A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO TEACHING ENGLISH WRITING

Ge Gen
Inner Mongolia Normal University

Abstract
Teaching English writing has been a tough job for many non-native English teachers. This is due to not only the language competence of the teacher but the application of the effective teaching approach appropriate for the relevant students. Based on a discussion on the traditional and modern approaches to teaching writing this paper aims to introduce a strategic approach which places preference on the process approach yet integrates an element of the traditional approach and is hoped to be more applicable in China's classroom for improving the quality of teaching and the effectiveness of learning.

Key words
process, traditional, strategic, approach, teaching English writing

Introduction
While I was doing my research work in the UK, I placed my focus on one of the areas of teaching which is comparatively weak in China: EFL teaching English as a foreign language classroom. That is the teaching of writing in English teaching. Writing has always been a challenging skill to teach, especially for non-native English teachers. Many English teachers in China will make writing one of the last choices on the teaching list, leaving the hot cake if possible, to the native English teachers to deal with. This is not just due to the high demand on the part of the teacher for competence of writing but also the capability of applying and adapting the relevant teaching approaches or methods appropriate for the particular context and the students concerned.

In China it is when the students enter the university that they may be involved in a course or a program for the formal training of English writing. Before that most students learn English at the secondary schools mainly by rule memory and grammatical translation practice. They had very little experience in English writing. In other words, they have never been given enough support in writing when they are young. Often our students can hardly write a paragraph with good logic and a clear idea after years of English learning. It seems that a lot of grammar and memory learning doesn't guarantee a student to write a sequence of sentences with good structure and coherent body. My interviews with these students tell that most of the English they learned at the secondary level was received rather than produced. Normally the pressure of the exams exerts great influence on the style of teaching English in the secondary school. As a result, the university teachers have to face a group of students who lack appropriate vocabulary to express their thoughts and unable to present thoughts logically. There are also many serious problems in their grammar. These special facts have pushed the teachers at university into a dilemma of whether to treat the students as beginners or as learners with some experience when writing instruction is engaged. Confined to the requirement of university English curriculum and course book teachers will have to conduct the teaching of writing within the ability of the students and the scope of university education. This is where the uniqueness of the situation lies.
A literary review reveals that a great many attempts are made to explore and develop new ideas between the traditional and modern approaches to teaching writing in both the fields of L1 and L2 English teaching among teachers and scholars across the world which gives great revelation to the improvement of teaching English writing in China

II A Review of the Approaches to Teaching Writing

Virtually all current composition theories make a distinction between process oriented and product oriented writing. The product approach which has still been applied in many of China's English writing classrooms has been mostly replaced by the process approach in the western world.

The Traditional Approach

Product oriented writing approach is a traditional approach which focuses on teaching rules of how to make writing clear and easy to read with particular emphasizing academic genre rules. This approach is not currently in favour appearing not working well with undergraduate. (Hillocks 1984)

The traditional skills approach advocates teaching component skills - structures and rules for writing and the process writing approach advocates facilitating writing through process of prewriting, drafting, revising and editing (Collins 1998). By traditional approach writing classes generally ignored the writing process. Teachers assigned papers, graded them, and then handed them back. They attended to the product — its clarity, originality, and correctness — but they didn’t attend to the writing process. Nor did they attend to the writers themselves. Consequently a series of problems arise correspondingly. In my experience of teaching in China I often share with my colleagues worries and frustration at the slow and little progress in the students writing after so much effort has been made. To help students cope with the composition writing in the national English test many teachers will select and introduce a framework of useful structures and expressions and train them just to fit the relevant words into this framework of writing. This exam oriented teaching style has been prevalent in Chinese English classroom for many years. The call for renovation is responded positively in the world of English teaching. However limited to a not English speaking environment and the special characteristics of the English learners in China it seems to many teachers that the traditional approach is still applicable with the introduction of some elements of the modern approaches prevalent in L1 and L2 English teaching.

The Process Approach

The process approach reflects a shift in thinking away from the products of writing towards the processes of writing and from the text to the writer. The emphasis is on writing as a set of behaviours which can be learned talked about and developed in different situations. One popular model of the approach represents writing as having five stages: prewriting, drafting, revision, editing, and publishing (Czerniewska 1992).

Process theorists believe that writing can be understood as the culmination of several steps in a complicated process. Furthermore, they feel that these steps— which include prewriting, writing, rewriting, and all their attendant strategies— can be talked about and modelled. Process pedagogy emphasizes the usefulness of dialogue as a teaching technique and challenges the traditional authoritative models of teaching in which professors, who know everything, talk “at” students, who know very little. Instead process pedagogy empowers students by getting them to talk about their writing at every step of the writing process. It is this “talk” that you will be engaged in as tutors and writing assistants (Gocsik 2004).

