

A Study of the Process Writing Approach -A Suggestion for an Eclectic Writing Approach-

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Introduction

L2 (second language) writing did not attract much attention until the 1960s; however, writing has been getting more attention recently. As Harmer (1998) points out, the writing skill has finally been recognized as an important skill for language learning. He lays stress on the essentiality of the writing skill saying “The reasons for teaching writing to students of English as a foreign language include reinforcement, language development, learning style, and most importantly, writing as a skill in its own right” (p.79). Writing is indeed becoming necessary not only in L2 in school settings, but also in our daily life, particularly owing to the prevalence of information technology, such as writing e-mail, or business letters overseas. Reid (1993) also indicates that along with a drastic increase in textbook writing, conference presentations, and published research and commentary about L2 writing, the inclusion of direct tests of writing on standardized tests of English proficiency such as the TOEFL Test of Written English has been a sign of the recognition of the importance of L2 writing (p. 29).

Despite such growing recognition of the importance and necessity of L2 writing, writing is still not a main focus in Japanese school settings. Junior and senior high school English education continues to focus on “practical communication proficiency”, as reflected in the latest Japanese Education Guidelines, and does not put as much emphasis on communication through writing. Most Japanese learners themselves tend to think that speaking is more important and more necessary than writing in foreign language learning. Therefore, under the circumstances, teachers of L2 or LF writing are struggling in everyday lessons looking for better approaches.

Having said that, through extensive research, a number of approaches and techniques have been provided regarding ESL or L2 writing during the last decade. Unfortunately, it is not easy to introduce these techniques directly into ESL classes. In particular, the process approach, which several researchers began to emphasize as the key in L2 writing from the late 1970s to the 1980s, has been influential in the classroom. Until then, the focus of writing instruction was the written product. The process approach, on the other hand, focuses on the process of writing. After considering both

the praise and criticism of the process approach, a number of writing teachers have deemed it valuable, and are using it in their classrooms.

This paper examines the value of the process approach by inquiring into its history, its advantages and disadvantages, and how we as writing teachers utilize it by providing the students with flexibility, practicality and applicability offered by process writing.

In addition, this paper offers another approach that incorporates other skills: reading, speaking and listening, and can be used with the process approach. Although writing is one of the important skills for communication, most of the time, students work individually without interacting with one another, so that if they are given time to communicate with their classmates about their products, incorporating speaking into writing-focused-class offers learners opportunities not only to express their own opinions but also to ruminate upon what they have written or what they are going to write by exchanging ideas. The result of this will be a comprehensive improvement in their language skills.

Most writing classes, as both teachers and learners tend to stereotype, are thought to consist of sentence writing or drills that focus on spelling and grammar, controlled composition, and translation tasks from Japanese into English. Grammar accuracy is regarded as an important aspect of language learning. Without it, students may have difficulties in getting their messages across. However, it may be useful to both teachers and students focusing on the process of writing, and not just on the product itself. Besides, most of the time in writing class, students work individually without interacting with one another, thus, if they are given time to communicate with their classmates about their products orally, learners will be able to express their own opinions and exchange ideas. The result will be a comprehensive improvement in their language skills.

1. What is Process writing?

Process writing is an approach to writing, where language learners focus on the process by which they produce their written products rather than on the products themselves. In the end, learners surely need to and are required to complete their products, yet the writing process itself is stressed more. By focusing on the writing process, learners come to understand themselves more, and find how to work through the writing. They may explore what strategies conform to their style of learning. Brown (2001, p. 336) states that writing is a thinking process, a writer produces a final written product based on their thinking after the writer goes through the thinking process. In

addition, Brown quotes Elbow (1973 : 14-16) as saying that writing should be thought of as an organic, developmental process . . . not as a way to transmit a message but as a way to grow and cook a message. Kroll (1990) also quotes Applebee (1986) as saying that the process approach “provided a way to think about writing in terms of what the writer does (planning, revising, and the like) instead of in terms of what the final product looks like (patterns of organization, spelling, and grammar)” (p. 96).

In the Process approach, learners are looked upon as central in learning, so that learners’ needs, expectations, goals, learning styles, skills and knowledge are taken into consideration. Through the writing process, learners need to make the most of their abilities such as knowledge and skills by utilizing the appropriate help and cooperation of the teacher and the other learners. It encourages learners to feel free to convey their own thoughts or feelings in written messages by providing them with plenty of time and opportunity to reconsider and revise their writing and at each step seek assistance from outside resources like the instructor.

