THE PROCESS-ORIENTED APPROACH TO ESL/EFL WRITING INSTRUCTION AND RESEARCH

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Abstract
The process movement is originally a reform effort in improving teaching composition to native English speaking students. It advocates an approach to composition teaching that emphasizes students' writing process rather than the product. Assuming that the ESL/EFL writing process is similar to that of the first language, early ESL process enthusiasts borrowed methods and techniques from the English composition class to be used in an ESL writing class that allow students ample time and freedom to write in the real sense. The process-oriented approach has also initiated a research effort in investigating the nature of ESL writing. Though still remaining the mainstream approach to ESL writing, the process approach does not provide solutions to all the issues in developing students' writing competence. However, a systematic study of the process approach can throw light on our understanding of writing and help us seek a better and more balanced approach to teaching writing.

Key words
ESL writing, process approach, ESL writing research

Introduction
One of the significant developments in the field of teaching English as a second language over the past few decades is the increasing attention given to the development of students' writing competence and the emergence of ESL/EFL writing research as a field of serious inquiry.

Although writing is one of the “four skills,” commonly accepted goals of language teaching, it has long been the most neglected skill. Writing has been considered either not important enough compared with speaking to deserve any special treatment or simply too difficult a skill to teach. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, when an increasing number of non-native English speaking students began to appear in institutions of higher education in North America and other English-speaking countries, the need to equip these students with solid writing skills in order for them to succeed in their education became apparent. As a result, a new writing pedagogy that emphasizes teaching ESL writing beyond language skills began to develop, and writing courses that teach writing as writing were introduced in university intensive English programs that provide language training to non-native English speaking students. This new movement has generated considerable enthusiasm and research efforts on the part of practitioners and researchers investigating the nature of ESL/EFL writing and led to the development of theory-based and research-supported approaches to second language writing instruction.

One approach that has had a major impact on second language writing research and instruction is the process approach, which has become a household name for language teachers today. As is evident in ESL
composition textbooks. Curriculum and instructional practice teaching writing as a process is now a commonly accepted practice in ESL writing. Though professionals in the field have reached the point of maturity that recognizes no single approach as adequate in helping students develop writing competence. This essay traces the origin of the process approach and examines its impact on second language writing research and classroom practice over the past two decades and its current development with the belief that a better understanding of this approach can further advance ESL writing.

The Process Movement in Teaching Composition to Native English Speakers

The process approach originated from the process movement in teaching composition to native English speakers which began in the early years of the twentieth century and reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s in North America. Johns 1990 It developed largely out of the dissatisfaction on the part of the writing teachers with the traditional approach to teaching composition that had its primary emphasis on the "product" of the completed students' written texts. The early reformers criticized the product approach saying that its primary goal was teaching literature rather than writing. They pointed out that teachers designed and assigned writing topics and evaluated student work without giving any thought to what happened in their course of writing nor did they assist students in their writing action. They claimed that the emphasis on the correct usage of grammar and style in traditional writing class did not help students develop writing skills because writing was not a single act of recording thoughts in a correct linguistic form as was traditionally believed but a very laborious process of discovering thoughts that involve many complicated competences and skills.

The interest in the writing process resulted in what Hairston called a "revolutionary paradigm shift" in teaching writing in American schools Reid 1993. Since writing is viewed as a highly individual process of self-discovery a non-threatening environment is considered essential to this process and since writing is a complicated cognitive process involves multiple stages of writing drafting revising and editing it was believed that teaching writing involves guiding students through the process and help students develop the "awareness" of their own writing process and effective strategies.

Consequently the process approach transformed the American college composition class. Process composition teachers in the 1960s and 1970s provided students with ample time and freedom to explore topics of their personal interest. The process-oriented writing classed students through the four stages of writing and provided them with opportunities to practice effective strategies at each stage. At the pre-writing stage for instance students practiced journal writing brainstorming quick writing using techniques such as question clustering etc. to generate ideas and get started. Students were allowed to write on the same topic in multiple drafts. Teacher feedback and peer review focused on meaning not on grammar and language and were used to help student writers to clarify ideas and improve writing. Corrections of surface errors were delayed until the editing stage.

The process movement also generated great interest in research. Using case study and think aloud a newly invented data collection method in which writers spoke their thoughts as they composed or planned their writing Reid 1993. Writing teachers and researchers in the 1970s enthusiastically attempted to discover the mystery of writing. These studies yielded many interesting results and lent support to the process approach.

The Process Approach to ESL Writing

The Traditional Approaches to ESL Writing

While foreign language teaching is an old profession teaching ESL EFL writing has a relatively short history. It was not until the late 1970s that serious attention began to be given to the teaching of ESL writing. Nevertheless influenced by a behavioral theory of learning and a structural view of language teaching writing at that time was seen primarily as a matter of reinforcing grammatical structures idioms and vocabulary Raimes 1983 and learning to write like learning to speak as a process of habit formation that was conditioned and reinforced by correct modeling and repeated pattern drills. The difficulties ESL EFL learners experienced in writing were viewed almost exclusively as language problems that could be fixed by practicing bits of language in sentence patterns striving for grammatical perfection Leki 1992 ESL writing class was essentially if not entirely a language or
simply a grammar class. Textbooks for ESL writers provided carefully controlled writing activities that
focused on discrete grammatical items rather than on tasks engaging learners in creating meaning or
composing itself.

