A Study of the Effectiveness of the Process-Based Writing in an EFL Classroom of Second-Year Students at Bangkok University

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ABSTRACT

This research was aimed to study the results of using the process-based approach in an EFL writing classroom by comparing its effectiveness to that of the product-based approach and to study the attitudes of the students taught with the process-based approach. A research hypothesis had been established: There will be a statistically significant difference of the writing scores between the students who have received and those who have not received the process-based teaching. The proficiency test (Pre-/Post-tests) and two achievement tests (Writing Quiz 1 and Quiz 2) were used for measurement. Also, a set of questionnaire was used to gain the attitudes of the students with the process-based teaching.

The subjects were 88 students from two EFL second-year classes at Bangkok University, selected through the purposive sampling, from the total 308 students who were assigned to the researcher during the regular semester.

After 14 weeks of the process-based treatment, it was found that the students with the treatment could gain a better writing ability. The students with the process-based treatment could outperform the students who did not receive the treatment on all three tests (Writing Quiz 1, Quiz 2, and Posttest). However, the statistically significant differences of the score results of the two groups were found only on Writing Quiz 2 and the Posttest.

Regarding the effectiveness of the process-based approach on the students’ attitudes, the questionnaire results showed that the students had positive attitudes towards the process-based method and that the method could help them write better and make the class more interesting.

RATIONALE

Writing in English is writing in a foreign language in the Thai context. It is particularly difficult since it takes place in a foreign language. Generally, in employing English as a foreign language (EFL), the writer must overcome both matters of language barriers: language rules and usage, and matters of written communication: rhetoric and effectiveness, for example. To conclude, writing in the first or native language is difficult, but writing in a foreign language is even more difficult. Above all, “good writing” is the most difficult.

Basiclly, the purpose of academic writing or writing at the university level involves all types of writing forms or styles, such as narration, description, comparison and contrast, argumentation, and so on. In addition, writing can be at a paragraph or essay level.

With regard to the academic writing, Bangkok University Language Institute (BULI) offers foundation English courses, such as EN 111, 112, 201, and 202 (as of 2002), to students in their first and second
year. Writing is normally integrated with its three counterparts, namely reading, listening, and speaking.

Following the pedagogical trends of teaching until the year 2000, BULI had used the grammar approach in the teaching of English writing, i.e., students practiced grammar points in isolation, such as filling in the blanks or rewriting sentences. Since the year 2001, the university has felt that students should be encouraged to really write or express their thoughts in written English. They have been expected to be able to write at the paragraph or essay level. The learning and teaching of writing has received much attention from BULI. In addition, since the university has had no restricted policy relating how to effectively teach writing, methods of teaching writing to maximize the learning outcomes and to create a communicative environment have been considered greatly challenging.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS

In teaching writing, BULI teachers prepare writing materials for the students and teach them accordingly. Yet, the focus is usually on the “product,” the text written by students, rather than the “process,” what the students go through while writing. This “product-orientation” is considered a traditional approach in most BULI English classes.

Basically, with the traditional writing approach, students are shown paragraph models of types of writing and are asked to write in the manner that follows the models. They may be given topics to choose from or asked to practice at the sentence level with some handouts of lists of mechanics or word connectors. Then, they are usually asked to write within a time limit and their first drafts are to be collected at the end of the time period.

As a result, the students usually regard their first drafts as the final product, which is to be evaluated by the teacher. Raimes (1983) points out, “What the teacher says about the piece of writing can have no influence on the content, form, or accuracy of the piece.” The teacher can manipulate only the “surface-level,” not the overall content and deep structures. This leads to the students’ “tendency to focus on sentence-level problems and their pre-occupation with grammar.” Importantly, in addition to problems with the traditional teaching of writing, the teachers cannot see how they can intervene at the stages of writing, or how they can participate in the stages with the students, rather than just criticizing the outcome product.

It is undeniable that, in an EFL class, Bangkok University students vary in terms of their English proficiency, since they are grouped according to their respective faculties and not the language placement system. It is also undeniable that, in a writing class full of varied students, a method with one instruction, i.e., asking them to write within a class period, does not usually elicit or make the most of what individuals have gotten as writers.

Obviously, academic writing is a time consuming and a thinking process. It makes sense that students need to be taught how to write and that their writing needs to be nurtured by the teacher. The same as English-native students, students who study English as a second or foreign language need the support and guidance from the writing teacher.

