Original Article

Challenges Teachers of English Encounter when Teaching Composition Writing using Writing Approaches: The Case of Three Selected Secondary Schools in Central West Education Division-Malawi

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the approaches teachers of English use to teach composition writing and how these approaches impact writing competence. The study explored the challenges teachers of English in secondary school face when implementing these writing strategies in the classroom. Adopting a qualitative methodology and employing a case study design, the study utilized in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, literature reviews, and analysis of documents, including learners' exercise books to collect data from selected participant language teachers and learners. Data were transcribed, categorized, and coded using content analysis techniques. The findings reveal that teachers predominantly rely on a product-oriented approach to teaching composition. However, this approach has limitations, as it often leads to surface-level errors, a lack of ideas or vocabulary, poor organizational skills, and an overall inability among learners to compose effectively. Learners also demonstrated poor writing skills, including a lack of ideas and vocabulary, and exhibited general apathy towards composition writing, hindering their development as effective communicators in an increasingly globalized world. The study's findings suggest a need for further research into the impact of various writing approaches on students' writing competence and provide a foundation for future studies in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching composition writing is a complex skill, especially when it is taught using a language that is a second language. Unlike receptive skills such as reading, listening, and speaking, composition writing is categorized as a productive skill. To develop competence in writing, learners must invest significant effort and focus. Teaching composition writing requires more structured work than teaching speaking or listening. It demands extensive reading of diverse literature and a strong grasp of sentence construction, including a solid command of vocabulary. In essence, writing is not just a skill to be learned but also a means of conveying ideas to the reader.

As a result, the teaching of writing encompasses various approaches. Initially, the productive composition writing approach is used, followed by the process-oriented approach, which is later integrated with the genre-based approach. These different approaches have been developed to teach English writing skills, providing learners with a broader scope to think creatively, apply the rules of a foreign language, and enhance their writing abilities.

English is a compulsory subject in Malawian schools, and failure to pass it results in students being ineligible for a certificate required for further studies. Writing is a crucial component at all educational levels, particularly in secondary school, which is the focus of this study. English proficiency is vital within Malawi's educational system and has significant socio-economic implications. Mastery of English literacy and composition writing skills offers considerable educational advantages. Brown (2000) argues that competence in English is essential for accessing higher levels of academic writing and achieving social mobility.

Despite the continued prominence of English in education, business, and social spheres in Malawi, teachers face numerous challenges in delivering effective literacy instruction, particularly in teaching English composition writing. The limited development of local languages due to resource constraints and logistical challenges further underscores the importance of learning English. These factors motivated the researcher to investigate the approaches English teachers use to promote competency in English composition writing.

Pursuant to this primary aim, the study set out to answer three questions. It set out to investigate composition writing approaches which English teachers use in the teaching and learning of English composition writing in the classroom. It also set out to establish how the composition writing approaches are implemented by English teachers in the classroom and, finally, identify the challenges which arise from the use of these approaches in the teaching and learning of English composition writing.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Vygotsky's social constructivism theory, which posits that an individual's cognitive development is shaped by social interactions and cannot be separated from social life (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986). According to Vygotsky, language plays a crucial role in helping individuals develop new strategies through communication, whether with others or internally. Writing is inherently a thinking process, requiring learners to produce texts based on their cognitive processes (Brown, 2000). From this perspective, learners actively engage in co-creating knowledge and maintaining social reality through their interactions with peers. These theoretical principles support the notion that learning is most effective when students engage in tasks within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the gap between what they can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory underscores the idea that cognitive development is driven by social interaction and communication.

English Writing Competence: Why It Matters to Secondary School Students

Strong writing skills are crucial for every student, as they significantly enhance their chances of excelling academically, securing employment, and participating effectively in society. The ability to write clearly and effectively is fundamental to human interaction, as it allows individuals to share their ideas, opinions, and thoughts with others (Graves, 1983). The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (2012) defines writing competence as the ability to use language effectively in real-world situations, in a spontaneous and unrehearsed context. Thus, a student who writes competently in English can articulate issues more clearly than one who lacks this competency.

