A research-based approach to teaching prewriting strategies in academic writing

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This paper presents an instructional method for prewriting strategies in academic writing classes. The instructional practices proposed have been tested in a variety of academic writing contexts, and they are based on theoretical and research insights from both genre-based and process approaches to writing. The paper refers to and builds on existent research in the field to first investigate the relevance of prewriting strategies in academic writing and then suggest practical ways in which these may be implemented in a writing class context.

WHY TEACH PREWRITING STRATEGIES?

Academic writing requires students to write texts that are determined by what may be described as specific rhetorical situations. In many class, home and examination contexts related to academic writing, students have to respond to pre-established rubrics, which necessitate writing in specific genres, and to address their writing to an intended audience. In such contexts, several crucial aspects of writing, including content, style, tone and pitch, are regulated by the requirement for qualities like clarity, relevance, coherence, accuracy and appropriateness. These expectations, which are generally inimical to impulsive and spontaneous approaches to writing, strengthen the case for students being taught prewriting strategies that enhance their awareness of and control over the overarching rhetorical situation.

Research into the effectiveness of prewriting techniques has consistently shown that specific forms of prewriting treatments tend to have varying degrees of largely positive effects on the quality of the writing of students at different levels (Graham & Perin, 2007; Brodney, Reeves, & Kazelskis, 1999; Reece & Cumming, 1996). For instance, Graham and Perin's (2007) extensive meta-analysis leads to several recommendations for the adolescent writing class context. Defining writing quality "in terms of coherently organized essays containing well developed and pertinent ideas, supporting examples, and appropriate detail," (p. 14), Graham and Perin (2007) highlight, among others, the effectiveness of prewriting, "which engages students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition" and of writing strategies, "which involves teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions" (p. 4). What is more contentious is not the relevance of prewriting in the writing class but the kind of prewriting strategy that may be most effective.

Emphasis on prewriting tends to be associated with process writing approaches (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Brodney et al., 1999; Graham & Sandmel, 2011; Morris, 2012). Prewriting strategies are seen as playing a crucial part in the writing process primarily because they provide writers with the opportunity to plan their work in various levels of detail before they move on to other phases in the writing process, including translating and revising (Graham & Perin, 2007). In this context, prewriting may take the form of brainstorming, clustering and concept mapping, through which writers generate ideas for writing and reflect on the best ways of presenting those ideas within the rhetorical circumstances provoked by the assigned rubric.

However, prewriting strategies are not exclusive to process approaches, and they also play a key role in genre-based methodologies, which are often proposed as alternatives to process writing (Hyland, 2007). Rather than focusing primarily on the cycle of writing, genre-based approaches foster an understanding of text as a specific type of communicative event serving a specific function and recognised by a relevant community. Texts are analysed for typical 'moves' within

the genre, some of which are obligatory and some optional (Swales, 1990; Henry & Roseberry, 1998). While genre analysis is characterised by a central focus on the text in context, different pedagogical routes may be employed (Wingate, 2012, p. 28). One key variation relates to whether the text analysis is carried out by the teacher-researcher who identifies moves in a wide range of texts in a specific genre, which are then taught to students in the academic writing class, or whether the text analysis is carried out, jointly, by instructors and learners within the modelling phase of the writing class (Wingate, 2012, p. 28). Within the method being proposed in this paper, the latter option is seen as preferable because it encourages learners to participate in the analytical phase of the process hence urging them to tap into higher order cognitive skills such as critical awareness that the method, as a whole, aims to foster.

Through exposure to model texts in the genre being studied, the method proposed guides students towards identifying key textual moves in a specific genre, their arrangement in texts, and related linguistic features. In particular, the focus is on recognising the typical rhetorical organisation of texts in a genre, which, as a study by Henry and Roseberry (1998) shows, allows students "to concentrate [during the writing stage] on combining the elements effectively in terms of both achieving their communicative goals and producing more highly textured writing" (p. 154). Genre analysis helps to foster the understanding that academic writing places writers within a pre-established rhetorical tradition characterized by specific norms and conventions. One key difference between this kind of prewriting, which is used in genre-based literacy pedagogy, and those associated with process approaches, such as brainstorming and concept mapping, is that it cannot be used in most examination contexts. However, both have a key role to play in the academic writing classroom environment and in pedagogies that value independent and active learning.

RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF METHOD PROPOSED

The prewriting treatments being suggested involve a combination of genre-based and process approach strategies. The motivation behind the method proposed here is to utilise the strengths of the different approaches while mitigating their potential weaknesses. More specifically, from process writing, I emphasise the activation of the students' higher-order thinking skills that brainstorming and concept mapping can provide (Bloom et al., 1956; Morris, 2012). Through these prewriting routines, students are encouraged to show "active engagement with ideas" in the context of specific rhetorical situations rather than simply working within pre-established prescriptive constraints (Morris, 2012, p. 85). Students are encouraged to not only think of relevant points, while distinguishing between superordinate and subordinate ideas, but also about the connections between

these points. This concept-based thinking encourages students to "shape their material according to its nature and their aims" (Robinson, 1994, p. 194).

