Considerations in the Implementation of the Process Approach

Harry Meyer

I

How can process writing help Japanese students improve their writing skills? Process writing has a number of advantages. It is a creative activity, allowing for greater personalization and thus increased motivation. It can be used to introduce western rhetorical style with a focus on audience awareness, content, organization, and persuasion. It can raise awareness of common problems that the students are having, and allow the teacher to adjust lesson planning to deal with these problems — should students not discover them personally. Lastly, because of the recursiveness of process writing students get repetition, as they read and re-read their work and that of their peers; thus, enhancing retention of new language and rhetorical styles.

How Can Process Writing Help Students?

Process writing is a recursive activity and it is this recursiveness that is most beneficial to EFL/ESL students. Second/foreign language teachers know the importance of repetition in acquiring a second language. Process writing can be a marvelous way of achieving that repetition, while making L2 study more personalized and interesting. Process writing allows students to write on a topic that either is one of their own choosing, or one — hopefully of interest — that has been chosen for them by the teacher.

The topic is perhaps the most important decision to be made during the

writing process, because of its relation to motivation. Without motivation any enterprise is doomed to failure.

Care must be taken to allow for the selection of a topic that is relevant to the students' interest; however, it should be noted that problems can arise when allowing students to choose their own topic. If their topic is too specialized, those reviewing it may have trouble giving relevant feed back (Boughey, 1997:128; Mangelsdorf, 1992: 280).

As the students receive feedback from the teacher and/or their peers, their consciousness of their failings can be aroused, and thus gradually corrected. They also get a sense of audience and the need to communicate their ideas clearly. Feedback "helps them to be aware of the need for producing reader based texts (Dheram, 1995: 65)."

II

Issues With the Process Approach

Before implementing a process approach various factors must be taken into consideration.

Time Management

When faced with the implementation of any syllabus time management is of great concern. Teacher and student have limited time to achieve the goals set out in the course. This leads to questions about the most effective use of time during a writing course and how feedback should be implemented.

Feedback is a cornerstone of process writing. What kind of feedback and how much are important questions.

Peer Feedback

Peer feedback has a number of advantages: it lessens the workload of the teacher, increases audience awareness, increases understanding of different points of view (Mangelsdorf, 1992: 278), raises the analytical power of the student (Keh, 1990: 296), and raises consciousness regarding grammar etc. As reviewers check the work of others they become more conscious of what they are looking for. One student in Keh's study comments:

> When they read the essays of their classmates, they can find out their mistakes and at the same time, this helps to remind them to avoid and correct such mistakes (Keh, 1990: 296).

Peer feedback is not without controversy. The question of the suitability of peers to give feedback has been raised (Boughey, 1997; Mangelsdorf, 1992; Sengupta, 1998).

One problem associated with allowing students to choose their own topic is that if the topic is less mainstream, reviewers — both teachers and peers — may have trouble giving adequate feedback.

> ... peers are not always in a position to comment on the ideas generated in a piece of writing, since their own understanding of the disciplinary content may itself be limited (Boughey, 1997: 128).

One student, in a paper written by Mangelsdorf comments:

> Mostly what happens is that when a paper is read by a peer they give negligible responses. Most of them cannot evaluate well due to lack of understanding of the subject matter (Mangelsdorf, 1992: 280).

Another problem is the lack of confidence expressed by students towards their peers. Mangelsdorf (Ibid) found that "... students did not think that

they, or their peers, could be good critics." While Sengupta (1998: 22) found that the secondary school students she studied in Hong Kong "did not perceive any value in peer evaluation, and two learners called the whole exercise a 'waste of time.'" Indeed, in some cases given the low level of the students, such doubts may be founded.

Role of the Teacher

What role is the teacher to perform in a process writing course? In Asian countries classrooms tend to be teacher focused, and the teacher is seen as the ultimate evaluator of the students. In Sengupta's (Ibid) Hong Kong study students regarded the teacher or examiner who knew ... "'correct English' to be the 'real reader' and 'not a peer with questionable command of English.'"

This sentiment was shared by students in other countries, such as South Africa (Boughey,1997: 130) and Japan (Stapleton, 2002: 254). In the South African study students considered the teacher to be their primary audience. This led to a lack of explicitness. Students assumed the reader was the teacher and that the teacher did not need explicit information on the topic since they had assigned it.

According to Muncie (2000: 49), the teacher must play a minimalist role, because the students will do what the teacher wants them to do. The learner must have as much control as possible. This forces them to think critically as to how to proceed and causes them to retain more of the information processed. If the teacher does too much for them, "the learner does not have to decide what to do, only (at best) how to do it."

Introducing the Process Approach - Modeling

When introducing the process approach modeling is a necessity. Examples

of writing in the desired format should be presented. The teacher and class should read through sample drafts and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Organization and content should be stressed rather than grammar (Mangelsdorf, 1992: 281).

The students can refer to these models as they progress through their rough drafts. The models can also be used by the teacher to illustrate to students the kind of writing the teacher is looking for (Boughey, 1997: 132).

While it is true that students should be given a wide latitude in the content of their work, style is something that must necessarily be introduced by the teacher; thus, giving the students direction.

After completion of their first draft, the teacher can give feedback by showing some of these as examples to the class (Keh, 1990: 296).

A second kind of modeling that should be taught, especially in ESL classrooms, is peer review/response. This can be done by role play (DiGiovanni *et al.* 2001: 264), video (Levine et al. 2002: 6), or with peer review sheets to show students how to be "polite, clear, and specific" in their criticism (Mangelsdorf, 1992: 281).

Peer Review Sheets

The students can be given detailed peer review sheets to start with. As the course progresses, the review sheets can become less detailed, thus giving the students more control over the feedback they give (Keh, 1990: 297).

