

An Application of the Process Writing Approach in Teaching English Writing to High School Students in China

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Abstract: *This research study aimed to investigate how the process writing approach affected the students' writing habits and to explore the students' perspectives on the approach after its application with forty-six EFL 11th grade Chinese students. To answer the research questions, the analysis ranged across the data collection methods including participant observation, content analysis of the students' writings, and semi-structured interview transcription were employed. It was found that after 30 teaching sessions, the students were motivated to spend more time and effort on writing; their critical thinking and logical thinking skills were improved after been trained with the systematic steps of the process writing approach. Moreover, the majority of the students stated that the process writing approach was beneficial to improve their writing skills. They felt more motivated to write; their group interaction had improved; and more opportunities for the students to practice oral-aural skills were provided. However, some agreed that this approach was time consuming and at times created learning anxiety. As long as the writing assessment in China continues being summative, the learners would not be intended in implementing the process writing approach even though they saw its worth. Formative English writing assessment type and more support are called for from the Ministry of Education as well as the experts, educators, the schools and teachers.*

Introduction

With the modernization and globalization of the world, English, as the most widely used language, has become increasingly significant in life. Among the four English language skills, ESL/EFL learners always feel that writing is a difficult skill to master because it requires more time and effort to achieve success than other skills (Qin & Tian, 2008; Zhang, 2009).

According to Chastain (1998 as cited in Sadaghian, 2012), students were not in the habit of doing writing tasks and they had little knowledge of how to approach, preserve and complete a writing draft. He proposed that teachers should consider carefully the students' psychological and emotional attitudes. The online *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defined "habit" as "a behavior pattern acquired by frequent repetition or physiologic exposure that shows itself in regularity or increased facility of performance" (The online *Merriam-Webster dictionary*, full definition of 'habit', 7). Generally, the most widely used writing teaching method in China is the product approach and the summative testing type, the English teachers consequently pay more attention to grammatical rules, lexical repertoire, linguistic accuracy, and the students' final products rather than their writing habits and their

functional language skills (Cai, 1991; Huang & Tang, 1997). Therefore, the students have less opportunity to practice their writing and become less motivated, and they pay little attention to systematical writing strategies and good writing habits. Although the Ministry of Education in China gives great attention and effort in supporting English language teaching, the quality of teaching and learning still does not meet the expectations.

As teaching and learning writing is really of great importance in English language mastery; yet, its current achievement is unsatisfactory. A great number of teachers have tried to apply the basic stages of writing process - generating ideas, structuring, drafting, focusing, revising and editing - into writing classes so that it can better enhance the learners' independent writing ability than the traditional approach (Raimes, 1983; White & Arndt, 1991). The process writing approach pays attention to the various stages that writing goes through; it concentrates on the students' cognitive learning process and writing habits.

According to White and Arndt (1991), writing is viewed as a recursive process as in the following diagram:

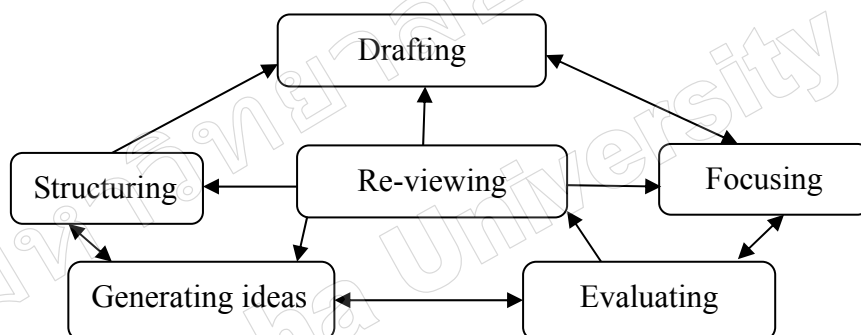


Figure 1: The Process Writing Approach

Source: White and Arndt (1991, p. 11)

Just as the name suggests, process writing focuses on the systematic steps of writing as a process rather than the writing drafts (Calkins, 1986). According to Legutke and Thomas (1991), humanistic education emphasizes that learners need to be empowered and to have control over the learning process. Qin and Tian (2008) drew the same conclusion that the process writing approach is in line with humanistic education. Silva and Matsuda (2010) cited that process writing emphasized teaching writing not as product but as process, helped the students to discover their own voice, allowed the students to choose their own topic, provided teacher and peer feedback, encouraged revision and used student writing as the primary text of the course. Nunan (1991) concluded that the process writing approach is able to encourage the learners' collaborative group work abilities in order to enhance motivation and develop positive attitudes towards writing. In a word, the process approach is helpful for developing and discovering the students' abilities.