The writing process usually involves several steps. A typical sequence is comprised of three steps: prewriting, drafting, and, revising. Some sequences, however, use four steps, such as thinking, planning, writing, and editing, while others use five steps, prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and evaluating. In other words, each writer has a preferred way of approaching the writing process, from simpler to more complex depending on the level of the learners, and the purpose of writing.

These steps generally are implemented in sequence, but in process writing the writing process is not necessarily a linear learning process, rather more of a recursive or spiraling process as the learners move around these steps, sometimes going forward and retracing their steps. For example, brainstorming, one skill that is important particularly for the prewriting step, can be exercised again and again at different stages if the learner needs new ideas later in the process. Learners can achieve their writing goals through the process in different ways.

2. Brief Background to Process Writing

ESL writing studies lag behind NES (Native English Speakers) composition research by one or two decades. That is, NES research has impacted the development of ESL writing to a great degree. This is partially because writing was not considered the most important skill in ESL learning, but just a sub-skill.

Until the 1980’s, the focus of ESL writing was mainly accuracy. For example, up to the early 60’s, the audio-lingual method (ALM), which emphasized practice, punctuation, and grammatical structure (Reid, 1993) was predominating. In this method,

learners would have to copy sentence structures provided by the teacher until they acquired it. At this point, teachers and researchers had little knowledge about or experience in teaching writing (Reid, 1993), so those people had no choice but stick to the ALM. This may sound like a vicious cycle, and as a result, research into ESL writing gained little attention. In the 70's, there was a gradual, but small change in ESL writing. The classes still focused on grammar and accuracy, which stemmed from the ALM, but learners would copy the provided sentences, and change them where necessary, or fill in the blanks. This is called controlled writing. According to Silva (1990, p. 14), controlled composition seems to have originated in Charles Fries's oral approach. Fries's approach is based on the notions that language is speech (from structural linguistics), and that learning is habit formation (from behaviorist psychology). This trend continued into the early 1980s with value placed on grammatical structure, or with language-based writing. Then some ESL teachers and researchers started with a pattern-product approach or writing-based approach, which focuses on creative composition and the organizational conventions used in U.S. academic prose (Reid, 1993). This approach is still applicable in the current academic setting because of its practicality.

In the 1980s, ESL writing moved from a language-base approach to the process approach. It is not clear what brought the process approach to ESL. Reid (2001) claims that it arose for two reasons: researchers' recognition of the newly developing field of NES composition and teachers' realization of the needs of English L2 students in the academic environment. During the 1980s, NES composition research conducted prior to ESL became accessible. For example, Reid (2001) introduces the most remarkable approach at that time in NES: the 'expressive approach.' He regards this approach as the basis for the process approach in ESL, in which writing was taught as a process of self-discovery; writers express their feelings in a climate of encouragement. Kroll (1990), on the other hand, points out that the introduction of the process approach to ESL composition seems to have been motivated by dissatisfaction with controlled composition and the current-traditional approach. He goes on to say that neither approach fosters thought or its expression nor encourages creative thinking and writing (p. 15). For those possible reasons, the process writing approach began to be embraced by various ESL researchers and teachers.

English as a second language (L2) writing classes were grammar-oriented up until the 1960s. Since then various approaches and suggestions have been developed through laborious studies and research. More recently, some researchers have presented the post-process approach for L2 writing (Atkinson, 2003; Matsuda, 2003), which adds more social dimensions to writers (Fujieda, 2006, p. 68), but the process approach

seems to remain preferred and approved approach.

3. Advantages of the Process Approach

Since the 1980s, the process approach has been accepted and applied to EFL and ESL writing classes because of its effectiveness. The effectiveness of the process approach can vary in many ways. First, in the product approach, the focus is on the end result of the learning process, and the learner is expected to perform as a fluent and competent user of the language. The process approach, in contrast, stresses the process that writers go through in composing texts (Nunan, 1991). Brown (2001) states that [in the product oriented approach] a great deal of attention was placed on 'model' compositions that students would emulate and how well a student's final product measured up against a list of criteria that included content, organization, vocabulary use, grammatical use, and mechanical considerations such as spelling and punctuation (p. 335). The process approach, on the other hand, lets students manage their own writing by giving students a chance to think as they write (Brown, 2001, p. 336). That is, students convey their messages to the readers in written form through the complex writing process; prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing.

