

First Year College Students' Perception of the Process Approach in Honing Critical Writing Skills

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Abstract

Philippine writing classrooms are still generally following the product approach since as a developing nation, this approach is still not feasible given the number of students per class, size and poor condition of a classroom, and the non-changing tradition of classroom teaching. Thus, the process approach being adopted by DLSU is considered to be a major leap in teaching writing. Yet, due to its novelty, Philippine textbooks on process approach is still scarce, thus making the professors at DLSU adopt a mixture of different approaches and trends. Eventually, this approach has failed to achieve the desired literacy due to improper implementation. Thus, this rote approach became just another uninspiring task to be fulfilled in every writing session by DLSU students. This paper investigated how a holistic view, emphasizing writing as a recursive process, is ineffective for second language learners, specifically first year college students who are exposed to this approach for the first time. Different stages of the process were discussed in terms of effectiveness in producing quality works. Substantial evidence from 150 outputs shows that 80% of the stages are done for compliance.

Keywords: Process Approach, Product Approach, Organizing Stage, ENGLCOM, input

Introduction

Over Contemporary writing classrooms now emphasize the recursive or the process approach to writing as a reaction to the usual product approach. The process approach was defined by Tribble (1996, p. 160) as 'an approach to the teaching of writing, which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of good writing practices rather than the imitation of models'. Accordingly, it is different from product approach to writing where students hand in a paper out of a prompt provided by the teacher, and at times only one draft is required. Jordan (1997) also believes that the process approach evolved as a reaction to the product approach, in that it met the need to match the writing processes inherent in writing in one's mother tongue, and consequently allow learners to express themselves better as individuals. This trend, which first became popular in the U.S., is now adopted by many Asian classrooms. Yet, despite the reputation of this approach, teaching writing still remains to be the most difficult area for SL and FL learners of English.

Ideally, in a process approach, students are provided avenues to brainstorm for ideas, draft their papers several times, edit, and revise according

to evaluations from peers, teachers, and sometimes themselves, before handing in a last draft. Thus, the process approach creates a venue for the students to write according to their interest, at the same time providing a time range that is suited to their preference in order to come up with a writing output (Cusipag, et al., 2006; Jaleco, Lalata, & Ranosa, 1999; Victoriano, 1995). This is the reason why the process approach to writing is viewed as the most effective way to teach writing to SL and FL learners. In addition, the process approach also posts some “assumed” benefits as opposed to the product approach. First, it is assumed that not all students get an idea about the prompt right away, several external factors may intervene in the first attempt to come up with a draft, and it may be unfair to grade the paper at once. Secondly, if students are given enough time and consideration on a topic, they will most often than not, reflect more as opposed to when they are on a limited time frame.

But despite all of these, the reality remains that most teachers adopting this approach fail to give justification to the students as to why they are required to go through several stages. Also, there is the lack of provision for practice of the writing skill in class due to time and syllabus constraints. Thus, majority get the misconception, that the stages are added burden to the otherwise difficult task that is writing. Eventually, this approach has failed to achieve the desired literacy due to improper implementation. This was also asserted by Myles (2002) who believes that certain social and cognitive factors related to second language acquisition show that strategies involved in the language learning process affect L2 writing and that the process approach to writing instruction can only be effective if these two components are taken into consideration. Thus, this rote approach became just another uninspiring task to be fulfilled in every writing session.

The Stages

As known to practitioners of this approach, pre-writing is the first stage that must be accomplished. This is where students supposedly gather ideas for their papers in order to establish the foundation for the remainder of the output (Cusipag, et al., 2006; Jaleco, Lalata, & Ranosa, 1999; Victoriano, 1995). Under pre-writing are the different activities such as journal writing, brainstorming, clustering, treeing, or free writing. After gathering enough ideas, they then proceed into the second stage, which is to conceptualize their working thesis followed by outlining, which is where they organize their thoughts. Although some writing books, such as that of Cusipag et al. (2006) consider the second stage as a part of the prewriting stage, this paper considers it a different part of the process for several reasons: (1) It is mostly done on a different writing session/day as the prewriting stage, giving students the impression that it is the “second stage” that they can accelerate to after accomplishing the prewriting activity; (2) It involves a different cognitive skill from the prewriting for it requires organization of ideas and linear thinking for the outline; and lastly (3) professors usually allot a higher bulk of the score for this stage as opposed to the prewriting stage. This stage is called organizing stage prior to drafting. Third stage is the first draft, which is then evaluated and/or edited either by the peers, the teachers or sometimes themselves. The students then make another round of draft out of the comments, suggestions, and correction, these evaluation and editing tasks comprise the fourth stage.

