

The Process Approach to ESL/EFL Writing

Deqi Zen

Southeast Missouri State University, United States

The past two decades witnessed an increasing attention to the development of students' writing competence and the emergence of ESL/EFL writing research as a field of serious inquiry. When an increasing number of non-native English speaking students appeared in institutions of higher education in North America and some other English speaking countries during the late 1970s and early 1980s, the need to equip these students with solid writing skills in order for them to succeed in their education became apparent. As a result, a new writing pedagogy that emphasizes teaching ESL writing beyond language skills began to develop. This new movement generated considerable enthusiasm and research efforts to investigate the nature of ESL/EFL writing and to develop theory-based and research-supported approaches to second language writing instruction.

One approach that has had a major impact on second language writing is the *process approach*. This approach originated from the *process movement* in teaching composition to native English speakers, which began in the early years of the twentieth century and "reached its zenith in the 1960s and 1970s" in North America (Johns, 1990, p. 25). It developed largely out of the dissatisfaction on the part of writing teachers with the traditional approach that had its primary emphasis on correct usage of grammar and style rather than helping students' develop writing competence. This short essay examines briefly the impact of process approach on second language writing research and instruction over the past two decades and its current development with the belief that a better understanding of this approach can further advance

EFL writing.

TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO ESL WRITING

Although writing is one of the ‘four skills,’ commonly accepted goals for language learning, it has long been a neglected skill. Not until the late 70s did serious attention begin to be given to the teaching of ESL writing. Nevertheless, influenced by a behavioral theory of learning and a structural view of language, teaching was seen primarily as a matter of reinforcing “grammatical structures, idioms, and vocabulary” (Raimes, 1983, p. 3) The difficulties ESL/EFL learners experienced in writing were viewed almost exclusively as language problems and an ESL writing class was essentially, if not entirely, a language or a grammar class. Even when the inadequacy of such an approach became apparent—students with a good knowledge of grammar still produced what Leki (1992) called “peculiar, non-English-sounding texts” (p. 5)—ESL writing instruction in the early 1980s was not yet ready to free itself from the strong behavioral and structural tradition. The emergence of what is often referred to as “*pattern-product*” approach introduced pattern drills at *discourse level* to ESL writing class, which proposed that students be provided with opportunities to practice how to “combine sentence patterns to form paragraphs and paragraphs to form whole essays” by following prescribed models (Leki, 1992, p. 5). In either the *grammar-based* or *pattern-product* approach, students were rarely engaged in *free writing* that involves creating meaning. The assumption underlying both approaches was that a mastery of formalities would adequately build up ESL students’ writing competence.

A MOVEMENT TO PROCESS APPROACH IN ESL WRITING

The validity of grammar-based and pattern-product approaches to ESL

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

THE PROCESS APPROACH TO ESL WRITING INSTRUCTION AND RESEARCH

The impact of the process approach on ESL writing was significant, though the change came gradually (Reid, 1993). ESL teachers in the early 1980s began to borrow techniques from English composition class. Textbooks based on the process approach began to appear that provided ESL learners with writing experience in its real sense. Process-oriented ESL teachers gave students ample *time* and *freedom* to write on topics of their own choice. ESL learners were encouraged to use language to explore, to voice, and to share

their beliefs, values, and experiences. Fluency was emphasized over accuracy. Teacher-conferencing and peer review were adopted to give ESL student writers feedback for revision. Teaching effective strategies at each stage of the writing process became an important component of a writing class. Reid (1993) observed, "since the middle of the 1980s," many ESL writing teachers had discovered, accepted, and implemented the approaches and philosophy associated with process writing" (p. 32).

The process approach not only brought about a change to the ESL writing class but also initiated a new field of inquiry. The advocacy for a process approach to ESL writing was based on an assumption that the second language writing process was similar, if not identical, to that of the first language, an assumption yet to be investigated and proved. Zamel, in her 1976 essay, called for ESL professionals to investigate the nature of ESL writing and to "discover what writing is, what it involves and what differentiates the good from the bad writer" (p. 33).

