PROCESS-FOCUSED APPROACH TO TEACHING WRITING

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Introduction

Second-language scholars, researchers and classroom teaching specialists have found out that a great deal of writing that goes on in ESL classes is sentence writing. This is true of classes in the elementary level and in most high school classes where students repeat or complete given sentences to reinforce the structure, grammar, and vocabulary they have learned. It is, however, suggested that we should go beyond those exercises so that our students could write, as Ann Raimes (1987) says, to be able to communicate with a reader, express ideas without the pressure of face-to-face interaction, explore a subject, record experience, and to become familiar with the conversations of written English.

The intention of this paper is to explain the process-focused as the most recent approach to teaching writing. But since we cannot completely debunk the other approaches which we are still using in our language classes, it is worthwhile reviewing the other approaches to teaching writing.

Earlier Approaches to Teaching Writing

First we have the *controlled-to-free approach* which was popular in the 1950's and early 1960's during the heights of the audio-lingual method. The audio-lingual method emphasizes speech and uses writing as a tool to reinforce the teaching of speech in that it stresses mastery of grammatical and syntactical forms. In line with this thinking, the controlled-to-free approach in writing is sequential, that is; first, the students are given sentence exercises, then paragraphs to copy or manipulate grammatically by changing questions to statements, past to present, or plural to singular, or by changing words/clauses and combining sentences. Only when students have reached a high intermediate or advanced level of proficiency are they allowed to do some free composition writing or express their own ideas. Furthermore, the approach emphasizes accuracy rather than fluency or originality.

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Then came the *free-writing approach*. Scholars of language teaching have felt that quantity of writing rather than quality is the better way. In this approach, the teaching of writing assigns most amounts of free writing on given topics, with only minimal correction of errors. The intermediate-level learners should put contrast and fluency first and not worry about linguistic forms. The teachers, on the other hand, do not correct the free writing products of students; they simply read them and comment on their ideas.

The third is the *paragraph-pattern approach*. The teachers allow students to copy paragraphs, analyze them and imitate model passages, instead of focusing on accuracy of grammar or fluency of content. Moreover, the students put scrambled sentences into paragraph order, identify general and specific statements, choose or invent an appropriate topic sentence and insert or delete sentences.

The fourth is the *grammar-syntax-organization approach*. This is based on the principle that writing cannot be seen as composed of separate skills which are learned one by one. So language teaching scholars suggested writing tasks that lead learners to pay attention to organization while they also concentrate on the necessary grammar and syntax.

Lastly, the *communicative approach* which stresses the purpose of a piece of writing and the audience first. The learners should act like writers in the real life and ask themselves questions about purpose and audience: "Why am I writing this?" and "Who will read it?" Teachers using this approach have extended the readership of student writing output in which by tradition it has been addressed to them. Students read and comment the work of their fellow students, do something with it, such as responding to the work, rewriting in another form, summarizing, or making comments – but not correcting. Furthermore, real classroom readers of students role play, exchange letters, and write back to each other by asking questions and making comments.

Process-Focused Approach

The process-focused approach is the most recent approach to teaching writing. The teaching of writing has begun to move away from a concentration on the written product to an emphasis on the process writing. In this approach, the learners asks themselves not only questions about purpose and audience, but also crucial questions: "How do I write this topic?" "How do I get started?" Process approach allows student writers, like all professional writers have experienced, to make decision on how to begin and how to organize their work. They are made to

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realize that what they first put down on paper is not necessarily their finished output but just a beginning or a setting of their first ideas, the so-called preliminary draft. Indeed, the student writers who are given a time for the process to work through feedbacks from their fellow students and teachers who give comments to their works will discover new ideas, new sentences, new words as they plan and write their first draft. In the classroom, the students before plunging into actual writing are given enough opportunities to explore a topic fully in their prewriting activities (discussion, reading, debate, brainstorming, and making lists). Summing up, the process-focused approach allows students to explore a topic through writing, showing fellow students and the teacher their draft, and using what they write to read over, think about, and move them on to new process of discovery of new language forms to express those ideas.

