

A Critical Appraisal of Process Approach to the Teaching of EFL Writing

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Abstract

Process Approaches to teaching writing tend to occupy a very obscure place in our curriculum. On the contrary, it remains in the main stream development of ELT researchers. And we see great many dimensions to process writing being advocated around the world. An analysis from the problems to the possibilities & pedagogical applications of process approach as to be used in Pakistan, a brief theoretical & functional aspect in the form of activities is discussed. The paper, therefore mainly aims to paint a picture of the process theory of writing in comparison with the obsolete product approach with a view to bring about an appraisal to the better understanding & application by the ESL writers-students and teachers.

Introduction

There have been numerous approaches to the teaching of writing in the history of English language teaching. These have evolved with the development of different approaches to teaching in general, which have in turn contributed to the changing role and status of writing within English language syllabuses and the English as a Foreign Language classroom. Despite methodological changes writing, however, continues to be one of the most difficult areas for the teachers and learners of English to tackle.

Traditionally, writing was viewed mainly as a tool for the practice and reinforcement of specific grammatical and lexical patterns, a fairly one-dimensional activity, in which accuracy was all-important but content and self-expression virtual non-priorities. As to Tribble (1996), students were purely ‘writing to learn’ as opposed to ‘learning to write’. Even in more recent communicative approaches to language teaching, writing can often still be seen by teachers as something embarrassing & threatening to detract valuable classroom time from the development of oral communication skills.

However, with an increase in attention to students’ practical needs, born out of functional/notional approaches and further developed in the various areas of English for Specific Purposes, the importance of the writing as a skill, learners might need to develop has gradually come to the fore. This gradual increase in the status of writing as a skill, along with the development of a more discursive rather than purely grammatically-based approach to language teaching, has altered the teacher’s perspective on both the needs of and the problems faced by language learners. Whereas traditionally, in the

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words of Raimes(1983a), teachers have ‘trapped our students within the sentence’ and ‘respond to the piece of writing as item checkers not as real readers’ , we are now beginning to develop a more top-down. and student-centered, approach to the teaching of writing, whereby issues of content, genre and discourse have been assigned greater importance now a days.

Problems and difficulties faced by the EFL students of writing:

A general point of view

For various reasons, as far as students and teachers are concerned, writing usually appears an extremely daunting task. First of all, the main focus when a writing task is assigned has traditionally been on the final product. The need to produce a coherent, well-written text can be a great source of stress to the writer if the intervening stages in the process of creating this text are overlooked. Few native speaker writers, let alone EFL student writers, can be expected to produce a highly structured text without first going through various pre-writing and drafting stages. However, this has not always been made clear to students of English as a Foreign Language, who are still often assigned writing tasks with little advice or support on the processes involved in completing them. (Tribble, 1996, p 75).

To produce different varieties of acceptable written texts, EFL students can also encounter problems arising from their unfamiliarity with the conventions of various different genres of written English. Moreover, the covert nature of written discourse, whereby distance from the reader obliges the writer ‘to make inferences about the relevant knowledge possessed by the reader, and decide what to include and what to omit from their text’, (Nunan, 1991, p86), can constitute a further obstacle to the already daunted EFL-student writer. This particular obstacle can be compounded by the frequent lack of any clear purpose or audience for writing resulting from the artificial nature of many EFL writing assignments and the lack of attention paid to the relevant issues of discourse and genre in the traditional, largely syntax-focused classroom.

All of the above, combined with the frequently limited and unconstructive, sometimes negative and often purely grammatically focused nature of teacher feedback on the completed piece of writing, can contribute to a strong lack of student motivation and a distinct reluctance to complete writing assignments either inside or outside of the classroom.

Finally, the students’ task in completing a writing assignment is made yet more difficult by the lack of provision for practice of the writing skill in class, writing often becoming a low priority for the teacher when time and syllabus constraints come to the fore.

The Specific point of view

In contrast to the problems generally faced by the students round the world, we in Pakistan in general & Sindh in particular, have more deeply rooted problems in

writing English. This, I believe is the bitter fruit of GTM(grammar translation Method) which paves the way to product approach to teaching writing English. The text available from school to graduation level for the purpose of improving writing skills is short, insufficient and defective. That's why students are not capable to write correctly and independently. The nature of present text comprises grammar, essay writing and precis writing- the structural approach. The problem is that teachers only teach the rules of grammar and not the use of grammar. In essay writing only topics from the prescribed books are recommended instead of teaching the techniques and skills of developing creative writing. Precis, which is believed as the most difficult part of composition remains a serious problem because making a precis requires students to be good at writing and paraphrasing which they are not. During a recent survey conducted in three universities of Sindh, 80% of the students say, they are not satisfied by the writing abilities. The problem besides many others, therefore, is not only the text but also the approach to teaching the target language.

