

Investigating the Impact of Modelling on the Teaching of Process Writing in a Primary Class

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This paper reports how a teacher educator attempts to effect change in the practice of serving teachers through modelling process writing with a real class of ESL children aged at about ten. The process of teaching was observed by two in-service teachers. Three research questions were put forward: first, whether the teacher educator's espoused theory will be modified by the theory in action gained through practice; second, the impact of modelling on the observer teachers and whether their theory in action will be modified by the modelling. Third, what impact does process writing have on the learning of the students? To answer these questions, the teacher educator employed qualitative research tools. It is found that the educator's espoused theory on process writing is enhanced by the practice in a real class. The modelling process increases the observers' motivation to try out the new practice through the successful demonstration of strategies in the same classroom context, which has eased the teacher's concerns over student responses and constraints of classroom resources. Young learners have learnt metacognitive skills through process writing but they also exhibit some misunderstandings in the approach in their initial experience with this process.

Key words: young learners, process writing

TEACHING OF PROCESS WRITING IN HONG KONG

This paper discusses the impact of a teacher educator going back to school

to teach a primary English as a second language class on a writing unit employing the process approach of writing. Process writing is an approach quite new to primary teachers in Hong Kong who often view writing as a product and do not give adequate emphasis on the writing process. Process writing involves the process of brainstorming, drafting, revising, editing and publishing when writing on any topic. This approach has been advocated in the literature as an effective means for teaching English writing (Barchars, 1994; Stewart, 1989). However, it is quite new to Hong Kong and has been put forward in the recent primary English Curriculum Guide (2004) as an approach that will facilitate assessment for learning (p. 197).

Learners in Hong Kong usually start learning English as a subject from the age of three when they enter the kindergarten. As English second language learners, they seldom use the language outside the classroom and grammatical accuracy and drilling have been the focus of teaching and learning of English at the primary level. Therefore, in the government's Primary English Syllabus (1997) which prescribes the level of English proficiency young learners should attain, it is stated that "using paragraphs and conventional punctuation to frame ideas", "using appropriate format, conventions and language features when writing non-narrative texts" and "using basic narrative structures" belong to more demanding skills which "require considerable teacher support or guidance" (p. 43).

Espoused Theory of the Teacher Educator

In one of the in-service professional upgrading courses for teachers, process writing was introduced by me to the teachers. I was interested to see how the approach could be applied in practice and invited the teachers at the meeting to contact me if they are interested in a tryout of process writing in their school. I intended to do the try out myself and the process would be observed by the teacher who had attended the methodology class on process writing conducted by myself earlier on. The intention of trying out the approach myself was driven by a curiosity to see what successes or problems

that approach would bring. As the approach is rather new to Hong Kong teachers, I did not feel that my trainees would be confident enough to try out the approach themselves. Also, my previous experience of working with teachers also point to the fact that a demonstration lesson will have positive impact on motivating teachers to take up the challenge of change (Siu, 2004a). The invitation was met with a number of positive responses. In the end, the experimental teaching was carried out in four double lessons which took place over four days in March, 2004.

My ideas about process writing stem from theoretical understanding of the concept based on reading books and literature on the approach, for example, Barchers (1994), Fredericks, Blake-Kline & Kristo (1997), Raimes (1992), and Stewart (1989). My general background and training as well as years of experience in observing teachers and students at work also tend to confirm that this approach will be beneficial to students in increasing their motivation to write, raising awareness of the writing process and through the process of editing their writing, develop in learners' skills to monitor their own work. This theoretical understanding is termed espoused theory by Argyris and Schon (1974) who explain that espoused theory involves explanations the professionals give when asked to justify their actions to others or to themselves. This is also the theory which I used when I explained the advantages of process writing to teachers during the in-service course. Argyris and Schon note another kind of theory which they call "theory in use" and it is this theory which governs the professional's practice. Some scholars name this craft knowledge or professional knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). They have the commonality of stemming from practice.