One key benefit of focusing on prewriting strategies in the academic writing class is that, as Morris argues, "quality prewriting helps motivate students by increasing their expertise and by spreading the cognitive load of composing, freeing mental resources for the actual writing" (Morris, 2012, p. 85). Having thought about which points will be developed and in which order before writing begins allows writers to focus more on language accuracy and expression during the writing itself.

A further consideration underpinning the method is the emphasis on strategy instruction that allows students to learn higher order skills that are transferable to different writing contexts. More specifically, the use of what Richards et al. (1992) describe as a combination approach to strategy instruction, in which strategies are introduced both explicitly and in ways which are embedded in the actual content of the subject (p. 355), allows students to acquire thinking, planning and writing skills that are essential not only in academic writing but also a variety of other genres (Flower & Hayes, 1980, p. 40). As Al-Shaer (2014) puts it, strategy instruction "transform[s] students into active learners by training them on how to learn and how to employ what they have learned in their daily life... [S]tudents learn to integrate new information with previous background, in a way that makes sense, facilitating information or skill retrieval at any time or place" (p. 3).

From genre-analysis, I retain the exposure to exemplary texts from specific genres. Reading a carefully selected sample of texts written in the genre that writers are learning compensates for the lack of awareness of language and genre constraints that an exclusively process-oriented approach to writing would create (Hyland, 2007). The method proposed also embraces the argument that the writing process cannot be conceived in a vacuum and that it is inextricable, both cognitively and pedagogically, from reading. Research by Brodney et al. (1999), which compared the effect of various combinations of prewriting and reading treatments on expository compositions written by fifth grade students, found that a combination of reading and prewriting before composing was "the most effective prewriting instructional strategy" (p. 5). Summarising the issue, Grabe (2001) argues that "One of the most consistent implications of two decades of reading and writing relations is that they should be taught together and that the combination of both literacy skills enhances learning in all areas" (p. 25). Brodney et al.'s (1999) review of relevant literature makes similar claims for the combination of reading and writing instruction. The authors justify the rationale for this combination by highlighting the way both reading and writing involve construction of meaning through the same cognitive schemata. During composition, writers anticipate the metacognitive processes involved in reading, and an understanding of text organisation and paragraph construction is crucial both in writing and in reading.

METHOD

The prewriting method proposed here may be schematised as consisting of five stages, beginning with genre analysis and continuing with four prewriting cycles characterised by descending degrees of teacher input and ascending degrees of independent learning. The model (shown in Figure 1) allows for flexibility as the writing instructors may opt to repeat or omit any of the prewriting cycles depending on their judgment of the cognitive abilities of the learners as well as their familiarity with the genre being taught and with the prewriting strategies employed. The rationale behind the combination of genre analysis, as a first stage, and successive prewriting stages is based on the assumption that the prewriting strategies employed—primarily, brainstorming and concept mapping—are more likely to be effective when the writers are familiar with the linguistic and rhetorical conventions of the genre in which they are writing. The proposed order of the prewriting stages, on the other hand, allows the classroom sessions to move, gradually, through the following combinations of teacher input and active learning: modelling and explicit instruction by the teacher; collaboration in the form of peer to peer and peer to teacher interaction; and relatively independent writing practice. The stages are designed to not only guide students into learning how to write in a specific genre but also to stimulate their higher order thinking skills and to equip them with thinking and writing strategies that can then be employed in contexts beyond the genre they are learning. One benefit of this focus on writing strategies means that in successive uses of the method for the teaching of different genres to the same students, less time will need to be spent on fostering the meta-awareness of the students about the processes of brainstorming and concept mapping as they will have already been exposed to this aspect of prewriting in previous cycles.

FIGURE 1: THE PREWRITING METHOD
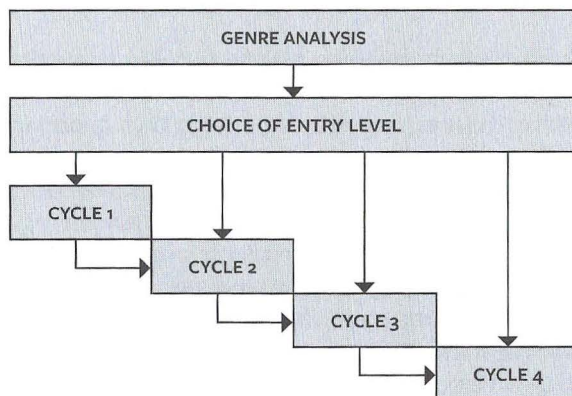
STAGE DESCRIPTIONS

This section of the paper offers suggestions on how the method being proposed can be applied, in practice, within the academic writing classroom context. The proposed teaching strategy is to combine prewriting exercises favoured in genre analysis with cyclical stages that are usually associated with process writing approaches. As it will become clear in what follows, the various cycles are designed to enhance students' higher order cognitive skills, thus allowing the specific training in a particular writing genre to also strengthen their writing in other genres. However, the cycles also allow for students to be exposed to appropriate models of writing in specific text-types, thus building on the philosophy of familiarity with convention that is central to genre approaches.

