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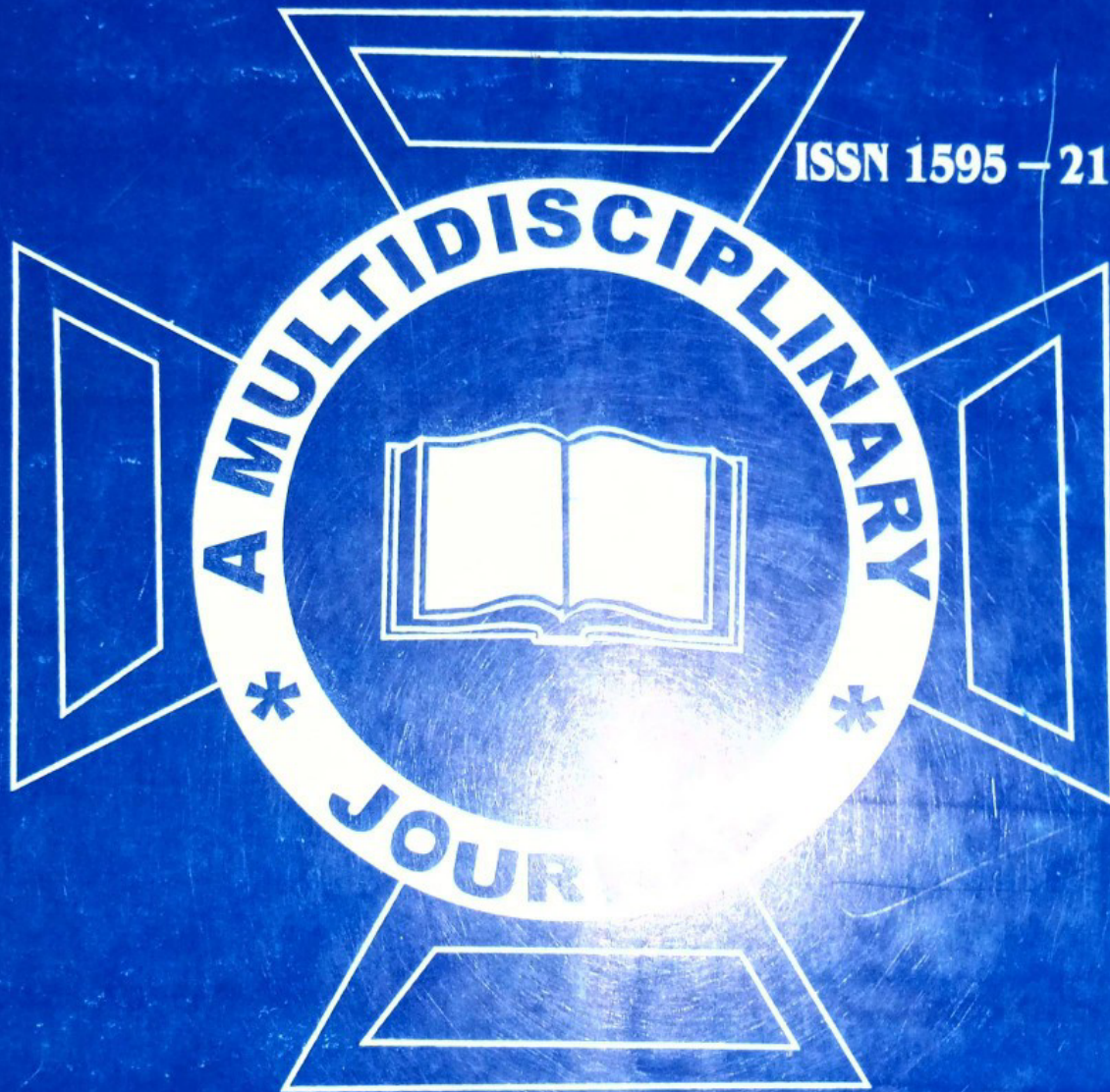
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WRITING AS A PROCESS: IMPLICATION FOR TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Mrs. Amina Gogo Tafida

Abstract

This paper discusses the two approaches to teaching and assessing writing. These are: *Writing as a finished product* and *Writing as a process*. While the former emphasizes the traditional method with writing standards prescribed by the teacher, the latter encourages the student-centred approach with the teacher, being an active participant and supporter. Detail analysis of the process approach with its advantages to both the teacher and the students is given. The implication of this approach to teaching writing to students in an ESL situation are discussed. Recommendations for encouraging teachers to promote writing as a process by their students are also outlined.

