Teaching English Writing through Process-Genre Approach: An Action Research Project

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ABSTRACT: *This study is an attempt to improve students' writing proficiency at a high school in Vietnam. To achieve this aim, a two-cycle Critical Participatory Action Research project was conducted. During the intervention procedure, Process-genre approach was implemented into writing lessons which focused on expository essays. The data were collected from the teacher's journal, questionnaire as well as the pre-test and post-test. The results indicate that students made considerable progress in most aspects of their writing, and they expressed positive opinions about this approach.*

1. Introduction

Writing is a fundamental part of any linguistic program. Being able to write is an essential skill for both learners of a foreign language and its native speakers. Thus, training students to write requires considerable attention and care from language teachers (Harmer, 2011). Nevertheless, Vietnamese students face numerous problems in writing. For instance, the lack of background knowledge prevented students from writing efficiently in English (Kieu, 2009; Le, 2013). Those learners also had difficulties expressing their ideas clearly through appropriate language (Pham, 2013; Du, 2015).

Methodology of teaching English writing has been mostly influenced by the Product-based, Process-based and/or Genre-based approach. Badger and White (2000) coined a new approach called Process-genre to exploit the strengths and overcome the limitations of those three teaching orientations. The new approach has yielded positive results in different teaching contexts such as Thai universities (Jarunthawatchai, 2010 & Janenoppakarn, 2016) and Vietnamese universities (Tran, 2016). All these studies confirmed the improvement in learners' writing competence.

This research project attempted to address similar difficulties which occurred in the researcher's writing class through the application of the Process-genre approach.

2. Literature review

2.1. Different approaches to teaching writing

2.1.1. Product-based approach

According to Pincas (1982), Product-based is a traditional approach that identifies writing as linguistic knowledge, with an emphasis on the proper use of vocabulary, syntax, and cohesive devices. This controlled writing approach underlies the imitation of teachers' model text to master linguistic features. Teachers provide and analyze model texts in order that students can write similar texts. Thus, Badger and White (2000) concluded that Product-based orientation realized the importance of providing learners with textual features and learning through mimicking.

Nonetheless, writing as a product is now devalued because it basically regarded language as a mechanical procedure of habit formation, which hindered learners' creativity and imagination of the learner (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

2.1.2. Process-based approach

In contrast to writing as a product, Process-based approach views writing as a creative process which includes a series of stages occurring recursively and depending on one another (Trible, 1996). Badger and White (2000) added that writing in Process-based approach was primarily associated with language skills, and far less emphasis was placed on linguistic features.

Learners can develop their writing competence through participating in various activities both inside and outside their classroom.

Harmer (2013) introduced a model of teaching in which writing can be seen as a kind of process wheel with four major stages, namely planning, drafting, editing, and producing the final version. Writers can skip a stage or transfer from a stage to the others. Moreover, when they have completed the final version, they can also revise any previous stages and have a suitable edition. White and Arndt (1991) recommended a list of probable activities that fitted these stages such as brainstorming, arranging ideas, conferencing, drafting, peer's editing and self-evaluating.

However, the main drawback of this approach originates from the perception that all writing is generated by a single series of procedures. Little emphasis is placed on the types and purposes of writing. Learners are provided with inadequate input, especially in terms of linguistic awareness, in order to write effeciently (Badger & White, 2000).

2.1.3. The Genre-based approach

To understand Genre-based approach, it is necessary to provide a brief concept of genre. According to Swale (1990), genre is a class of communicative events with several shared sets of communicative purposes. Hammond and Derewianka (2001) defined genre as the recognizable and recurrent pattern of everyday, academic and literary text within particular cultures.

Genre-based approach views writing as predominantly linguistic. This approach also emphasizes that writing varies according to the social context in which it is produced (Badger & White, 2000). Nevertheless, the disadvantage of Genre-based approach is that it downplays the skills demanded to create a text and views students as relatively passive (Badger & White, 2000; Hyland 2003).

Feez and Joyce (1998) proposed a five-phase model to teach writing. The first phase deals with building the context. The second phase involves modeling and deconstructing the text. In the Joint-construction phases, students collaborate with teachers or work in groups to create a text. In the independent-construction phase, each student produces a similar text independently. In the last phase, students link their writing products with related texts.

