



A Comprehensive Approach to Teaching Academic Writing: The Content and Corpus Integrated Inquiry-based Approach

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ABSTRACT

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This article discusses the definitions and applications of content-based approaches, inquiry-based approaches, and corpus-based approaches respectively. Based on the analysis of these approaches' strengths and weaknesses, a comprehensive approach, namely the content and corpus integrated inquiry-based approach, is proposed to complement their drawbacks, which has practical significance for teaching academic writing.

Keywords:

Academic writing; Content-based Approaches; Corpus-based Approaches; Inquiry-based Approaches.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an academic setting, learners need specific academic skills, including how to express their opinions academically in writing, which is the core of academic writing instruction and a feature that distinguishes it from general writing approaches. In EAP writing, the purpose is not single. It is required to combine with content, develop learners' thinking and exploration, and make them understand and master the rules of academic writing. Therefore, a single teaching method is challenging to meet the needs of many aspects. This article reviews and discusses three common approaches to academic writing: content-based approaches, inquiry-based approaches, and corpus-based approaches. I attempt to provide instructors with a comprehensive approach that integrates the three approaches to apply in the academic writing course.

2. CONTENT-BASED APPROACHES

Shih (1986) proposed content-based approaches in academic writing. She considered that the approach is based on

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specific academic subjects and focused on content comprehension (Shih, 1986). For college students, the combination of English writing and subject knowledge facilitates content comprehension as well as promotes writing skills, and they anticipate learning professional knowledge in English class (Khonsari, 2005). Based on learners' needs, the content-based approach is suitable for those who want to integrate learning content into English academic writing.

In this approach, the writing stages follow the writing process, mainly focusing on pre-writing, first drafting, and revising (Shih, 1986). Compared with traditional process approaches focused on personal experiences, the content-based approach is emphasized more on acquiring some basic academic skills during the academic writing process. In pre-writing stage, it emphasizes organizing writing through a series of scholarly inquiry activities, where writing ideas are primarily sourced from readings, lectures, discussions, or academic papers related to specific academic contents, and writers integrate, interpret, and critique collected information (Shih, 1986). At the first-drafting and revising stages, writers can continuously monitor and modify both contents and languages (Shih, 1986), making writing more suitable in an academic setting.

Shih (1986) stated that "Content-based academic writing courses prepare students who are at the beginning of the

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undergraduate study to handle writing tasks across disciplines” (p. 635). The class is surrounded by the selected themes that are suitable for students (Shih, 1986; Heriyawati et al., 2014). Firstly, teachers need to monitor and evaluate relevant materials for the chosen topics to ensure the authority and practicality of the materials (Shih, 1986). It can be achieved by teaching students how to filter for appropriate reading materials, For example, by teaching students to target appropriate and authoritative literature based on key journals and search keywords, which is an essential skill in academic writing. The selected topics are preferably related to the students’ majors so that they can also learn professional knowledge and skills in writing through content-based approaches. Before writing the first draft, teachers help students cultivate analytical abilities through various pre-writing activities (Paltridge, 2004), such as reading and analyzing relevant materials and discussing after reading. Furthermore, the discussions can be displayed in various forms, such as delivering presentations and debating, which enriches the construction of students’ writing content (Shih, 1986; Khonsari, 2005; Heriyawati et al., 2014).

In summary, content-based approaches focus more on the pre-writing construction and emphasize the importance of the contents from relevant materials and activities and the contents that can arouse students’ interest and motivation to learn and write.

3. INQUIRY-BASED APPROACHES

Inquiry-based approaches are considered exploratory methods. It focuses on a knowledge discovery process that engages students in inquiry (Wale & Bogale, 2021). In the process, students are involved in “making observations; posing questions; examining sources; gathering, analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing data; proposing answers, explanations and predictions; communicating findings through discussion and reflection” (Derseh, 2020, p. 139). Students would also apply what they learn in the classroom to real situations (Barron & Darling-hammond, 2010; Derseh, 2020).