SIGNIFICANCE AND NEED OF STUDY

Although there has been an increasing number of studies in the area of the process-based writing, very little has been done in the context of university level, especially of private universities with a large number of varied students.

In addition, since writing is an important skill that constitutes an English class required by every university, research and studies on how to maximize the students’ writing ability have always been in constant demand.

This research, therefore, has tried to prove the point that the process-based method is a method that can enhance the students’ writing skills and that it can help to support the English communication in an EFL classroom through the interactions between the students and the writing teacher.

OBJECTIVES OF RESEARCH

The research is aimed to

1. study the results of using the process-based approach in an EFL writing classroom, by comparing the effectiveness of the process-based teaching to that of the product-based, and
2. study the attitude of the students in response to the process-based methodology.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

There will be a statistically significant difference of the writing scores between the students who have received and those who have not received the process-based treatment.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher had gathered data and information about the process-based writing and prepared the materials that would fit the course EN 202. She also had planned an implementation of the process-based writing approach for the present study. A set of questionnaire to gain the students’ attitudes towards the process-based approach had been constructed to be used with the students at the end of the treatment.

Two groups of students enrolling in EN 202 at Bangkok University were purposively selected as participants. The writing proficiency of both groups had been tested with the writing Pretest, and their mean scores were found to be of no statistically significant difference. One group was then randomly selected as the experiment group and the other as the
control group. Then, the experiment group was taught writing with the process-based approach, while the control group with the traditional teaching. The traditional teaching had been used in the mainstream ESL classrooms at Bangkok University.

In the mid-term examination, both groups did a writing quiz (Writing Quiz 1) and their mean scores were compared. Again, in the final examination, the two groups did another writing quiz (Writing Quiz 2) and their mean scores were compared. After 14 weeks of class sessions, the two groups wrote on the writing Posttest, which was the same test as the Pretest. Their mean scores were compared. All papers were graded by two raters, the researcher herself and a part-time teacher, and were analyzed, using the t-test. On the last day, the experiment group answered the questionnaire. The data or the questionnaire results were used for a discussion.

For the inter-rater reliability, prior to the present research, the researcher and the part-time teacher had tried co-rating for a reliability of the rating. A group of students was asked to write on a topic and their papers were used to examine the reliability of rating. First, one paper was randomly chosen and graded. The score results from both raters were brought into a discussion so that they could reach a mutual understanding in grading. Later, another five papers were graded. The score results given by both raters were found to be very close. Then, the two raters started grading the rest of the papers. Discussions related to matters of grading were held from time to time and when necessary by the two raters.

For the rating scales, the two raters had used the “ESL Composition Criterion/Profile,” in which the holistic scoring rubrics are used to assess the students’ competency in certain features of writing: content, organization, sentence construction, vocabulary, and mechanics.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE
The Views of Writing: as a Process and as a Product
Teaching writing to students has received a lot of attention from language teachers worldwide. This is due to the fact that writing is a skill that needs to be taught, and, yet, teaching it does not necessarily guarantee the students’ ability to write effectively. Thus, how to effectively teach writing to students has been a main issue and has brought about approaches in the mainstream classrooms.

In light of teaching writing to students, it is obvious that which teaching approaches to be used in the language curriculum depends importantly on how the teachers view or define the term “writing.” To date, two views of writing composition prevail: writing as a product and writing as a process.

As explained by Richards (1990), the view of writing as a product derives from the audiolingual theory. Writing is seen as a “written form of spoken language” and writing serves to reinforce speech, through the stress of the mastery of grammatical and syntactic forms. The term “product approach” itself reflects the focus on the students’ “ability to produce correct texts.” Thus, the correct sentence structure is an essential component of writing and grammatical skills receive considerable emphasis.

He points out that the view of writing as a process emerges as a result of the “limitations of a product approach,” as the product approach focuses on “ends rather than means,” while ignoring how students write or create their writing that has form and structure. Thus, with the product approach “the composing processes of good writers are ignored.”

Regarding the views of writing, Lindermann (1995), in her article on “Three Views of English 101,” says that each view, whether as a process or product, is right for the person who holds it and each view has its own history, its own theory of language, its own notion about how students learn, and its own implications.