However, some researchers and practitioners hold a conservative attitude that process approach may be very effective for teaching writing to L1 learners but may not well apply to learners with other backgrounds.

Suk Mei Regina points out in an article that while process approach gained great popularity and more widely adopted in L1 English writing and significantly improved writing instruction it is not fully accepted by the teachers of L2 English learners. Teachers worry 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 exams.

James L Collins comments that the process revolution has brought many positive changes to writing instruction but its strength is not helping struggling writers or writers with comparatively low level of writing. Purposeful writing and multiple drafts took the place of contrived exercises and grammar focus and teachers adopted the role of facilitators circulating among writers and providing response guidance and support. These activities undoubtedly may be beneficial to the students but by itself however the process-based writing instruction is not sufficient to overcome the difficulties L2 learners have in their writing. Process approach tends to downplay the teaching of skills and text regulations.

While putting this innovation to practice most teachers of L2 learners have been aware that some explicit knowledge and skill and some advice on adapting knowledge and skill to the achievement of particular goals must be added to a general process orientation. Such learners need to develop writing strategies that are both appropriate and congenial. Thus it is recommended that an eclectic approach combining product centred and process centred models is a useful way to go.

The Strategic Approach

James L Collins introduced a more balanced approach which he calls strategic writing instruction in his book Strategies for Struggling Writers. His purpose is to encourage teachers to think strategically about writing and the teaching of writing so that they can help writers identify and use strategies to control their own writing skills and writing process.

He states that a strategy is a sequence of cognitive steps designed to accomplish a particular outcome. Writing strategies are deliberate thinking procedures writers use to solve problems they encounter while writing — problems ranging from spelling a word to planning a whole project. Strategies furthermore are acquired or learned in social and cultural contexts. Some strategies are acquired intuitively from experience with reading and writing others are learned more directly from instruction and practice.

In this sense process and skill become integrated as writers learn to look for and work with strategies for managing writing and for achieving communicative goals through writing.

Although Collins' strategic approach is meant for L1 struggling writers an analogy is possible that relates the struggling writers to most of the Chinese students considering their difficulties and problems in English writing. In our attempts to improve the writing instruction I hope the introduction and application of this strategic approach will bring about some beneficial outcomes in our classrooms.

The Practice of the Strategic Approach

In Collins' model the strategic approach consists of 4 steps. Without these four steps a strategy is only an activity something to be engaged in temporarily by students when the teacher requires.

1. Identifying a strategy worth teaching.
2. Introducing the strategy by modelling it.
3. Helping students to try the strategy out with workshop style teacher guidance.
4. Helping students work toward independent mastery of the strategy through repeated practice and reinforcement.

For example you may decide to introduce the strategy of building an "issue tree" after generating ideas for a composition writing. To model the strategy you can design an activity to make students generate ideas on a certain topic like "My Best Friend" followed by building the tree with ideas filled in the right place. Then go to the third and fourth steps by providing teacher and peer help and guidance for students to practice first in class then out of class.

Since the strategic approach grows out of the traditional and the process approaches a strategic writing process combined with the skills teaching is hoped to be a more rational and effective method of teaching writing in the Chinese background. Here is the elaboration of the practice of the strategic model of teaching.

In the process approach a typical model represents writing as having five stages, pre-writing, ...
drafting revision editing and publishing Murray 1984 labelled the five stages as collect focus order and draft clarify Process based approach recommends taking component tasks one at a time prewriting through final draft and strategies based instruction recommends using writing strategies with each component task

■ Prewriting stage

In our teaching we find one of the serious problems in students writing is that they have no or little ideas what to write about. It is not that they don’t have any ideas but that they are not inspired to relate what they are going to write to their realities. The ideas are hidden somewhere in their brain waiting to be elicited in one way or the other. The purpose of this stage is to help students to generate ideas for writing or stimulate ideas for writing. Usually the idea generating strategies include brainstorming reading listing copying talking or discussion. With the development of ICT the audiovisual and multimedia input may also be provided to motivate students to write.

■ Brainstorm strategy

To stimulate students interest in writing we need to find ways to demonstrate everyone’s brain is both packed with memories and capable of responding to requests for specific recollections Darcy 1989.[4]

Brainstorm is a strategy favoured by many teachers in modern teaching asking students to think of as many ideas as possible. We can all brainstorm for facts for feelings for ideas for personal memories or even for images. 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. The brainstorm can be thinking out aloud or thinking silently or jotting down on the blank sheet as they come to mind. The benefits are it may demonstrate to the students how useful writing can be a way of making thoughts visible. Once there is a writing list there is always more that can be done.