In Malawi's secondary schools, all content subjects are taught in English, and teachers assess students' understanding of subject matter primarily through writing (Chilimanjira, 2012; Chimombo and Kunje, 2010; Mmela, 2006; Zhu, 2004; Fukao & Fujii, 2001). Research findings consistently demonstrate that writing is a key determinant of academic progress and success, underscoring the importance of students acquiring competence in writing. However, these studies also reveal that many students struggle to communicate effectively in written English, highlighting significant challenges in developing writing skills.

Writing approaches in English composition

Numerous studies have been conducted on writing approaches to enhance writing competence, particularly in improving composition writing among second language learners. Teaching English composition to second language learners is widely recognized as a challenging task. To address the difficulties faced by these learners, various researchers have explored different strategies. The collective efforts of psychologists and researchers have led to the development of three key theoretical concepts that underpin approaches to writing competence: the product writing approach, the genre writing approach, and the process writing approach. This study reviews literature that examines the challenges of these approaches, particularly in the context of teaching composition writing at the secondary school level. It also explores the role of the teacher in fostering writing competence among learners.

In the African context, particularly in Malawi, there is evidence to suggest that the appropriate environment for learning English composition as a second language (L2) may not be adequately provided. As noted by Pongweni (1999), teachers cannot depend on the community to sufficiently reinforce English language learning. This situation is further complicated by the competency limitations of English teachers, who are often themselves second-language learners of English. These factors may contribute to the challenges learners face in developing effective composition writing skills.

The Product Writing Approach

The product writing approach emerged during the era of audiolingualism, focusing on the mastery of writing as a key objective. In this approach, emphasis is placed on the final written product, with teaching beginning with small, manageable units that learners gradually expand upon. Nunan (1999) describes this as a bottom-up process. The product writing approach heavily relies on mimicry and memorization of model texts, with a primary focus on the form and content of the written work. Teachers evaluate the written products against specific criteria, often without consideration of the meaning or thought process behind the finished work (Meriwether, 1997). Critics of this approach argue that it leads to "mindless, repetitive, anti-intellectual" work (Williams, 2003, p. 2) and results in superficial copies of a particular style or organizational plan (Escholz, 1980). Silva (1993) also critiques this method as merely "an exercise in habit formation." The product writing approach is rooted in behaviorist theory, which views language as a system of structurally related elements for encoding meaning, with language learning focused on mastering these elements (Richards and Rodgers, 1995). This emphasis on form and correctness likely explains the approach's preoccupation with surface-level accuracy.

The Genre Writing Approach

The genre writing approach, unlike the product approach, involves learners in creating texts that

reflect specific structures and features related to a given topic. According to Swales (1990), genre writing involves "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (p. 58). Martin (1992) further defines this approach as a goal-oriented, staged social process, where learners interact to achieve specific social goals (Hyland, 2003). Although relatively new to English language teaching, the genre writing approach shares some similarities with the product approach, particularly in its focus on linguistic knowledge. However, the genre approach places greater emphasis on writing within various social contexts. The approach typically involves three stages: introducing the text by the teacher, constructing the text with some guidance, and producing the final text independently. Analytical writing, a key component of this approach, involves critically evaluating texts, explaining them with reasons, and presenting personal views supported by logic and references. Chronological writing, another element, organizes events in sequence, with historical essays serving as prime examples (Park et al., 2005).

The Process Writing Approach

The process writing approach contrasts sharply with the product approach, emphasizing creativity over mimicry and memorization. Developed as a reaction to the limitations of the product approach, the process approach views writing as a dynamic process rather than a static product (Jordan, 1997; Wyse, 2003). This approach shifts the focus from the final written product to the various stages of writing. Graves (1996) outlines five stages in the process approach: brainstorming/pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. These stages encourage learners to engage deeply with their writing, making informed decisions and taking responsibility for improving their work through discussion, drafting, feedback, and revision. The process approach, as described by White & Arndt (1991), is cyclical and recursive, allowing learners to revisit and refine their ideas continuously.