Introduction

Writing involves stringing together ideas in words, sentences and paragraphs to convey some message to the readers. It is one of the four basic language skills – the others are listening, speaking, and reading. Many people regard writing as the most difficult of all the language skills and so difficult to teach. Learning to write does not develop automatically in the course of schooling. If children are to learn to write, they must be given the opportunity to write from their very first day at school.

Writing as a Process

The process approach to writing is not a new approach. It has been around since the early 1970s. This approach sees writing as a multiple of draft process which consists of generating ideas. Writing a first draft an with an emphasis on content to (discover meaning and author's ideas); second and third and possibly more drafts to revise ideas and the communication of these ideas. The readers' feedback on the various drafts is what pushes the writer through the writing process on to the eventual end-product.

Current research on the process of writing emphasizes its cyclical and recursive nature. For example, Flower and Hayes (1981:367) suggest that writers are constantly planning (pre-writing) and revising (re-writing as they compose (write). Pre-writing, writing, and re-writing frequently seem to be going on simultaneously. Thus, writers are seen to produce multiple drafts and to revise both plans and drafts constantly in the light of what has been produced so far.

Oyetunde (1990:44) identifies the writing process as containing the following steps:
a) Organizing the classroom
b) Selecting the topics
c) Modeling the topics
d) Revising
e) Publishing

The above emphasize the fact that writing is a complex process because it involves a number of operations going on simultaneously.

Teacher's Responses to Students' Writing

The Traditional Approach: For most of our teachers of English as a second language, writing is viewed and assessed as a finished product and as such the process approach is viewed as impractical or too time consuming or perhaps not a good preparation for exams. In such cases, teachers may equate endless hours of marking (particularly red – pen corrections at the surface level) with working hard. This 'traditional' method has great face validity to on-lookers e.g. fellow teachers, headmaster, etc). The red marks on the students' papers may also prove the teacher's superiority over the students and demonstrate that the teacher is doing his or her job. Moreover, teachers may find it difficult to

implement the approach due to lack of sufficient time given to English on the time-table. Or, they may run into some form of difficulty in the implementation and so give up the idea. Writing teachers invest so much time responding to student writing and respond to most writing as if they were final draft, thus reinforcing and extremely constricted notion of composing. Their criteria take in to account how composing constraints can affect writing performance. Furthermore, teachers' marks and comments' usually take the form of abstract, confusing, arbitrary, and vague prescriptions and directions that students find difficult to interpret. Such responses to texts give the students a very limited and limiting notion of writing because they fail to provide students with the understanding that writing involves producing text that evolves over time.

Sommers (1982:149) maintains that teachers' comments that were intended to motivate revision take students' attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teacher's purpose in commenting. According to Murray (1984:7), "we want our students to perform to the standards of other students, to study what we plan for them to study and to learn from it what we or our teachers learned". As a result, students revise according to the changes that teachers impose on the text. Furthermore, some teachers assess their students' writing by establishing themselves as authorities. Thus, they apply uninformed, inflexible, standards to their students' texts and respond according to the extent to which these texts conform to or deviate from these standards. They pre-empt control of important decisions-making processes allowing their own ideal texts to dictate choices that properly belong to writers. Students are thus given to understand that what they wanted to say is not as important as what their teachers wanted them to say. Furthermore, these ideal texts may interfere with the teachers' ability to read and interpret text, with the result that text may be misread and comments and reactions may be inaccurate, misleading, or inappropriate, (Green-Baum and Taylor, 1981; Sommer, 1982). In the face of their teachers' critical judgments, students are unlikely to make any effort to establish that their meaning has been misconstrued. The writer therefore, avoids or alters meaning rather than risk the teacher's disapproval. When teachers assess writing in this way they are obviously viewing texts as products to be judged and evaluated. Their responses therefore do not taken into account the writers' (students') intention and the actual playing out of that intention in the process of writing or the writer's relation to audience in any full way (Rose, 1983). Thus, Brannon and Knoblauch (1982), Feedman (1984), Ziv (1984) all contend that the changes and revisions that students incorporate not only may fail to clarify what they are intended to communicate but may have little to do with what was originally intended.

