Using Annotation in a Process Approach to Writing in a Hong Kong Classroom

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Introduction

Using a case-study approach, this research investigated whether a process writing approach is an effective ESL teaching/learning approach in a genuine Hong Kong secondary school context—one of the classes the author taught. The process writing approach used was modified, with emphasis on making annotations for composition drafts before the final written product was completed.

Theoretical Orientation

The process approach to writing, or process writing, has gained considerable attention from educators worldwide. The approach comes from the snowballing recognition that recursiveness is a major characteristic of the natural process of composing and that, in the process, the writer repeatedly revises his/her drafts. (Murray, 1978; Perl, 1980; Freedman, 1982; Li, 1992)
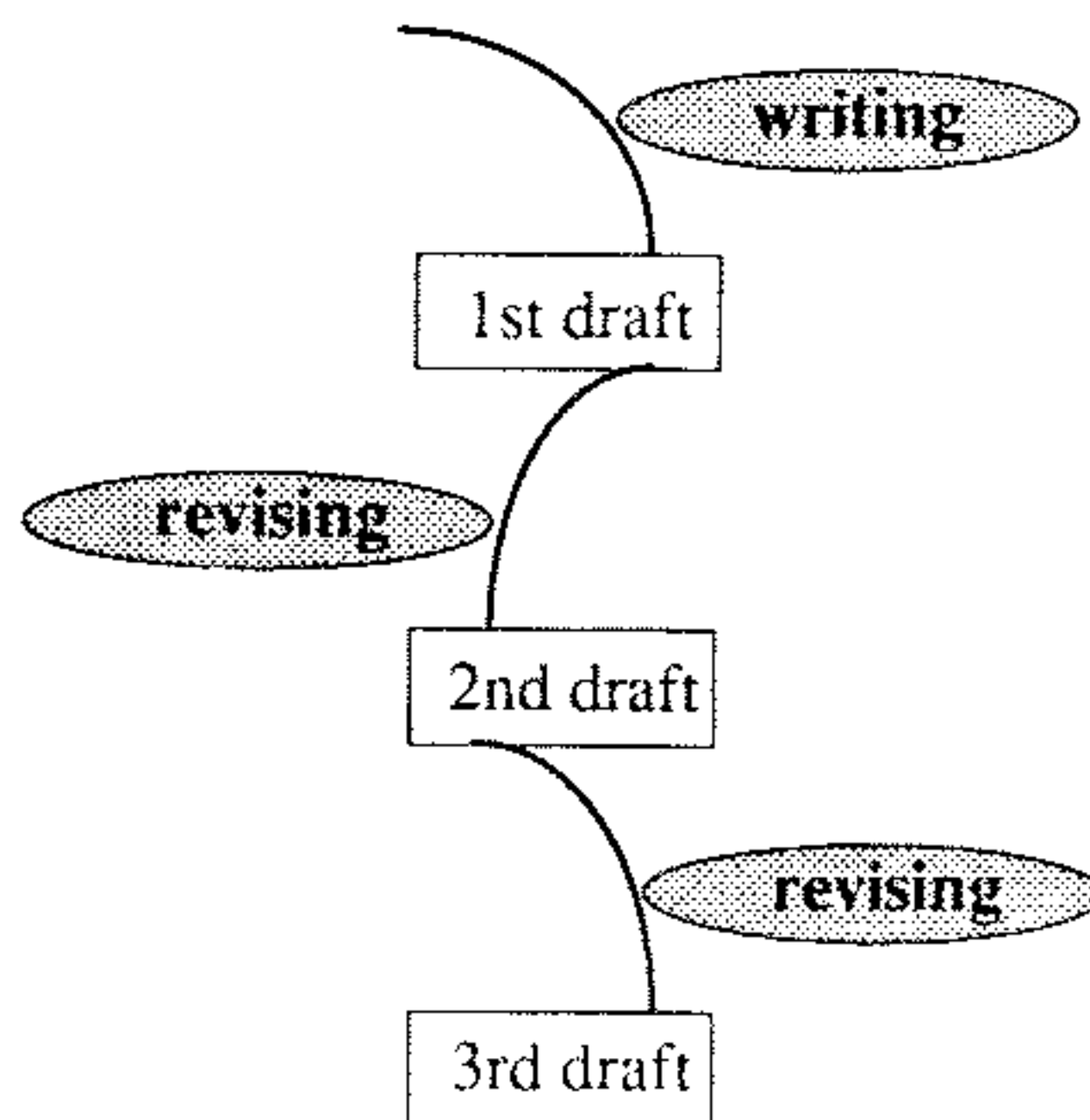

Figure 1.   The Process of Writing

Facilitating effective revision is the main goal of process writing. The input to facilitate revision may be based on the draft so-far written or other information. For an example of the latter, the input directed towards the writer's communication message can be some prescribed reading or some vocabulary or knowledge which is related to the composition topic and is introduced by the teacher. The other type of input which is given according to the draft written up to a certain point in time can be called feedback.

