

## Writing as a Recursive and Messy Process and Some Implications for EFL Writing Classes

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The present paper explores rationales for the process-oriented approach to teaching writing and their implications for EFL writing classes. The product-oriented traditional approach to writing has put too much emphasis on linguistic aspects of writing. It fails to see the enormous complexity of the act of composing. In the process-oriented paradigm, writing is regarded as a messy process leading to clarity and the writer discovers meaning instead of merely finding an appropriate structure in which to package ideas already developed from the beginning. Based on the underlying assumptions, some suggestions are made for EFL writing classes. Firstly, practitioners should be aware that writing is a recursive activity in which the writer moves backward and forwards between drafting and revising, with stages of re-planning in between. Secondly, writing teachers should help the student writers build an awareness of themselves as a writer and encourage their sense of confidence in writing. Lastly, students should be encouraged to pay their attention to content revision at first, and delay editing changes until the last draft.

## **I. Introduction**

Thomas Kuhn's (1970) theory of a paradigm shift is not restricted to the areas of pure science. His theory has implications for teaching L1 and L2 writing. Over the last three decades there has been a sign of a paradigm shift from product-oriented composition teaching to the current process-oriented paradigm in the field of ESL writing. Proponents of the emerging process approach saw the traditional product approach's failure to consider the enormous complexity of the act of writing. Efforts have been made to understand the nature of writing process with focus on how writers create; how they think, feel, and verbalize to enable writing; and how they learn while writing. This paper outlines the underlying assumptions of the present-day process-oriented approach to teaching writing as a background for understanding ESL writing research and pedagogy. Then, we shall look at some implications of the process-oriented approach for EFL writing classes.

## **II. The Process-Oriented Approach to Teaching Writing**

Early ESL writing research was influenced by a rich and substantial body of L1 writing research on composing processes. Research in the theory of process writing for ESL students paralleled, to a large extent, L1 writing process research.

### **1. Underlying Assumptions**

The process approach defines writing in a different way from the traditional approach. As Zamel(1983:165) puts it, the process approach sees composing as an exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate

'meaning'. Writing, in the process approach, is recast as 'a door which is unlocked, freeing us to develop what we potentially know'(Urzua 1987:279). Research on the composing process has encouraged us to look for a model which defines writing as a complex process whereby the writer discovers meaning instead of merely finding an appropriate structure in which to package ideas already developed from the outset. In the new paradigm, writing is considered an act of discovery and a means of developing ideas in the composing process. As Hairston(1982) indicates, teachers in this paradigm evaluate the written product by how well it fulfills the writer's intention and meets the audience's needs. In this context, it is suggested that less emphasis should be given to surface-level errors and correctness in the writing class.

Another assumption of the process approach is that the writing is not linear. In the traditional product paradigm, writing moves smoothly in one direction from start to finish. On the contrary, proponents of the new paradigm assume that pre-writing, drafting and revising are important activities, which overlap and intertwine. In this context, focus is given to the writer's cognitive structures and the process through which s/he goes to create text. Flower and Hayes(1980:10) show how cognitive operations produce enormously complex actions in the writing process. According to their demonstration, the writer's world is composed of three main parts: the task environment, the writer's long-term memory, and the writing process. These three components interact within the cognitive model. The task environment and the writer's long-term memory are the context in which the model operates. The writing process is subdivided into three major processes: planning, translating and reviewing. In the writing process the writer is involved in such sub-processes as generating ideas, discovering a 'voice' with which to write, planning, goal-setting, monitoring and evaluating what is going to be written as well as what has been written. The cognitive model of writing process suggests that

writing processes are not linear but rather recursive where major processes and sub-processes of composing interact to produce a piece of written text.

## 2. Second Language Writing Process Research

As already mentioned, L1 composition research and teaching theory had influence on opening new developments in ESL composition research and teaching. Johns(1990) sees the point that most of the research and pedagogy has been drawn from research in L1 composition. The last two decades have seen a growing body of literature on L2 writing research. ESL writing researchers have conducted investigations of L2 writing processes(for example, Zamel 1976; Raimes 1985; Urzua 1987). Various studies have been conducted on second language writing processes.