This research aimed at exploring the effect and the students' perspectives towards the application of the process writing approach in Shizong No. 1 Middle School, Qujing city, Yunnan Province. With the main objectives of this study, the following two questions were developed:

1. How does the process writing approach affect the learners' writing habits?
2. What are the learners' perspectives on using the process writing approach in English writing classes?

Research methodology

A **qualitative research design** was employed in this research. Forty-six 11th Grade students from Shizong No.1 Middle School, Qujing city, Yunnan Province, the participants of this study, had received the instruction of the process writing approach. Then, ten informants out of the 46 students were selected based on their performance in the school writing performance assessment to participate in a semi-structured interview which aimed at investigating the students' perspectives towards the process writing approach instruction

Also, as this research is a qualitative study, the researcher herself was an important human instrument to cope with the whole research process.

Instruments

Observation notes: The researcher observed the whole procedure and concentrated on the participants' responses, their behaviors and performances on process writing instruction. Participant observation in this study provided first-hand information of what happened inside and outside the class, the behaviors of the participants in response to the research question, and the interactions between the researcher and the participants.

Semi-structured interview: A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions was scheduled aiming to elicit the participants' perspectives and opinions as a result of experiencing process writing treatment. In order to facilitate the ease and accuracy of the informants' opinions and expressions, the interviews are conducted in Chinese. Each interview lasted approximately 15 minutes. The interview started with general questions related to the students' writing habits or skills used in writing classes. Then, other specific questions were asked based on their individual responses. Each interview was recorded and later translated into English.

Writing drafts: During the 30 sessions of the process writing approach instruction, the students needed to finish four topics with 12 pieces of writing papers in total. For each topic, the students needed to write the first draft for self-assessment, the second draft for peer feedback, and the final draft for teacher's comments. All the writings were collected in a writing folder. The written texts in the folder were evidence to show the students' writing performance under the instruction of the process writing approach.

Data collection

According to Patton (1990), qualitative data are highly descriptive and they are capable of capturing a dynamic process; therefore, they are very suitable for process studies. Moreover, data collection is regarded as a process that "a series of interrelated activities aimed at gathering good information to answer emerging research questions" (Creswell, 1998, p. 110). Merriam (1998) also stated that different strategies for data collection normally involve "all three strategies of interviewing, observing, and analyzing documents" (p. 137). Thus, this study employs three strategies: participant observation, interviews, and content analysis

of relevant documents. The researcher's classroom observation notes, the recorded semi-structured interviews, and the informants' process writings were collected as qualitative data in this study. Besides, as the researcher is one of the human instruments, the researcher's conceptualization and psychological responses of the study also contribute to the final outcome (Creswell, 1998).

Data analysis

Merriam (1998, p. 178) explained that data analysis is a "complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation." Data analysis is a continuous process that affects the whole research study from the beginning to the end (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). In order to make the data analysis more organized and effective, the data were triangulated from the observations, semi-structure interviews, and the students' process writing drafts. Classroom observation notes of the students' behavior and performance during process writing instruction were manually coded and categorized by the researcher; the recorded interviews were transcribed, translated into English, coded and then put into groups; as well as the informants' writing evaluation forms. Moreover, the informants' writing pieces were content analyzed in order to know their performance during the instruction.

Research results

To address Research Question 1, "How does the process writing approach affect the learners' writing habits?", most of the learners specified that their writing habits had changed positively. Compared with the previous ones under the guidance of the product-oriented approach, the students writing habits had changed in the following aspects:

(1) Willingness to spend time and effort in writing

The process writing approach was beneficial to the students in that it prompted ownership of their continual learning. They became engaged in group work to discuss their mistakes and share writing ideas; they took the time and effort to improve their first draft based on their friends and teacher's comments in order to write better. The students found that they had performed better in writing performance under the systematical guidance of the process writing approach; thus, they felt more willing to take the time and effort on writing tasks. Evidence shows this aspect as the following quotations:

Informant A mentioned, *"I think I feel more confident in completing a writing task now, and I believe I can manage my time with the tasks. I want to write more sentences and express more ideas on one topic."*

Informant B said, *"It seems unbelievable. I started to keep a diary in English after class; I think it will help me improve my writing ability too."*

Also, it was found from the observations that, *"The students were observed to be enjoying themselves in group work. They enthusiastically asked and answered questions during each practice step of the process writing."*

(2) More critical in thinking

According to the students' learning performances and the informants' interviews, the process approach was also found helping the students become critical in their learning

process. It helped the students realize their limitations and then they tried to find ways to improve as the writing process focuses on the cognitive process and the systematic steps of writing learning.