Feedback may come from various sources. The common sources are (i) the writer's peers (who are usually the learner-writer's classmates), (ii) writing experts (i.e., the teacher in most language learning contexts), and (iii) the writer himself/herself. Among the three, (ii) has often been criticized for its ineffectiveness (Sommers, 1982) and (iii) is a much unexplored area. On the other hand, (i) is often commended for several reasons. First, unlike feedback from an expert, peer-response offers feedback at the learner's own level of development. Second, since other people, besides the teacher, are the readers of the written product, the writer-learner can gain a greater sense of audience. Third, through the activity of comment-giving, students may learn more about writing. Fourth, in addition to the above reasons already mentioned by Keh (1990), the learner may get the feeling of being a reader of others' writing. Fifth, through experiencing the process of giving feedback, students may appreciate the effort their teachers have made on their written work and take a more positive attitude towards the feedback they receive on their writing.

Feedback can also be done in a number of modes. For example, it may be given verbally on a one-to-one basis, as in the case of composition conferencing. Annotation, by means of which one makes comments in the form of notes on one's own or another's paper, is another example. Annotation from the writer's peers and the writer himself/herself has been found advantageous in a number of ways. Regarding notes made by the writer's peers (peer annotations, PAs), the first is that the response can be given on a separate sheet. This minimizes the second peer-reader's being influenced by the first one. Secondly, because the response is written down, the writer may refer to it at any time s/he needs to. Thirdly, as discovered by Arndt (1993), Chinese students studying English as a non-native language prefer comments to be given in written form, thinking that it is "face-saving" or less embarrassing.

Regarding annotations made by the writer himself/herself (writer annotations, WAs), first, they allow students more control over feedback. Second, they facilitate dialogue between the writer and the teacher or between the writer and his/her peers. Third, they help the student to understand what the problem is, though the student may not yet be able to solve it. Fourth, they reveal crucial information about the writer's intentions. Fifth, they reveal the student's concerns, which may be different from the teacher's (Charles, 1990).

Other than these advantages identified by Charles, written annotation naturally makes the job of identifying errors, which traditionally falls to the teacher as reader, a task that is shared by the writer as well. This shared responsibility gives rise to several additional advantages of WA. First, for a feedback system to function properly, as Johnson (1988) points out, the learner must desire to correct the wrong behavior. As the learner-writers identify concrete questions/problems of their own in their annotations, they are motivated to get feedback on those points and to understand it. Second, through the process of figuring out what the problems are and seeking solutions from the feedback, the learner-writer's consciousness may be heightened, and such consciousness-raising[1] may facilitate learning in his/her language system. Third, in written annotations, the areas of concern are less teacher-directed, making the approach more student-centered. Fourth, annotation is itself a type of writing task which gives students additional practice in meaningful writing[2].

In general, the problems identified in drafts can be classified into two types. The first type of problems are those concerning lower order matters such as syntax, grammar, and mechanics, or in Keh's (1990) terms, matters of form. The second type are those about higher order concerns such as plot, organization, context and communication setting, and deal largely with content. There is a general tendency among educators these days to move the focus from form to content. The effectiveness of feedback on form has often been doubted and criticized (e.g., Hillocks, 1987; Williams, 1989). Among studies attending to the role of form and content in writing, one prominent feature seems to emerge: better writers revise content more than form (Faigley and Witte, 1981; Sommers, 1980). The facilitation of revision can be summarized schematically in Figure 2.

In Hong Kong, process writing has not been popular, and writer annotations and peer annotations are rarely used in writing classes. Though it is common that teachers make notes about students' writing (i.e., using teacher annotations, TAs), the TAs are often predominantly form oriented. Such a tendency seems to be particularly strong when the TAs are for students of low language proficiency. Against such a background, this research aimed to investigate the appropriateness and feasibility of (i) TAs focusing on content only, (ii) PAs, and (iii) WAs (i.e., the shaded parts in Figure 2) in the teaching/learning of the complex process of composing. The research revolved around the central question: Is annotation an effective teaching/learning method in the process of composing in ESL in a Hong Kong secondary school context?