Macken-Horarik (2001) introduced eight common genres of writing in the curriculum of secondary schools, including recount, information report, explanation, exposition, discussion, procedure, narrative, and new story. Exposition, the genre of focus in this study, argues for a particular viewpoint on a single issue through reasons and evidence. An expository text needs a thesis which proposes a perspective on an issue. Afterwards, a position is clearly stated, and the arguments are listed in the preview section. In the elaboration part, the arguments are asserted and elaborated. The reiteration section returns to the thesis and gives the conclusion. According to Humphrey (2013), the purposes of expository texts were to persuade readers to think in a certain way by accepting a theory or position and to persuade readers to act in a particular manner. Important language features

Table 1. Features of exposition genre

Language for expressing ideas	Use of verb groups to identify phenomena, present reasons, explicit personal opinions, explain causes and effects. Use of present verb tenses Use of abstract, general, particular and technical noun groups as evidence
Language for connecting ideas	Mainly complex sentences and simple sentences Logical connections of cause and effect
Language for forming cohesive texts	Use of text connectives to arrange and connect arguments Use of zig-zag theme patterns to link with previous ideas Use of passive voice to emphasize the objects. Nominalization to summarize incidents and denote abstract phenomena

of the exposition genre which are summarized in the following table.

2.1.4. The Process-genre approach

Badger and White (2000) were pioneers to merge the three previously mentioned orientations, which led to the emergence of the Process-genre approach. The two scholars indicated the following core values of their new Process-genre approach. Initially, writing requires linguistic knowledge (the product and genre theories), awareness of the context (the genre approach), and a set of language skills (process approach). Furthermore, writing competency can be developed by unlocking learners' potential, which is a strength of Process-based approach and by supplying input language, which is an achievement of Genre-based approach.

Badger and White (2000) initiated a framework for teaching writing with five major stages and identified the roles of teachers, learners and texts. Yan (2005) presented an adapted version of this original model, as follows.
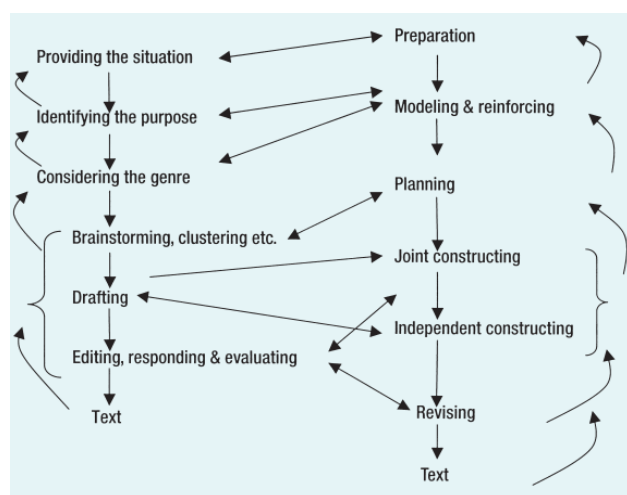

Figure 1. Application of the Process-genre approach (Yan, 2005, p.25)

The left side of Yan's model presents the stages suggested by Badger and White (2000) while the right side illustrates the adaptations by Yan (2005). Process-genre models are meant to be flexibly used. These models interact in a recursive way. A stage may be repeated numerous times to achieve a desired outcome. Moreover, teachers may enter at any step of the framework

based on students' demands and readiness for certain activities.

Stage 1 (Preparation): The teacher defines a circumstance that necessitates written text and places it inside a defined genre to engage the conceptual frameworks and prepare learners for the structure of a genre.

Stage 2 (Modeling and reinforcing): The teacher offers a genre model and students evaluate the social purposes of the text, including its targeted audience. The teacher then explains how the text is structured and organized to achieve its purpose. The students can compare their works to other writings to enhance their knowledge of the genre.

Stage 3 (Planning): Students activate their schemata when they brainstorm, discuss, and read relevant content. The goal is to spark students' interest in the issue by linking it to their own experiences.

Stage 4 (Joint constructing): The teacher and students collaborate to start drafting a text. The teacher performs this through brainstorming, drafting, and rewriting. The final draft serves as a model for students to develop their own works.

Stage 5 (Independent constructing): Students write another text individually during class time, or this stage of writing may be assigned as homework.

Stage 6 (Revising): Learners will have a draft that will be revised and edited. Teachers do not need to score all papers personally. Students may verify, discuss, and assess their work with their peers under the teacher's guidance.