The peer review sheets should contain specific questions for each draft, forcing peers to summarize their oral arguments (Levine *et al.* 2002: 6). For each draft they should stress different concerns. Sheet 1 should stress content, asking peers to identify the thesis and clearly stated topic sentences for body paragraphs etc. Sheet 2 should deal with organization and grammar

(Levine *et al.* 2002: 7).

Given that Japanese avoid direct criticism of each other review sheets must be highly structured. Students must ask prepared questions or look for specific errors presented by the teacher.

Methods of Teacher Feedback

Aside from peer feedback it is necessary for the teacher to give feedback periodically at key stages in the writing process (*i.e.* after each draft). Since time is always at a premium for the teacher, the most efficient means of accurate feedback must be implemented. Conferencing with students, taped feedback, and electronic feedback through computer software are some methods.

Keh (1990) outlines how students are given focus questions to answer before a conference, such as:

What is the main point of your essay? How have you organized your points? Who is your audience? What specific area do you want the teacher to look at? Are there any words, phrases, etc. that you feel insecure about (Keh, 1990: 299)?

By having students prepare such answers before hand, a tremendous amount of time can be saved. Indeed, given the limitations of students' English abilities, this preparation is absolutely vital.

For group conferences (two to three students), she schedules 20 to 30 minutes. Regular class is cancelled and students sign up for appointments. Students not scheduled for a conference go to class for group work.

She also states that "compared to writing comments, conferences...allow more feedback and more accurate feedback to be given per minute (Keh,

1990: 248)."

This may be true in certain respects; however, certain questions need to be asked such as will the teacher give feedback in English or the student's native language? How good is the teacher in the students' language? Conversely, if the feedback is given in English, are the students likely to understand the oral feedback? Some combination of written and oral feedback may be required.

Keh (ibid.: 248) goes on to point out additional advantages to conferencing, such as students having a chance to converse with the teacher in English, and getting clear feedback as to what their problems are.

Hyland (1990: 283) discusses the use of taped commentary to give feedback to students. Students hand in old or blank cassettes with their writing. As the evaluator marks their work he or she writes a number in the margin indicating the place on the tape, switches the recorder on and speaks. This has the advantage of being faster than writing, allows the student a listening comprehension exercise, on a topic they are familiar with, and gives them a record of what was said. In some ways this may be better than face to face conferencing in that the student can replay the tape if they don't understand; although students may have to ask the teacher for clarification later. This may also save the students some embarrassment in so far as they don't have to face the teacher's criticism directly. Something that has significance in Japanese culture as public criticism tends to be avoided.

Recently universities have begun to use on-line feedback with such software as Microsoft Word or Norton Textra Connect. These kinds of software have a number of advantages, as they allow the teacher to monitor students' work and make comments on-line. They also allow students to work together outside of the classroom when convenient and allow students to be more direct than they would necessarily be in face to face peer review (DiGiovanni et al., 2001: 268).

Which of these methods of feedback are to be used depends on institutional and teacher preference and access to computer facilities.

Written Teacher Comments

If on-line feedback is used, then comments will be written. When writing comments, how much detail is to be given? This brings us back to Muncie's point about the teacher playing a minimalist role (Muncie, 2000: 49).

Keh (1990: 302) believes that written comments must be specific as to what they are referring to. For example, writing "good." Is this a comment on grammar, writing style, or content? She believes it necessary to be specific for the sake of clarity and student comprehension.

In contrast to this Haswell (1983) developed a system he called the "minimum marking method," where by surface errors

> ... are indicated only by a cross in the margin alongside the lines in which they occur. The sum of these crosses is then entered into a record book and the paper returned with comments to the students (Haswell, 1983 — in Hyland, 1990: 280–281).

Students identify and correct their mistakes before handing in their papers for reassessment.

While Haswell's method describes manual writing, it could be modified for use in an on-line format.

Haswell's method would perhaps be best employed for the final draft, while more specific comments should be made for the first and revised drafts, as suggested by Keh.

This allows the students to be gradually weaned away from dependence on the teacher, as they discover what mistakes the teacher is referring to,

thus aiding acquisition of writing skills.

Syllabus Adjustment

As the teacher reads over the students' drafts common problems may become apparent. The teacher should respond to these through lessons aimed at correction, thus adjusting the syllabus to suit the students' needs.

The process becomes reciprocal. Feedback on their writing is given to the students and the teacher receives feedback on what problems students are having, and what needs to be addressed in lesson planning (Boughey, 1997: 32).

Grammar correction should be ignored until near the final draft. Whatever common problems are apparent can then be addressed.

How Many Drafts?

How many drafts are necessary for a successful outcome using the process approach?

The students in Boughey's study (Boughey, 1997: 132) did two essays, a first draft and a final draft, while in Levine's study (Levine *et al.* 2002: 6) students did three essays. Dheran (1995: 166) says a three draft approach is necessary, after finding that most of the respondents in that study "confessed that they would read the teacher's comments carefully, if they had to write a third draft (sic)."

Requiring three drafts from students seems appropriate. One rough draft, one revised draft — to institute changes from feedback and to be re-evaluated by reviewers — and a final draft to be submitted for grading. A two draft approach would not be sufficient as it does not allow for re-evaluation by reviewers before submission. Four or more drafts are not likely to be feasible due to time constraints.

Conclusion

Process writing can be a valuable tool for both teaching English and critical thinking. The use of focus questions on teacher and peer review sheets force students to consider their thesis, audience, content, organization, and the goal of influencing their audience to agree with their position. Students' consciousness of English grammar can also be raised, and retention of new knowledge can be aided through the revision associated with writing multiple drafts.

Notes

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