This paper was born out of casual observations of ENGLCOM (English one) teachers at De La Salle University Manila regarding the uselessness of the process approach to first year college students. Seemingly, students go through the stages without much reflection and with very little improvement in the final drafts. Thus, the researcher analyzed where the problems are coming from in order to see whether the stages are in fact needed in coming up with a better output.

This program is believed by the institution to be a complete opposite of what they freshman students were exposed to since the high school educational system in the Philippines is product approach in general. The steps simply include the following: a) the teacher poses a prompt for the students; b) students write about the prompt on a theme paper; c) teacher checks for mistakes, mostly on grammar; and d) students revise according to the correction. There are no venue for brainstorming, for outlining, and even several evaluations coming from different people. This is mostly due to the educational culture which relies heavily on traditional examination upon entrance to colleges and universities. Thus, the process approach is a totally new approach for many of the students coming from high school.

Methods

In order to first identify the perspective of students, a survey was conducted to 150 students, all of which have gone through the process-approach to writing in their first English course at De La Salle University Manila (DLSU). The survey identifies their opinion regarding the effectiveness of each stage in the process approach. It also requests for their personal comments, both positive and negative. The results of the survey were coded and presented in figures to represent the responses. The open-ended data questions on the other hand, were manually summarized for the purpose of identifying emergent trends and patterns. Plausible explanations of the emerging results are provided and implications for EFL/ESL composition teaching are accordingly drawn. A face-to-face interview, on the other hand, was also conducted to selected respondents, again, to identify their opinion of the effectiveness of the process approach in honing their writing skills using English as a second language.

Results and Discussion

Survey Results

The results of the survey for the first stage (Prewriting) are presented in Figure 1. Majority of the students agree that the pre-writing stage is useless ($n=41$) and/or rarely helpful ($n=36$), with only 17 viewing it as always helpful. Seven of the respondents even commented that the process approach should directly start with outlining for the prewriting stage did not help them at all in generating new ideas for some of them relied only with what they already know “I was never really able to gather ideas using the prewriting activities for prior to the prewriting, I already know what to write...”. “The prewriting activities were not very helpful because I was never used to doing them prior to writing...” “I think the prewriting activities should be more innovative than simply the ones

given to us...”

One even added that prewriting was done only to comply with the requirement of the process approach which includes this stage

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This comes as a surprise considering that the “prewriting stage is supposed to be the most important in the writing process because it lays the groundwork for the rest of the process” (Cusipag, et al., p.29, 2006), and if this has not been given focus by the writing teacher, then the prewriting may fail to achieve its purpose. But according to Shi (1998) “although prewriting discussions might have an effect on students’ writing, the talking effect might not necessarily have an immediate influence as students wrote their first drafts” (p.332). Similarly, Hedge (1988, as cited in Badger & White, 2000) identified four elements of the context that pre-writing activities should focus on: the audience, the generation of ideas, the organization of the text, and its purpose. Thus, if teachers are not fully aware of these elements, the prewriting stage may fail to achieve its purpose. Lastly, if this stage is not given enough time, students might not have ample ideas for this stage is where students supposedly spend 85 percent of their time (Cusipag, et al., 2006).

Figure 2 shows the results for the outlining stage. The comments of the students that the process approach should directly start with outlining are verified by the result of the survey for outlining. A whopping 92 of 150 students view it as always helpful, and none of the respondents view it as rarely helpful or useless.