The second point is related to what learners have internally. Brown (2001) claims that the process approach is advantageous to students in language learning because students are the creators of language, they need to focus on content and message, and their own intrinsic motives are valued (p. 335). Language skill are best learned when learners have their own intrinsic motives. Raimes (1983) indicates that in the process approach, students do not write on a given topic in a restricted time and hand in the composition. . . rather, they explore a topic through writing (p. 10). She goes on to say that through the process approach teachers find that the writing process is a process of discovery for the students: discovery of new ideas and new language forms to express those ideas. In addition, the approach is beneficial to students because the approach focuses more on the various classroom activities. This is believed to promote the development of skilled language use, and a number of interesting classroom techniques, including 'conferencing', have emerged from the process approach to writing (Nunan, 1991, pp. 86-87). When various group activities are utilized in writing classes, the learners exchange comments or responses, or work together to write a paragraph or an essay. Nunan (1991) also affirms that the [process] approach also encourages collaborative group work between learners as a way of enhancing motivation and developing positive attitudes towards writing.

4. Criticism of the Process Approach

Since the 1980s, when ESL writing started to receive more attention, a large number of studies in a wide range of areas from psychology to pedagogy have been conducted. Consequently, a great deal of criticism and suggestions have been made. It goes without saying that there is no such thing as a perfect theory or approach, and the process approach is no exception. Here are some typical and notable views against the process approach.

The main concern that people have with the process approach is that it pays less attention to grammar and structure, and puts little importance on the final products. Reid (2001), however, expounds on this phenomenon as follows:

[in the 1980s, they developed] a false dichotomy between ‘process’ and ‘product’ classrooms in the L2 pedagogy. Process teachers encourage students to use their internal resources and individuality. . . they neglected accuracy in favor of fluency. In contrast, it was suggested that product teachers focused solely on accuracy, appropriate rhetorical discourse and linguistic patterns to the exclusion of writing processes. . . In reality, most L2 students were being taught process writing strategies to achieve effective written communication (products), with differences occurring in emphasis. (p. 29)

It is fair to say that ESL students need to acquire accuracy as well as fluency and to improve their language skills, and become good communicators in English. Therefore, accuracy is not something that you can minimize in language learning, and by neglecting accuracy or grammatical elements the process approach does not serve the learners’ purpose.

There are many other concerns among those who are involved in ESL writing. Leki (1992), for example, indicates three main limitations; few ESL teachers receive specific training to teach writing, many ESL teachers are not likely to abandon more traditional views, and both NES and NNS (Non Native Speakers) teachers and researchers consider the process approach to focus too insistently on personal experience. In addition, as Horowitz (1986) asserts, some people think that the process approach is unrealistic because it puts too much emphasis on multiple drafts which may cause ESL students to fail the academic exams with their single draft restrictions (as cited by Leki, 1992). Criticism like this should not be disregarded. Nevertheless, it can be resolved by ESL teachers and researchers’ creativity and flexibility. As many textbooks have adopted the process approach, it has been found to be quite useful for both ESL teachers and learners. Therefore, we should use the process approach as one teaching technique even though there is still plenty of room for improvement.

5. Current situations in ESL and EFL Writing Classes

Currently, the process approach has been generally accepted, and has been widely used, even though many researchers are still doubtful of its effectiveness. Hyland (2003) states that despite considerable research into the writing process, we still do not have a comprehensive idea of how learners go about a writing task or how they learn to write. He goes on to say that it also remains unclear whether an exclusive emphasis on psychological factors in writing will provide the whole picture, either theoretically or pedagogically. It is certain, therefore, that much more research should be completed in order to offer learners better teaching. In reality, classes cannot wait until a perfect approach or method becomes available. Teachers including myself have to try to find more balanced and eclectic approaches which can motivate the students, and eventually improve their language abilities.

For classes, a variety of writing textbooks introduce the process approach, and many writing teachers use the process approach to a varying degree. The advantage of the process approach is that it is possible to combine several approaches and also incorporate other skills. In order to make the writing class more effective, there are various aspects that teachers may have to consider, such as the proficiency of each student, what the students need or what is necessary for them. For example, some students may need to focus on sentence-level practices, or need to learn how to organize their thoughts, feelings, and opinions logically. Leki (1992) notes from the research conducted with ESL students that even if students were able to do grammar-based guided compositions, and even if students did have a fairly good grasp of grammar, they still produced peculiar, non-English sounding texts when asked to write more creatively. Grammatical accuracy including spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation does not appear to be enough to master the writing skill. Teachers generally tend to give only vocabulary or sentence level instruction in particular for those who have a low level of proficiency and confidence. Can those students manage so called “free writing”?