The other writing problems found in the survey Mashori .G.M (2002) are: -

- .. Poor grammar (Parts speech and tenses).
- .. Shortage of vocabulary.
- .. Lack of practice in writing.
- .. No inspiring guidance.
- .. Proper usage of words.

A Comparative View of the Writing Problems in the Light of Survey

NAME OF UNIVERSITY	Skill Taught	NO. OF STUDENTS	Average Level of fluency in writing	IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS WITH STUDENTS				
				PERCENTAGE IN AGREEMENT				
				Grammar	Vocabulary	Guidance	Usage of words	Practice
Karachi University	Yes	100	60 %	60%	50%	50%	60 %	60%
Sindh University	No	100	50%	60%	60%	70%	70 %	50%

Process Writing: a critical appraisal

After a general & specific analysis of the problem, we discuss what the process

writing actually is. Tribble defines the 'process approach' as 'an approach to the teaching of writing which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models'. (Tribble, 1996, p160). Thus, the focus shifts from the final product itself to the different stages the writer goes through in order to create this product, by breaking down the task as a whole into its constituent parts, writing can seem greatly less daunting and more manageable to the EFL student.

Various headings have been given to the different stages in the writing process, possibly the most exhaustive being White and Arndt's 'generating ideas, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating and re-viewing'. (White and Arndt, 1991, p 4). These stages generally involve different forms of brainstorming, selecting and ordering ideas, planning, drafting, redrafting and revising and editing. Furthermore, as Raimes comments, the process is 'not linear at all' but 'recursive' (Raimes, 1985, p229. as, in Tribble's words, 'at any point in the preparation of a text, writers can loop backwards or forwards to whichever of the activities involved in text composition they may find useful'. (Tribble, 1996, p 59). This not only provides the student writer and the teacher with a practical and manageable framework within which to work through the writing process, but also allows for great flexibility, depending on each individual task and the personality and preferences of each individual writer.

The more a writing activity can engage the learner as a person, the more it will capture his/her imagination and spark his/her motivation. This involves a consideration both of what our students might need to write outside the classroom and of what they are interested in, as highlighted by White and Arndt (1991, p 49), and befits quite well with the shift in primary focus inherent in the process writing approach from language, to ideas and content. As Raimes comments, students have traditionally had 'no intellectual or emotional investment in what they are writing about. They are saying something that nobody cares about in order to practice something else'. (Raimes, 1983 a). Advocates of process writing approaches have attempted to remedy this, in the provision of interesting and stimulating topics to write about, the development of activities which engage the students' interest in these topics and help them to express and develop their ideas on them and in the attempt to develop tasks where students have a more genuine purpose to write and a stronger sense of the audience for whom they are writing. This is the problem in our context also. Writing is always aimed for one proxy audience-teacher, which greatly hinders the creativity and development of the young writers.

Although it is advantageous to provide students with a genuine audience for whom to write, it is not always possible. However, Tribble suggests that the simple incorporation of peer-conferencing sessions into a writing lesson, a typical feature of the process writing approach. can achieve similar motivational effects on the written text:

Knowing that your peers will be evaluating your work, provides a more

motivating context in which to write than writing for an entirely fictitious reader.
(Tribble, 1996, p107)

This shift in focus to producing what Flower defines as ‘reader-based’ as opposed to ‘writer-based’ prose (Flower, 1979. quoted by Keh, 1990, p 294) can also constitute the first step in the process of decoding the rules and conventions of discourse and genre, which can present another demotivating obstacle to the EFL student writers.

Although there are many different process approaches to writing (see for example. Hedge 1988, White and Arndt 1991), they share some core features. Tribble . (1996: 37) suggests that process approaches stress:

... writing activities which move learners from the generation of idea and the collection of data through to the ‘publication’ of a finished text.

Writing in process approaches is seen as predominantly to do with linguistic skills, such as planning and drafting, and there is much less emphasis on linguistic knowledge, such as knowledge about grammar and text structure.

There are different views on the stages that writers go through in producing a piece of writing, but a typical model identifies four stages; prewriting; composing/drafting; revising; and editing (Tribble 1996: 39). This is a cyclical process in which writers may return to pre-writing activities, for example, after doing some editing or revising.

A typical prewriting activity in the process approach would be for learners to brainstorm on the topic of houses. At the composing/drafting stage, they would select and structure the result of the brainstorming session to provide a plan of a description of a house. This would guide the first draft of a description of a particular house. After discussion learners might revise the first draft working individually or in groups

Finally, the learners would edit or proof-read the text.