Procedure

The investigation was made in the 1992/1993 school year. Four students from a Form 4 class which the author was teaching were chosen as subjects of the research.
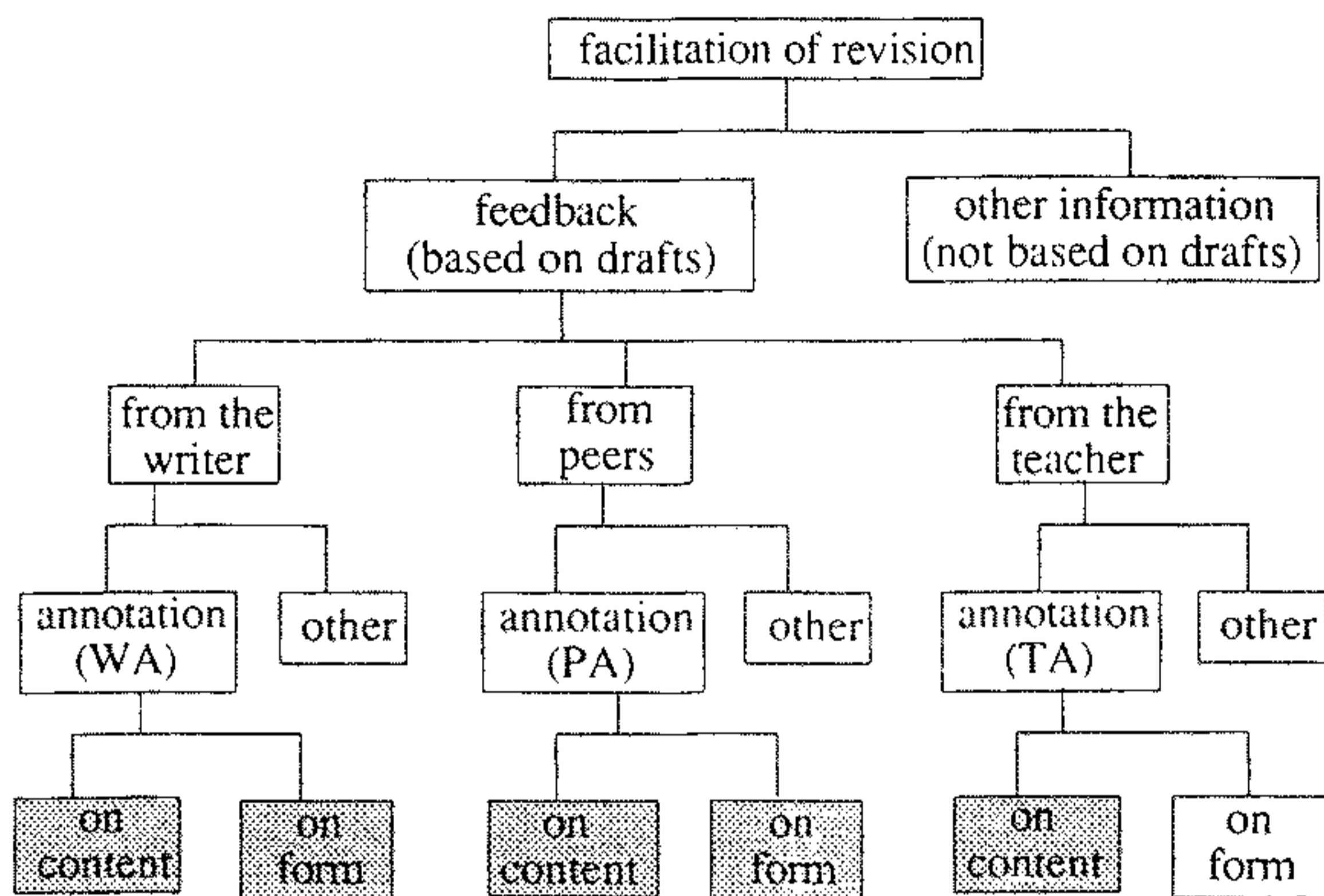
Figure 2.   Types of Revision Facilitation

The subjects were about 16 years old, having Cantonese, a dialect commonly used in the south-eastern part of China, as their mother tongue. Of the four subjects, two were from each of the two different levels of English proficiency represented in the class (labeled "high" and "low"), as judged according to the class's baseline compositions and their performance in the school English tests. The baseline compositions were the first compositions they wrote in the school year, prior to any treatment related to process writing or the use of annotations. Students were given little guidance when they composed the baseline essays, so that the essays genuinely reflected their language proficiency and composing ability. The two subjects of relatively high English proficiency are identified as H1 and H2, whereas the two of relatively low English proficiency are identified as L1 and L2.