A most common strategy such as web making is widely used to help students brainstorm ideas. In many class observations in UK I noticed that both teachers and students are rather skilled in making this web of ideas when necessary. For example after watching an episode of a popular cartoon film the teacher asked students to brainstorm what they know about a chosen character in the film using web making technique in pair work. Then they shared with each other the ideas they generated loading each student fully with what they chose to write about.

■ Copying strategy

Copying as a traditional learning strategy has proved still quite effective as a planning strategy useful for promoting writing development. Copying can help writers generate content plan structure and conform to writing conventions. Collins 1998[5] A teacher may choose from students’ contribution of models and ask them to copy or do a little adaptation. It is observed that copying or paraphrasing the author’s words can take the place of independent content generation. And summarizing the plot or repeating the author’s order of ideas can take the place of independently structuring one’s own writing.

Copying involves necessary adaptation. For the university students most of whom are adult teachers may introduce the strategy of rewriting the model piece. The basic rule followed can be “keep the form but change the words and the meaning” which is a more creative practice.

Another adaptive version of the strategy consists of having a student dictate a story or essay while a teacher or his peer writes it down. The teacher or the peer then dictates the story back while the student writes it down. By this step content generating and scribal activity are happening at once and writers benefit by focusing on content, writing and ideas.

■ Reading strategy

Learning to read and learning to write can be seen as mutually supportive activities. Reading involves recreating an author’s meaning. Writing is the production of meaning in a written form with the expectation that the meaning can be understood and retrieved later by oneself or by others Browne 1993[6]
A good writer is usually one who does multiple or wide reading since what you write largely originate from your readings. Articles from various sources especially from the authentic or latest books, magazines and newspapers related to the topic of writing should be prepared for the students to read to collect more ideas for writing. The importance of reading to the development of writing is also expressed in an old Chinese saying quoted in the process of learning. Read thousands of volumes of books and you will be able to write with magic.

It is believed that experience with reading introduces students to the way written language is used in terms of pattern, style and explicitness. Teacher may encourage students to look for appropriate articles and read parts of the material more than once. The reading ideas can be shared with peers in discussion to obtain more ideas for writing. Actually we can also find many new and ready course books or learning materials in recent years which aim to integrate reading and writing. As a teacher of writing we should always bear in mind that it deems to be a failure if the writing instruction is conducted in isolation with other language learning skills. This useful strategy can only be passed to the students to guide them in their future writing when it develops into habitual classroom behaviour.

Listening strategy

In addition to reading, listening may also be a powerful input for the development of writing. Teachers can read aloud articles related to the topic for students to write down information they can use in their writing. This can be some words or phrases or a sentence or a whole paragraph. Some teachers tend to give a dictation of parts of an article for the students to pick up what they think useful. To add interest teachers may let students listen to some stories, humours, songs, music, poems or rhymes. It is not uncommon that “listen and write” is now becoming a more frequent correlative activity in a writing classroom.

Talking or discussing strategy

It is widely accepted that talking is central to writing development. Students need to talk about their writing to share ideas, to comment on each other’s work and to consider their composition through conversation. This is also a good opportunity for students to expand their vision and to change communication through peer learning. When a controversial topic confronts them, a teacher may require them to work with a group of peers to converse and to collaborate until they can together draft a paper that represents the views of all present.

This strategy can be quite effective at the initial stage of teaching writing — narrative writing for low level students. Students need to be given time to tell or retell a tale so they can bring the story to life. Speak the structure and shape the meaning in their own words and enrich the quality of narrative writing. Through direct teaching and considerable experience of telling and retelling classical tales with their clear structures, story characters, repetitive and figurative language students can come to make fuller use of these features in their own written narratives. Furthermore, through talking students generate and capture narratives so they have something to say and someone to share with. Thus they will have begun to shape the narrative before they make any attempt to write it down.

Throughout the writing process, teacher/student interaction, response partners and small group collaboration make a difference to a writer, growing competence. Pair or group discussions have also been shown to be particularly effective in shaping and drafting composition. Through such talking students begin to discover what they want to say and what they can say which evidently strengthens their confidence to transform the oral speech to the written form. As it is acknowledged that a successful writing classroom should include rich oral experience of telling, retelling and refining texts as preparation for writing.

Writing Stage

The purpose of this stage is to help students make the first draft with the ideas they have collected in the prewriting stage. Teachers may tell the students to use the ideas from the reading or discussion and express them in their own words. It is not cheating to paraphrase ideas from the reading. In fact that is a good way to make the ideas your own. Collins 1998. The following strategies are introduced to help
teachers conduct and organize the instruction of actual writing.

Making a preliminary outline

After collecting the ideas on content students are instructed to consider in a group which ideas should come at the beginning, middle, and end of the writing. Then they number the ideas in the order that they will occur in the text to form an outline. While retaining the plan for reference, the students with the guidance of the teacher begin to compose the writing. It is necessary to teach students to recognize that writing involves planning when initial thoughts are recorded and ordered.

