

A Possible Approach to Improve Teaching of Writing

Suk Mei Regina Lo

City University of Hong Kong

Background

Stewart (1988) comments that writing is an excellent tool to express oneself as well as develop the mind, and has the valuable function of spreading new information and discoveries to readers. Perl (1980) also suggests that writing is a tool for discovery of personal ideas, and writing instruction should be based on developing creativity. However, secondary students in Hong Kong and elsewhere seem to find writing English (their second language) a source of frustration rather than self expression because what is done in the composition lessons does not seem to conform to the purposes of writing described above.

The pressure of examination exerts great influence in the style of teaching writing in many places around the world, with practice being strictly modeled on the format of examination papers. At all levels, writing takes place in a very stressful atmosphere with no opportunity for interaction between the students and the teacher. Students are required to observe rigidly the time limit and essay length and are made to understand that if they cannot produce the required number of words in the daily lessons, they will likely fail in the assessment. Even if students cannot finish their compositions in class, they are not allowed to complete them at home but must hand in the assignment on the same day using recess lunch time to finish it. It is not uncommon to find students agonizing for a whole day in school to meet a particular target word number. Every writing lesson is a testing lesson within which students can seek no help either from classmates or the teacher. It seems clear that under such circumstances, students do not enjoy writing at all in school.

Students are usually unable to produce an organized piece of work of examination standard. They lack appropriate vocabulary to express their thoughts and they are unable to present arguments logically. There are also serious problems in their grammar. To solve these problems in writing, compositions are usually heavily guided, with teachers providing a fixed outline, as well as vocabulary and grammatical structures for students to follow. Teachers also tend to reward students for compliance to the prescribed outline and structure because the resulting product will look better organized. Some students will try to write creatively, deviating from the set outline, but their efforts are rewarded by numerous red marks from teachers, indicating all the errors they made.

In marking students' compositions, heavy emphasis is placed on accuracy and teachers are expected to highlight every grammatical error students make and hence many spend hours and hours painstakingly marking compositions. They always feel disappointed because their students' work is often disorganized and laden with all sorts of grammatical errors. Demoralizing comments are usually written by the teachers to vent their indignation about students' poor performance. Composition corrections usually take place during the following week. Students, on receiving their compositions, often feel disappointed because their work is full of red marks and sporadic one- or two-word comments that do not make much sense to them. Cohen (1987) investigated the effect of feedback given to students on their writing, observing that students do not understand many of the general comments directed to them by the teacher. Teachers cannot often afford the time to clarify their intentions to the students. Students are then asked to copy the corrected composition or the problematic sentences again as corrections.

It seems that writing is an ordeal to be completed by students and that marking compositions becomes a chore to be completed by teachers. The problem is that despite such painstaking efforts on the part of the teachers to correct errors, students do not seem to make much progress in their writing and the same kinds of mistakes occur repeatedly with no sign of eradication. One would question the effectiveness of this long—established approach to the teaching of writing and doubt whether such an approach which examines only the end product without giving help to students in the process of writing will benefit students in the acquisition of L2 literacy.

Process Approach to Teaching of Writing

Whereas traditional approaches have failed in producing competent writers, the more recent process approach has shown to be very effective in tertiary settings (Ng, 1994). In contrast with the traditional approach which focuses on providing students with grammatical instruction and writing exercises for assessment, the process approach sees writing as occurring in a recursive and convoluted manner: A process in which the writer begins with developing and organizing ideas, writing multiple drafts, receiving constructive feedback from peers or teachers, and editing before the completion of the written product with emphasis on meaning rather than form all through the various stages.

Although the process approach has significantly improved writing instruction in some of the English-speaking countries in the last decade (Daniels and Zemelman, 1985), it is neither fully understood nor widely adopted by many ESL practitioners in South East Asia (Nga, 1994). Despite vigorous efforts by training institutions to conduct courses on process writing, the traditional product paradigm continues to exert great influence on the writing pedagogy in these countries. Teachers' worries are that the process, approach

emphasizing free expression of ideas and writing of several drafts for feedback, is too time consuming to fit in the tight schedule of classroom teaching which is heavily geared towards examinations. Whereas such apprehension is justified, a number of studies have shown that the approach can be successfully implemented even in rigid and restrictive settings through adaptations and modifications of the basic framework (Stewart, 1986; Cheung, 1989; Stewart and Cheung, 1989; Cheung et al., 1992; Zeller-mayer, 1993; Lo, 1994; Peyton et al., 1994).