In addition, regarding the same topic, Nunan (1991) says that in the “product-oriented approach” the teachers focus on the “end result” or the written paper of the students. In the classroom of the product-oriented writing, students are engaged in such activities as “imitating, copying and transforming models of correct language.” Students are believed to have to start at a small unit of grammar and sentence writing in order to be successful at the paragraph level.

While in the “process approach,” he points out that the teachers focus more on such “various classroom activities” as idea gathering, group work, and conferencing which are presumably important elements that a writer has to go through when writing.

FINDINGS
A: Quantitative Findings
Table 1 Mean and Standard Deviations (SD) of the Experiment and Control Groups on the Pre- and Post-tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group of Students</th>
<th>Pretest Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Posttest Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Group</td>
<td>64.74 (7.07)</td>
<td>66.92 (8.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td>66.96 (8.34)</td>
<td>63.04 (7.14)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 1, the mean score of the Pretest of the experiment group was 64.74 and the mean score of the Pretest of the control group was 66.96. For the Standard Deviations (SD), the experiment group was of 7.07 and the control group was of 8.34. For the Posttest, the mean score of the experiment group was 66.92 and the mean score of the control group was 63.04. The Standard Deviations (SD) of the experiment group was 8.96 and of the control group was 7.14.

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviations (SD) of the Experiment and Control Groups on the Writing Achievement Tests (Writing Quiz 1 and Quiz 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group of Students</th>
<th>Writing Quiz 1 Mean (SD)</th>
<th>Writing Quiz 2 Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experiment Group</td>
<td>69.38 (8.20)</td>
<td>70.27 (9.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td>67.97 (5.96)</td>
<td>65.72 (7.20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 2, the mean score of Writing Quiz 1 of the experiment group was 69.38 and that of the control group was 67.97. The Standard Deviations of the experiment group and the control group were 8.20 and 5.96 respectively. For Writing Quiz 2, the mean score of the experiment group was 70.27 and that of the control group was 65.72. The Standard Deviations of the experiment group and the control group were 9.91 and 7.20 respectively.

Table 3: Compared Means: Independent-Sample t-test (of the Experiment and Control Groups)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scores</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>t-test</th>
<th>Significant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>-2.22</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>0.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Quiz 1</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing Quiz 2</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>0.012*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>2.08</td>
<td>0.021*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<0.05

In Table 3, although the mean score of the experiment group (64.74) was less than the mean score of the control group (66.96) on the Pretest, the t-test analysis showed that there was no statistically significant difference. That is, on the Pretest, both groups did not perform differently, t = -1.12. This indicated that at the beginning of the research, both groups of students were found not to be statistically different in terms of their proficiency, as measured by the Pretest, and they were therefore compatible being the subjects of the present study.

For the first Writing Quiz’s result, the mean score of the experiment group (69.38) was higher than the mean score of the control group (67.97). The result indicated that the experiment group did better than the control group. However, the t-test analysis on Writing Quiz 1 indicated that there was no statistically significant difference between the two sets of mean scores, t = 0.86. The interpretation is that, as the process-based treatment had begun, the students of the experiment group did not show a greater performance in their writing ability (Writing Quiz 1).

However, there was a change in how the experiment group had performed, as the writing treatment continued towards the end. On the second Writing Quiz and the Posttest, the mean score of the experiment group from Writing Quiz 2 (70.27) and from the Posttest (66.92) were higher than those of the other group, which were 65.72 and 63.04 respectively. Also, the t-test analyzes on the second Writing Quiz, 2.30, and on the Posttest, 2.08, indicated the statistically significant difference of the two groups’ performance (p<0.05). It was evident that, later on, the experiment group outperformed the control group in their writing ability, as measured by the two tests.

From the results of the statistics on the mean scores of the writing tests, it can be concluded that the students with the process-based writing treatment had gained the ability to write. In addition, they could write better than the other group.

B: Results of the Hypothesis

The hypothesis was “There will be a statistically significant difference of the writing scores between students who have received and those who have not received the process-based treatment.”

The significant difference was set at p = 0.05. The score results of the three tests were used to test the hypothesis.

During the treatment, for Writing Quiz 1, it was found that there was no statistically significant difference of the mean scores between the students who were participating in the treatment and those who were not. Therefore, the hypothesis was rejected.
for Writing Quiz 1. That is, the two groups of students did not perform differently on the first quiz.