In process approaches, the teacher primarily facilitates the learners writing, and providing input or stimulus is considered to be less important. Like babies and young children who develop, rather than learn, their mother tongue, second language learners develop, rather than consciously learn, writing skills. Teachers draw out the learners’ potential. Process approaches have a somewhat monolithic view of writing. The process of writing is seen as the same regardless of what is being written and who is writing. So while the amount of pre-writing in producing a postcard to a friend and in writing an academic essay are different (see Tribble 1996: 104), this is not reflected in much process teaching.

While a process approach may ignore the context in which writing happens, this is unusual. For example Hedge (1988: 15) identifies four elements of the context that pre-writing activities should focus on: the audience, the generation of ideas, the organization of the text, and its purpose. These definitely play a pivotal role in the developmental process.

Subsequently, we can say that process approaches see writing primarily as the exercise of linguistic skills, and writing development as an unconscious process, which happens when teachers facilitate the exercise of writing skills.

An other view

Nevertheless, in spite of all the arguments in favour of the use of a process approach to the teaching of writing, the problem still remains in many circumstances that writing, like in our context, is not sufficiently prioritized, by teachers, students and curriculum designers, as occupying an important place in a communicative teaching syllabus. However, White and Arndt remark that many of the activities included in their book:

...include pair and group work, not to mention discussion and collaboration, so that the writing class becomes, in a very genuine sense, a communicative experience in which much more than skill in writing is practised and developed. (White and Arndt, 1991, p 5).

Process versus Product: A comparative point of view

Nunan (1999) clearly states how very different this ‘process’ approach is from the traditional product-oriented approach. Whereas the product approach focuses on writing tasks in which the learner imitates, copies and transforms teacher supplied models, the process approach focuses on the steps involved in creating a piece of work. The primary goal of product writing is an error-free coherent text. Process writing allows for the fact that no text can be perfect, but that a writer will get closer to perfection by producing, reflecting on, discussing and reworking successive drafts of a text.

Jordan (1997) acknowledges that process writing evolved as a reaction to the product approach, in that it met the need to match the writing processes inherent in writing in one’s mother tongue, and consequently allow learners to express themselves better as individuals. This is not to say, however, that the product approach no longer exists, nor that it has no practical applications. Indeed, the process approach can still contain elements of product-based writing. Nunan (1999) reaffirms this by stating that there is no reason why a writing program should not contain elements of both approaches. The few fundamental are as made in the following table.

Process writing	Product writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • text as a resource for comparison • ideas as starting point • more than one draft • more global, focus on purpose, theme, text type, i.e., reader is emphasized • collaborative • emphasis on creative process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • imitate model text • organization of ideas more important than ideas themselves • one draft • features highlighted including controlled practice of those features • individual • emphasis on end product

Which approach to use

The approach that you decide to use will depend on you, the teacher, and on the students, and the genre of the text. Certain genres lend themselves more favorably to one approach more than the other. Formal letters, for example, or postcards, in which the features are very fixed, would be perhaps more suited to a product-driven approach, in which focus on the layout, style, organization and grammar could greatly help students in dealing with this type of writing task. Other genres, such as discursive essays and narrative, may lend themselves to process-driven approaches, which focus on students' ideas. Discursive activities are suited to brainstorming and discussing ideas in groups, and the collaborative writing and exchanging of texts help the students to direct their writing to their reader, therefore making a more successful text.

One or the other

The two approaches are not necessarily incompatible. I believe that process writing, i.e. re-drafting, collaboration, can be integrated with the practice of studying written models in the classroom. What I take from the process approach is the collaborative work, the discussion which is so important in generating and organizing ideas. Once students have written their first drafts, model texts can be introduced as texts for comparison. It is normally found that learning appeared to be optimal in 'those situations in which the students knew what they wanted to say and the teacher's intervention made clear to them there was a particular way to say it.' Teacher intervention through model texts could thus aid the learning process.

The Roles of Teacher and Student

The teacher needs to move away from being a marker to a reader, responding to the content of student writing more than the form. Students should be encouraged to think about audience: Who is the writing for? What does this reader need to know? Students also need to realize that what they put down on paper can be changed: Things can be deleted, added, restructured, & reorganized.

Stages in a Process Approach to Writing

Though there are many ways of approaching process writing, it can be broken down into three stages:

1. Pre-writing

The teacher needs to be stimulate students' creativity, to get them thinking how to approach a writing topic. In this stage, the most important thing is the flow of ideas, and it is not always necessary that students actually produce much (if any) written work. If they do, then the teacher can contribute with advice on how to improve their initial ideas.

2. Focusing Ideas

During this stage, students write without much attention to the accuracy of their work or the organization. The most important feature is meaning. Here, the teacher (or other

students) should concentrate on the content of the writing. Is it coherent? Is there anything missing? Anything extra?