Moreover, students are further likely to be confused by the contradictory ways in which different teachers respond. Many teachers apply very different and even conflicting standards based on different experiences, orientations, expectations, preconceptions and biases. This variation in teachers' responses is confirmed by a number of investigations (Hake, 1978; Harris, 1982). Hence, when two pieces of discourse are read by two different readers the very text that pleases one reader may irritate the other. In a related study, Freedman (1984:335) found that teachers' expectations of, and assumptions about students' writing determine their responses to students' writing. Even teachers' anxiety about their own ability to write may be a contributory factor to the way teachers respond to students' texts.

From the above findings however, one could say that most ESL teachers are still by and large concerned with the accuracy and correctness of surface-level features of writing and error identification. According to Cumming (1983:6) "Error identification appears to be ingrained in the habitual practices of second language teachers who perhaps by reason of perceiving their role solely as instructors of the formal aspect of language, restrict their activities to operations exclusively within the domain of formal training rather than that of cognitive development". One can therefore say that ESL writing teachers misread students' texts, are inconsistent in their reactions, make arbitrary corrections, write contradictory comments, provide vague prescriptions, impose abstract rules and standards, respond to text as fixed and final products and rarely make content-specific comments or offer specific strategies for revising the text. The most striking thing about these ELS teachers' responses however, is that they overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers, rather than writing teachers; they attend primarily to surface level features of writing and seem to read and react to a text as a series of separate sentences or even clauses, rather than as a whole unit of discourse.

The Importance of Revision and Feedback in the Writing Process

The emphasis on writing as a process has influenced the teaching of writing because revision has assumed a position of central importance. The role of the teacher in responding to students' various steps in writing aims at providing a formative feedback which will help the student to improve his or her writing. Oyetunde (1990:47) maintains that revision in the writing process involves revising or editing for (I) Content such as ideas and choice of words and (II) Writing mechanics such as spelling and punctuation. Revision is therefore central to the process of writing and in an ideal feedback situation, the teacher and student would meet on a one-to-one basis as editor and writer to discuss the draft text. In this situation, the editor (teacher) puts the relevant expertise at the service of the writer who contributes his or her ideas as expressed in the first draft. Thus, a dialogue over the text takes place to which both parties contribute, and by discussion together they solve the problems that arise. The editor (teacher) in this case is a very special kind of reader, one who through this dialogue has access to the writer's (student) intentions and whose job it is to help the writer realize those intentions. The establishment of this type of ideal feedback situation during which important discoveries can be made by both reader and writer is very vital. Unfortunately, the problem for most students in most schools is that the time is not available for this kind of individual editorial discussion.

Feedback is a fundamental element of a process approach to writing. It is an input from reader to a writer the effect of providing information to the writer for revision. In other words, it is the comments, questions, and suggestions a reader gives to a writer to produce reader-based prose. Through feedback, the writer learns where he or she has misled or confused the reader by not supplying enough information, illogical organization, lack of development of ideas, or inappropriate word-choice or tense.

Research finding on writing identifies three major areas of feedback as revision. These areas are peer feedback, conference as feedback, and teacher's comments as feedback. Keh (1990:52) illustrates how the implementation of feedback takes place.

Draft   Draft   Draft

Input... F......./........./........F.............................F........./............./...............

  Pre-reading   Conference   Comments Optional Draft

                   Corrections re-write
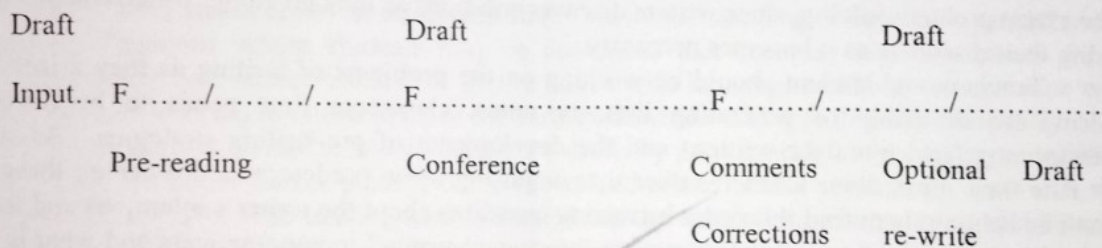
F = feedback

Input on the continuum means anything which helps students to get ideas for writing. This includes invention strategies such as brainstorming, fast writing, clustering, and interviewing (Keh, 1990:52). After the students have received input for writing, they write their first draft (DI) but they are made aware that DI is only a draft. After the DI is written, students receive their first form of feedback from peers.