### 1) Comparison of Skilled and Unskilled Writers

It is assumed that the composing processes of L2 writers are similar to those of L1 writers. The assumption has been supported by the findings of studies on L2 writing process. A number of studies on L2 writing process find that the composing processes of unskilled L2 writers are similar to those of unskilled L1 writers. It is also found that the composing processes of skilled L2 writers are similar to those of skilled L1 writers. In Zamel's study(1982 & 1983), skilled L2 writers revised more and spent more time on their writing than unskilled writers. Skilled writers in her studies saved editing until the end of the process, while unskilled writers edited from the beginning to the end of the process. These findings recalled those of L1 writing studies on the writing strategies of skilled and unskilled L1 writers(for example, Pianko 1979). Compared with the findings of Sommers'(1980) study, Zamel's skilled L2 writers' attitudes toward revision were identical to those of

experienced L1 writers. It may be assumed that skilled writers regarded revision as a means of discovering ideas, while the less skilled writers were concerned with local problems from the very beginning. The less skilled writers change words and phrases but hardly making changes that affected meaning. We may go on to assume that the problem of unskilled writers may result from a truncated writing process'.

## 2) The Role of L1 Use in L2 Writing

Some L2 composing process research has recently been carried out to consider the role of L1 in L2 writing. They investigated what the influence of the first language may be on the L2 language writing process. It was found that L2 writers utilized their first language in L2 writing. L1 use in L2 writing was a fairly common strategy among second language writers. For example, in Lay's(1982) study the essays whose writers had more native language switches were of better quality in the light of ideas, organization and details. According to Galvan(1985), his subjects' writing in L2 was generally affected by both their L1 and L2 thinking and culture. Advanced-level L2 writers in Hall's(1987) study used both L1 and L2 knowledge and experience while revising. These findings all support Raimes'(1987) assumption that L2 writing has no definable types. It is generally accepted that L2 writers represent a variety of types, backgrounds and needs. More importantly, the observation on L2 writing has made the investigation of L2 writing processes so critical. Only a more close and rigorous investigation may lead us to a clear understanding of the unique nature of L2 writing, of how and to what extent it differs from L1 writing. If a closer examination of L2 writing process may reveal important differences between L1 and L2 writing, then decisions need to be made in adopting L1 writing practices.

### III. Some Implications for EFL Writing Classes

It is asserted that we, as language teachers, need to know about and to take into account the process of how learners produce a piece of writing. We explore some insights which a body of research on ESL writing process provides for the teaching of writing. We look at the issue of what the process approach to teaching writing actually requires.

#### 1. Writing and the Writer

From the findings of various studies, it is suggested that students should be encouraged to attend to content revision at first, and delay editing changes until the last draft. According to Flower(1979:36), to delay editing lowers the writer's cognitive load, allowing her/ him freedom to generate a breadth of information and a variety of alternative relationships before locking herself/ himself into a premature formulation. It is clearly assumed that over-concern with grammatical rules may prevent writers from concerning themselves with meaning and from discovering new ideas while writing. However, the emphasis on fluency in communicative writing does not mean that an editing guide should be ignored in a classroom, rather it should act as an aid in the process, not as an end in itself.

The process approach suggests that we classroom teachers should help the student build an awareness of himself as a writer and encourage her/ his sense of confidence. Smith(1982) points out the danger that too rigid a prior specification can interfere with the creativity of a writer. Based on these assumptions, Zamel(1987) indicates that we need to adopt the pedagogy which takes into account and acknowledges students' attempts to create and negotiate meaning. This implication has turned much of researchers' and teachers' attention to the individual writer, while the traditional approach pays more attention to the written product. The

process approach has filled the gap that the traditional paradigm failed to take into account: what writers in fact do to produce a text. It seems that the process approach is more sympathetic to writers'. In other words, it explores the underlying multiplicity of constraints that writers juggle and orchestrate to produce a text(Silva 1990). This attitude towards the writer urges us to become more concerned with an individual's purpose and desire for writing, for the act of composing is the result of a genuine need to express one's personal feeling, and reaction to experience(Zamel 1982).