The following evidence was taken from the interview transcriptions to prove the point.

Informant B said, *"I never knew that I could do such a good job until I saw there were not so many corrections in my writing. Also, I never thought that I was able to assess other people's products. Every time I completed my writing I got used to going back from the beginning of the passage and checking whether I made mistakes or not."*

Informant C mentioned, *"I think every time if I could be more careful, I could do a better job. I reviewed my papers and I found I am able to find my own mistakes. It's really amazing to me. When I read my peers' writing pieces, I am more attentive because I want to find errors to help them improve."*

(3) Logical thinking in learning

The steps of the process writing approach are systematic steps to present the logical nature of writing and at the same time to demonstrate a cognitive learning process. The students expressed benefits gained from the steps, such as generating ideas, structuring, re-viewing and evaluating. Reviewing, focusing and evaluating stages also provided them opportunities to improve their writing. These steps were used to train the students to write systematically and help them to reflect on their learning process more thoroughly.

Informant A said, *"I've never thought that I could be such a systematic writer, just like many famous writers! My thoughts and ideas were never in a mess as before; but now I am able to organize them logically and picked up useful information to write."*

Informant C mentioned, *"I thought writing was finishing the task within twenty minutes with not less than 120 words before. But after I learned with the process writing approach, I have a clearer idea than before. I know I could do a better job if I were more careful and logical. I could organize my thoughts logically and there were fewer repetitions in my writing."*

According to Research Question 2, "What are the learners' perspectives on using the process writing approach in English writing classes?", both positive attitudes and negative feelings towards the usage of the process writing approach were clearly expressed by the informants. The following are details of the accounts.

Positive attitudes

(1) Motivation to write

The pre-writing, while-writing and post-writing activities helped prepare the students in the writing process, stimulate the students' creativity, and explore their abilities in writing. All steps of the process writing approach were systematic and logical, so the students were trained to think systematically and express their thoughts logically. Consequently, they felt writing was not so boring and were more motivated than before.

The following samples reflect the students' positive attitudes towards the process writing approach.

Informant B said, *"I never thought I could think about so many supporting ideas for my writing topics! And I have never thought that I could write such a long paragraph even though I still need the help of the dictionary in word usage and grammar; I feel really happy to discover that I am creative in writing. It's magical."*

Informant D mentioned, *"I think it's really amazing that I can find my friend's writing errors! This really encourages me! I feel I am a rater, like the teacher; I am able to evaluate my friend's writings. I can also find my mistakes if I pay attention to the focusing and reviewing stages; it is really a new discovery for me! I really like learning with this new writing approach!"*

(2) Increased group interaction

The majority of the students said that they were fond of the pre-writing activities because they rarely had experience in discussing writing topic with their classmates and exchanging different opinions freely in their previous writing class. They were amazed that they could learn a lot of useful information from sharing ideas and using them to support their writing topics. Moreover, the evaluation stage gave the students chances to work with their classmates, to share their knowledge and to practice structuring sentences by themselves. The students also stated that they could work with others and be engaged in group interaction.

Enthusiasm towards group interaction in the process writing approach is expressed as follows:

Informant C said, *"Do you know that I have never talked with some of my classmates? It is true. I don't know many of them because I am a new student. I like group discussions and group mind-mapping. I have made friends with some of them because we thought of the same ideas for one topic! We felt so excited. And I admire those who always share unusual and different ideas with us. I have learned a lot from them."*

Informant D mentioned, *"I was fond of doing homework or class tasks with my classmates together because we can learn more from group work. You will never know other people's ideas or thoughts unless you share together. Working in pairs or in groups was helpful for us to improve."*

(3) More opportunities for students to use oral-aural skills

The process writing approach also provided opportunities for students to interact with their classmates and the teacher by answering questions, discussing or debating, and evaluating writing drafts. All these activities provided the students better opportunities to listen and speak in English. This was a good sub-effect of the process approach and the students enjoyed this part very much.

One informant expressed that she really enjoyed answering questions and discussing with the whole class because she was able to speak more and was more voluntary than usual: *"I enjoyed a lot when the teacher asked us to answer questions, debating with my classmates was interesting too. I am more willing to share my ideas and I practiced my speaking skills with the instruction of the process writing approach at the same time."*

Negative attitudes

Some slightly negative perspectives were expressed by some informants. Learning anxiety and time consuming were the most common negative attitudes expressed by the majority of the informants. Some informants pointed out that the peer review activity was not easily done because they had never shown their own writings to their classmates before. It was a totally new experience for them. Others thought it would be embarrassing whether or not their peers were able to find their writing errors. Moreover, some students had difficulty in evaluating their peers' writing because they lacked linguistic competence. Besides, the

informants said that they had lots of homework and assignment to do, so they did not want to spend extra time and energy on their writing. They said they wasted time writing one topic three times; especially when most of the content among the three pieces was about the same.