Inquiry-based approaches to writing mainly have four stages, including “engagement, exploration, explanation and extensions” (Marshall, 2013, cited in Wale & Bogale, 2021, p. 2-3), and the assessment and evaluation are involved in each stage for monitoring (Wale & Bogale, 2021). Engagement refers to activating students’ previous knowledge and learning interest, which means that students begin their learning by generating writing ideas and selecting specific topics. In exploration, students mainly search for and collect the

information they need. They organize and explain the collected information in the explanation stage by providing supportive evidence and data to demonstrate their opinions. When it comes to the extension, students apply what they have learned and collected into the authentic context to form a deeper understanding of the learned knowledge.

In the inquiry-based academic writing class, students identify and explore problems to develop their knowledge, while teachers facilitate the learning process (Wale & Bogale, 2021). Teachers are responsible for activating students’ learning interests and thinking by asking them to brainstorm problems. Additionally, they should provide students with scaffolds and instruction in each stage to better facilitate students. During each phase, teachers monitor and assess students’ inquiry and writing process and provide feedback and suggestions, which benefit students to have a deeper understanding of their writing themes. For students, writing is mainly dependent on their self-directing and self-exploration. Under teachers’ guidance and instruction, they start their learning by generating ideas and problems of writing. Based on the decided topics, they collect and evaluate information by finding evidence and discussing it. When it comes to writing, the emphasis is on the construction of their writing by providing convincing arguments, considering the audiences and text genre, evaluating and building connections between writing information. Finally, they obtain feedback from instructors and peers. More importantly, students generate academic writing in an actual situation based on what they have learned during the inquiry process, which makes writing more practical and meaningful and makes students learn more deeply. Students also assess their writing in each inquiry stage formatively and summatively (Barron & Daring-Hammond, 2010).

To sum up, inquiry-based approaches to academic writing can be student-centered and thought-provoking. Students can benefit greatly from it and apply “classroom-gathered knowledge to real-world problems” (Barron & Daring-Hammond, 2010, p. 199). In the academic setting, students cultivate their research awareness and have an understanding of conducting research, but it needs more learning initiative and autonomy in the inquiry process.

4. CORPUS-BASED APPROACHES

Corpus is a synthesis of representative languages in natural contexts (Hou, 2014), and it is valuable for EAP writing (Chang, 2014). Different types of corpora can be used for teaching. According to the characteristics of the corpus, it can

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be divided into general or specialized corpus (Hou, 2014). The general and direct corpora are the dictionaries (Flowerdew, 2017), while the specialized ones are served for specific purposes, such as the corpus for academic purposes or the self-compiled corpus. In an academic setting, corpus-based approaches focus on language use in academic discourses (Lu et al., 2021).

Corpus-based approaches enhance the language understanding from many aspects (Davies, 2008, cited in Nasution, 2018). In an academic corpus, “lists of academic vocabulary and collocations are usually organized alphabetically, by frequency, or by collocation type” (Lu et al., 2021, p. 61). One of the most important features is the frequency of word use, which is fundamental and the main contribution of corpus to language teaching (Flowerdew, 2017). The frequency of words will affect the choice of learners. This language compilation provides the use of language in authentic contexts, which is authoritative and practical for users’ reference.

Academic corpora are helpful for academic writing, allowing students to search for academic vocabulary and language patterns for use in writing. In EAP writing class, a corpus is the language resource for students to search for proper language use and self-correct. Learners retrieve specific words through the corpus platforms. They can identify what kind of words to use in writing by the frequency of word usage, context, and other properties. For teachers, it is necessary to teach students on how to choose appropriate corpora and make use of them in writing (Chang, 2014). In Chang’s (2014) research, students highly valued a more specialized corpus because of its direct relevance to their academic field. When choosing a corpus, teachers need to help students select suitable corpora according to their writing needs and instruct them on how to use corpora. Otherwise, it may result in “difficulties in independent corpus use without the intervention of an instructor” (Chang, 2014, p. 255). In class, some activities like group discussions on consulting the use of corpora may be helpful for students better to cultivate their corpus competence (Chang, 2014). In addition, teachers should also encourage students to create their corpus to collect and accumulate academic language (Charles, 2012, cited in Chang, 2014). Students’ self-created corpus is more specific and meets their writing.

In short, corpus-based approaches focus on the academic language in academic writing. It provides students with reliable language resources in both general and specific manners. Under

instructors’ guidance, learners’ writing can benefit from the approach which provides them with valuable and authentic language.