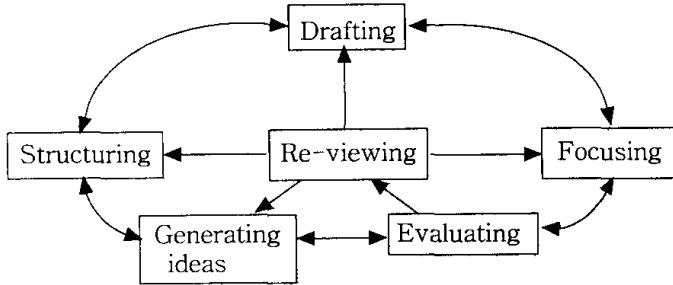
More importantly, the process approach brings to the fore the issue of interaction between writer, reader, language and content. It is suggested that we should be writing as an act of communication between the writer and the reader. At the same time, there is a clear concern for formal aspects of writing in the context of creating meaningful content. The text, though a secondary concern in the process, is considered as a function of its content and purpose(Hairston 1982).

## 2. Writing as a Recursive Process

Shaughnessy's(1977) assumption that writing is a messy process leading to clarity. It is suggested that the controlling schema of the process approach is the writing circle, depicted as continual phases of pre-writing, writing and rewriting, and editing. Hedge(1988), by the same token, describes the process of writing as the overlapping and intertwining of those major activities. In Figure 1, White and Arndt(1991), in more detail, attempt to visualize our perceptions of this complex interplay of activities involved in writing:

**FIGURE 1**

A model of writing(White and Arndt 1991 : 4)

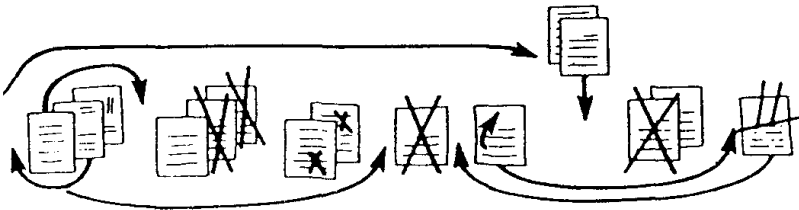


The model of writing in the above figure, though simplified, serves as a framework into which individual elements of the composing process can be fitted. As White and Arndt(1991) illustrate, writers are faced with a very complex management problem because they are moving back and forth from one facet to another in real time. they have to make decisions at all levels, generating ideas, planning organizing etc.

By the same token, Smith(1982) characterizes writing as a recursive activity in which the writer moves backward and forwards between drafting and revising, with stages of re-planning in between. He proposes a model of the messy process of writing in Figure 2:

**FIGURE 2**

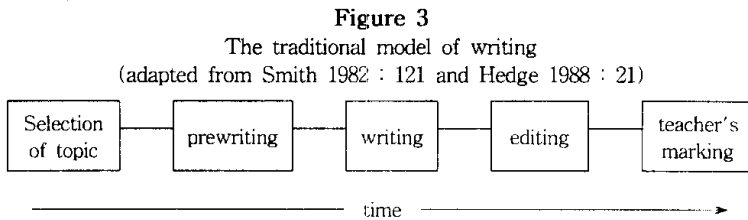
A messy process of writing (Smith 1982 : 117)





In the figure above, some of the pages of a text may be rough notes on various scraps of paper; some of the lines on the pages may be marginal notes of amendments(Smith 1982). While the text is developing, words, sentences, paragraphs and entire pages may be revised, reorganized, or deleted.