Since the 1980s, there has been an increasing interest in the investigation into ESL writing, and a particular area of interest has been devoted to the second language writing process. Using the methodology borrowed from English composition research, early writing process researchers tried to "describe all aspects of L2 composing processes" and were enthusiastic in finding "which behaviors seem to be successful or unsuccessful in producing effective L2 compositions" (Krapels, 1990, p. 39). Zamel (1982), for instance, used "*think-aloud*" and *interviews* techniques in her case study and found results supporting her theoretical assumption that the writing process of ESL learners was very similar to that of native English speakers.

In her later study (1987), she further compared the writing processes of "skilled" and "unskilled" ESL writers and also investigated how writing in a second language influenced the composing process. She concluded that her subjects "did not view composing in a second language in and of itself [as] problematic" (p. 179), a finding that was quite contrary to the traditional belief that writing problems ESL learners have are solely language problems. Like Zamel's, many early ESL writing process studies focused on discovering

the similarities between L1 and L2 writing processes. Their findings were widely used to support the process-oriented approach and develop a theory of second language writing. Though these early process studies have been criticized for their “over-and misinterpretation of evidence” (Silva, 1988, cited in Krapels, p. 50), they have contributed to the development of ESL writing as a field of inquiry.

LOOKING BEYOND THE PROCESS

The process movement has been considered “the most successful in the history of pedagogical reform in the teaching of writing” (Matsuda, 2003, p. 69). As discussed above, it has had a major impact on the development of second language writing research and instruction. It is largely due to the process approach that writing in its real sense has gained its due status in a second/foreign language class; it is due to the writing process research that we began to recognize the complex nature of writing in another language; and it is also due to the efforts of ESL process writing researchers and teachers that ESL writing has developed into a field of serious inquiry. It is hard to find a second language writing class today that does not include some components of process writing and few language teachers today would believe that grammar or organizational pattern drills are all a second/foreign language student needs to learn in writing. Popular methodology textbooks for second/foreign language teachers now introduce process writing as the mainstream or orthodoxy approach to second language writing instruction. It is indeed difficult to conceptualize effective second language writing without including some of the basic tenets of the process approach (Atkison, 2003).

However, like many other instructional reforms, the process approach does not provide solutions to all the issues involved in learning to write. Questions, for instance, have been raised about its adequacy in preparing students for such a complex task as writing, which has been increasingly recognized as *a socially and culturally situated activity*, not simply a cognitive process that is

highly private or individualistic as described in the process approach. Viewing writing as a social and cultural practice implies that writing is more than a set of cognitive activities. It involves knowing not only one's own writing process, but also the purpose and the context of writing. Writing program that narrowly focuses on personal experience and cognitive processes of writing can hardly prepare students adequately for the types of writing tasks expected for them in the real world. Studies of academic writing in university settings in the 1980s (Horowitz, 1986) reveal that students were seldom allowed free choice of topics. Instead, students had to write according to the course requirements, which often defined the content, the aim, the form, and even the strategies of writing. They had to write to meet the expectations of the *academic community*, where it was their writing *product*, not their writing process that was evaluated.

The "social turn" observed in the current efforts of re-conceptualizing writing and writing instruction has given rise to a renewed interest in the study of *genres*, defined as "abstract, socially recognized ways of using language" (Hyland, 2003, p. 21). An explicit command of genre knowledge is viewed as essential for effective writing because writing as a purposeful social and cultural practice implies that we do not just write, but write in different ways in different contexts for different purposes. If such knowledge of genres is important for L1 learners, it is then crucial for L2 learners.

The current trend to move beyond the process approach to encompass social and cultural consideration in teaching writing seems to indicate that professionals in the field are coming to consensus in seeking a more balanced approach than a *single best* approach to teaching ESL writing. The complicated nature of writing as cognitive, social and cultural activity determines effective writing instruction must adequately address all aspects involved. The process approach today, as Seow (2002) observes, "is no more than a *writing process approach* to teaching writing. The idea behind it is not really to dissociate writing entirely from the written product and to merely lead students through the various stages of writing process but 'to construct process-oriented writing instruction that will affect performance'" (p. 316).

THE AUTHOR

Originally trained as an English teacher in China, she taught English for eight years in high school in China before going to the United States for advanced studies. She received master degrees in second education and Southeast Asia studies and PhD in education from Ohio University. She has been doing teacher training in both China and the U.S. for the past ten years. She now teaches in the MA TESOL program in the English department at Southeast Missouri State University. Her research interest includes comparative education, language teacher training, second language literacy, and second language writing.

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