Peer feedback is referred top by many names such as peer response, peer editing, peer critiquing and peer evaluation. Peer response may come earlier on in the process (e.g. after DI) with a focus on content, organization of ideas, development with examples) and peer editing nearing the final stages of drafting (e.g. after D2 or D3) with a focus on grammar, punctuation etc (Keh, 1990:54). At this level, students exchange their drafts among the peer group and act according to the teacher's directives. Each student should be actively involved in this process and the teacher should act as an adviser and supervisor. Peer feedback is very important. It saves teachers' time on certain tasks, freeing them for more helpful instruction. Through this, the learners gain a greater sense of audience with several readers. They learn more about writing through critically reading other's papers as well as gaining conscious awareness that they were writing for more than just the teacher. Peer feedback is also useful for obtaining immediate feedback and detecting problems in other papers.

Conference as feedback: There are several advantages of conferences between the student-writer and teacher-reader. One advantage is the interaction between the teacher and student. The teacher-reader is a live audience and thus is able to ask for clarification, check the comprehensibility

of oral comments made, help the writer sort through problems' and assist the students in decision-making (Keh, 1990:54). Thus, the teacher's role can be perceived as a participant in the writing process rather than as a grade-giver. Conferences also allow more feedback and more accurate feedback to the given at each point in time. They also help to build up the students' confidence in oral work. Conferences should be non directive so as to build up students self-esteem, reassure them and give them further confidence to write (feedback).

Written Comments as Response

Making comments on students' papers causes the most frustration and usually takes the most time and, teachers worry whether the comments will be understood, produce and desired result, or even be read. To avoid writing inefficient and ineffective comments the first step is for the teacher to respond as a concerned reader to a writer-as a person, not a grammarian or grade-giver. Keh (1990:976) urges the teacher to communicate in distinctly human voice, with sincere respect for the writer as a person and sincere interest in his improvement as a writer. The comments should also be limited to fundamental problems, keeping in mind that students can not pay attention to every thing at once. Comments are useful for pointing out specific problems, for explaining the reasons for them, and for making suggestions.

All the three types of feedback discussed above are student centred rather than teacher-centred. They are also consciously connected with lesson objectives.

Implications of Teaching Writing as a Process

In view of the fact that writing is supposed to be taught and assessed as a process and not just as finished product, English as a second language (ELS) students should be allowed the opportunity to explore their ideas with reference to a topic which truly engages them to make decisions about the most effective way to communicate these ideas. They must be taught to understand that writing is to some extent problem solving, since writers discover solutions as they go along, which enables them to modify their discourse as it becomes necessary.

Teachers and student should be working on the problems of writing as they arise. When students are incapable of generating lists, or notes, classroom time needs to be devoted to brainstorming (either oral or written) and the development of pre-writing strategies. As students articulate their ideas, their teacher, rather than imposing some predetermined order on these ideas, should be helping them find this order by raising questions about the writer's intentions and focusing on the discrepancies that exist between what the student wanted to communicate and what is in fact communicated. As students come to understand the importance of this dialogue, both through one-to-one conference and through class discussions centering on their writing, they can begin to serve as teachers for each other either in pairs or in small group collaborations, and can then incorporate this teacher-reader voice into their very own interactions with their texts. It is in this way that they are likely to develop a real sense of reader expectations (Keh, 1990:299).

The teachers, intervening throughout the process, set up a dynamic relationship which gives the writers the opportunity to tell their readers (teachers) what they mean to say before these writers are told what they ought to have done. It is through this relationship that readers (teachers) can gain insight into the writers' (students) thought and discover what their problems are. By studying what our students do in their writing, we can learn from them what they still need to be taught. Responding to writing in this way is based on the assumption that establishing the cause for error is necessary before prescribing corrective measures and that addressing individual needs, allowing students to teach us what they need to know, should form the basis of further instruction. Corder (1967: 164) is of the view that: "by examining the learner's own built-in syllabus, we may be able to allow the learner's innate strategies to dictate our practice and determine our syllabus; we may learn to adapt ourselves to his needs rather than impose upon him our preconceptions of how he ought to learn, what he ought to learn and when he ought to learn it".

