

Teach Writing by Process Writing Approach

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Abstract

The college entrance examination (gaokao) has placed higher demands on students' writing skills, and traditional writing instruction methods no longer meet the needs of talent cultivation today. The process writing approach is one of the most popular methods for teaching writing. This article, based on a comparison of the product writing approach and the process writing approach, focuses on the characteristics and specific implementation stages of the process approach. Finally, two suggestions are proposed in the hope of assisting frontline teachers in improving English writing instruction in junior and senior high schools.

Keywords

English writing; process writing approach; product writing approach.

1. Introduction

In the realm of the four fundamental English language abilities—listening, speaking, reading, and writing—scholars and educators have underscored the paramount significance of writing skills in fostering students' capacity to communicate effectively and comprehend the underlying structure of language. Conley(2009) emphasized the role of writing in rendering our thoughts and experiences more tangible, stating that "In many ways, writing is the way we make sense of our world." Simultaneously, it is widely acknowledged that cultivating writing proficiency is among the most challenging endeavors. Hunt et al.,(2005) observed that crafting a cohesive, fluent, and expansive written piece is arguably the most demanding task in language acquisition, irrespective of whether the language in question is a first, second, or foreign one. Pasand and Haghi (2013) highlighted that writing entails not only the generation of ideas but also the ability to articulate them in a logical and coherent manner. Consequently, facilitating learners in mastering the art of writing and equipping them with the ability to express themselves through writing stands as a primary objective in the realm of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), especially given that communicative objectives rank among the foremost priorities in contemporary English language pedagogy. Substantial efforts have been dedicated to examining the nature of writing skill, as well as identifying the most effective and communicative methods for its instruction.

Despite the substantial time and effort invested by both teachers and students, the outcomes in terms of writing proficiency have consistently fallen short of expectations, deviating significantly from the stipulated curriculum objectives. This situation has been influenced by various factors, particularly the impact of traditional writing pedagogies. In traditional English language programs, writing has been predominantly treated as a tool for language study rather than a vehicle for communicating ideas. In the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom, writing often follows a prescribed pattern: the teacher assigns a topic or a selection of topics, provides a set of requirements, and imposes a time limit. Students then complete the task within the given time frame and submit the final product for evaluation, primarily based on the accuracy of the result. Nowadays, amid the influence of various linguistic theories and teaching methodologies, significant strides have been made in the development of English writing theory

and pedagogy. Writing is no longer perceived as a linear process with independent and sequential stages. Instead, it is now acknowledged as a multifaceted, integrated set of interactive and recursive processes.

In this context, English teachers are compelled to shift their instructional focus towards the writing process of students, teaching them how to write and become independent writers, not only in terms of cognitive processes involved in writing but also within the communicative context.

2. Comparison of process writing approach with product writing approach

The product writing approach is rooted in behaviorist learning theory, viewing the teaching process as a stimulus-response mechanism. In contrast, the process writing approach is based on communicative theory, emphasizing writing as a cyclical cognitive, creative, and social interaction process. As two mainstream writing pedagogies, virtually all contemporary composition theorists have conducted a comparison between them. Murray(1978) delineated it as the contrast between internal and external revision (revising to clarify meaning for oneself versus revising to clarify meaning for the reader). Flower(1979) characterized it as the distinction between writer-based and reader-based prose. McCrimmon(1994) highlighted the disparity between writing as a way of knowing (process) versus writing as a way of telling (product). Pritchard and Honeycutt(2007) explicitly articulated the substantial difference between the "process" approach and the traditional "product" approach. While the product approach focuses on writing tasks where the learner imitates, copies, and transforms teacher-supplied models, the process approach centers on the steps involved in creating a piece of work. The primary objective of product writing is to produce an error-free coherent text, while process writing acknowledges that no text can be perfect, emphasizing the importance of producing, reflecting on, discussing, and reworking successive drafts of a text to approach perfection.

It is important to acknowledge that there is no single best teaching method, each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. The product approach is indeed helpful for beginners, as imitating model texts and receiving teacher feedback can assist students in producing correct sentences. However, it has several shortcomings, such as neglecting the students' proactive and autonomous learning, lacking the cultivation of English thinking skills, and, fundamentally, overlooking the process through which students go while completing the writing task. In comparison, the process writing approach has more advantages, as it guides students to actively engage in writing activities, understand the writing process, and gradually improve the quality and level of their writing. Although these theorists differ in their explanations of the distinction between process-oriented and product-oriented writing, they all agree on one important point: a good product depends on a good process.

Therefore, to make the teaching of writing effective, we should advocate for process writing, guiding students through the writing process, fostering their desire to write, and then teaching them how to write. Subsequently, a comprehensive overview of the process approach will be provided.