A case study approach was used to make a detailed investigation into the subjects' performance. The activities of the study were accomplished on a whole-class basis, though the performance of the four subjects only was used in the research analysis so as to avoid unequal treatment, unnecessary and/or sensitive administrative problems and unnecessary disturbance to the normal class routine or to the teaching progress schedule laid down by the school. This agreed with and fitted the research purpose, which was to examine the feasibility of the process-approach annotation treatment in a genuine local secondary school context. The class from

which the subjects were chosen was one of low motivation[3], and their language ability was generally very weak.[4] In the three-month investigation period, the class was asked to write a total of three compositions in sequence.

Before the submission of the final draft of each composition for the teacher's marking, students were asked to write two drafts of it. After they had finished the first draft, they wrote out their own notes, comments, and questions (WAs) on a sheet attached to the draft, addressed to the readers on specific parts of their work. The WAs were numbered (the first note being numbered A01 and the second A02 and so on), and the places in the draft to which the annotations referred to were indicated by the corresponding numbers.

The first draft and the sheet with the WAs were then passed to two peer-readers for comments. Each of the peer readers made comments (PAs) on another separate sheet, also using a similar number-referenced annotating method. The first note of the first reader was numbered 1R01 and that of the second reader 2R01; the second note of the first reader was numbered 1R02 and that of the second reader 2R02, and so on. To ensure that each peer-reader was an "independent" reader, after the first reader had finished his/her annotation tasks, the comment sheet was given to the writer directly, without letting the second reader know what the response and comments were, though there were numbers left on the original draft for the writer's reference. The draft was then passed to a second peer-reader and s/he made his/her responses and comments in the form of PAs. Examples of typical or insightful annotations were also given to the students to help them understand what they were expected to do in the annotation activities.

After the WA and PA activities, the teacher collected the drafts and wrote TAs on the content of the drafts for the students on a separate sheet. When the writer had received the response and comments from the two readers and the teacher, s/he rewrote the essay again to produce a second draft for the composition, making appropriate revisions. When the writer had finished, the processes of WA, PA and TA were repeated. Then the writer made revisions and finished the final draft. For every revision task, the students had WAs, PAs, and TAs to help him/her.

When the students had finished all three drafts of all compositions, the subjects' drafts were given to two markers (M1 and M2), who were students of the MA (TESL) program of the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong and had over ten years' ESL teaching experience. Using the Jacobs et al. (1981) "Composition Profile," they marked the drafts independently. Before their marking of the drafts, the markers had been reminded to work carefully and to finish all the marking in one sitting, to avoid inconsistency in the application of marking or grading criteria. The subjects' drafts were sent to the markers in a type-written form, randomly ordered. The markers did not know which of the drafts were first, second, or third drafts, or which of the drafts was written by which subject.

After the students had finished the final draft of the third composition, a questionnaire was given to them. The purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain data about their attitudes towards the treatment of process writing.

To avoid having an unnecessary language barrier, students were allowed to use either English or their mother tongue, Chinese, in their annotations, though they were encouraged to use English to have more practice in English writing. Also, all instructions and questions in the questionnaire were in both English and Chinese.

Analysis of Results

The annotations, the drafts, the grades awarded to the drafts, and the questionnaires were analyzed and the findings of note are summarized below.

Writer annotations (WAs) were oriented almost exclusively towards content. Of the total of 107 WAs, 83% (89/107) were content-oriented and only 11% (12/107) were form-oriented. (Some were about neither form nor content. For example, one WA just said, "The handwriting is clearly legible.") 92 of the WAs suggested changes in the drafts. Of these, half (46/92) paralleled some subsequent changes made in the revision after the annotation tasks. In all the three writing cycles, the number of WAs used in the second annotation tasks were less than that in the first one. Comparing the scope of concern of the content-oriented WAs of the two proficiency groups, the low group showed a stronger tendency to focus on elements at sub-sentence level than the high group [52%(26/50): 26%(10/39)]. In this respect, H2 stood out among the four subjects in that she least used notes covering sub-sentence level scopes and only 14% (3/21) of her WAs were at that level.