Integrated Writing Approaches

Combining the strengths of the product, genre, and process writing approaches can lead to more

effective writing instruction. An integrated approach to teaching composition writing encourages collaborative learning among students and fosters interaction between teachers and learners throughout the writing process. This approach also promotes critical thinking by allowing students to engage freely and interactively with the material. Additionally, it provides teachers with opportunities to monitor students' progress at every stage, offering tailored input, feedback, and resources to support their development. Thus, adopting an integrated approach in teaching composition writing skills is a viable strategy to enhance students' acquisition and mastery of writing skills, leading to more effective and proficient composition writing.

While there is significant literature on writing approaches and their theoretical underpinnings, there is a notable gap in research examining the specific challenges teachers face when teaching composition writing using these approaches in Malawi. Existing studies focus primarily on students' writing abilities and theoretical models but provide little insight into the practical difficulties teachers encounter in applying these methods in real classrooms. Factors such as limited teacher training, inadequate resources, and large class sizes are likely to hinder effective implementation, yet these challenges remain underexplored in the context of secondary schools in Malawi.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the challenges that teachers of English face when teaching composition writing using various writing approaches in selected secondary schools in the Central West Education Division of Malawi. Understanding these challenges is critical for developing strategies that can improve the teaching and learning of composition writing in Malawian schools.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach, employing a variety of methods through triangulation. These methods included classroom observations, in-depth interviews (IDIs), focus group discussions (FGDs), analysis of school documents such as learners' exercise books, and the use of observation and assessment protocols over a ten-week school term. The research strategies

involved conducting in-depth interviews with teachers, focus group discussions with learners, and classroom observations of both teachers and students. Purposive sampling was used to select three secondary schools, allowing the study to target informants whose insights could be generalized to similar settings in other schools and classes within the locality.

Field notes were collected through observations of six different teachers and 72 learners in a natural classroom setting, with the researcher acting as a non-participant observer over the course of the ten-week term. One-on-one, open-ended semi-structured interviews were conducted with participating teachers and students, complemented by an analysis of classroom exercise books, including draft compositions, brainstorming notes, and composition writing assignments. The data collected from observations, interviews, and document analyses were then categorized for analysis, aligned with the research questions, and used to draw conclusions for discussion and to inform recommendations.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study, which utilized in-depth interviews, classroom observations, and focus group discussions, revealed that the teachers predominantly employed a product-oriented approach to teaching composition writing. This approach demonstrated a lack of emphasis on the value and importance of writing as a creative skill essential for promoting writing competence. Teachers appeared to overlook the long-term benefits of developing their students' composition writing abilities, treating the teaching of composition writing as a mere formality rather than a crucial educational activity.

The findings suggest that composition writing instruction was often uninspired and infrequent, reflecting a lack of passion and commitment from the teachers. This attitude was evident in their handling of composition writing lessons, which were often delivered with minimal enthusiasm. Additionally, teachers frequently assigned composition writing as homework, particularly to struggling students, citing constraints such as limited classroom time and large class sizes (typically around forty students per class). Overall, the study

highlights a need for more engaging and creative approaches to teaching composition writing, as well as a recognition of its importance in developing students' writing competence.

Product Writing Approach

Classroom observations in this study revealed that teachers predominantly focused on evaluating the final product of students' writing, assigning grades based on surface-level criteria such as spelling, punctuation, and organization, while neglecting the content and meaning of the compositions. The product writing approach consists of three main stages: familiarization, where learners are introduced to the features of the text; the controlled or guided stage, where they practice writing skills with increasing freedom; and the free writing stage, where they apply these skills independently. However, the study found that teachers often bypassed these stages, limiting the effectiveness of the approach.