3. Process writing approach

3.1. Definitions and features of process writing approach

The precise and universally accepted definition of the process approach to writing remains elusive, although certain defining characteristics have been the subject of scholarly discourse. Fowler (1989) posited that process writing emerged as a response to the product approach,

aiming to align with the inherent writing processes found in one's native language, thereby enabling learners to express themselves more effectively as individuals. Nunan (1991) explicitly articulated that the process approach centers on the sequential stages involved in crafting a piece of writing, emphasizing that process writing acknowledges the imperfection of initial drafts, advocating for iterative refinement through production, reflection, discussion, and revision of successive versions of a text. Steele(1992) defined the process approach as primarily concerned with diverse classroom activities such as brainstorming, group discussion, and rewriting, all of which foster the development of language use. According to Graham and Sandmel (2011), the process approach regards all writing as a creative endeavor necessitating time and constructive feedback for optimal execution. In process writing, the teacher assumes a role distinct from merely assigning writing topics and evaluating final products, instead intervening in the writing process itself. Wyse and Jones (2001) delineated the principal features of the process approach, highlighting:

Inclusion of various writing models, encompassing expressive and expository forms.

Emphasis on writing conferences, wherein the teacher engages with students during the writing process, providing guidance on advancement.

Iterative drafting as a fundamental aspect of the writing process.

Promotion of collaborative writing, with students aiding each other in composing texts.

Recognition of errors as natural occurrences, rectified in later stages, with teachers offering fewer judgments and more inquiries and suggestions in response to students' drafts.

Integration of grammar learning within the context of writing for communication.

3.2. Stages of process writing approach

Research and studies in the field of writing have demonstrated that the process approach to writing encompasses several distinct stages, including pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.

Pre-writing: According to Laksmi (2006), this initial stage involves several key steps, such as identifying the topic and audience, and activating students' prior knowledge through activities like brainstorming and mind mapping.

Introduction of the Topic: As noted by Tribble (1996), assigning tasks that present real-world challenges to learners can sustain their motivation and foster a sense of accomplishment. Therefore, the chosen writing topics should be of interest to students and allow for positive contributions, thereby creating an active and interactive writing environment.

Brainstorming: Recognizing that starting can be challenging, students can be swiftly organized into groups to collaboratively generate and record all ideas related to the given topic. The process of brainstorming involves rapid, uninhibited thinking, ultimately leading to the development of an engaging piece of writing. During this phase, the teacher should maintain a supportive role, offering language assistance only when necessary, so as not to hinder students' idea generation. Evaluating ideas during brainstorming can be intimidating and could impede the creativity that the process aims to foster.

Mind Mapping: This stage allows students to assess the quality and utility of their ideas. Students are encouraged to expand their ideas into a mind map, spider diagram, or linear format. Unlike brainstorming, which focuses on idea generation, mapping aids students in organizing their ideas, selecting useful ones for inclusion in their writing, and visualizing how these ideas can be interconnected coherently. Mind maps and spider diagrams present organized information, facilitating the transition into a draft. Such visual aids also make the hierarchical relationships between ideas more apparent, assisting students in structuring their texts.

The pre-writing stage, also known as the planning stage, aims to motivate and prepare students for writing, as well as to stimulate idea generation. As Shi (1998) observed, the more time students dedicate to pre-writing activities, the more successful their writing is likely to be. McDonough and De Vleeschauwer (2019) also asserted that the pre-writing stage fosters effective writing by encouraging originality, creativity, and personal awareness. Therefore, teachers should design engaging and diverse activities to activate students' language and cultural knowledge, stimulate their interest in writing, and equip them with the necessary skills to write effectively.

Drafting: During this stage, students engage in rapid writing on a given topic for five to ten minutes, prioritizing content over language correctness. As noted by Piolat and Roussey (1996), the initial draft should not be approached with the expectation of perfection, but rather as a means of further exploring ideas and objectives. Therefore, students are encouraged to write as quickly as possible, not fixating on finding the perfect word but instead leaving a space or using their native language if necessary. The primary focus should be on continuous writing, allowing ideas to flow without interruption.

Revising: The process of revising entails examining the organization, main points, supporting evidence, examples, and connections between ideas. According to Noskin (2000), revising is the crux of the writing process, as it allows ideas to evolve, meanings to be clarified, and the final product to be refined. Furthermore, Manzo and Manzo (1995) contend that revising should be viewed as a cognitive process that enables students to refine their ideas, identify new connections, and explore them more deeply in an attempt to effectively communicate their message to an audience. A proficient writer must learn to evaluate their language and improve their writing by meticulously scrutinizing their text for errors. Students should be encouraged to revise their writing autonomously and independently, adding new points and deleting irrelevant information. However, collaborative revision can be more motivating and effective, particularly for weaker students.

Editing: Following the revision phase, students proceed to the editing stage in order to refine their work into its final version. Editing involves the meticulous correction of spelling and grammar within a written piece. This process can take on two forms: peer-editing and self-editing, both of which are instrumental in enhancing students' writing skills by fostering a deeper understanding of clear writing practices. In peer-editing, students exchange their drafts and identify necessary changes to enhance the reader's experience, such as improving organization, paragraph structure, sentence variety, and vocabulary selection. Additionally, they serve as each other's editors, identifying vocabulary repetitions, grammatical errors, and spelling mistakes. To facilitate this process, students should be equipped with an editor's checklist, which includes specific criteria for evaluating and providing feedback on each other's work.

The editor's checklist may include the following points:

Are the ideas logically grouped into coherent paragraphs?