As for PAs, a total of 177 notes were made. 79% (140/177) of the PAs were about content, and only 12% (22/177) were about form. And 154 of the 177, that is 87%, of the PAs were different. 73 of the 154 pointed to changes needed in the drafts and 62% (45/73) of them paralleled some subsequent changes made in the revision after the annotation tasks. Such a rate was higher than that of WAs. As high as 85% (150/177) of the PAs were responding to the WAs, though in every annotation lesson the teacher reminded the students they could respond to any other things they liked besides responding to the WAs. This was probably a reason for the following findings. Like WAs, there was a general drop in the number of PAs used in the second annotation tasks as compared with the first ones. Also, like the scope of concern of the content-oriented WAs, the PAs for the low group showed a stronger tendency to focus on elements at sub-sentence level than those for the high group [49%(39/79): 30%(18/61)].

As for TAs, their numbers showed a general increasing tendency, growing from 10, 13, 12, 14, 16, and finally to 17 in the six feedback-giving occasions. Also, the average numbers of words in the TAs given grew from 42.9, 60.8, 80.3, 103.9,

97.5, and finally to 111.3 in the feedback occasions. 56 of the TAs suggested changes to drafts. Of those, 66% (37/56) paralleled changes made in the group's subsequent drafts. Compared with the counterparts of WAs and PAs, this rate was the highest.

The grades awarded to the drafts, on a scale of 1-100 (See Table 1), showed that there were small within-group differences in average grades between subjects of similar proficiency levels (1.31 in both cases) and a substantial between-group difference (14.01) between subjects of the two proficiency levels. This supported the validity of the subject-selection for the research. The grades across revisions and across the three compositions were not so clear-cut however, in their support of the process approach techniques used in this study. Of the four subjects, H2 made the greatest improvement through the rewriting process, and L1 and L2 also generally made slight improvement through revision. However, H1's grades went down in four of the six revising occasions, despite her effort to improve the drafts.

	first comp.			second comp.			third comp.			overall
	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	1st	2nd	3rd	average
H1	75	75	69	76	74	69	71	67	75	72.3
H2	64	72	74	68	71	73	66	73	78	71.0
L1	59	57	61	56	51	53	57	59	60	57.0
L2	56	60	58	54	57	61	60	57	62	58.3

Table 1. Average Grades Awarded to Drafts

According to the responses to the first section of the questionnaires, none of the subjects had had process writing experience before the treatment. The second section of the questionnaires marked encouraging results. In general, the responses showed that the subjects were positive about the process approach with annotation and they found the approach useful for their learning of writing.

Discussion

To the research question of whether annotation is an effective teaching/learning method in the process of composing in ESL in the Hong Kong secondary school context, the study seemed to suggest a positive answer for the following reasons:

First, using WAs, the students had great control over what feedback from others was to be addressed. As found in the study, 85% of the PAs were replies to what the writers mentioned as concerns in their WAs. Second, the approach helped students understand their problems, even though they might not yet be able to solve them. This was evident in the subjects' responses to the questionnaire. Third, the approach facilitated and ensured dialogue between the writer and the reader. The above three

reasons echo well the advantages of annotation identified by Charles (1990). Fourth, the annotations made were useful for revision, as reflected in the high percentage of their being used in the rewriting modification. Fifth (to be further discussed below), the approach helped the teacher see clearly how his students worked and how they preferred to work.

The study also offered insights for the teaching/learning of ESL writing. First, the PAs given by different classmates to the same draft were not often similar. There is probably no need to worry that the independently working peers will tend to give similar comments, and/or that asking two, or even three, peers for comments will make the task uneconomical. Second, the general drop in the use of notes in the second annotation task for each composition may imply that the effectiveness of the annotation tasks for the same composition decreases with the increase in the number of times the tasks are given. Third, as found in the research, students' revision work, like H1's, may sometimes lead to deterioration of written products. This should be regarded as interim deterioration and teachers should guard against condemning the students for the deterioration. After all, it is through the trial manipulation and revision of drafts that students learn to improve their writing. Fourth, in parallel with the last point, not marking the interim drafts not only saves the teacher's time, but also avoids discouraging students from attempting revision by not exposing students to the threat of interim deterioration.