Positive results were found when the Process-genre approach was applied in various contexts. Jarunthawatchai (2010) indicated that a Process-genre approach helped students view English writing as sophisticated cognitive and social activities. Their comprehension of genre knowledge and their integration of the genre awareness in the writing process contributed to learners' production of high-quality texts. Moreover, Janenoppakarn (2016) claimed the effectiveness of this approach in developing both her higher and lower proficient students' writing competence. Both groups of students could encouragingly change their learning

attitudes towards essay writing. Furthermore, Tran (2016) claimed the effectiveness of the Process-genre approach in improving students' ability and performance in writing. Not only students' understanding of the genre's purpose but also their language and ideas are developed.

2.2. Problems Vietnamese students face in writing

Various studies were done by Vietnamese scholars to identify the difficulties which their students encounter in writing. One of the most detrimental problems resulted from students' poor linguistic competence (Kieu, 2009; Hoang 2013). Because students had to write within their restricted linguistic capability, their writings were recorded with poor expression and many grammatical mistakes. They were unconfident in writing skills because they did not have enough vocabulary and structures to express their ideas. Lack of background knowledge about the required topic was another problem that students had to face (Kieu, 2009; Le, 2013; Du, 2015). Social knowledge was of great importance for students to make the contents of their writings more profound and persuasive. Without sufficient background knowledge, students often found it hard to organize and develop ideas. Moreover, Hoang (2013) and Du (2015) revealed that classroom conditions were major obstacles in learning writing. Due to the large number of students in a single class, students lack the guidance and feedback from their teachers and peers. Teachers also had to simplify their performance and teaching activities due to the limitation of classroom facilities. Last but not least, students lacked necessary skills in the writing process. Kieu (2009) indicated that students skipped the stages of brainstorming and organizing ideas. Students did not have the strategy to outline their writing (Du, 2015). They thought in their mother tongue and translated their ideas into English. Their language in writing papers, thus, became unnatural (Nguyen, 2013).

Encouraging results in aforementioned studies suggest that the implementation of Process-genre approach can address those problems in writing. Nonetheless, there has been little research which investigates the application of Process-genre approach into teaching writing by Vietnamese educators, especially at upper secondary schools. This study, hence, attempted to determine how Process-genre approach affected students' writing proficiency and to explore students' attitudes towards the implementation of this approach into writing lessons through two research questions.

Question 1: *To what extent does the application of the Process-genre approach help improve students' writing performance?*

Question 2: *What are students' attitudes towards learning to write expositions through the Process–genre approach?*

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research setting

The participants were 11th grade English non-major students who were at the age of seventeen. They had learnt English as a school subject for eight years. Based on the results of the school classifying test, these students were at pre-intermediate level of English. All these students studied in a class with 6 males and 28 females. The students were aware that their writing units would be taught by the teacher who would also play the role of a researcher. They were also informed that the instruction would be part of the researcher's Master study. The participants had

Table 2. Genres of writing in the English 11 textbook

Unit	Requirements	Genre
4	Write about problems facing disabled people and solutions	Expository essay
5	Write to introduce an ESEAN member	Brochure
6	Write about causes and effects of global warming, and solutions	Expository essay
7	Write to ask for information about higher education	Email
8	Write about the reasons why Trang An was recognized a World Heritage	Expository essay

not been officially exposed to the Process-genre approach before.

The teacher-researcher was attending a Master's course on teaching English at Hanoi National University of Education and had ten years of experience in teaching English to learners of English as a foreign language. He was trained in the Process-genre approach in a career development course. He also received valuable guidance on applying this approach from his instructors at the university where he was studying.

The research covered five units of the English 11 textbook by Hoang Van Van et al. (2015). The requirements of writing lessons in these units are specified in the table below.

3.2. Research design

This study follows the Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) model by Kemmis (2013). The application of CPAR in the research includes two major cycles. The first cycle lasted five weeks. The researcher held a pre-test, found a shared concern, established a public sphere (the researcher, participants, and related people and organizations), built a collective plan to handle the shared concern, applied Process-genre approach into writing lessons, and observed classroom activities to make necessary changes. In the second cycle, the researcher continued implementing this approach. A post-test and a survey was delivered to collect data for further analysis. The results of the study were presented to members of the public sphere.

3.3. Data collection procedure

The data for the research were collected from three major sources, including a teaching journal, tests and a questionnaire. The results of the tests and questionnaire were compared to the observational information selected from the teacher's journal as a means of triangulation.

Journal in this study was a notebook in which the researcher kept a record of the occurrence, progress and changes in his writing class. Thanks to this journal, many issues, ideas, events and interactions during the teaching procedure did not lapse into insignificance. The journal written

at the end of the day was an interval to evaluate what had been done and achieved.