Do the paragraphs follow a logical sequence?

Is there any superfluous or irrelevant information?

Are there any sections that are unclear or difficult to comprehend?

Are there frequent word repetitions?

Can more precise and varied vocabulary be employed?

Is there an excessive repetition of linking words such as "and," "but," or "then"?

Do all verbs agree with their subjects? (e.g., "She are/is...")

Have articles (e.g., "the," "a," "an") been used correctly?

Have the correct verb forms been utilized?

Is the punctuation accurate?

Have all words been spelled correctly?

Following the peer-editing process, both the editors and writers should engage in a discussion to exchange ideas. If necessary, they should be encouraged to provide justifications for the changes they propose, fostering a deeper understanding of the editing process.

Publishing: Following students' completion of editing their own work, teachers should facilitate opportunities for students to share their writing. This can be achieved through various means, such as organizing class or group presentations, enabling students to learn from each other's work. During class presentations, teachers can select specific compositions for critique, emphasizing encouragement and focusing on identifying students' strengths, thereby fostering a sense of accomplishment and boosting students' confidence and enthusiasm for writing. Additionally, organizing a writing conference, showcasing works in a classroom writing exhibition, and publishing a class writing newsletter are effective methods for encouraging and promoting students' writing skills.

Although the above activities are presented in a linear manner, it does not mean they have to be followed exactly in the same order. There can be several rounds or cycles within each activity or through the whole process. Even after the final marks are given, teachers can still allow students to continue improving their writing. In other words, students can revise their writing again if they are not satisfied with the grade, and a new grade can be given if better improvement is made within the time frame given to encourage individuals to be more self-directed in learning.

3.3. Benefits and challenges of using process writing approach

The process writing approach offers numerous potential benefits. Firstly, it aids students in developing sound writing habits and techniques by encouraging planning, drafting, and revising. Research indicates that the cognitive activities involved in these processes contribute significantly to the quality of adolescent writing (Rijlaarsdam & Van den Bergh, 2006). Secondly, instruction in writing through minilessons, and conferences, is expected to enhance the overall quality of writing and cater to the individual learning needs. Thirdly, the emphasis on collaboration, personal responsibility, individual attention, and a positive learning environment could elevate motivation for writing, thereby enhancing students' appreciation of specific academic tasks (Troia et al., 2012). Lastly, it is believed to cultivate students' cognitive abilities. Engaging in brainstorming sessions as a class before writing can significantly enhance students' divergent and creative thinking through continuous contemplation, exploration, and discovery.

Despite these potential advantages, the process approach to writing is not without its critics. Some argued that the instruction provided in process writing classrooms may not be sufficiently robust to ensure that all students, especially those struggling with writing (Graham & Harris, 1997). They also argued that minimal time is devoted to explicitly teaching students strategies for fundamental writing processes like planning and revising (Cutler & Graham, 2008). Additionally, the quality of peer feedback is a contentious issue. On one hand, students with limited language proficiency may not be able to provide accurate evaluations and guidance and may struggle to identify areas for improvement. On the other hand, for Chinese students, receiving feedback from peers can be uncomfortable, as they fear becoming the subject of ridicule if their writing is subpar. Due to concerns about "face," many students may withhold candid feedback when evaluating their peers' work. Therefore, teacher guidance during the peer editing phase is indispensable.

4. Suggestions

The process approach to writing does not only pay attention to what students do while they are writing, it also attaches great importance to what they and the teacher do before they start writing and after they finish writing.

(1) Prepare students well before writing.

The pre-writing phase, as the initial stage of the writing process, significantly influences the ultimate quality of written outcomes. Pre-writing activities like brainstorming or a class discussion on the topic will help students broaden their views and encourage a generation of ideas. Simply giving students a topic and asking them to write on their own often makes them frustrated because many of them don't know where to start and how to develop ideas. Therefore, try to make the topic of writing as close as possible to students' lives and leave students enough room for creativity and imagination. For example, students would be more motivated to write something on "the cars in the next century" than "description of a present vehicle".

(2) Providing constructive and positive Feedback

Feedback plays a crucial role in process writing instruction, as students need to revise their compositions based on peer or teacher feedback. Simply providing a grade or generic praise such as "good" or "very good" may not effectively support students' writing skill development. Therefore, feedback should encompass at least three components: 1) positive acknowledgment of the strengths in the writing piece; 2) identification of areas for improvement; and 3) the evaluator's personal perspective on the topic addressed in the writing. Offering personalized and specific feedback for each student can cultivate trust between teachers and students. When students perceive that their writing is taken seriously and engaged with in meaningful ways, they are likely to feel more motivated to write.

5. Conclusion

Relying solely on one or two writing classes to comprehensively improve students' writing skills is insufficient to achieve the desired goal. However, if effective teaching methods are correctly applied, the desired results can be achieved with half the effort. The process approach is very suitable for English writing. Teachers, under the new curriculum reform concept, should break through traditional teaching concepts, combine actual student situations, and reasonably apply the process approach to writing, emphasizing the students' active role and helping them become familiar with the writing process. This will cultivate good writing habits, gradually improving their English writing quality and proficiency.

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