However, for Writing Quiz 2, it was found that there was a statistically significant difference of the mean scores between the students who were participating in the treatment and those who were not. Therefore, the hypothesis was accepted, for Writing Quiz 2. That is, the two groups of students performed differently on the second quiz.

And finally at the end of the treatment, for the Posttest, it was found that there was a statistically significant difference of the mean scores between the students who have received and those who have not received the treatment. Therefore, the hypothesis was accepted, for the Posttest. That is, the two groups of students performed differently on the Posttest.

According to the findings of the score results of both the experiment and control groups, it was found that the experiment group outperformed the control group on the Posttest and Writing Quiz 1 and Writing Quiz 2. They gained higher scores on these tests. However, between the two groups, there were statistically significant differences of the mean scores only of Writing Quiz 2 and the Posttest (p<0.05).

C: Discussion of the Statistic Findings

According to the findings, the students who were taught with the process-based treatment gained higher mean scores than those who were not. In this study, the traditional or product-based teaching treatment was used with the other group for the comparison. Please be informed that the product-based method has been used traditionally to teach writing in class.

It would be too soon to jump to the conclusion that, because of the process-based method, the students could do better in their writing than the students who received the product-based teaching. However, when considering what lies beneath the two types of treatment, which are the components of the two teaching treatments, it is obvious that the process-based teaching offers more to students than the product-based does.

That is, with the product-based method which focuses on what the student is writing, mainly mechanics, grammar, and language structures, finding what is right or wrong or shaping each sentence in the writing is inevitably the main treatment in the class. As its name sounds, the writing piece or product is where the treatment touches most.

From the findings, however, it is obvious that such treatment is not sufficient in the students’ writing, especially when writing usually occurs in one draft. After all, the treatment that focuses on the writing product or outcome cannot be of much help for students, since writing is a pack of ideas expressed in sentences. These sentences cling together and are difficult to be dismantled. Obviously, with such treatment, students were occupied with “getting every thing right”, and, thus, were hindered by it in “communicating the message.”

Whereas, with the process-based treatment, the main component is “writing in steps” which makes the students realize that they are writing for an audience and that they can follow the steps to come up with a better writing.

One main reason that the process-based teaching has a positive impact on the students’ writing ability could be that it offers an opportunity for students to spend more time with writing, due to its natural characteristics. The process-based teaching depends mainly on activities that need interactions among students and between the teacher and students. Writing does not just finish in one draft, but it reoccurs anywhere possible. Some activities, such as giving feedback or the student-teacher conference, may need to take place outside of class, which results in the students’ being involved more with writing.

Another characteristic of the process-based teaching that supports the students’ writing ability is the “rewriting” and the teacher’s coaching through “giving feedback.” Grammar and language structures come second to how the students think and what they want to convey. As a result, students can concentrate more on their message, which is rather substantial. With the feedback, one of the activities, they can write and rewrite before they have reached the final draft.

However, such treatment does take time. Its effectiveness takes time to be seen, too. This is evident in the findings of the score results from Writing Quiz 2 and the Posttest, where the differences of the mean scores of the two groups were found statistically significant. In Writing Quiz 1, the difference of the mean scores between the two groups was not statistically significant.

D: Discussion and Conclusion of the Questionnaire Findings

The discussion and conclusion of the questionnaire findings can be divided into two main parts. The first part was about the answers from Part I, which revealed the attitudes of the students towards the process-based method and towards the writing steps, as affecting their writing and the writing class. The second part was about the written answers from Part II, which supported their attitudes towards their writing contexts.

1. Discussion and Conclusion of Part I It can be summarized from the responses in Part I that the subjects who participated in the process-based teaching highly agreed that the process-based teaching method and its writing steps could help improve their writing ability. Considering the percentages of the responses given to each statement, it was found that students were quite satisfied with the teaching method used with them.

Each statement in this part was aimed at finding how the students felt about themselves and the writing class after the treatment. Therefore, it was quite satisfactory to see from the results of this part
that students strongly agreed that they thought they could write more correctly and lengthily, or that they could think better of what to write and imaginatively. After all, these are what a writing teacher would expect as an outcome when teaching writing to students.