The in-depth interviews indicated that teachers adhered to a product-oriented paradigm, which emphasizes grammatical accuracy and positions the teacher as a judge rather than a facilitator of the writing process. As a result, teachers often provided negative feedback, focusing on form rather than content. Despite this, teachers recognized the product approach's role in developing students' linguistic skills, as evidenced by Teacher 1A, who stated during an interview:

"Whenever I want to teach composition writing, I first produce a text myself and then ask my learners to read the text by going through its features and the organization of ideas. I do this to avoid poor use of language structures by learners. When marking, you don't stress yourself." [IDI-Teacher 1A 04/05/2021]

During lessons, features of the product approach were evident. For example, at the familiarization stage, Teacher T1B introduced students to the type of writing they would produce, while at the controlled writing stage, Teacher T3A assigned combining and substituting exercises. These activities involved matching or reordering words and imitating items produced by the teacher. However, this led to students producing compositions with

limited vocabulary and short, underdeveloped paragraphs.

Moreover, the study found that teachers provided minimal feedback during the writing process, offering critiques only after the final draft had been completed. This late feedback did little to help students improve their writing, as it was too late to incorporate suggestions into the composition.

The product writing approach can result in students jumping from topic to topic, as they are given the freedom to express their thoughts without much consideration for structure or coherence. For instance, when Learner 2C was given 10 minutes to write freely, she produced the following:

> **SHE CAPTURED MY HEART:** *"Joana is a beautiful girl. I feel she is also creative in nature. Anywhere she goes, she is acknowledged. Despite the weather, she dresses nicely. Why doesn't she look weird? Her nice look captures the scene. Does she read more of grooming and etiquette books? Maybe, as the look of things...."* **[L2C/18/06/2021]** *Chalkboard work*.

This example illustrates that in the product writing approach, the topic and final product are entirely at the discretion of the writer, often leading to compositions that lack grammatical and syntactical correctness, logical flow, and coherence.

Ultimately, the study concluded that the product writing approach, with its emphasis on structure over content and meaning, did not effectively enhance students' writing competence. The feedback provided by teachers focused on surface-level errors rather than helping students develop meaningful and coherent compositions. Consequently, students' writing was often limited in scope and lacked depth, reflecting their struggles with communication, grammar, and vocabulary skills necessary for competent writing.

The Genre Writing Approach

The genre writing approach emphasizes writing within various social contexts, in contrast to the product approach, which focuses on linguistic knowledge and competence. Classroom observations revealed that the genre approach to teaching composition writing consists of three stages. The first stage is the introduction, where the teacher introduces the text to the learners. The second stage involves learners constructing the text under the teacher's guidance. In the final stage, learners complete the text independently. However, the study found that teachers using the genre approach often did not fully implement the final stage, where they work with learners to construct a similar text. Additionally, teachers provided little feedback on necessary developments during the composition process, leaving learners without adequate support and guidance on how to transition from spoken to written language.

Despite these shortcomings, classroom observations indicated that the genre approach facilitated interaction among learners, encouraging social processes in writing. However, students using the genre approach faced challenges with new vocabulary, particularly in using prepositions and verb tenses correctly.

Further analysis revealed that the genre approach can be understood both as an approach, method, or strategy for teaching and learning writing, and as a product of writing itself. As an approach, genre refers to the systematic process of writing, with specific steps that teachers and students must follow. The genre writing approach is characterized by its distinctive features, including organization, physical design or layout, and the communicative purpose and linguistic features employed. Genre-based approaches are particularly suitable for learners with low competencies and low motivation. These approaches guide learners from simple, dependent steps to more independent steps, thereby facilitating independent learning.

Process Writing Approach

The process writing approach represents a shift from a product-oriented focus to a focus on the writing process itself. This approach involves five key stages, as outlined by Graves (1996): brainstorming/pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing. It emphasizes the idea that writing is an iterative process where learners are encouraged to make decisions about their writing direction through collaboration, drafting, feedback, and informed choices, as noted by Frederickson

(2003). This method allows students to engage deeply with their work, reflecting the cyclical and recursive nature of writing.

In secondary schools in Malawi, writing requirements vary by level: junior certificate learners are expected to write between 200 and 250 words, while senior secondary students must produce texts of 350 to 500 words (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2014). Extended composition writing aims to develop learners' academic writing skills and functional writing abilities for both in-school and real-world contexts. Proficiency in extended writing is crucial for examinations and can significantly benefit from the process writing approach.