Details of the Process-Focused Approach

The first diagram (Figure 1) shows that producing a piece of writing involves various participating variables and features, namely: syntax, grammar, mechanics, organization, word choice, purpose, audience, the writer's process, and content. This suggests that teaching writing is such a complicated process. To simplify this task is to teach writing through letting them involved in the process of producing a written output.
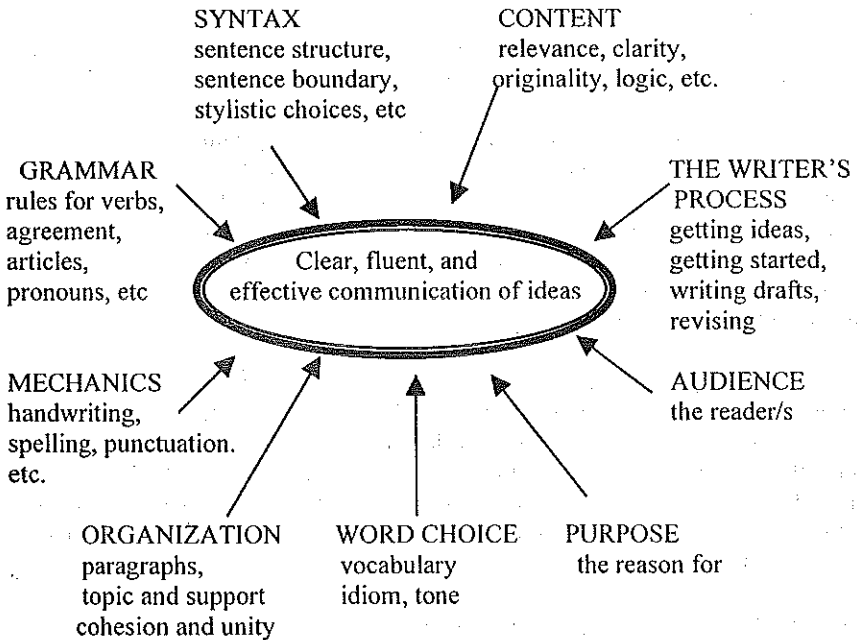
The *process-focused approach* is based on the assumptions, as follows: (1) that teaching and learning is a joint enterprise including both teacher and students in a partnership where the participants have complementary roles and similar status; (2) that grammar is important – but as a tool, a means, not as an end in itself; in other words giving attention to meaning, not form, will improve language and written outputs; and (3) writing takes time; a time is needed to incubate and try out new ideas.

Writing is not an easy task. Cognitive psychologists have described it as the most complex process and demanding of all cognitive activities done by human beings, because there are no clear-cut rules. In fact, writers are considered free agents: they can choose to say what they want and how they want. Student writers are therefore expected to experience this process. In the process-focused approach, the students really get involved in the writing process. They verbalize as much as possible of what goes on in their mind as they write, either relevant or irrelevant ideas. Figure 2 shows the suggested stages of teaching writing as a process (White and Arndt, 1991), namely: 1. generating ideas, 2. focusing, 3. structuring, 4. drafting, 5. evaluating, and 6. reviewing.
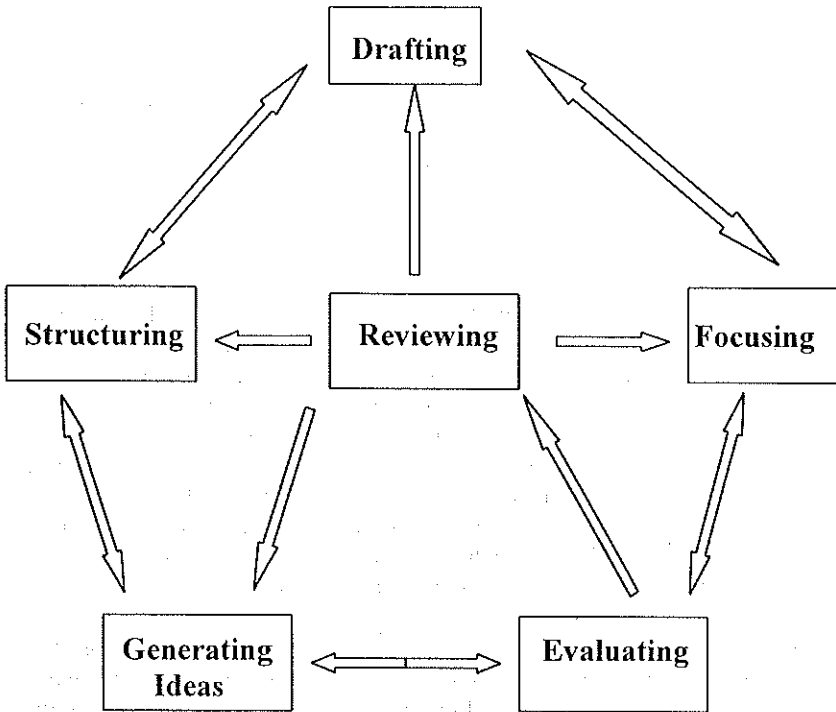
1. Generating Ideas