Research demonstrating the effectiveness of the process approach in Hong Kong has been conducted by Stewart (1986) with a group of tertiary students and Cheung (1989) with a class of Form One (12 year old) students. In both occasions, the adapted process approach was superimposed on the traditional product-oriented model. Results show that students make improvement on their quality of writing in terms of an increased amount of information in their content, more appropriate use of language and a stronger sense of the writing purpose. Lo (1994) reports her successful experience of using the process approach to improve the writing skills of a class of Form Three students in Hong Kong. Stewart and Cheung (1992) remark that the process approach can be implemented smoothly if it is introduced gradually with appropriate modifications to address the constraints imposed by the traditional framework. It is encouraging to know that the process instruction can also be used effectively to prepare L2 students to write examination answers (Lynch, 1988).

There are also attempts by teachers in the United States to apply the notion of the process approach to conduct writing workshops to teach English language learners whose first language is Spanish, from elementary to high school levels (Peyton et al., 1994). Here, the teachers modified the process-oriented model to negotiate with the severe constraints of limited time, space, and resources present in the school system. To solve the problem of limited time, for example, teachers integrated the writing workshop with content area study to achieve learning objectives. Teachers in the writing workshop all reported positive changes in students' writing performance in that they showed better attitudes towards writing, overcame the need to write error-free compositions, interacted more successfully with their peers, and scored better on the district writing test than their counterparts who had not participated in the workshop.

In Israel, the demands of the highly centralized educational system are constantly presenting challenges to teachers who attempt to incorporate the process approach in the current writing curriculum which places heavy emphasis on examination assessment. Teaching of writing is conducted in a very severely restrictive condition of having to follow a rigid syllabus, tight space, limited time, and sometimes poor teaching facilities. The Tel Aviv University conducted workshops and follow-up meetings to train secondary

teachers to use process writing-oriented methods. Findings suggest that the traditional curriculum has not deterred teachers from practicing the process approach and that they manage to integrate some essential elements of the model to the existing writing instruction (Zellermayer, 1993).

It seems that the process approach can function well even in adverse conditions of resource constraints and rigid school curricula if teachers show a clear understanding of the approach and make judicious adjustments and modifications to suit a particular teaching context. Pennington and Cheung (1993) point out that it is important for teachers to identify “uncontrollable, as well as controllable factors, in their teaching contexts” so as to work out realistically, modifications that suit the work situations (p. 31). Heng and Heng (1995), in a Malaysian context, observe that teachers’ own experience with the process approach is essential to the understanding of the notion before effective adaptations and adoptions of the features of the process approach can be made.

As a matter of fact, trying to change the long-established traditional practices may involve a tremendous amount of difficulties. To accomplish this, “teachers need time, flexibility, and courage — to try, change, try, and change again” (Peyton et al., 1994, p. 484). If encountering obstacles, teachers should persevere. Eventually, the process writing innovations will flourish and teachers can taste the fruit of success.

A Possible Approach that can Improve the Teaching of Writing

The following is a model for classroom practice in the teaching of writing, and providing input and assistance to students at various stages of generating, drafting, revising and editing in the process of writing.

Generating

Since student writers do not seem to have ideas to write in their composition lessons and the requirement of writing to a certain target word limit has always been a source of agony, teachers may help students gather ideas for writing at the beginning of the writing task so as to teach students how ideas can be stimulated. Keh (1989) tries out “a mixture of idea-generating activities” including brainstorming, reading, listening, doing surveys, quickwriting, and the like, with a group of students studying at a tertiary institution in Hong Kong. Hepburn (1992) also suggests that audio-visual input may be provided to the students at the generating stage to motivate them to write. The following is a list of activities that teachers may consider to help students develop ideas prior to the act of writing.

1. *Brainstorming*

Brainstorming is an idea-generating activity in which students are asked to think of as many ideas as possible related to a given topic (Keh, 1989). This can be done with the whole class with the teacher listing the ideas on the blackboard, or in small groups with the students writing down the ideas by themselves. For senior form students (Forms 6 and 7) who are required to write argumentative essays, the teacher can suggest a title for the students to agree or disagree with and give reasons to support their position.