Even when the inadequacy of such an approach became apparent — students with a good knowledge
of grammar still produced what Leki called "peculiar not English-sounding texts when asked to write
even somewhat more creatively" Leki 1992 — ESL writing instruction in the early 1980s was not yet
ready to free itself from the strong behavioral and structural tradition. The problem ESL student writers
experienced was attributed to a lack of understanding of the organizational patterns or structural
characteristics of the written discourses of English. It was therefore proposed that pattern drills at
discourse level should be added ESL teachers then tried to determine "patterns typical of English" and
writing class provided students with opportunities to practice how to "combine sentence patterns to form
paragraphs and paragraphs to form whole essays" by following prescribed structures or models Leki
1992. In either the grammar-based or pattern product — also referred to as current traditional
rhetoric approach in which rhetoric is defined as "the method of organizing syntactic units into larger
patterns" cited in Silva 1993 students were rarely engaged in free writing that involves creating
meaning Leki 1992 because carefully controlled and guided activities were considered essential to
endorsing the formation of a correct habit. The assumption underlying both approaches was that a
mastery of formalities would adequately build up ESL students' writing competence.

The Early Process Movement in ESL Writing

The validity of grammar-based and pattern product approaches to ESL writing was questioned in the
late 1970s and early 1980s by several ESL specialists such as Zamel 1976 1982 1987 and Raimie
1983 1985. Inspired by the process movement in teaching composition to native speakers early ESL
process advocates questioned the very assumption underlying the existing approaches to ESL writing Zamel
1976 for instance in her frequently cited landmark essay on the process approach to ESL writing Teaching Composition in the ESL Classroom What We Can Learn from Research in the Teaching of English reprint in Silva 2000 faulted the grammar-based and pattern product approaches as "unfounded though well intended" p 28 She argued that the emphasis on surface level correctness was "of little value" in helping students learn to write and the mastery of textual structures had little to do with "the creative process of writing" p 28 ESL learners at least those at the advanced level she claimed should be taught writing in the same way as their native English speaking peers and "the primary emphasis of the ESL writing class" should be upon the expressive and creative process of writing p 34 She then urged ESL writing teachers to abandon traditional approaches to teaching writing and to look for new options from "well established" approaches used in the composition class to native English speakers. In her later essay Raimie 1982 she further advocated that the ESL writing class should "recognize the importance of generating formulating and refining one's ideas" revision should become the main component and "writing teachers should intervene throughout the process and that students should learn to view their writing as someone else's reading" p 195 Zamel's call for a change in ESL writing instruction was responded to enthusiastically by many teachers.

The Process-oriented Writing Instruction and Research

The introduction of the process approach exerted a major impact on ESL writing instruction though the change came gradually Reid 1993 ESL teachers in the early 1980s began to borrow techniques from English composition class. Textbooks based on the process approach began to appear that provided ESL learners with real writing experience. For instance Exploring through Writing a Process Approach to ESL Writing by Raimie 1985 was a popular textbook for ESL learners for years. Process-oriented ESL teachers provided students with ample time and freedom to write on topics of their own choice. ESL learners were encouraged to use language to explore to voice and share their beliefs and experiences. Fluency was emphasized over accuracy. Teacher-conferencing and peer review were adopted to provide ESL student writers with feedback for revision. Teaching effective strategies at each stage of the writing process became an important component of a writing class. As Reid 1993 observed "since the middle of the 1980s" many ESL writing teachers had discovered accepted and implemented the approaches and philosophy associated with process writing p 32.
The process approach not only brought about a change to the ESL writing class but also initiated a new field of inquiry. The advocacy for a process approach to ESL writing was based on the assumption that the second language writing process was similar to that of the first language—an assumption yet to be investigated and proved. Zamel, in her 1976 essay, called for ESL professionals to investigate the nature of ESL writing and to discover what writing is and what it involves and what differentiates the good from the bad writer. Since the 1980s, there has been an increasing interest in investigating ESL writing and a particular interest has been devoted to the second language writing process. Using the methodology borrowed from English composition research early writing process researchers tried to describe all aspects of L2 composing processes and were enthusiastic about finding which behaviors seem to be successful or unsuccessful in producing effective L2 compositions. Krapels 1990, 1992, and Zamel 1982, for instance, in her case study of the writing processes of eight university-level proficient ESL writers used “think-aloud” and interviews afterwards as data collection techniques and she was able to support her theoretical assumption. She found that the writing processes of her ESL students were very similar to the writing processes of native English speakers described in L1 studies. In her subsequent study of six advanced ESL students 1987, she further compared the writing processes of skilled and unskilled ESL writers and also investigated how writing in a second language influenced the composing process. She concluded that her subjects did not view composing in a second language in and of itself as a problematic. A finding that was quite contrary to the traditional belief that writing problems ESL learners have are solely language problems. Like Zamel, many early ESL writing process studies focused on discovering the similarities between L1 and L2 writing processes. Their findings for a detailed review of the early ESL writing process research see Krapels 1990 were widely used to support the process-oriented approach and develop a theory of second language writing. Though these early process studies have been criticized for their over and misinterpretation of evidence and unjustified generalization from very small samples to large subgroups or the entire population, Silva edited in Krapels 1990, 1992, they have contributed to the development of ESL writing as a field of inquiry.