Moreover, as students work through a set of successive drafts, they would learn from their teachers and fellow students that issues of content and meaning must be addressed first and that language is of concern only when the ideas to be communicate have been delineated. This is no easy matter for either ELS teachers or student to accept, since these students are still developing linguistic competencies and that their teachers feel responsible for advancing this development. However, it

makes little sense to pinpoint errors in first drafts, since these first papers may undergo substantial changes once they have been read and responded to. Furthermore, a premature focus on correctness and usage gives students the impression that language form rather than how language functions, is important and may discourage them from making further serious attempts to communicate. According to Brannon and Knoblauch (1982:165), "If we pre-empt the writers control by ignoring intended meanings in favour of formal and technical flaws, we also remove the incentive to write and the motivation to improve skills".

Moreover, students must be provided with flexible criteria, the time and opportunity to employ these criteria and incorporate teachers and peers responses into the texts. They must be made to understand that the texts evolve, that revision is to be taken as a process of re-seeing one's text, and that this re-seeing is an integral and recursive aspect of writing. Thus, rather than responding to texts as fixed and finished product, we should be leading students through the cycles of revision. By providing assistance before an essay is considered finished we are facilitating more writing and reinforcing the idea that continual clarification and exploration may be necessary before one's meaning becomes articulated. Sommers (1982:154) opines that:

> We need to sabotage our students' conviction that the drafts they have written are complete and coherent. Our comments need to offer students revision tasks … by forcing students back into chaos, back to the point where they are shaping and restructuring their meaning.

In addition, we need to establish priorities in our responses to the different drafts and subsequent revisions and encourage students to address certain concepts before others. Purves (1984:71) suggests that we need to play a whole range of roles as readers of students' writing and adopt those that are appropriate for the various stages of a developing text. According to him, by probing, challenging, raising questions and pinpointing ambiguities, we can help students understand that meaning – level issues are to be addressed first. This understanding is especially crucial in the ESL writing classroom, where students may be convinced that accuracy and correctness are of primary importance and where, because of their concern with language and their inexperience with writing, they may be trying to attend to all of the various demands of composing simultaneously.

Furthermore, we should respond to students' drafts by participating in the making of meaning and by this we would no longer present ourselves as authorities but as consultants, assistants and facilitators. Thus, rather than making assumptions about the text, taking control of it, and offering judgmental comments that unbalances the teacher-student equilibrium in an ideal language learning situation, we need to establish a collaborative and suggestive possibilities. In this sort of relationship, student and teacher can exchange information about what the writer is trying to communicate and the effect that this communication has had upon the reader.

Moreover, instead of limiting ourselves only to written comments that lack any function as far as learning is concerned, we should set up collaborative sessions and conferences during which important discoveries can be made by both reader and writer. The reader can discover the underlying meaning and logic of what may appear to be an incoherent text and instruct the writer on how to reshape, modify, and transform the text. The writer can at the same time discover what lies behind and motivates the complex reactions of the reader and helps the reader understand a text that up to this point may have been ambiguous, elusive, or unintelligible.

Conclusion

This paper has fully discussed the advantage of teaching and assessing writing as a process. Revision and feedback that are very vital in the writing process have also been highlighted. Therefore, in the light of all that has been discussed, English teachers should begin to re-examine their typical approaches to teaching and responding to writing. For, just as the recent approaches to language instruction have underlined the fact that language learning can best be promoted when language is used purposefully and communicatively, the process of composing also parallels this approach.

Recommendations

English as second language teachers should:

1. Encourage students to write about their experience in life and be their guide rather criticizing what they write including making negative comments on students' composition.
2. Allow students to realize and recognize the mistakes in what they write by re-writing it constantly until they come about a final draft. They should only provide students with the guidelines and opportunities for making corrections themselves rather than penalizing them.
3. Allow students themselves to be each other's teacher by exchanging their essays and making necessary corrections themselves even before the teacher's interference.
4. Realize that using the traditional method of using red pen to underline or circle students' composition work is no more a vogue as far as teaching writing is concerned. Rather than encouraging students to write their own ideas themselves, this method demoralizes them and dampens their interests to write compositions that can be regarded as their independent work.
5. Remember that revision is very important in the writing process. The teacher should therefore use this forum to discuss the problems in the content, writing mechanics such as spelling, grammar, punctuation etc which has been noticed in the students' writings.
6. Finally, the current time-table in use in our schools should encourage the teaching of writing as a process where the English teacher is an active participant, rather than a grade giver. In this way, teaching writing would become a student centred activity.

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