The espoused theories about process writing and the theory in use met with each others face to face when I explain the concept of process writing during the in-service course. Nevertheless, as a teacher educator who was not involved in teaching primary kids directly, it seems to me that I was caught in a vacuum with my teaching on best practices informed by "espoused theories" and no chances to reach out and test their practicality in action. At the same time, I was making an attempt to change classroom teachers' theory

in use through my teaching of the espoused theories on process writing on the in-service course to practising teachers. Teachers' theory in use is informed by their everyday interactions and understanding of children in the classroom and it is in itself a very valid interpretation of students' needs. No doubt sometimes we, as teacher educators, are met with accusations of not understanding the classroom reality. Crying out slogans in that vast vacuum is not very useful. Therefore, I decided to become an agent of change and aimed to show teachers that the gap between theory and practice can be bridged through the intervention of my own teaching in a real class.

The Experimental Teaching

The experimental teaching took place over four days in March, 2004. The teaching began with shared reading of the big book, *The Paper Bag Princess*. The book is written by Robert Munsch and it is a post-modern fairy tale about a princess with the name Elizabeth whose castle and beautiful clothes were burnt by a nasty dragon which also took away her fiancé, Prince Ronald. Elizabeth managed to clothe herself in a big paper bag and tricked the dragon so in the end, she saved her fiancé while the dragon was sleeping. Nonetheless, Ronald was not grateful. Instead he blamed Elizabeth for her disrespectful outfit and asked her to only come back in her beautiful clothes. Being a post-modern princess, Elizabeth left the prince and the last picture of the book saw her running away with raised arms, seeming to be enjoying her newly gained freedom.

The shared reading of the book was followed by post-reading activities, such as answering comprehension questions based on the text, retelling the story using pictures and captions, a discussion on the main characters and finally writing an alternative ending to the story by completing the dragon's diary which accounts for what happens to Ronald when the dragon woke up and saw him out of his prison. The writing of the dragon's diary was done through the process approach of writing whereby the students wrote the first draft, followed by a discussion of common mistakes guided by the teacher.

The students made corrections of the first draft and using a self-correction checklist (Appendix 1), the students did proof-reading of the second draft and finally submitted the work to the teacher.

Literature on Modelling as an Education Strategy

Dewey (1963) suggests that personal experience and interactions with objects and persons constitute knowledge and learning. Perhaps Dewey puts it most poignantly when he talks about the relationship between knowledge, judgment and change.

“There is no point in the philosophy of progressive education which is sounder than its emphasis upon the importance of participation of the learner in the formation of purposes which direct his activities in the learning process.” (Dewey, 1963, p. 63). And he goes on to argue that the formation of purposes involves “1. observation of surrounding conditions; 2. knowledge of what has happened in similar situations in the past, a knowledge obtained partly by recollection and partly from the information, advice, and warning of those who have a wider experience and 3. judgment which puts together what is observed and what is recalled to see what they signify. A purpose differs from an original impulse and desire through its translation into a plan and method of action based upon foresight of the consequences of acting under given observed conditions in a certain way.” (p. 69)

Dewey’s ideas seem to be picked up more recently by social scientists who are interested in the idea of modelling. How to change and enhance teacher’s knowledge has been a subject of discussion in the literature, notably modelling has been identified as one of the strategies that may effect change in teachers. Dennen (2004) identifies two types of modelling: behavioural and cognitive. The former refers to imitation of a demonstrated act while the latter observes the reasoning. King (1999) finds that peer modelling manifests through learners observing and following the strategies used by others working on similar tasks may occur even without instructor design. Gallamore and Tharp (1990) assert that modelling of this kind is important in

socialisation and enculturation of children and even adults in new environment. They further explain that assistance gained by observing a more competent peer helps the new member to internalise a new cognitive development (Tharp & Gallamore, 1988). Cooper (1999) supports the significance of observation by claiming that individuals who engage in the process of expert observation, reflection and practice are more likely to apply the learned knowledge in a different setting than those who receive a passive model. One could say that the teacher educator who goes into the primary classroom is an embodiment of the espoused theory and having the teaching process observed by the teacher is a kind of behavioural modelling which the literature suggests will have a positive impact on the observer.

THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. To what extent is the researcher's espoused theory changed by practice, or modified by having acquired the theory in action?
2. What is the impact of the teacher observing the modelling of a more experienced peer? Does modelling have any impact on the teacher's theory in action?
3. On the level of classroom practice, what impact does process writing have on the learning of students?