Idea-generating is equally important as initiating process. Since writing is essentially organizing information and communicating meaning, generating ideas is a crucial element of the writing process. Ideas can be generated from the three kinds of memory store. First, from our *episodic memory* which is devoted to events, experiences, and visual and auditory images. Then we have from our *semantic memory* which is devoted to information, ideas, attitudes and values; and finally, from our *unconscious memory* which includes emotions and feelings. To assist in generating ideas are the two kinds of discovery technique: the *guided* and the *unguided*. The *guided technique* utilizes prompts, usually questions, to enable student writers to discover new ideas. The *unguided technique*, on the other hand, does not rely on external prompts, but generates ideas itself. The processes involved in generating ideas are brainstorming, using questions, making notes, using visuals, and using role play or simulation.

Figure 1. Producing a piece of writing

SYNTAX
sentence structure,
sentence boundary,
stylistic choices, etc

CONTENT
relevance, clarity,
originality, logic, etc.

GRAMMAR
rules for verbs,
agreement,
articles,
pronouns, etc

Clear, fluent, and
effective communication of ideas

THE WRITER'S
PROCESS
getting ideas,
getting started,
writing drafts,
revising

MECHANICS
handwriting,
spelling, punctuation.
etc.

AUDIENCE
the reader/s

ORGANIZATION
paragraphs,
topic and support
cohesion and unity

WORD CHOICE
vocabulary
idiom, tone

PURPOSE
the reason for

(After Ann Raimes, 1983)

Figure 2. Process writing

Drafting

Structuring ⟵ Reviewing ⟹ Focusing

Generating Ideas ⟷ Evaluating

(After Ron White and Valerie Arndt, 1991)

Brainstorming is an unguided technique of generating ideas. It is widely used and an effective way of getting ideas flowing – ideas for actual content or ideas for organizing content. It can be used to (a) choose a topic, (b) identify a reason or purpose for writing, (c) find an appropriate form in which to write, (d) develop a topic, (e) work out a plot, and (f) develop the organization of ideas.

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"*Using questions*" is another way of generating ideas for writing. Questions are an important prompt for writers. Simple questions, like Who? What? Where? When? Why? How?, can be recommended to form complex ones, such as: "How does Who Affect What?", "Why does Who Affect What?", and "Why is What Affected by Who?". Student writers use questions to stimulate their thinking, to draw on their experience and to develop and shape their ideas.

"*Making notes*" also provides ideas for organizing ideas for writing a draft. It is a long-standing technique and there is no reason to abandon it. *Using visuals* is another technique of generating ideas. Visuals can be photographs, physical objects, charts, diagrams, maps. *Using role or simulation* can be used as stimuli for many different types of writing.

2. Focusing

After generating ideas for writing comes the question, "What are you trying to tell us?". To communicate our message effectively, let us focus upon a central idea, or upon a viewpoint which will unify the text student writers may produce. This can be done through (1) discovering main ideas during the drafting process, (2) considering purpose for writing, whether to entertain, to provide a record of events or experiences, to inform, to influence opinion or to request information and so on, (3) considering audience, that is, to be able to see their texts through someone else's eyes and anticipate places where the message might not be clear; and (4) considering form which involves acquiring the linguistic tools of words and structures with which to communicate meaning.