Fifth, the study showed that WAs, PAs and TAs could all initiate revision. The students made use of all three kinds of feedback in their revision. Among the three types, TA had the highest rate of adoption for use in revision while WA had the least. Predictably, this implies that the students relied more on opinions from others, especially the opinions from their teacher, than their own judgments. Sixth, as found in the WAs, the students of relatively higher proficiency tended to be more concerned with matters beyond sentence level. This suggests that students' proficiency may somehow be related to their foci of concern, and that, the more proficient one is, the more likely one may look at matters beyond sentence level. Seventh, as shown in the close relationship between H2's success in making consistent progress through revision and her heavy content-oriented concern towards matters covering wider scopes, the wider the scope of the students' concerns were, the better the revision would be. This suggests that teachers should encourage students to lift their eyes from sentence-level concerns and try to focus on elements covering wider scopes.

The experience was illuminating to the teacher. It was found that the approach provided access to help the teacher to understand how his students used English at their own level. As the students produced a number of drafts for the same composition, the teacher could closely observe how his students manipulated the

language as they went through the recursive cycles of rewriting by comparing across drafts. In the period of the investigation, the teacher found that he had learned a lot about the students' use of the language. The new knowledge would hardly have been gained in the product approach to the teaching of writing.

An important finding of this study is the value and vitality of content-orientedness. The orientation towards content, instead of form, could be helpful to both the teacher and the students. The teacher's concentration on content lifted his eyes away from the surface form to focus onto the students' intended communication message. This helped the teacher appreciate what the students had actually done in their revision and, seeing the students' efforts in their revision, the teacher was much moved and motivated to help the students, despite the language errors found and some interim deterioration across drafts. This was evident in the increase in TAs' quantity.

That the subjects' annotations showed a consistent and strong tendency towards content, rather than form suggests that it may have been the way of composing that they preferred or that was most natural for them. For students who are very weak at language form, such as the subjects of the study, a deviation from the emphasis on form could free students from the confines of the form-barriers to communicating their ideas. And as the students felt insecure when handling form, content would be the area they preferred to focus on and manipulate. Also if they worried less about form or mistakes in surface grammar, they would probably write more. And perhaps if they wrote more, they would gain more confidence and more practice in writing. This could lead to a cyclical reinforcement effect and influence the class receiving the treatment in a number of positive ways.

The compositions the class wrote in the school examination held after the third writing cycle were found to be significantly longer than those of other classes of the same level. (The mean length of the compositions of the class studied, in terms of word-number, was 209.9 and that of the other class was 161.2. The standard deviation found was 86.3 and the sample size was 31. The calculated t-value was 3.142, which was significant even at $p > 0.005$.) This suggested that the students receiving treatment could produce text longer than those not having the treatment. A main reason for the ability of the students receiving treatment to produce longer texts could be their confidence to write more. The success of the research treatment in building the students' confidence probably lay in its allowing enough room for content-orientedness to realize its vitality and thus for students to achieve their writing potential.

Conclusion

A classroom case-study investigation of the effectiveness of the process approach to teaching/learning of writing with emphasis on the use of annotations for revision

has been reported. It is hoped that the moderate success of the implementation of the approach will encourage ESL teachers and learners, especially in Hong Kong, to take a more positive attitude towards writing and process writing methods. The fact that the approach was found successful in a low-ability, low-motivation classroom should be encouraging and illuminating to the teachers often complaining about the great difficulties of teaching their seemingly ineducable students to write.

The study also calls for further research in the following areas. First, the study was a small-scale one. Research studying more subjects of a wider range of language proficiency for a longer period of time is needed to substantiate the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study revealed little about the mental processes in the students' mind when they wrote or used annotations. Further research probing the mental processes is needed to obtain information about the difficulties students face when they write.

Notes

[1] The idea of "consciousness raising" is developed by Rutherford (1987, 1988a, 1988b), and Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith (1988).
[2] Martha C. Pennington, personal communication, 12 October, 1992.
[3] Teachers of the school often complained that the class had a lot of behavioral problems. It was not uncommon to find that one-third of the students were sleeping during the lesson and another one-third were chatting. Some of the students had been involved in gang fights and some were suspected to be triad gang members and addicts of soft-drugs. This class was probably a typical "band 5" one (i.e. students belong to the lowest 20% in terms of academic ability) and it was in such an environment that the research was carried out.
[4] For example, in one of the English lessons, some of the secondary four students asked me if the past form of "has" is "was" and how the word "interesting" is spelled. From the general response of the students, teachers of the class all agreed that the students of the class were mostly band 5 ones, though there were no official or objective data available proving this.

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