Students took a pre-test in week 1 and a post-test in week 12. Each test required students to write an expository essay (approximately 250 words) in 45 minutes. Students wrote about "the benefits of living independently" in the former and "the benefits of university education" in the latter. Both tests were marked in the scale of 100 points with a rubric adapted from the essay marking rubric by Oshima and Hogue (2006). Four main aspects, namely Mechanics (10 points), Content (20 points), Organization (45 points) and Language (25 points) constitute the total score. The Organization accounts for the highest points since this aspect includes many different sub-criteria. To maintain the objectivity of the test results, another English teacher in the researcher' school participated in marking the tests. This second rater had eight years of experience in teaching English as a foreign language, and she was informed about the criteria in the rubric. The overall score and the scores of each aspect were analyzed with the paired sample t-test by SPSS program version 20.

An online survey was delivered to participants at the end of the research. Identity of participants was not revealed in the survey so that they could give their responses without any anxiety. The questionnaire consisted of ten statements, one Yes-No and one open-ended question. The statements which were shortlisted from the questionnaire by Janenoppakarn (2016) were in the 5-point Likert scale. In each statement, students selected one of five options, including Strongly disagree (1 point), Disagree (2 points), Neutral (3 points), Agree (4 points) and Strongly agree (5 points). The SPSS descriptive statistics was used to identify participants' degree of agreement. According to Pimentel and Jonald (2019), the mean score 1.00-1.79 signifies a very low, 1.80-2.59 signifies low, 2.60-3.39 signifies moderate, 3.40-4.19 signifies high, and 4.20-5.00 signifies very high level of agreement. The Yes-No question checked whether students chose to continue the Process-genre approach, and the Open-ended question determined the reasons for the students' choice.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Improvement of students' writing abilities.

Overall score

The data derived from the students' pretest-posttest findings, demonstrated that the participants could enhance their writing capabilities.

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the overall score of the two tests. As can be seen, there was a statistically significant upsurge in the mean scores (p < .05). Noticeably, the mean score of the post-test was 14 points higher than that of the pre-test.

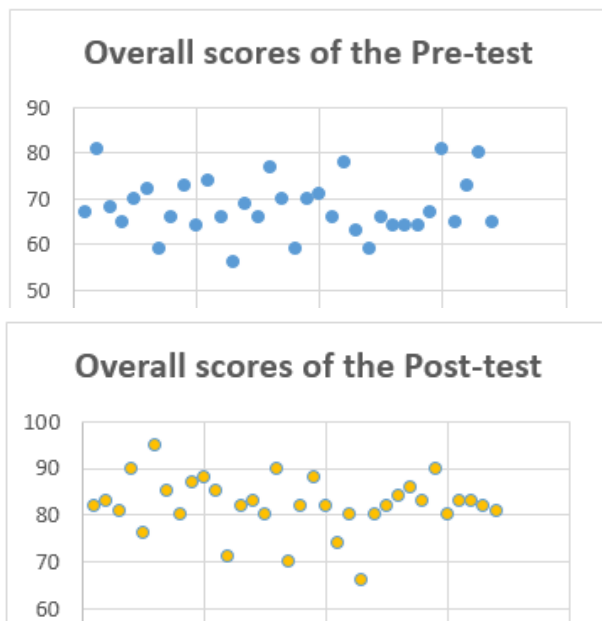The differences between the total scores of the two tests are illustrated in the following charts

Figure 2. Distribution of overall scores

Most of the marks ranged from 60 to 70 points in the pre-test but from 80 points to 90 points in the Post-test. The right chart also signified the equivalence of students writing competence with 25 students getting good scores (≥80 points) and 4 students getting excellent scores (≥90 points).

The comparison between the two tests showed considerable improvement in students' writing skills after lessons with the Process-genre approach. Most of the students could produce a high-quality text at the end of the research (82.18 mean points). These results corresponded to the findings in Thai scholars' studies including Jarunthawatchai (2010) on five-paragraph essays and Janenoppakarn (2016) on the cause-effect essays. It was also consistent with the study of Tran (2016) who found the enhancement of Vietnamese students' proficiency in IELTS writing task 2.

Scores of main aspects

Four paired-samples t-tests were conducted separately to compare the mean scores of each aspect of the two tests. The results of those four test are summarized in the following table.

The results indicated that mean scores on such aspects as Mechanics, organization and language statistically increased (p < .05). However, there was no statistical difference in the mean scores on content (p>.05).