5. COMPARING CONTENT-BASED, INQUIRY-BASED, AND CORPUS-BASED APPROACHES

The three approaches to academic writing have their characteristics and strengths respectively. To some extent, they are complementary and promote academic writing and help students learn better.

The advantages of content-based approaches aim to strengthen students’ abilities, including critical thinking, academic reading, and writing abilities (Heriyawati et al., 2014). Through the statistical analysis, Heriyawati et al. (2014) found that implementing content-based approaches can enhance students’ writing ability and enrich students’ knowledge related to writing topics. It also helps improve writing content, organization, and use of language. Moreover, this approach to teaching writing helps students strengthen and expand their understanding of the subjects and majors, and when students write on a topic for which they have more knowledge and ideas, their writings are more likely to be organized better (Khonsari, 2005).

Inquiry-based approaches help improve students’ overall level of English learning, especially academic writing skills because the approach encourages students to explore knowledge and content actively. (Wale & Bogale, 2021). When students write through this inquiry-based approach, their abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate are also enhanced because inquiry-based writing engages students actively in problem-solving and promotes their self-directed and lifelong learning (Wale & Bogale, 2021; Wale & Bishaw, 2020; Ali, 2020). Additionally, inquiry-based instruction in writing guides students to activate their cognition, being reflective and creative (Ali, 2020).

Regarding corpus-based approaches, research has found that most students use a corpus to help improve their academic writing skills (Nasution, 2018). Furthermore, it can help students develop a more comprehensive understanding of using appropriate language and encourage them to practice these languages in their academic writing (Nasution, 2018). The function of correcting language is one of the most critical strengths of corpus-based approaches, examining grammatical errors and whether language use is appropriate (Chang, 2014). It also allows students to compare their writing and language with the texts written by native and authoritative scholars

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(Johns, 1986, cited in Nasution, 2018). Students can benefit significantly from corpora and improve language use in their writing (Chang, 2014; Nasution, 2018).

However, they also have some drawbacks in some aspects. Generally, content-based instruction pays little attention to language features (Paltridge, 2004). In content-based academic writing classes, language is a tool and foundation for understanding content (Heo, 2006; Heriyawati et al., 2014). Teachers are less likely to stress and teach language use. If teachers cannot meet students' language needs, it will make it difficult for students in academic writing tasks. The inquiry-based approach also shares the same disadvantage, not involved in language instruction. Additionally, compared with inquiry-based approaches, content-based approaches are only focused on the assessment of writing in the revising stage and have not stressed the assessment and reflection throughout the whole writing process. It is necessary for students to monitor and evaluate the collected information and reflect on their ideas and writing so that they can improve better.

The inquiry-based approach also has some limitations. When students spend too much time inquiring, there is a risk that the core writing topics may be ignored, and it is difficult for students to complete the inquiry progress and produce writing in a short period ((Wale & Bogale, 2021). Moreover, the approach requires high motivation for learning because motivation can enhance meaningful inquiry learning (Edelson et al., 1999). If students are under-motivated, inquiry-based writing tasks will be difficult. When combined with content-

based approaches that connect students' majors with the writing content, the inquiry-based approach can be meaningful when it is conducted in academic writing courses.

The corpus-based approach also has some challenges. It has no strict procedure for using corpora, so it should be combined with other methods that have systematic stages of writing to perform its correction function. Additionally, students may reuse the corpus with a plagiarism risk (Flowerdew, 2017). When teaching the use of corpora, teachers need to acquaint students with how to use them properly.

Through the overall review and analysis of the three approaches, they are all concerned about students' needs in academic writing. Due to their characteristics, merits, and disadvantages, a comprehensive approach can be proposed.

6. COMPREHENSIVE APPROACHES: CONTENT AND CORPUS INTEGRATED INQUIRY-BASED APPROACHES TO ACADEMIC WRITING

The comprehensive approach can be named as content and corpus integrated inquiry-based approaches to academic writing that gather all the advantages of the three approaches and complement their drawbacks. The comprehensive approach has focused on learning and exploring professional knowledge and applying it to academic writing in authentic contexts. In the inquiry-based writing process, this approach concerns content construction and corpus-based academic language use.