2. *Quickwriting*

Quickwriting is a way to train students to develop ideas quickly on a given topic. Students are asked to write continuously without stopping for two minutes, for example, to express their own opinions or explore new ideas on the topic. Students are reminded that the importance of this activity is to discover meaning, and not the production of grammatical sentences, and hence, students can write in a stress-free atmosphere. Papers can be swapped between classmates who will further give comments to each other's ideas. Teachers should first show students how quickwriting should be done so that students have an idea of what the technique is like. Brainstorming and quickwriting are very good strategies particularly useful for students who have to produce a piece of writing within a specified period of time as in tests and examinations.

3. *Reading*

Articles from various sources such as books, newspapers, magazines and so on, related to the topic of writing are prepared for students to read in order to collect more ideas for writing. Students can also be involved in identifying appropriate articles for the reading task. Students are encouraged to read the text interrogatively and give comments. The reading is followed by small group discussions to obtain more ideas from peers.

4. *Listening*

Teachers can also read aloud articles related to the given topic for students to write down information which they can use in their writing. In addition to generating more ideas to write, such an activity can also train students in listening comprehension and taking notes, which are important examination skills. Tapes by a variety of speakers can also be played to expose students to different accents and voices.

5. *Doing Surveys*

This may be an activity that students take part in after school. People from all walks of life may be interviewed by students to gather various opinions on a given topic. Such first-hand experience in collecting information for their own writing will motivate students

for the task (Hepburn, 1992). A lot more ideas from various sources will be brought in to their writing.

6. *Using audio-visual input*

Teachers can make use of video-recording of funny cartoons from television or Education Television Programs (ETV) to help students extend their imagination in story writing. Audio-taped stories can also be used for the same purpose, simultaneously training students' listening comprehension ability.

7. *Building up vocabulary*

A lack of vocabulary in expressing what they want to say in the L2 is always a great hindrance to the smooth production of text. Although students may not lack imagination to write, they may not have sufficient vocabulary for the given topics, despite teachers' effort to help them. Teachers may start providing appropriate vocabulary about the topic, but given that every student will have different ideas to express, it may be difficult for teachers to detect what expressions are causing difficulties to students. Occasionally, teachers may allow students to say the expressions that they do not know how to express in their L2 by using their mother tongue and teachers may demonstrate how such expressions can be represented in the L2. Hence, students may be encouraged to communicate their intended meaning in spite of their inadequacy in the language. Pierson (1990) suggests that local teachers have the advantage of understanding students' difficulties and thus will be in a better position to detect problems and planning remedial programs.

To prepare students for examination, timed writing in the classroom is also an important practice. After students have been accustomed to the above methods of generating ideas, they should be given the opportunity to apply what they have learned under examination conditions. Since students have difficulties in writing to the target word limit for examination, the skills they have learned for generating ideas may accelerate the writing process and minimize the pressure of not being able to write enough words for assessment.

Drafting

Teachers should explain to the students that the first draft should focus on the ideas they want to communicate. It may be modified at a later stage either for clarification or elaboration of the meaning, or for stylistic changes based on the feedback by their peers or teacher. Students should be reminded to think of the purpose and the audience of writing. In order to deal with the time constraint, drafting can be done at home.

Revising

Revision is an essential component in the development of L1 and L2 writing competence. Flower et al. (1986) point out that revision is a way to improve content and structure of a piece of writing. Peer revision can sharpen awareness as writers and audience, enhancing "social growth" (Huff and Kline, 1987, p. 137). Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992) investigate the effect of oral/aural revision, requiring students to read out their compositions to their peers who would then give feedback after they had listened to their reading. The performance of two groups of students in their writing was compared, the first group receiving careful teacher feedback and the second group having peer feedback conducted in an oral/aural mode. Results show that the two groups improved in different areas, the teacher feedback group performing better in grammatical aspects, and the peer feedback group doing better in content, organization and vocabulary. Hedgcock and Lefkowitz (1992) conclude that peer feedback may not necessarily be more effective than teacher feedback, but it does provide an opportunity for students to comment on the content of one another's work in a stress-free setting.

Feedback, whether given by teachers or peers, has been proved to be beneficial to developing writing competence in students (Partridge, 1981). Collaborative revision helps to enhance audience awareness. Writing becomes a task for communication rather than a regular exercise to be completed for teacher assessment. The supportive atmosphere in the classroom helps instill confidence in students. Despite benefits brought about by peer revision, however, some researchers doubt the usefulness of such practice (Freedman, 1985). Flynn (1982) found that peers were unable to produce helpful and focused comments to their partners. In view of this, Stanley (1992) suggests that students should be adequately prepared in order to become peer evaluators. She concludes that peer revision cannot be a very productive activity without sufficient training and preparation work given to the students.