RESEARCH METHODS

To answer the first question, self-reflections were done on each double lesson within 48 hours of the lessons so that important points would not be lost due to memory failure. The self reflections involve writing a non-structured narrative account of important happenings and thoughts after the

day of teaching. Themes and categories are then analysed when they emerge using grounded theory suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990). To answer the second research question, teachers were asked to complete a simple observation form (Appendix 2) on what they observed during the class. A follow up e-mail was also sent to the teachers after the eight lessons to capture the main areas of their observations and learning. Lastly, student responses were captured in their written work, a bilingual class questionnaire (Appendix 3) that all students filled out and an interview was done with six students belonging to three different levels of English proficiency as identified by their teachers.

The analysis of the data was done through grouping ideas and comments that could answer the different research questions into various categories based on Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory.

RESULTS

Impact of the Research on the Researcher

A total of four journal entries were made which covered two thousand words in terms of length. As mentioned earlier, the journal entries were not structured and I simply recorded events and feelings that seemed most important to me. When the journal was analysed, three categories of items recurred and they seemed to be the centre of discussion or expression in the journal. They were descriptions of my own feelings and emotions related to the experimental teaching; recording and discussing student response and lastly thoughts about issues related to the use of time, space and resources in the classroom. Discussion on the processes and procedures, which is what one would expect and see in a book about process writing, did not occupy a lot of space in my journal. This seemed to point to the fact that what was foremost in the practitioner's mind when she implemented a new approach was not the procedures or the methods, it was the more practical concerns of

time and space, resources and students' response and in turn these concerns had an impact on the emotions of the teacher and affect her theory in action.

In the journal, I talked about being nervous before the try out.

"I was a little nervous as I woke up twice in the night before the teaching" and I went on to explain my nervousness, "I felt that although I was well prepared, what turns out depends a lot on the responses of the students which are rather unpredictable."

Other feelings reported include "satisfaction" which related to the fact that "I never had to resort to nominating students for answers using the name list". "Tired!" marked the first word of the last paragraph in entry three and it was followed by the remark that indicated "happiness" when seeing weak students participate actively in class. Journal 4 saw myself claiming to be "extremely perplexed" when I was pondering over how to deal with students who finished their writing at different speeds. And I was relieved when I found, through checking their planning sheets, that although some students had barely started the writing, they actually knew what to do. The checking of their final product also led to a positive feeling that "the second draft is an improved version of their writing".

As evidenced in the above discussion, my feelings in the lessons were very much tied with the response of the students in the class and undoubtedly student responses and observation of those form the major part of the reflections. After the first day of teaching, I remarked that "the teacher was rather busy in the shared reading process and could observe the student response only occasionally". Even then, in the first day, I remarked on students' expression of enjoyment for the lesson through their laughter, students' participation through raising up their hands and answering questions, students' inability to follow part of the lesson when they failed to answer a factual question. I also noted students' restlessness in the second reading and that nominating students who did not put up their hands might not be a good idea.

The same pattern emerged in the second day of teaching where I commented on students' enthusiasm for the retelling activity and that they were quite "strong" in the gap-filling activity. Students' volunteering, putting up their hands, laughter, speed in correcting their errors became focuses for discussion in the days three and four. To put it simply, students' response was the very much in the centre of teacher's thoughts in the class and this seemed to point to the importance of successful experiences in helping teachers to adopt new practices. Actually, a teacher observer in her observation feedback also mentioned a number of times about students' response and she used words, like, "brave" enough to answer questions, "enjoyed" the activity; "interest" in discussing characters of the story and "excitement", etc.

Another concern that came up very dominantly was that of time, facilities and space. The first thing I did when I went into the school was to look at the setting of the language room and check the facilities. All four entries of the journal mentioned time, whether it was using too much time for an activity or not giving students enough time for something or the satisfaction of finishing most work planned within time. Resources like the big book stand, the pointer, the blackboard and the visualiser and how to use them to present information were also a point of discussion in most entries.