The mean score on Mechanics increased approximately 2.2 points between the pre-test and post-test. This aspect deals with punctuation, capitalization and spelling. The post-test witnessed fewer errors in the first two criteria. Nevertheless, students' spelling mistakes did not decrease because they tried to use more complicated words in their essays. The observational results from the teaching journal contributed to clarifying this finding. When giving feedback to other papers and receiving feedback from partners, students highlighted Mechanics mistakes. Thus, they could heighten their awareness of similar mistakes in the Post-test.

Table 3. Total score of the pre-test & post-test

	Pre-test		t	p	Mean difference
	Mean	SD			
Overall score	68.18	6.303	-10.1	.000	-14
	82.18	5.885			
* Significant at the 0.05 level (p<0.05), N = 34					

Table 4. Improvement of the four aspects

Aspect of marking	Pre-test		Post-test		t	p	Mean difference
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD			
Mechanics	6.00	6.303	8.21	5.885	-4.735	.000	-2.206
Content	16.44	2.894	17.38	1.859	-1.510	.141	-.941
Organization	32.26	3.250	37.53	4.039	-5.876	.000	-5.265
Language	13.47	3.287	19.06	2.785	-8.763	.000	-5.588
* Significant at the 0.05 level (p<0.05), N = 34							

The mean score on Organization rose from 32.26 in the pre-test to 37.53 in the post-test. This rise indicated the improvement of students in understanding the structure of an expository essay and supporting main ideas with relevant details. In the pre-test, four students wrote a paragraph instead of an essay, and five students lacked an essay conclusion. However, only two students wrote paragraphs, and the others completed their essays in the post-test. The teaching journal revealed that these two students knew the structure of an essay, but they made the mistake owing to the test pressure. Students also became more skillful in writing the introduction and conclusion.

The Language aspect experienced the highest growth in the mean score with nearly 5.6 points. Most students could use various sentence structures and academic vocabulary in their post-test. However, the students made several grammar mistakes when they attempted to write long complex sentences. According to the journal, students could learn numerous vocabulary items and structures from their partners when they participated in group work and peer correction.

The progress in students' writing after the application of process-genre approach could be explained by Vygotsky's notions of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to ZPD's theory, the students in this study reached a level at which independent work brought little effect. Students complained in the teaching journal, that before Process-genre approach was implemented, their writing marks had witnessed no improvement although a huge amount of time was spent on self-learning. However, with the teacher's guidance and peers' cooperation throughout various scaffolding activities such as discussion, model analysis, joint construction and writing correction, the students eventually acquired the necessary skills and knowledge to complete their writing assignments independently (Hyland, 2003).

The only aspect which was recorded with no statistical difference in the mean score was the Content. However, the students achieved high mean scores in both pre-test and post-test (16.44/20 and 17.38/ 20, respectively). Students had little difficulty maintaining high scores in the Content aspect because the topics of these essays were related to familiar themes in their syllabus. The ideas which students conveyed in the tests might be sufficiently accumulated in previous lessons.

4.2. Response of the students towards the application of Process-genre approach

The data from the survey were combined with the teacher' journal to explore students' attitudes towards learning to write expositions through the Process–genre approach.

The results of the statements in the Likert scale are synthesized in table 5.

The first three statements dealt with students' interest and confidence. A high level of students' interest was seen in writing expository essays and Process-genre approach. By contrast, the mean score of 2.82 in question 3 merely indicated a moderate level of students' confidence in writing expository essays. The teaching journal also expressed the same opinion. The students took

Table 5. Synthesis of students' attitudes

Statement	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Level
1. I like learning to write expository essays.	34	2	5	3.59	0.821	High
2. I like writing lessons with Process-genre approach.	34	1	5	4.03	0.904	High
3. I am confident in writing expository essays.	34	1	5	2.82	0.797	Moderate
4. I like the guidance from the teacher when writing expository essays.	34	2	5	4.2	0.808	Very high
5. I like working with partners in when writing expository essays.	34	1	5	3.47	1.022	High
6. I like the teacher's feedback in writing expository essays.	34	3	5	4.5	0.663	Very high
7. I like peer feedback in writing expository essays.	34	1	5	3.5	0.992	High
8. I think that learning from the model text is useful.	34	2	5	3.94	0.814	High
9. I think that learning to write a variety of genres helps ease my writing.	34	2	5	4.06	0.851	High
10. I think that various activities in the writing process help develop my writing skills.	34	2	5	4.18	0.904	High

part enthusiastically in writing lessons since they realized the importance of writing essays, especially for those who were going to take the IELTS certificate. However, some students who were accustomed to writing single paragraphs found it unconfident to write a complete essay.