Free writing with guidance

The process approach advocates that when students are ready to write the first draft they should be encouraged to write in a free way. That means getting it down fast without worrying about the transcription elements such as spelling, punctuation or handwriting. As long as the students can read his writing, there is no need to interrupt the creative flow of the writing. Browne (1993) But for EFL learners in China free writing may not entirely work. Teachers need to spend some time introducing the basic skills for grouping ideas into themes or clarifying the format before the attempt of free writing. For example, the teacher may specify that for an easy a good format should include an introduction, main ideas, support and a conclusion. For a story, a letter, a list, a resume, the format will vary accordingly. But make sure the students know clearly what is expected. The key elements for making an understandable draft are knowing how to start, what to write about, and how to write well. After adequate modelling in class free writing may be tried step by step from drafting a short beginning paragraph among students.

Imitating a model

If the students have trouble getting started, tell them to use other writings as a model. Teachers may also provide a model of the type of writing expected for the students. Make the new piece of writing look like the old one that they know is similar and successful.

Self or peer revising

When the first draft is complete it is time for the student to read through his writing. He can look for clarity of meaning and change words, phrases, and sentences to make a more satisfactory piece of writing. As Karen Gonski (2004) states at some point in the writing process writers must turn their attention from the writing process to the written product. They must transform writer-based prose into reader-based prose. To do this, they must be ready to revise paying close attention to their prose and to the effect it may be having on their audience.

To be honest, this strategy of writing is mostly neglected by both teachers and students in China. In many cases, it is the teacher’s job to revise or edit a product of writing for the students with too detailed corrections. As a result the students become so dependent of the teacher that they seldom take the trouble of thinking about revising on their own after the first draft. Many will just give a quick look at the teacher’s work and then put it away. Teachers have also realized that this teacher-centred revising is not only time and effort consuming but with little effect of improving students’ writing level.

Some teachers and researchers have identified that self or peer revising is a strategy which can help students increase their responsibility for the quality of what they write and learn to find and solve problems by themselves. The following criteria for judging a good piece of writing suggested by some British teachers may be used in the revision process.

1. A story should have a good structure with:
   - beginning, setting the scene, interesting the reader
   - development, interesting events, characters, problems
   - resolution, ending where the problem, problems are solved

For a single paragraph writing, the teacher may instruct students to check their first sentence and see if the following sentences create a ladder of related ideas by leading back to the top sentence. Rewrite the sentences or add some others to make connections.
2 Writing should be expressed in" best words"
- range of adjectives verbs adverbs
- expanded noun phrases One cold wet evening
3 Writing should have a good style
- use of varied sentences short and expanded
- use of metaphor and simile
4 Writing should use correct forms of expression including
- consistent use of tenses
- correct use of spelling and punctuation
- idiomatic expressions
5 Writing should be conducted with audience and purpose in mind including
- interesting content that is well sequenced

Peer revising can take place in pairs or group when students listen to each other reading and make comments To avoid the inefficiency of some students who may be weak it is suggested that students be adequately paired or grouped according to their ability

- Post Writing Stage
After doing self or peer revising the students are ready for a feedback from the teacher If the teacher has too many students to discuss with them individually face to face he should be very careful to give his constructive suggestions or feedback in the written form before asking the students to make the final draft

- Making the final draft
With the advice and comment from the teacher students may produce the final draft to incorporate all the suggestions for improvement that he has received and to include new ideas or sections that he feels would improve the piece At the end of the final draft it should be a piece of writing that is satisfying for the writer and interesting for others to read

- Publishing
Publishing means making the students writing public It has not necessarily to be published in a book or a newspaper Instead teachers may have students read out their writing or choose a few pieces of good work to read or display for the whole class to demonstrate what a good piece of writing may be like Publishing challenges a student to focus on the final product of their own and tries to make it as perfect as possible

IV Conclusion
Strategic writing instruction may be effective when teachers learn to adapt strategies to a particular context Strategies are invented and adapted and then constructed as teachers and writers work together Certainly not all the strategies introduced here are expected to be accepted and applied in each writing class And many of them need to be practised further But chances are that students will follow the right model of writing when they have learned to use these strategies The essence of the strategic approach is to teach students to use a strategy in the process of writing and learn to construct a strategy for themselves Therefore the best a teacher can do is to assist them in the construction process by suggesting a strategy modelling its use and assisting with acquisition and learning and repeated practice

References
Biggs 1987 Lai C Tang C E Lavelle 1999 Teaching writing to ESL graduate students A model and an illustration British Journal of Educational Psychology 69 293–306
Brown 1993 Helping Children to Write London Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd
Calkins 1986 The Art of Teaching Writing Portsmouth New Hampshire Heinemann Educational Books Inc
Continued on p 94