefited more from the translation approach, as they used more complex structures than they did in writing simply in English and had better style and organization. The higher-level students also had more complexity in their translated writings, but they also had higher levels of errors that interfered with reader

understanding. They concluded that this approach is best for lower-level students, who benefit more from incorporating their L1 resources in the planning and writing stages.

Kim (2010) provides an enlightening example of how translation can be used for error correction as well as composition. Kim was struggling with her SLW course for new university students in Korea. The process approaches she used in class were not working well for the students, both because of their low level of English and their cultural expectations of the class and the teacher. They minimally revised their essays, had a hard time catching their grammatical errors, and were generally unresponsive to peer feedback. Then Kim asked her students to translate their English essays into Korean, read them in Korean, and then identify errors and room for growth. This approach was effective in helping students to dramatically improve the content and style of their English essays when rewriting. However, the students still usually did not catch their grammar errors when translating, as they knew what grammatical construction they had intended in English and translated it to that in Korean. Kim employed a second step of asking students to translate each other's essays from English to Korean, being careful to translate all the errors as errors. Students were much more likely to catch and translate each other's errors, especially when those errors impeded understanding the content. Students responded favorably to these two exercises and showed more openness to the revision process and to peer feedback as a result. Thus, Kim's approach is an excellent example of adapting an existing approach to the needs of the local cultural and linguistic situation of the classroom.

The third approach could be considered a mix of the first two: the translation of literary texts from English to the students' native language, or in reverse. Loffredo & Perteghella (2014) outline this approach. In arguing for it, they explain how this exercise, when done well, foregrounds the creativity of the students. By drawing actively on both of their languages, the students can engage more of their linguistic resources. They recommend that students do the translation in small groups, so that they can learn from each other and learn to think of the reader and context as well as the text. Since translating from one language to another usually brings pragmatic and cultural issues to the forefront, it is also an effective way to start conversations and learning about how culture is embedded in language and how to best translate meaning when the semantics do not provide a close match. One obvious limitation of this approach is that, for teamwork, the students must share an L1. However, it is possible to either not assign group work, or to ask for translation from one genre or voice to another within the L2, both of which are possible modified exercises Loffredo & Perteghella (2014) recommend.

The fourth and final element that can be incorporated into any approach to SLW pedagogy is peer feedback. Since the topics of teacher feedback and error correction have been so thoroughly researched and debated as to form their own academic area of study, I will not touch on that aspects. However, in the right cultural context, when the benefits are explained to students, it can be beneficial to the students to include the feedback of their peers in their writing processes (Ferris, 2016). Ferris (2003) summarizes the findings on how best to include pair feedback. First, teachers must consistently model the kind of feedback they want students to give to each other. If the teacher tends to comment on grammar rather than content, students will do so as well; similarly, if teachers concentrate on global issues, so will the students. Second, teachers must explain the importance of writing for an audience and demonstrate what audience awareness means for students if the students are to take their peers' feedback seriously and use it in their revision processes. And finally, it is important that, especially initially, the student feedback be low-stakes and not affect the students' grades, because otherwise students will refrain from giving each other feedback so as not to hurt each other's grades.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, there are indeed many exceptions to the perceived lack of clear pedagogical approaches in SLW. Through the intermingling of many disciplines, a variety of effective and exciting approaches have emerged. A SLW teacher can draw from a wide range of disciplines and tools when selecting how to organize a course. And, as Kim (2010) demonstrates, there is always room for effective innovating. I concur with Raimes (1991) that this is indeed a positive situation, and that, as there will never be one perfect solution, it is good to have so many excellent options.

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