3. Evaluating, structuring and editing

Now the writing is adapted to a readership. Students should focus more on form and on producing a finished piece of work. The teacher can help with error correction and give organizational advice.

Classroom activities

Here are some ideas for classroom activities related to the stages above. These activities have been found useful in graduate classes at Shah Abdul Latif University

1. Pre-writing

1.1 Brainstorming

Getting started can be difficult, so students divided into groups quickly produce words and ideas about the writing.

1.2 Planning

Students make a plan of the writing before they start. These plans can be compared and discussed in groups before writing takes place.

1.3 Generating ideas

Discovery tasks such as cubing (students write quickly about the subject in six different ways – they should do the following:

1. describe it
2. compare it
3. associate it
4. analyze it
5. apply it
6. argue for or against it.)

1.4 Questioning

In groups, The idea is to generate lots of questions about the topic. This helps students focus upon audience as they consider what the reader needs to know. The answers to these questions will form the basis to the composition.

1.5 Discussion and debate

The teacher helps students with topics, helping them develop ideas in a positive and encouraging way.

2. Focusing ideas

2.1 Fast writing:

The students write quickly on a topic for five to ten minutes without worrying about correct language or punctuation. Writing as quickly as possible, if they cannot think of a word they leave a space or write it in their own language. The important thing is to keep writing. Later this text is revised.

2.2 Group compositions

Working together in groups, sharing ideas. This collaborative writing is especially valuable as it involves other skills (speaking in particular.)

2.3 Changing Viewpoints

A good writing activity to follow a role-play or storytelling activity. Different students choose different points of view and think about /discuss what

this character would write in a diary, witness statement, etc.

2.4 Varying form

Similar to the activity above, but instead of different viewpoints, different text types are selected. How would the text be different if it were written as a letter, or a newspaper article, etc.

3. Evaluating, Structuring and Editing

3.1 Ordering

Students take the notes written in one of the pre-writing activities above and organise them. What would come first? Why? Here it is good to tell them to start with information known to the reader before moving onto what the reader does not know.

3.2 Self-editing

A good writer must learn how to evaluate their own language - to improve through checking their own text, looking for errors, structure. This way students will become better writers.

3.3 Peer Editing and proof-reading

Here, the texts are interchanged and the evaluation is done by other students. In the real world, it is common for writers to ask friends and colleagues to check texts for spelling, etc. You could also ask the students to reduce the texts, to edit them, concentrating on the most important information.

A lesson plan is attached in appendix (A)

The importance of feedback

It takes a lot of time and effort to write, and so it is only fair that student writing is responded to suitably. Positive comments can help build student confidence and create good feeling for the next writing class. It also helps if the reader is more than just the teacher. Class magazines, swapping letters with other classes, etc. can provide an easy solution to providing a real audience.

Conclusion

Process writing is a move away from students writing to test their language towards the communication of ideas, feelings and experiences. It requires that more classroom time is spent on writing, but as the previously outlined activities show, there is more than just writing happening during a session dedicated to process writing.

In conclusion, it can be said that the incorporation of process-oriented approaches and activities into EFL writing classes, especially when used in conjunction with genre and discourse analysis, can go a long way towards tackling some of the problems traditionally experienced by teachers and students in this difficult area. What is more, they can turn the writing class into a stimulating, pleasurable and communicative learning experience, making a firm and valuable contribution to the 'language-learning experience as a whole. Not only this but also a very significant shift from "writing to learn" to "learning to write" would take place.

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A lesson plan is attached in appendix (A)

Lesson plan for the teaching of process writing

Over all aims: -

- (i). Students will be able to learn the process of writing a paragraph .
- ii). They will be able to write fluently.
- iii). They will be able to improve writing skill.

Aids:- White Board —Marker —Papers— Charts.

Specific objectives

- (i). Students will be able to give ideas on the topic.
- 2). Write topic sentences.
- 3). Explain the topic sentence by writing supporting sentences
4. Write concluding sentences

Pre-writing Teacher greets the students. **(10 Minutes)**
Teacher writes topic on the board and writes the words on the board.

Writing: **(35 Minutes)**
Activity (i) Teacher makes the students work in group of four or five and asks them to write the topic sentence with the help of the words given on the board.
Activity (ii) Teacher asks students to write some lines on the topic.
Activity (iii) Teacher asks student for self-edit and exchange their copies with their friends sitting next to them.

Post writing:- **(15 Minutes)**
Activity (i) Teacher edits the students finished product and asks them to write again.

Activity (ii) Teacher selects some paragraphs, notes the common mistakes, and explains them with the help of board.