Informant F mentioned, *“I am weak in math, geography, and history. My English performance is fine; I think I need to spend more time and effort on the other three subjects. The process writing approach takes too much time; I don’t want to spend much time on writing only but pay less attention to the subjects which can be more easily improved.”*

Informant G mentioned, *“I always feel anxious and embarrass when I need to assess my friend’s writings. I think if I correct their errors, they will feel unhappy. I don’t want to make them feel uncomfortable. It puts me under pressure.”*

Informant H said, *“Because my writing ability is too limited, I don’t want to show my writing piece to my classmates. I am afraid that they will laugh at my writing errors, even though they won’t, I still feel uncomfortable to show it to other people besides the teacher.”*

In summary, the findings of the research questions prove the process writing approach can positively change the students’ writing habits, and demonstrate the students’ different attitudes. It is also evident that despite the advantages of the process writing approach, some students still prefer to learn with the conventional product-oriented writing approach. Besides, because of the informants’ negative attitudes towards the process writing approach, the researcher suggested that formative assessment type could be helpful in this case. Meanwhile, more support is still needed from the Ministry of the education, the experts, the researchers, the schools as well as the teachers.

Discussion

The findings of this study proved that the process writing approach was effective in helping the students develop good writing habits. The findings underscored the ideology that process writing approach is a method emphasizing on the learning process and fostering good writing habits rather than focusing on the accuracy of grammar and word usage. The process writing approach was closely related to the nature of humanistic education (Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Qin & Tian, 2008).

The findings of this research clearly support that the students’ attitude towards the process writing approach was generally positive. This is also evident in the studies conducted by Marefat (2004), Sharifi and Hassaskhah (2011) that the majority of their participants showed positive attitudes towards the instruction of the process writing approach. Under the instruction of the process approach, students were trained to become independent learners, and they were more logical and critical in thinking and learning.

Another issue worth mentioning stems from content analysis of the students’ writing drafts is that most of the errors detected among the students were related to the accuracy of grammar, spelling and vocabulary. The reason can be explained in that the students had been mainly trained and were familiar with the conventional product-oriented writing approach focusing on word usage or grammar instead of content and organization. Moreover, as writing is a long-term practice, the limited research duration was considered insufficient for students to change their previous habits that only focusing on the accuracy of grammar and word usage. Still, it was favorable to see the students transferring their familiar linguistic

competence under the guidance of the product-oriented approach to the process writing approach.

From the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the students could improve their writing weaknesses by using the process writing approach, under the guidance and condition of having more time and putting effort to their writing tasks in order to improve their English competence and their writing performance.

Finally, the research findings indicated both the possibilities to enhance the effectiveness of writing skill among Chinese EFL learners and the limitations of using it under the summative assessment environment. It was obvious that the process writing approach was useful and helpful for the Chinese high school students, but a relevant test type should be taken into consideration in order to help the students practice more rewarding and achieving success.

Recommendations

In order to make the process writing approach to be efficient to the Chinese students and to yield better writing performance, suggestions are as the following: (1) As many experts (You, 2002; Mo, 2005; Zhang, 2008) mentioned, the current education style could be adjusted from the test-oriented type into quality-oriented type. The process writing approach is in agreement with the quality-oriented education style which is not only focusing on the test but paying attention to the students' overall abilities. (2) Writing evaluation should not be product-oriented only. The writing evaluation type should change into a type that emphasizes on the organization of ideas instead of the accuracy of words and sentences. Evaluation among the students helps them to be more responsible for their learning and become empowered as autonomous learners.

For further studies on the process writing approach, firstly, as this research study only employed the qualitative research study method, the findings of the research cannot be generalized to high schools nationwide in China. Future research may employ either the quantitative method or mixed methods in order to get more information or a complete picture of the use of the process writing approach. Since the current research duration was short, it only focused on the students' writing habits rather than their performance. Future studies could be conducted for a longer period of time and investigate the students' writing performance under the instruction of the process writing approach. Moreover, the participants of this study were limited to the Grade 11 students in one High School in a southwest city of China, so the data was exclusive to this certain group of students. Future studies should be conducted with participants from high school students in different locations as with participants from higher levels like college students.

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