Guidelines should be given to students when carrying out the revision task. They should be made very clear that the focus of writing is communication. Hence, in evaluating their peer's work, they should concentrate on the content and idea development first. The following checklist may be used as a guideline for peer evaluation:

1. What is the main idea for each paragraph? Write them down briefly in the margin.
2. Are the ideas clearly expressed? Which idea is unclear to you?
3. Are the ideas related to the given topic? Any irrelevant ideas?
4. Are the ideas logically presented? If not, try to restructure them.

5. Are there any ideas you think are lacking?
6. Are there any ideas you find confusing? How would you clarify them?

The above list is by no means exhaustive. Teachers can tailor—make the revision checklist for various classes. The central idea is that when doing their revision, students should pay attention first to the content, structure, and organization of the composition rather than grammatical accuracy.

After students have done their evaluation, teachers may go over their drafts and give additional comments and input for improvement. Student-teacher conferences may be held to help weaker students clarify the comments given to them both by their peers and teacher. Before students attend the conference, they should go over their drafts very carefully, thinking on how their writing can be improved. During the conference, the teacher will also give immediate feedback to students.

Editing

This should be done after the revision of content and structure, mainly for the improvement of style and the elimination of mechanical errors such as spelling, punctuation, and other surface features. Corrections of the form at an early stage will discourage students from writing creatively and have negative consequences in the learning of writing. When doing evaluation at this stage, students should be told that the focus of the editing task will be rather different from that of the revision in that attention should be paid to the modifications of surface forms and the improvement of the language. On completion of the editing work, students will write the final version for submission to the teacher. Again, this part can be done as homework.

Corrections

The current practice of asking students to copy the corrected composition once may not be very helpful to students. For an essay of 500 words, students might need to spend one whole period to make their corrections, and the problem is that there is no guarantee that students will learn from this kind of copying exercise.

The Curriculum Development Committee (Hong Kong Ministry of Education, 1983) recommended the use of correction cards compiled by the teachers to deal with individual grammatical problems. The cards are classified into different grammatical categories, consisting of explanation on the front and exercises on the back for students to practice. Students having a particular grammatical error may identify the appropriate card to work on. The preparation of such cards may take a long period of time. To start, teachers may design a few in the first year and then accumulate them year after year till a full collection

of grammatical items are prepared. Although the preparation of cards is time-consuming, they may be very useful in the long run and save the time of students in copying. The valuable class time may be spent more profitably with students dealing with their own problems.

Publishing good work

It is highly motivating for students to have their work read out or published (Holmes and Moulton, 1994). Teachers may choose a few pieces of good work to be published in class magazines or on bulletin boards. Notes or comments on why a paragraph or an idea is good is a useful means of letting other students know the standard of good writing.

Afterthought

In retrospect, it may be seen that the model of writing presented above benefited students a great deal. Students develop better human relationships because the atmosphere in the peer discussion session is relaxing and non-threatening, and they are more willing to take risks in experimenting with the language they have newly acquired because there is no penalty for making mistakes. The model also provides students with enough ideas to write and creates a real purpose and audience in writing. The peer review sessions also give an opportunity for student to integrate speaking, listening, reading and writings skills, and students are encouraged to develop creativity and originality in their writing. The approach has given rise to a group of writers who are willing to exchange their ideas with one other and who have developed a better rapport among themselves.

References

- Cheung, M. (1989). *How Unskilled EFL Writers can Rewrite Better: A Classroom Study of a Process Approach in Hong Kong*. Unpublished B. Phil Dissertation, University of New Castle Upon Tyne.
- Cheung, M., Wong, A., Chan, M., Yeung, A., and Murphy, M. (1992). Action Research Report Implementing process writing in a F.3 classroom. *Institute of Language in Education Journal*, 9, 171-176.
- Cohen, A. D. (1987). Student processing of feedback on their compositions. In A. Wenden and J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner Strategies in Language Learning*. UK, Prentice Hall.
- Curriculum Development Committee. (1983). *Syllabus for English (Forms I-V)*. Government Printer, Hong Kong.
- Daniels, H. & Zemelman, S. (1985). *A Writing Project: Training Teachers of Composition From Kindergarten to College*. Portsmouth, Heinemann.