6. One Suggestion for ESL Writing Class

In spite of the fact that this is not new, I would like to make one suggestion from what I have been doing in my writing classes: that is, the process-product writing approach incorporating other skills and cooperative learning. In essence, the suggested classes focus on academic writing based on the process approach with other skills like speaking, listening and reading. Since my classes are for college students, it is logically necessary to study academic writing. In the real ESL writing classroom, students feel

that they need to learn about academic writing, special purpose writing, letter, or journal writing. In other words, they need to know how a paragraph and an essay are structured or how their writing is logically organized. Kroll (1990) points out that the process approach does not adequately address some central issues in ESL writing. Several researchers believe that the process approach does not help students prepare for academic work which is necessary to academic success. Basing their learning on the process approach teaches students not only the pedagogical aspects, like how to start, how to organize ideas logically, and how to revise, but also with opportunities to think about themselves, and free to express their own thoughts. Japanese students are usually at a loss as to what to write because many of them have had little experience learning writing besides sentence composition. They do not know what to write, or how to write it. Therefore, the process writing approach can make it easier for them. While students learn how to produce various academic prose-writing, they also have a chance to obtain grammatical accuracy during the revising stage or while doing peer evaluations, and cooperative learning. For instance, they can tell a story to each other through the sequence of the writing process, which can be modified at the discretion of the teacher of the class.

Moreover, integrating skills is important in improving students' abilities. Harmer (1991) argues that the position [skills are separated and should be treated as such] is clearly ridiculous for two reasons. Firstly it is very often true that one skill cannot be performed without another. . . . Secondly, though, people use different skills when dealing with the same subject for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes, we need to focus on just a certain skill, but in later activities, we may require another skill or other skills. Brown (2001) also emphasizes that the added richness of the latter [integrated-skills courses] gives students greater motivation that converts to better retention of principles of effective speaking, listening, reading, and writing (p. 233). Reading and writing are considered closely related, and so are speaking and listening. The differences between writing and speaking, however, are more distinct because they are often compared as written and spoken language. In particular, the necessity of accuracy varies as well as the swiftness of response or feedback from the reader and the listener. Both skills, nevertheless, are productive skills, and are easily integrated. At any step of the writing process, students can talk about their products, and exchange their ideas, give feedback and comments, and then in the end, they can present their products orally, which is regarded as an important part of communicative activities.

Reid (1993) points out that the focus on the expectations of academic discourse communities and the writing process approach appear to be lasting additions to the ESL

writing classroom. Hyland (2003) also indicates that the conflict between process and product can only be damaging to classroom practice, and the two are more usefully used to supplement and round each other out. The best way to use these approaches is to know what the students need and what motivates them to improve their own abilities.

7. Conclusion

This paper, a study of the process approach, one of the most notable writing approaches, introduced the definition, history, criticism, advantages, and the current writing trend of the approach. This paper also demonstrates that the process approach is beneficial to both teachers and learners because not only are there various textbooks available and many teachers who have incorporated the approach for writing classes despite the fact that there are still many researchers and writing teachers who are not convinced of its effectiveness or believe that the process approach needs to be improved. Reid (1993) concludes from ESL writing research that the focus on the expectations of academic discourse communities and the writing process approach appear to be lasting additions to the ESL writing classroom. This means that the effectiveness of the process approach has received some recognition in the ESL context and probably in the EFL context in Japan.

In reality, however, it is not practical to implement the process approach in full and carry out only this approach in class. The eclectic writing class that uses other approaches such as cooperative learning, and other skills as suggested in this paper is one example that many writing teachers have found effective through trial and error. I hope this will be found useful. However, I admit that we need to make more efforts to show our students better and appropriate learning strategies and help them become motivated by what they learn in class.

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要旨

ライティングのプロセスアプローチに関する一考察

折衷的アプローチへの一提案

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近年、書くことによるコミュニケーションにも注目が集まってきているが、それは自己表現力をつけることの重要性と、書くことが外国語学習においても重要であるということが認められてきたことではないかと思われる。

その指導法にも多くの研究調査がなされている。その中で、プロセスアプローチはライティングの過程を重視したもので、議論や批判を呼びながらも注目を浴びている。作品つまり結果のみを重視するのではなく、あくまでも学習者の中にあるものを、各過程を通し引き出し、すべての段階で仲間や教師と相談しながら、修正、改善していく手法で、ライティングの技術を向上させて行くものである。

本研究では、このプロセスアプローチを文献研究し、その意味や、定義、有効性、学習活動にどう生かしていくかを調査する。加えて、アカデミックライティングにこの手法を取り入れ、また、総合的に力をつけるためにも話すこと、聞くこと、読むこと、又、他のスキルを組み入れながら、行う折衷的な学習指導を考察、提案している。

しかし実際の授業の中で効果を上げつつもいくつかの課題がある。例えば教師や、授業自体に長い時間を要する、実生活への反映度、文法や語彙指導に十分な時間がかけられないなどが挙げられる。今後こうした問題への取り組みがなされるべきであろうと思われる。