The above writing models devised by advocates of the process approach are compared with a traditional model of writing. As Figure 3 shows, the traditional model is characterized as being linear, moving from planning to composing to revising and to editing:



Understanding of the writing process has urged us to re-evaluate our false belief that skilled writers sit down at the typewriter and write through to the end. Smith(1982:196) ascribes this wrong impression to the fact that we only see the written product and never witness or experience planning and revision. In a similar vein, Krashen(1984) points out that we classroom teachers encourage this error when we assign compositions in class and require students to finish within the hour. Such assignments are likely to convince students that extensive planning is not necessary or desirable; and that revision is not part of the writing process. As suggested earlier, what we need is classroom writing pedagogy to show that composition is not a matter of putting down one word after another, or of translating successive ideas into words, but rather of producing a text according to a constantly changing plan.

### 3. More Demanding Role of the Teacher

While the teacher in the traditional paradigm assumes the role of an examiner of the student's written work, the process approach suggests that the teacher take more than one role. As Chang(1997) indicates, instead of being a linguistic judge, the teacher in the process-oriented classroom becomes a reader sharing experience, ideas, attitudes and feelings with writers. She goes on to say that the notion of the writer as discoverer and creator suggests that the teacher should provide optimum opportunities to develop the writer's ideas and to engage her/ him in interaction with the reader. Silva(1990) also notes that guidance and intervention are seen as preferable to control in the process approach. It is suggested that a teacher should build rapport and a climate of encouragement. Hartwell(1985) stresses that teachers should abandon their traditional role as knower, as wielder of power, and take on the role of co-enquirer with students in the writing process. Otherwise, as Raimes (1983) warns, writers feel restricted, upset and frustrated, even losing their desire to write and their confidence as writers. Along with guidance and encouragement, it is suggested that the teacher be aware of individual differences among students in composing. Kantor(1984) emphasizes a type of instruction which best meets individual students' needs and abilities. The point is that the teacher should establish a supportive environment in which individual students are acknowledged as writers, encouraged to take risks, and engaged in creating meaning.

It can be said that the role of the teacher in the writing class is becoming more demanding and even difficult. As indicated earlier, the traditional approach is the teacher-dominated paradigm. Its prescriptive nature requires teachers to take the role of authority. On the other hand, the current process paradigm can be referred to as 'learner-centered' in character. More attention is given to individual learners, but it does not mean that the teacher's role has become simple and less demanding.

Rather, it is becoming more complex than the role of evaluator of students' written texts, who reflects a concern with rhetorical forms and standards and attends to grammatical problems. Clearly, there is a parallel to Parrott's(1993) suggestions regarding the different roles teachers perform in a learner-centered, communicative approach as diagnostician, planner, manager and provider. Recently, there has also been demand for teachers to act as classroom researchers. It is suggested that teachers should become researchers themselves and investigate the relationship between teaching and writing development in their own classrooms (Raimes 1991).

Zamel(1987) stresses the benefits of being a teacher as a researcher in terms of bridging the gap between research and practice. According to her, teachers can apply what we have learned from research in the most profound way, for they live with and within the daily situation where writing is taught. In the process of investigating their own practice and the extent to which this practice affects what students do, these teachers are themselves classroom researchers. Thus the gap between research and practice can be bridged. Throughout the discussion of the teacher's role in the process of writing, we are reminded of Breen and Candlin (1980:99), who discusses the multiple role of the teacher in an attempt to facilitate communication: a set of roles as organizer of resources and as a resource himself; as a guide and as researcher and learner.

#### IV. Conclusion

A body of research on L2 writing process has offered insights into understanding the nature of L2 composing process. It is argued that writing should be characterized as a recursive activity in which the writer moves backward and forwards between drafting and revising, with stages of re-planning in between. As the writing process is recursive and

complex, teacher feedback on student writing is ongoing, not a single act. This means that the teacher, while student writers are engaged in composing, becomes a reader sharing experience, ideas, attitudes and feeling with student writers. The role of the teacher in the writing class is becoming more demanding and even difficult. While the traditional approach with the teacher-dominated paradigm requires teachers to assume the role of an examiner of the student's written work, the current process-oriented approach encourages writing teachers to take multi-roles from supporters to classroom researchers. It is emphasized that writing teachers should constantly investigate, reflect on, and interpret the data of the composition classroom with the object of making their teaching more useful and their students more successful.

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