EMBED MSGraph.Chart.8 \s

*Figure SEQ Figure | * ARABIC 2. STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF OUTLINING*

To further verify their perception of the second stage, 11 of the students even commented that outlining helps them become more organized in the flow of their writing and one of the respondents mentioned that it is already difficult for him to write without an outline. Yet, two of the eleven who gave their comment about this stage mentioned that their ENGLCOM teacher was not very strict in checking outlines for she did not anymore check their succeeding outlines after the first process writing. This may have led to some students taking the outline for granted despite its usefulness for the majority. One of the students was asked during the interview as to why she thinks her ENGLCOM teacher did not check her outlines after the first one, she mentioned that it must be due to lack of time because the teacher concentrated more on the drafts. She also added that the succeeding outlines were merely checked according to the rudiments of outlining, thus leaving the content unchecked. This is a problem area for it was found out that students give more time for reflection than in the actual writing of the draft (Pennington, 1993). This is supported by Caudery (1995), who claimed that process teaching often requires more in the way of input from teachers and students alike, and the degree of individualization involved can also present organizational problems, leading to disruption of "normal" teaching patterns. Thus, if teachers fail to address individuality, outputs may not be any different from what will be produced using other approaches such as the product approach.

Results for the drafting stage are presented in Figure 3. Student respondents also see this stage as equally helpful, with 78 and 52 of them

viewing it as always and occasionally helpful respectively. Yet, the drafting stage is not just one round in the process approach, but is composed of several rounds, according to the need of the paper. Even if the students consider this stage as helpful, many of them commented that not all drafts are important in the process approach.

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STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF DRAFTING

To expound on the comments of the respondents, 19 of the 78 commented that only one of the three drafts is taken seriously. Succeeding drafts tasked to do at home or inside of the classroom are pretty much the same with the second draft. In fact, if there are changes, these are attributed only to some words and word count. When asked why there seems to be very little difference, one student answered that the second draft received very little corrections already and most of them would not do a self-evaluation anymore and would just apply the corrections of the teacher, which in many instance, are minimal. *Our teacher pays small attention to the succeeding drafts after the second because they are given as an assignment and we do them at home,* answered one student. Thus, corrections of the teacher are paid attention by the student if there are any for the succeeding draft and if there are none; students change only a few words in the writing output.

This is supported by Murray (1980, as cited in Caudery, 1995), who claimed that there should be an emphasis on a series of drafts in the writing process as the writer gradually discovered through writing what it was that s/he wanted to say. Even if SL teachers claim that the process is better than the product approach, there are still constraints on time available in covering all the lessons specified in the syllabus. This leads to the simplification of the process approach with all its purpose and benefits.

Results of the evaluation/editing stage are presented in Figure 4 below.

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Figure SEQ Figure | ARABIC 4.* STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF PEER-EVALUATION/EDITING

This stage is the most useless for all the respondents. All of the comments even said that it should not be applied anymore. When asked why they feel so, all of them said that questions are pretty much the same for every writing outputs, one also mentioned that *I think peer-evaluation is useless for I receive comments from my classmates who do not seem to know what they are talking about.* One respondent added *some of my classmates give me advice on my grammar but I know that their advice is worse than mine.* Another student said that *I have this Korean classmate who cannot even speak straight English so how can he give me advice on my writing? I think peer-evaluation should be selective of those who are really good in the class.*

The comments on peer evaluation are not surprising for many peer-evaluation guide questions used by ENGLCOM teachers are usually for native speakers of English. Thus, what may be appropriate in a native-speaking writing class may not work in an ESL context. Several articles already proved this claim through application of the concept in an "oriental" classroom. This goes to show that ESL teachers should regularly be reminded that difficulty in writing in the target language does not always speak about the student's competence in writing, especially in the pattern expected by an ESL teacher. In fact, the process approach to instruction, with its emphasis on the writing process,

meaning making, invention, and multiple drafts (Raimes, 1991), is only appropriate for second language learners if they are both able to get sufficient feedback with regard to their errors in writing, and are proficient enough in the language to implement revision strategies (Myles, 2002). In addition, the purposes of the students' writing are sometimes not the kind valued by Western academic communities. The nature of academic literacy often confuses and disorients students, "particularly those who bring with them a set of conventions that are at odds with those of the academic world they are entering" (Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993, p. 30).