My experience seems to confirm what many writers talk about stages of development in teachers. Experienced teachers, having moved from the survival stage to acquiring instructional expertise, seem to be more geared towards facilitation of learning than centring on the procedures for carrying out certain tasks. (Leithwood, 1992) And the realisation of student learning is done through observing their response. Student response, rather than espoused theory, seems to be more critical in informing teachers' theory in action I did not stick to my plan of asking students' to do peer editing on noting that their response for self editing was not very good and so it was deemed that peer editing would not be successful and was not done as had been planned.

This phenomenon seems to point to a dichotomy between espoused theory

and theory in practice. While my espoused theory on process writing is driven by theoretical understanding of how best writing should be done and so how best writing should be taught, this kind of understanding has no realistic situations attached to it. My theory in practice in this case was informed by my own sense of efficacy when I participated in the classroom, which was in turn informed by students' responses in class and the resources that I had. All these factors have determined my happiness or survival in the classroom and so, in a way, they indeed override my espoused theory. The teacher educator who introduces new theories to the teacher should help them adapt the new theory to suit their own sense of efficacy, student response envisaged and resources available because these are things that are important to the teachers in their teaching habitat.

Impact of Modelling on the Teacher Observers

Although teachers' opinions were sought when the first lesson plans were drafted, they did not give specific feedback on them. The teachers had been very helpful in arranging the necessary resources for the lessons, for example, the use of special rooms, the setting up of visualiser and the white board which had to be arranged by the teachers. The also helped in the pair work in the first lesson in explaining the worksheets to the less able groups. Other than that, most of the time, teachers served as observers in the classroom. They were asked to fill in a simple semi-structured feedback form after each lesson observed. Informal feedback was also gathered in chats after the lesson. And an e-mail was sent to the teachers after the eight lessons to gather their views on the try out.

Only one teacher, Ms Chow, managed to observe all the eight lessons. Ms Tsang, who responded to my invitation and initiated the try out in the school, unfortunately could observe only four lessons due to time-table clashes. In gist, the teachers felt that observing the process writing part was more useful than the first part on shared reading because they were already familiar with the techniques and procedures of shared reading. Ms Chow, the original class

teacher, reported the greatest benefits from observing the modelling in her e-mail feedback.

Firstly, Ms Chow learned something new about her students. Some students who did not usually respond in the class became active in the lessons. She learned that “through some effective approaches, student interests would increase.” Secondly, the modelling had encouraged her to “copy” the successful strategies. She reported using the techniques of discussing the character, the common mistakes and using of self-editing checklist after the observed lessons although she did not “have much time for the activities”.

“Copy” was the word used by the teacher to respond to the impact of the observation on her. This is an interesting and meaningful word to use. It seems that observing a successful experience has bred the motivation to imitate the successful behaviour and this has been spurred on by the fact that success has been achieved through working with the same class, who shares the same language background, previous learning experiences, interests and resources limitations.

This seems to echo what has been discussed in the impact of the tryout for the teacher educator. The teacher educator’s concern as expressed in her diary are three fold, the students’ response, the resources available and the emotions generated in the try out. If students’ response and resources are not obstacles to success in the tryout of the new approach as demonstrated by the implementation of the approach by the teacher educator, the teachers’ worries and hesitations about the implementation have been eased through observing the successful tryout. The demonstration has shown to the teachers that factors which influence their theory in use, namely, students’ response and resources available are not obstacles in the implementation of this new strategy. Therefore, the teachers feel safe to try out the new approach. This explains the eagerness of the class teacher to implement the new strategy herself despite the constraints of time in her situation. In this way, modelling by a more experienced member of the profession in the same educational setting has encouraged teachers’ tryout of the same strategy through the successful demonstration of the impact of the strategy. That justifies why

modelling is powerful especially in the same educational setting.