There are techniques in discovering main ideas as a process of what the student writer is going to write about or focus on. The first is the **fastwriting** which depends on speed and lack of inhibition. It is primarily concerned with developing individual ideas relating them. Inasmuch as speed is emphasized, it is best to have a time of ten and twenty minutes for fastwriting. Another technique of discovering main ideas is loopwriting. **Loopwriting** is a recursive process in which the writer produces a stretch of text, summarizes it in one sentence, and then uses that sentence to begin a new loop. Each successive loop helps to reveal the concept which is most important for the student writer, and each successive summary sentence draws upon the ideas developed in previous loops. Still another technique of obtaining a focal idea for the writing of draft is **conferencing.** It is a process of consultation between the student writer and the teacher or fellow students.

3. Structuring

The next thing that a student writer should do is to arrange or sequence the ideas generated from various sources. This is what we call *structuring*. What information to select and how to arrange it are crucial to the success of writing a draft. However, writing should not be thought of as a process where organization of ideas is a preliminary and finite stage, but rather where on-going reorganization is the keyword. How do we structure the text? One way is to do some initial fitting together of ideas into clusters or categories. One example we can give is to group ideas using the spidergram technique (Figure 3). Another way of structuring the text is experimenting with arrangements. This concept suggests that there may not be a single "best way" to organize information, and the student writer is flexible enough to revise and change arrangements in order to incorporate ideas which arise in the course of writing the draft. Guide questions, like the following, will help the student writer sequence his ideas as an experiment: "Which idea is to be given greatest prominence? Do you think this idea provides a good focus for the text? "Where is this key idea in the text?"

Relating structure to focal idea or theme of the composition is another method of sequencing the generated ideas. The purpose of this activity is to find out the theme that gives a good lead for thinking about how to structure the text.

4. Drafting

The earlier discussion in this paper actually deals on prewriting activities, idea-generating and theme or focal idea-organization. This stage now involves the processes of writing, revising and rewriting - the common cycle required of all writing tasks.

Drafting can be done first by the teacher. This activity helps reveal the process to the student writers who appreciate that even for teachers, the writing process can be difficult. Writing the first draft is done by the teacher, as follows: First he displays notes made during the idea-generating, the organization and structuring activities. Then he may specifically refer to the central idea or theme identified as the thesis for the text; try out different ways of beginning and asks students to offer their suggestions; select the opening that seems interesting and continue writing; and talk about choices that students will make at each writing stage. To make the process more interactive, how to develop them, and how to continue the text must indeed be experienced by students under the guidance of the teacher.

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Figure 3. 'Crops' spidergram
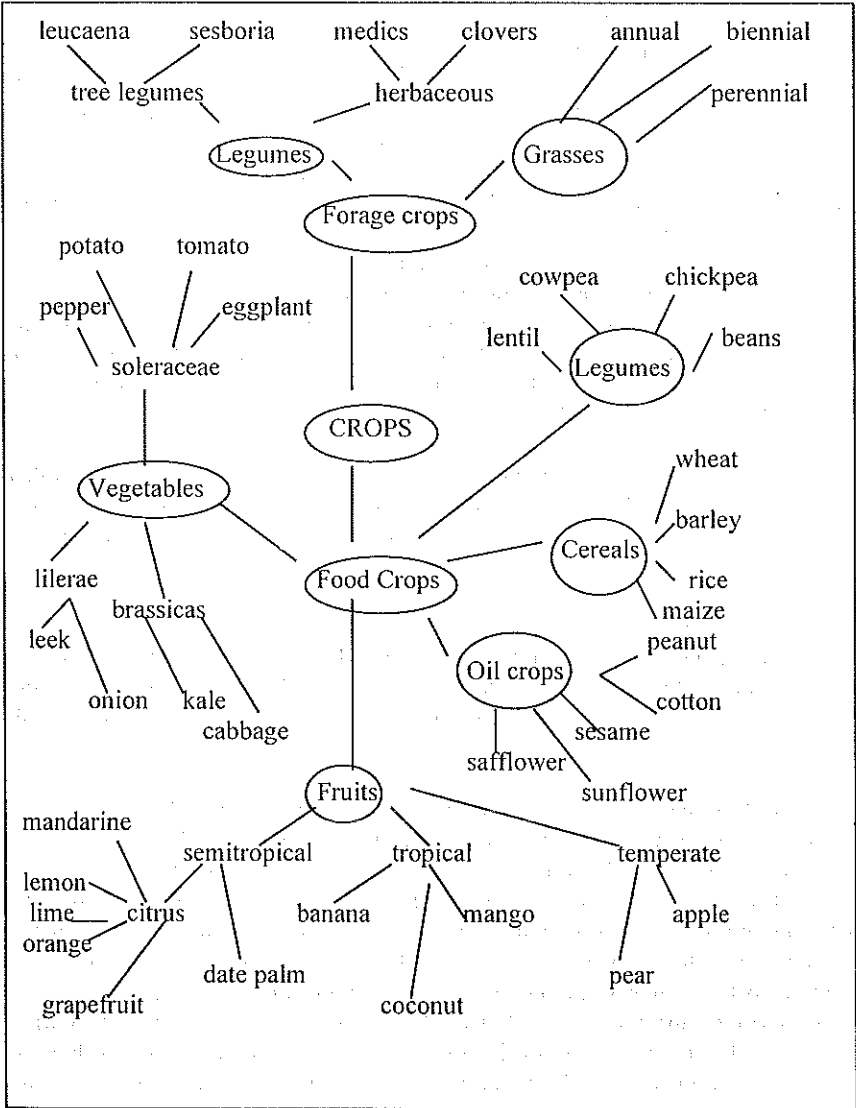
(After Ron White and Valerie Ardnt, 1991)