However, the process writing approach requires systematic supervision throughout the writing process. Observations, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions revealed that teachers often lack the time to guide learners through every stage due to other responsibilities. For example, one teacher explained:

> "I have many learners and time does not allow me to work with them through all the stages of writing. I focus on the planning and drafting stages to ensure their ideas are developing well." [IDI- T1C- 18/06/2021]

The editing stage is particularly important as it allows learners to review and refine their texts, improving readability, clarity, and organization. This stage is crucial for adding or removing details to enhance content and focus. Effective writing instruction requires teachers to guide learners through each stage of the writing process, recognizing and addressing each learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD represents the range of tasks a learner can perform independently or with assistance (Murray, 2004). It includes both the actual level of development and the potential level achieved with support. Teachers must provide appropriate feedback and assistance to help learners progress through their ZPD.

At the secondary school level, learners need to practice composition writing for exams, social and economic purposes, and future academic writing. Proper supervision and guidance can significantly enhance their motivation and writing competence. Effective writing involves searching for, selecting, and reflecting on information, as well as structuring sentences and paragraphs, grouping related ideas, and ensuring logical sequence. Mastery of these skills is essential for learners to become effective writers.

Challenges in Using Writing Approaches

Lack of Pedagogical Skills

Teacher attrition is a significant issue in Malawi's secondary education sector, leading to a reduction in the number of skilled and experienced teachers. This shortage adversely impacts students' learning outcomes and performance (Nkhokwe, et al.). In this study, only 33% of the participating English teachers held formal qualifications in the subject, indicating that only a third were likely equipped to employ formal approaches to teaching composition writing.

This gap in qualifications is reflected in the observed teaching practices. Many teachers focused on basic text structures and formats rather than employing effective writing approaches. For instance, one teacher stated:

> "The approach I used was not recognized as a specific method; I just applied various ways to help my learners construct relevant sentences. I am not familiar with the names of approaches, only general teaching methods like teacher-centered or learner-centered." [IDI-T1B-22/06/2021]

This lack of awareness highlights a broader issue: many teachers are not familiar with the specific approaches to teaching composition writing, leading to a focus on superficial aspects of writing rather than on developing students' understanding of writing processes and techniques.

Lesson observations indicated that while the genre approach offers learners the opportunity to study grammar and vocabulary in context, the overall effectiveness of writing instruction is hindered by the lack of pedagogical skills and understanding among teachers.

Lack of motivation due to inadequate feedback

Focus group discussions with learners revealed that the absence of proper feedback on their work significantly impacted their ability to learn and develop writing skills. Analysis of student assignments indicated that teachers often awarded marks without providing any feedback. For example, students who received low marks did not get explanations about what was wrong with their work or how they could improve. One student described this issue:

> "We face challenges like kugwetsedwa ulesi (lack of encouragement) because we just receive marks without explanations, like 10 out of 40, and that's it. When we ask for clarification, we are told to check with classmates who scored higher. We feel embarrassed and discouraged." **[FGD-Learner 1A 24/03/2021]**