Looking beyond the Process

The process movement over the past few decades has been considered the most successful in the history of pedagogical reform in the teaching of writing. Matsuda 2003, 39, As discussed above, it has had a major impact on the development of second language writing theory, research agenda, and instructional practice. It is largely because of the process approach that writing in its real sense—that is, writing as creation of meaning and writing as communication—has gained its due status in a second language class. It is due to the writing process research that we began to recognize the complex nature of writing in another language and it is due to the efforts of ESL process writing researchers and teachers that ESL writing has developed into a field of serious inquiry. It is hard to find a second language writing class today that does not include some components of process writing and few language teachers today would believe that grammar or organizational pattern drills are all a second language student needs to learn in writing. Popular methodology textbooks for second language teaching now introduce process writing as the mainstream or orthodoxy approach to second language writing instruction. For instance, a recent publication on second language teaching methodology by Cambridge University Press Methodology in Language teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice 2002, includes two essays on teaching second language writing and one of them is entitled “The Writing Process and Process Writing.” It is indeed difficult to conceptualize effective second language writing without including some of the basic tenets of the process approach. Atkinson 2003, In a sense, it is the view of writing as the culmination of several steps in a complicated process and the belief that such steps and their attendant strategies can be discussed and modeled that make teaching writing a more manageable business.

However, while the usefulness and power of process writing and its contribution to both research and teaching practice have been widely accepted, like many other instructional reforms, the process approach does not provide solutions to all the issues involved in learning to write. Questions for instance have been raised about its adequacy as a single approach in preparing students for such complex tasks as writing, which has been increasingly recognized as a socially and culturally situated activity, not simply a cognitive
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process that is highly private or individualistic as described in the process approach. Viewing writing as a social and cultural practice implies that writing is not simply a matter of manipulating some activities of a universal cognitive process such as prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing but above all, a means of connecting people with each other in ways that carry particular social meanings.” Hyland 2003 [2] 7 One may observe the social turn observed in the current efforts of re-conceptualizing writing and writing instruction that has given rise to a renewed interest in the study of genres “defined as” abstract socially recognized ways of using language” [11] Hyland 2003 [3] 4 An explicit command of genre knowledge is viewed as essential for effective writing because writing as a purposeful social and cultural practice implies that we do not just write but write in different ways in different contexts for different purposes. If such knowledge of genres is important for L1 learners, it is then crucial for L2 learners. In a sense, learning the genres of one cultural or literary tradition is part of entering into it with understanding and part of developing the necessary ability to change it” [12] Christie 1987 [3] 9 As discussed earlier, viewing writing primarily as something internal as a cognitive process led some early L2 writing process theorists to the claim of writing competence as something universal largely divorced from linguistic competence which was in return taken to imply that a L2 writing class should focus primarily on writing processes and strategies instead of language grammar and rhetoric. Therefore, language and rhetorical organizations tend to be things tackled to the end of the process as “editing” rather than the central resources for constructing meanings italicized by the author of this essay [13] Hyland 2003 [3] 9 The disregarding of the importance of written form in writing is another deficit that has drawn major criticism to the process approach. It has effect as some critics have pointed out, “it takes power away from learners particularly those for different language or cultural backgrounds” Reppen 2002 [4] 21 The current genre-based approach has arisen largely as a response to the inadequacy of the process approach to second language writing.

The current trend to move beyond the process approach to encompass social and cultural considerations in teaching writing should not be taken as a rejection or abandonment of the process writing approach but rather as an effort on the part of the professionals to seek for a more balanced approach to teaching writing. The genre-based approach is not a replacement but an expansion of the process approach. As a matter of fact, the process approach today is “no more than a writing process approach to teaching writing.” The idea behind it is not really to dissociate writing entirely from the written product and to merely lead students through the various stages of writing process but to construct process-oriented writing instruction that will affect performance.” [5] Seow 2002 [4] 316 Increasing attention has been given to providing students with systematically planned learning experiences aiming at developing their problem-solving skills that will enable them to achieve specific goals at each stage of the composing process and eventually produce a successful final product.

References

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