In order to show how students disregard the peer-evaluation, sample comments are presented below together with the revised draft of the student writer:

Sample comments

The use of pronoun "you" should be avoided in essay and paragraph writing

For me the usage of the word why as the first word of a sentence that is not a question should be avoided.

Revised draft

***Why** I chose this topic is because of my curiosity about pasta. I wanted to describe how I feel when I eat pasta. **Why** this is one of my favorite food is because it can unwind the soul and make the mind and body relax. No matter where **you** are, there will be pasta that will be served on **your** table since pasta became a universal favorite of both old and young alike.*

The revised draft, apparently, disregarded the comments of the peer, as shown in the bold faced words that still appeared in the paragraph despite the advice. Another sample is shown below:

Sample comment

...just add a concluding sentence for paragraph 3

Revised draft

*...**He** is also similar to the legend since the story shows the character to be headstrong, stubborn and having a huge appetite. And just like Superman, he is considered to be Earth's Greatest Protector and this is how Superman and Son Goku are different.*

The second sample again shows that student no revision was done even if the advice of the peer was logical and clearly stated. The last sentence of the paragraph was still a discussion of the topic and no concluding sentence was added.

Interview with an ENGLCOM Teacher

In order to verify the results of the survey, one ENGLCOM teacher was interviewed. According to the teacher, students should not just be taught to adopt the same patterns shown in class, especially if the sample essays are western in context. If teaching is to be treated as a pedagogical act, teachers should know the culture of the students. This is in line with the study of Myles (2002) who claimed that, in addition to instructional and cultural factors, L2 writers have varying commands of the target language, which affect the way structural errors are treated from both social and cognitive points of view. Secondly, ESL classrooms should not be treated as a world on its own, in a way that "methods do not exploit deliberately 'unnatural' L2 learning" (Cook, 1991, p. 90). If teachers treat the process approach as just another method, then it will really fail to address the goal of the approach in a writing classroom.

Conclusion

Despite their implications for classroom instruction, not all the stages are appropriate in an L2 context. First of all, ESL students have a fair grasp of the language, which enable them to bluff their way around the pre-writing stage. This is observed most especially at DLSU manila where students are mostly upper class to upper middle class, and thus, use the English language in their daily conversations. ESL students are aware, mostly after the first process of what the teacher is looking for, and would just do the tasks out of compliance, and not really as an exercise of linguistic skills.

This trick practiced by students inside of the writing class is seen most especially in the final drafts they turn over. Teachers notice that there is not much difference if compared to the previous drafts, but due to lack of time, teachers cannot extend the writing process to more drafts. In addition, peer comments are not given much attention, if not at all, by majority of the students. Corrections and comments of the teachers are given more importance, particularly corrections done on the actual paper. This gives the impression that the process writing is seen as a just another requirement that they have to fulfill and not really so they could improve their writing skills.

Practicality of most activities that go with the process approach is another concern by some respondents. This is why most have solved the concern by simplifying the requirements, and that is, not imbibing the actual objectives that the stages are meant to accomplish. In fact, the only time that the process approach was implemented in its totality was during the first task, succeeding essays are already burdensome. Applebee (1984, as cited in Caudery, 1995), for example, writes that "The process approach to writing instruction has been inadequately and improperly conceptualized, as a series of activities or steps in the writing process" (p. 188, par. 39). Thus process is viewed, not as a recursive process by SL learners, but as a predictable and mechanical process which has to be fulfilled in class (Purves & Purves 1986, as cited in Caudery, 1995).

Implications for ESL Composition Teaching

The following implications were drawn from the result of the survey and the interview In order for the process approach to be truly effective, it has to be introduced as early as in the secondary education of Filipino students. This will familiarize them to the approach and the rudiments that go with it.

Professors should not be constrained by the number of outputs each student should produce. This will enable them to explore the fullest potentials of each student in terms of improving their outputs.

Peer evaluation should be context-based and should not only be patterned after the available guide questions on the Internet or writing books. This will avoid adhering only to the parameters of the rhetorical patterns.

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Bioprofile

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