As highlighted by the student, effective feedback is crucial for improving writing competence. Constructive feedback not only boosts motivation and performance but also supports continuous learning and personal growth. It guides students on areas needing improvement and helps them understand how to perform better in future tasks. The lack of feedback, as illustrated by the unmarked assignment of Student 6 from School C, further underscores the problem. Feedback should provide actionable insights, not just justify grades, to truly benefit students' development in writing.
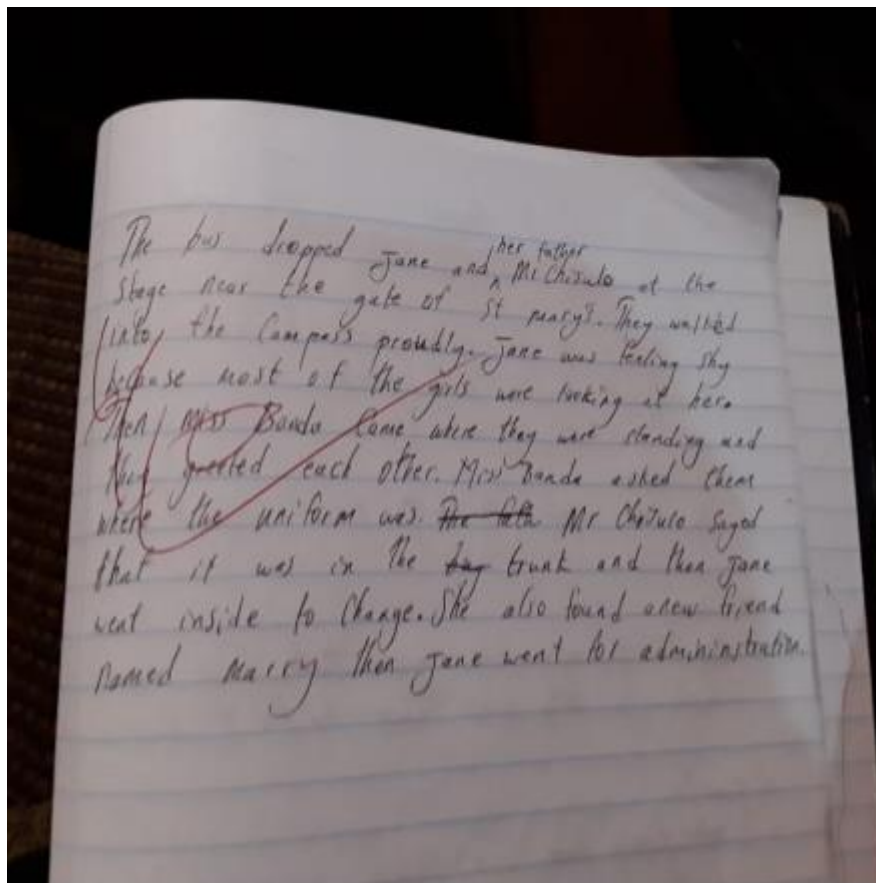
Lack of adequate supervision in writing

The three teachers assigned composition writing as homework following initial prewriting activities, such as topic discussion and group brainstorming. While assigning homework is not inherently problematic, many learners struggled with composing texts and required more teacher guidance and supervision to develop their writing skills. Completing composition writing outside the classroom limits the teacher's ability to address errors and provide immediate feedback.

The study revealed that both learners and teachers faced time constraints, with teachers often believing that composition writing could only be effectively

completed within a single lesson. Consequently, all observed composition lessons were finished as homework. Additionally, students perceived that taking too long to complete a composition was indicative of failure, rather than an opportunity for thorough development.

In contrast, effective writing instruction requires ample time for reflection, research, drafting, and revision. Unfortunately, both students and teachers failed to leverage this time to enhance writing skills, resulting in a lack of adequate supervision and guidance during the composition process.

CONCLUSION

The social constructivist theory emphasizes that learning should be an active, participatory process. It is closely linked to teaching and learning approaches that consider the learner's nature, the learning process, and motivational factors. Effective teaching must account for the learner's essential needs, background, and the complexity of their learning context. However, in the observed teaching practices for composition writing, these crucial factors were largely neglected.

Teaching and learning English as a Second Language (ESL), particularly in composition writing at the secondary school level in Malawi, presents significant challenges. Addressing these challenges requires exploring various strategies and writing approaches. It is crucial to implement measures to enhance composition writing instruction, including improving library resources, providing relevant textbooks and materials, organizing writing workshops and competitions, offering refresher courses, and implementing remedial teaching for learners with diverse needs. Ultimately, the goal of literacy is to develop individuals' abilities to communicate effectively and competently in both national and global contexts.

The recommendations provided address some key aspects of improving writing skills for L2 learners at the secondary school level in Malawi, but they are not exhaustive. Future research should consider examining the types of writing and creative writing practices at the primary school level to better understand the sources of learners' composition writing challenges and to inform more effective interventions.

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