In writing the draft, two important things must be in the mind of the student writers. First, that of having a good beginning which usually attracts the readers' attention; and that of having a good ending which leaves the readers satisfied and stimulated.

5. Evaluating

Language scholars and teaching specialists emphasize that any writing output should be made understandable and the reasoning be well-maintained. The student writers can actually fulfill this requirement. It should be noted that students are the very critics of their own papers, not teachers. Either individually or in group, students first evaluate their written output.

In evaluating the draft, the student writers must develop its criteria. They should be made to feel that checking one's work is not looking for mistakes in spelling, punctuation, grammatical structure and others. Rather, they should assess the produced draft as to its coherence and how they present the information and ideas in their drafts. Furthermore, the students must not only evaluate their own work, but also their fellow-students'. All students should have a chance to evaluate three or four drafts of their fellow students. They must have to apply the same criteria for evaluation to their own work and other students' output. Some evaluation questions run as follows: What type of writing is this supposed to be? Is the purpose clear? Do ideas need to be resequenced? How? Is the beginning suitable? If not, why? Is ending suitable? If not, why?

In the process approach, reading students' work involves responding to the text as a reader, rather than simply as a marker. Teachers should exercise self-control in responding to the students' text as a marker. Students should be made to feel that teachers are readers, not markers of their papers.

6. Reviewing

Writing as a process never ends. Reviewing is simply to "review" the draft as if a new pair of eyes is looking at it. The two purposes of review are to further develop critical capacities and to enrich the repertoire of linguistic resources which are the essential tools for writing. The drafts produced by the students should be reviewed by them, not by the teacher. The teacher only assists them in their review process. The items that shall be reviewed are: (1) the context

of the composition - its purpose, audience and form; (2) the use of corrections, transitional devices or logical links in between sentences and paragraphs; (3) the segmentation of a text into sections or paragraphs; (4) use of appropriate expressions and structures; and (5) grammatical accuracy and correctness of form.

Part of the review process is the editing. Editing should be done by the student writers themselves as the final step in the process of completing their draft. After editing, their respective draft is submitted to their teacher for correcting and marking. Correcting and marking are considered as feedback to the students from the teacher for the purpose of further improving their draft.

Conclusion

Teaching writing as a process is indeed a sensitizing activity or a way of giving students awareness and insight with what they do when they write. The students themselves are involved in the process from the idea-generating to the editing stage of their written output. The teacher, on the other hand, only performs a minimal participation in the process through correcting and marking which are taken as feedback to the student's work. In short, the process-focused approach is primarily experiential as it allows student writers to feel or experience fully what they do when they write.

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