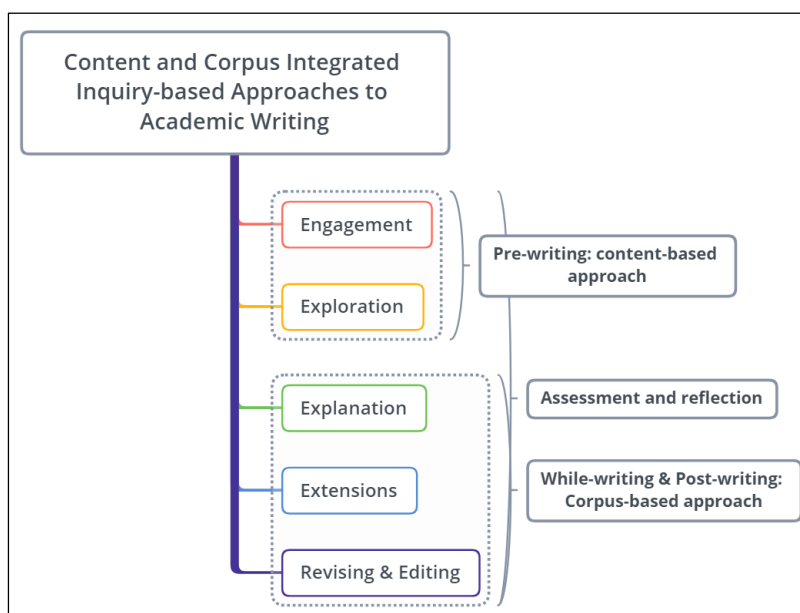


Figure 1 The model of the comprehensive approach

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Content and corpus integrated inquiry-based approaches follow five stages that integrate inquiry-based approaches with the writing process in content-based approaches, including engagement, exploration, explanation, extensions, and revising and editing based on the academic corpora (see Figure 1). In the first two phases, they focus on constructing pre-writing knowledge and content, which combines the characteristics and advantages of inquiry-based approaches and content-based approaches. These stages also emphasize students' autonomy and ability to explore knowledge, which is the strength of inquiry-based approaches. The explanation and extension phases are where students begin to write academic essays by considering actual contexts, cultivating their abilities mainly to interpret information, provide evidence and think critically. After drafting, revision is a necessity to improve content and language. Academic corpora are applied throughout the while-writing and post-writing stages, facilitating students to pay attention to the proper usage of academic language. In the whole stages, assessment and reflection are the fundamental elements to monitor the inquiry and writing process.

Through academic inquiry activities in the pre-writing stages, such as reading, discussing, and delivering presentations, students explore the writing topics to activate their previous knowledge and organize collected information. The contents are mainly related to students' majors, which is beneficial for them to apply what they have learned to practice. Students select, analyze, critique, and integrate collected data and information with teachers' guidance (Shih, 1986). After the content construction, students have the opportunity to compose writing with explanations and analysis based on their understanding of the knowledge that they explore. Through analysis, they need to apply the ideas and opinions of the writing topics in a real context, establishing the connection between theory and practice (Wale & Bogale, 2021). Throughout the writing, students can use academic corpora for reference, revising, and editing their compositions. Under teachers' instruction, Through corpus searching, students can examine and correct errors that appear in writing (Chang, 2014). Teachers' instruction is also throughout the implementation of the approach to provide students with assistance and support in each stage.

To sum up, this approach integrates the strengths of the three approaches and is student-centered. In the learning process of this comprehensive approach, learners explore knowledge and content, apply them to explain and criticize and combine theories with practice in academic writing. Furthermore, it pays

attention to the writing content construction and academic language through corpora.

7. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have introduced the content-based approach, inquiry-based approach, and corpus-based approach in academic writing instruction. Through analysis, some strengths and weaknesses are discussed. To combine the advantages and complement the drawbacks of each approach, a comprehensive model that integrates the three approaches is presented and can function better and benefit students' academic writing with instructors' facilitation. In this approach, students can deeply understand and explore the topics related to their professionals, express their views with professional academic knowledge, including content and language, and apply what they have learned into practice, which is the value of this synthetic approach.

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