Genre analysis

During this stage, students are exposed to a range of texts in the genre that they are learning. Teachers may employ a variety of methods to make the students aware of the linguistic devices and the rhetorical moves that are typical of a specific genre. They may use their expertise in a genre, acquired, for instance, through analysis of relevant corpora, to highlight the generic constraints directly. They may also guide the students by asking specific questions and assigning specific exercises aimed at eliciting generic characteristics from the learners.

For instance, in teaching academic writing, teachers may ask students to identify the transitional phrases and the topic sentences in some paragraphs or the whole text. They may then focus on a particular paragraph and elicit the different functions of sentences within a paragraph, such as exemplification, clarification, elaboration, referencing, quoting and linking. The aim of these exercises is to expose students to the linguistic, rhetorical and generic constraints they will need to be aware of when writing in the specific genre at a later stage.

Cycle 1

Brainstorming and concept mapping are the two key prewriting strategies in academic writing. The first cycle after the genre analysis allows the writing instructor to introduce both of these strategies by highlighting their importance to students and offering a practical demonstration of how they may be employed in academic writing. In this cycle, the instructor provides a significant level of input by eliciting and participating in both the brainstorming and concept mapping phases. At this stage, learners are immersed in "borrowed consciousness," that is, "the idea that learners working with knowledgeable others develop greater understanding of tasks and ideas" (Hyland, 2007, p. 158). In this cycle, the instructor acts as a model for the learners, while the students actively learn by participating in the prewriting exercises as a class activity.

At this stage, the instructor may focus on highlighting thinking strategies

that the students may employ to facilitate their prewriting exercises when they are working on their own. While brainstorming is often thought of as a random association exercise, students may be shown the usefulness of thinking triggers that could improve their brainstorming skills in different writing genres. For instance, students may be shown the effect of looking at the specific topic they are writing about through journalist questions—what, who, where, when, how and why—or through a series of other relevant prompt words, like 'context,' 'history,' 'theory,' 'for' and 'against,' which may facilitate and guide their brainstorming. These prompts may also be adapted to the specific academic writing genre being taught.

In the concept mapping stage, the instructor may focus on distinguishing between superordinate and subordinate concepts that will have arisen in the brainstorming phase. The class discussion may also be focused on eliciting different opinions about the ways in which the concepts may be organised in the writing. This encourages the students to develop meta-awareness about the prewriting strategies they are practising.

Cycle 2

The cycles following the genre analysis phase and Cycle 1 are meant to gradually shift the cognitive workload from the writing instructor to the learner, thus encouraging the latter to take a gradually increasing responsibility in the prewriting exercises conducted in class. In this cycle of teacher-supported learning, the brainstorming is done by the students, in groups of three to five, and is then followed by a teacher-led class discussion of the possible concept maps that may be derived from the students' brainstorming. Once again, in this part of the prewriting, the teacher can contribute to the shaping of the concept map. Through the group work, the students have access to "shared consciousness," that is, "the idea that learners working together learn more effectively than individuals working separately" (Hyland, 2007, p. 158).

Cycle 3

The aims in this cycle are to, on the one hand, give further opportunities to students to practise prewriting strategies and, on the other hand, develop the higher order skill of meta-cognitive awareness. In this cycle, the brainstorming is done by the students working individually, while the concept mapping is done collaboratively by the students in groups of three to five. During this part of the session, the instructor can roam around the space of the classroom in order to offer feedback and assistance where necessary. After the groups have formulated their concept map, the structure of the lesson changes to a class discussion in which the various concept maps are explained by group representatives and the teacher gives feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the various possibilities proposed by the students.

Cycle 4

In the final cycle, students work individually throughout the various stages of prewriting, that is, through brainstorming and concept mapping. The instructor may opt to ask some of the students to share their final plans in a class discussion or may give individual feedback while roaming around the class.

CONCLUSION

The method proposed here has been developed and utilised over ten years of teaching within the context of academic writing classes at both pre-university and university levels. While evidence of the method's beneficial effects on students' writing exists in the form of student feedback and teacher evaluation, more scientifically verifiable evidence of its positive impact on writing quality should be sought. A potential limitation of this method, also to be verified by research, is the time needed for its implementation. Given its cyclical structure, which is inspired by process approaches to writing, the use of the method for the teaching of a specific writing genre needs to be spread over a number of lessons. Whether an exclusively genre-based approach may lead to better results within the short (or indeed the long) term is a research question worth investigating.

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