The next four statements concerned students' attitudes towards interaction and collaboration during the teaching-learning process. The mean scores of statements 4 and 6 indicated a very high level of students' appreciation of the teacher guidance and feedback. A high level of agreement with peers' cooperation and feedback was recorded in statements 5 and 7. The teaching journal confirmed these findings. Although students appreciated feedback from both the teacher and peers, they were more in favor of the former. Some students, thus, sent additional essays to the teacher for guidance and correction.

The last three statements displayed students' high level of agreement with the benefits of Process genre approach. The highest mean score (4.18 points) in statement 10 indicated that the students benefited the most from participating in various activities in the writing process. The students highly agreed in question 8 and 9 that they could write more easily as a result

of knowing various genres, and they could also learn from the model texts. The teaching journal showed that it took short periods of time for students to grasp the requirements of the learning activities. Moreover, students participated in an activity because they realized its usefulness, not just because it was compulsory.

Nine over ten statements were recorded with high or very high levels of agreement, which was similar to the results of the post-survey by Janenoppakarn (2016). The only statement that showed the moderate level of agreement was the students' confidence in writing expository essays. Students felt that they needed more time to practice this genre.

The Yes-No question showed that 91 percent of the students wanted to continue the Process-genre approach in their writing. This high percentage indicated students' positive attitudes towards Process-genre approach.

The last question attempted to understand why students like or dislike the implementation of the Process-genre approach in their writing class. On the one hand, most of the participants gave optimistic evaluations by using adjectives "effective" "useful", "interesting" and "helpful" to describe this approach. Students also added

that this approach facilitated the development of critical thinking and teamwork and helped them understand the purposes of the texts they were going to write about. On the other hand, two participants thought that this approach was difficult and confusing because it required too many activities. Another participant believed that writing would only improve when her reading progressed.

The data from the journal verified the findings in the questionnaire. Most of the students in the class were observed to be eager in classroom activities. Particularly, they were enthusiastic when participating in the Joint-construction stage on the blackboard. Moreover, students frequently handed in different versions of their writing on time, with sufficient peer feedback.

5. Conclusions and implications

According to the quantitative analysis of the tests, most students improved their writing abilities after being taught with the Process-genre approach. Three over four aspects of marking reflected apparent increase in the mean scores. The findings indicated that Yan's model used in this study had a significant effect on students' writing development. When the Process-genre approach was employed students could gain a better understanding of the exposition genre and increase their knowledge of the writing process. The developments of students' writing proficiency could be explained through Vygotsky's concepts of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding. With the teacher's support and the students' collaboration, the students eventually developed the necessary skills and knowledge to complete their writing assignments.

The data from the questionnaire revealed that most participants had optimistic attitudes towards learning to write essays through the Process-genre approach. They demonstrated very highly positive attitudes to the guidance and feedback by the teacher. Seven other aspects demonstrated a high degree of agreement, including an interest in expository essays and lessons using Process-genre approach, collaboration with partners and peer feedback, the benefits of learning from model texts, and studying various genres through

a variety of activities. However, a moderate level of students' confidence in writing expository essays was seen.

The findings of this study confirm that it is feasible and beneficial to incorporate Process-genre approach into writing lessons at high schools. This approach is recommended as one of the alternatives for writing instruction in classrooms. Teachers should let students analyze various genres from many perspectives, expand their knowledge, and develop their creativity and critical thinking skills. Because Yan's model is adaptable in classroom practice, teachers can adjust it to their own groups of students because this model is effective for both high and low proficient students (Janenoppakarn, 2016).

The present study has some limitations that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, some activities encouraging students to concentrate on academic language, coherence and cohesion were omitted due to the study's time constraints. Secondly, several external factors such as the students' background knowledge and career goals might influence the students' writing development. Thirdly, because this study examined the efficiency of Yan's model in teaching English writing to students at a Vietnamese high school, the study's scope was limited in content and population. Hence, the findings of the present research may not be applicable to other studies that use a different teaching framework of Process-genre approach.

Some recommendations for future research are made from the findings of this study. Future research should be expanded to other genres, not just exposition. Moreover, it would be beneficial for teachers to conduct longitudinal projects to determine how the Process-genre approach affects students' writing development and learning attitudes over a longer period. Additionally, the findings of this study could be generalized to students in the upper secondary level only. Other studies should be conducted to determine the effect of the process-genre approach on writing instruction at other levels, such as lower secondary or university.

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