- Flower, L., Hayes, J., Carey, L., Schriver, K. & Stratman, J. (1986). 'Detection, diagnosis, and the strategies of revision'. *College Composition and Communication*, 37, 16-55.
- Flynn, E. (1982). *Effects of Peer Critiquing and Model Analysis on the Quality of Biology Student Laboratory Reports*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of National Council of Teachers of English, Washington, D. C.: (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 234 403).
- Freedman, S. (1985). *Response to and Evaluation of Writing: A Review*. Resources in Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 247 605).
- Hedgcock, J. & Lefkowitz, N. (1992). Collaborative oral/aural revision in foreign language writing instruction. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 1, 255-276.
- Hepburn, H. (1992). 'Motivating students to write'. In M. Lau and M. J. Murphy (Eds.), *Developing Writing: Purposes and Practices*. English Division, Institute of Language in Education, Hong Kong.
- Heng, T. & Heng, C.S. (1995 May). *The Writing Process - the Need for An Encounter*. Paper presented at the Malaysian English Language Teaching Association Biennial International Conferences, Kuala Lumpur.
- Holmes, V. L. & Moulton, M. R. (1994). "I am amazine to see my write in print": Publishing from ESL students' perspective". *TESOL Journal*, 3(4), 14-16.
- Huff, R. & Kline, C. (1987). *The Contemporary Wiring Curriculum: Rehearsing, Composing, and Valuing*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Keh, C. (1989). The process approach made practical: an example of a writing course. In V. Bickley (Ed.), *Language Teaching and Learning Styles Within and Across Cultures*. Institute of Language in Education, Education Department, Hong Kong.
- Lo, S. Y. J. (1994). Can a leopard change its spots? A personal account. *TESL Reporter* 27, 27-33.
- Lynch, T. (1988). Teaching examination answer writing: Process or product. In P. C. robinson (Ed.), *Academic Writing. Process and Product* (ELT Document No. 129) (pp. 53-60). London: Modern English Publications & The British Council.
- Ng, R. (1994). 'Revision in the ESL class: A comparative study of the effectiveness of peer and self-feedback'. *Perspectives* (Working Papers of the Department of English, 6), 61-80. City Polytechnic of Hong Kong.
- Nga, J. (1994 April). *Process Writing: Implementing Theory into Practice*. Paper presented at the SEAMEO RELC 29th Regional Seminar, Singapore.
- Partridge, K. (1981). *A comparison of the Effectiveness of Peer vs. Teacher Evaluation for Helping Students of English as a Second Language to Improve the Quality of Their Written Compositions*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of Hawaii, Manoa.

- Pennington, M. & Cheung, M. (1993). Managing contextual factors in educational innovation: Process writing in Hong Kong. *Journal of English and Foreign Languages*, 12, 20-33.
- Perl, S. (1980). A look at basic writers in the process of composing. In L.N. Kasden & D. R. Hoerber (Eds.), *Basic Writing*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Peyton, J. K., Jones, C., Vincent, A., & Greenblatt, L. (1994). Implementing writing workshop with ESOL students: Visions and realities. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28, 469-487.
- Pierson, H. (1990, June). *A Shared Enquiry Approach to Teaching "Literature" in and ESL Language Learning Context*. Paper presented at the Conference on the Teaching of English Language, Literature in the Hong Kong Context, Hong Kong.
- Stanley, J. (1992). Coaching student writers to be effective peer evaluators. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 1, 217-233.
- Stewart, M. (1986). *Teaching Expository Writing. A Process Approach*. M. Ed. Dissertation, University of Hong Kong.
- Stewart, M. (1988). Language awareness and self awareness: Cognitive and affective concomitants of a process approach to writing instruction. In V. Bickley (Ed.), *Language in Education in a Bi-lingual or Multi-lingual Setting*. Institute of Language in Education, Education Department, Hong Kong.
- Stewart, M. & Cheung, M. (1989). Introducing a process approach in the teaching of writing in Hong Kong. *Institute of Language in Education Journal*, 6, 41-48.
- Zamel, V. (1982). Writing: The process of discovering meaning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, 195-209.
- Zellermayer, M. (1993). Introducing a student-centred model of writing instruction within a centralized educational system: An Israeli case study. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 19, 191-214.

About the Author

Regina Lo is an Assistant Professor at the City University of Hong Kong. She is presently teaching student teachers in the BA (Hons.) TESL course. Regina has a doctorate and has done research in the areas of teacher education, second language acquisition and comprehension processes of first and second language learners.