Impact of Process Writing on the Students

Students' response was, on the whole, very positive. From the questionnaire that each student filled in, it was found that over 70% of students reported that they understood the writing activities in the eight lessons and they knew how to correct their own writing mistakes after the try-out. This was confirmed by both the positive comments students made in the interviews and the amount of self-corrections they made in their drafts (Siu, 2004b). Moreover, the design of this literature based writing unit has managed to increase students' interest in writing. Eleven students out of the class of 34 said that they did not usually enjoy English writing and this number dropped to 4 students who said that they did not enjoy the writing lessons taught. However, quite a big number of students (about 40%) expressed that they did not fully understand the story "The Paper bag princess". Nevertheless, they were successful in the writing task. It might point to the possibility that students might have a different interpretation of the word understanding. For the purpose of the writing task, I was happy that they could develop the story ending but they might have been trained for a very detailed understanding of the text which gave them the impression that they had to understand every word in a text. Besides, I did not do peer editing that was intended and planned (Appendix 3) because I noted that students were bored after the first proof reading and also they did not seem very interested. Students seemed to lack the habit of monitoring their own learning and learn how to learn.

IMPLICATIONS

When theory meets practice in the real classroom situation, the espoused theory of the procedures of process writing does not seem to be the focus of attention in the researcher's reflections. Student response, availability and

limitations of resources and the emotions thus generated seem to be foremost in the mind of the one who implements something new. And these three factors may contribute to the personal professional knowledge of the teachers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). Therefore, when teacher educators going back to their lectures in the university, they should not cry out terminology of the espoused theory in vacuum, but should attend to teachers' perceptions of student response and availability of resources. After all, it seems that professional knowledge is very much informed by student response and classroom experiences and are therefore, emotionally charged (Hargreaves, 1997). Negligence of these emotions in the dissemination of espoused theories in the university setting may lead to resistance of teachers to implement change. It is because espoused theories usually fail to take into account the contextual background of the teacher who each faces different student responses and resources constraints, and thus has a different sense of efficacy in face of the new strategy introduced.

On the other hand, modelling of a new strategy by an experienced member of the profession is useful in encouraging teachers to try out the new approach because the successful demonstration has shown that student responses and resources are not obstacles to successful implementation.

Tharp and Gallamore (1988, p. 89) aptly describes the above point by saying "A central feature of the interpersonal plane is its intersubjectivity. In joint activity, the signs and symbols developed through language, the development of common understanding of the purposes and meanings of the activity, the joint engagement in cognitive strategies and problem solving---all these aspects of interaction influence each participant. While the more able member of a joint activity exercises more influence, through providing more assistance, it is one task of the teacher to understand the subjectivity of the learner, and---for the task at hand---to share it so as to influence it. As new members coalesce in a new activity, a new intersubjectivity is created, and for all members, it is internalised into a new cognitive development."

On the classroom level, implementing process writing in the primary school is possible but teachers need to train students and get them into the

habit of monitoring their own learning and also employ creative strategies in helping second language students to brainstorm and express ideas in English.

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APPENDIX 1

The Paper Bag Princess: Checklist for proofreading






















Put a tick in A if you have done the following and a tick in B if your friend has done the following.

Writing Tips	A (Myself)	B (My friend)
1. Did I use a capital letter to start a sentence?		
2. Did I use past tense verbs (e.g. verbs with "ed")?		
3. Did I use the correct punctuation marks?		
4. Did I spell correctly? Do I need to ask a friend or the teacher?		
5. Is my handwriting neat and tidy?		
6. Is my writing clear? Did I say clearly what happened to all the people in the story?		
7. Did I write a good ending for the story?		

APPENDIX 3

Student Questionnaire

The Paper Bag Princess:

1. I like the story : “The Paper Bag Princess”. 我喜歡 “The Paper Bag Princess” 這個故事。	  
2. I can understand the story “The Paper Bag Princess”. 我能明白 “The Paper Bag Princess” 的故事內容。	  
3. I like writing. 我喜愛英文寫作。	  
4. I understand the writing activities in these eight lessons. 我明白這8課的寫作活動。	  
5. I like the activity of writing the dragon’s diary. 我喜愛寫作巨龍的日記。	  
6. I like drawing pictures about the story. 我喜愛為故事繪畫圖畫。	  
7. I know how to revise and correct my own writing. 我知道如何修改、改正作文的錯處。	  
8. I enjoy working with friends in pair work and correcting each other’s work. 我喜愛和同學一起寫作和更正同學的作品。	