However, from the results of this part, it was interesting to find that the students would never stop being afraid of writing, even with the process-based method. It could be assumed that students viewed writing as a duty, which they had to do correctly to get a good grade. To them, probably to all others, writing is not something they could have fun with.

2. Discussion and Conclusion of Part II Part II had four questions which were aimed at revealing the students’ attitudes towards the process-based method and its activities.

Question 1: “What do you think of the process-based writing? Is your writing class this semester different from before?” It could be said that the majority of the students who have participated in the process-based teaching agreed that they could see the difference in the teaching when compared to their previous classes. Most of them expressed the preference of the teaching, saying that it gave them a clearer direction for writing.

From the findings, students with the treatment learned not to jump into writing right away once they received the writing assignment or once they were asked to write. Rather, they learned to spare some time to think and plan first, then write and rewrite, with the teacher as a coach. From their point of view, the teacher also played an important role in giving more guidelines and supervising the students. The students acknowledged the role of the teacher, as some of them expressed their appreciation towards it.

It could be added here that it is important to make the students aware of the writing class where they are participating in as well as of the role of the teacher in giving support to their writing. The awareness can benefit the students in that they know how to handle writing and where to seek help when needed.

Question 2: Which steps do you like the most or which steps help your writing the most? Although the findings showed the ranking of the writing steps, it can be mentioned here that students saw every step or activity useful to them. Some students might prefer one activity to the other, or they might feel that one or two particular steps worked well with them, while the others did not. In addition, the students who had participated in the treatment understood well how to employ each step or activity in their writing. Thus, they tried to use all activities provided by the teacher as much as possible so that they could write better.

One interesting point found from the finding was that when the students expressed their less preference of any activity, they gave the reason that related rather to how such activity did not work well with them than to how useless the activity was to them.

For example, one student stated that he did not like the step of “generating ideas,” and he preferred to start writing right away. The implication here is that, without realizing it, he preferred to start writing “freehand,” which is one technique of generating ideas. Another example is that one student ranked the step of “peer response” second to the last. He gave the reason that he could learn more or better with the response from the teacher than with the friend’s criticizing.

It could be concluded that the process-based teaching of writing comprises of writing steps or activities, which can be beneficial to students. However, students should be taught how to follow these activities so that they can gain the most benefits of the method.

Question 3: In the writing process, how do you like meeting with the teacher in the student-teacher conference? Do you think it helps your writing? Regarding the findings of this question as well as field notes taken during the conferences, it could be stated that the majority of students had positive attitudes towards the step of student-teacher conference.

The crucial element of this step was the teacher – who acted as a consultant and who helped nurture the students’ work from the beginning to end or from their blank paper to the final draft. The students acknowledged the importance of the teacher and they were aware of how the step could help them to achieve the final draft.

However, some students expressed that the activity of “student-teacher conference” could be problematic to them. Yet, they stated clearly that the problem was about time, not the activity itself. It was the problem that came from the time limitation of both the students and the teacher.

It can be stated that conferencing with a student is a time consuming process, and that to make the conferences successful and efficient, they need to be well-planned.

Question 4: Do you think your writing ability has improved at the end of the course? From the findings, the majority of the students admitted that their writing had improved at the end of the course. They can write better now and with more confidence.

The implication is that they were not deserted in the writing classroom. Instead, their written work received attention from the teacher. As a result, the students were equipped with the writing tools they learned from the treatment, which were the steps or activities that they followed and that helped them write lengthily and correctly.

It can be stated that the process-based method has had an effectiveness on the students’ writing. Or, at least, it has improved their writing ability. Its components, which are the writing steps, require the students’ involvement in writing and rewriting. This results in the students’ improvement of their writing ability.
Implication of the Research

Several implications can be drawn from the information taken from the discussions and conclusions of the quantitative and qualitative findings.

1. University EFL students need to practice writing and their writing need to be taught by the teacher, either implicitly or explicitly. However, an explicit teaching of writing obviously enhances the students’ writing ability more. The process-based teaching is one explicit teaching method that can help students increase their writing ability.

2. Writing at the university level can be achieved by a variety of teaching methods. Teachers of writing have a duty of finding a good method, not necessarily the best method, for their EFL students. The process-based teaching method may be time consuming, yet its elements or components can help improve the students’ writing, which as a result makes them have a better attitude towards writing. One reason is that, with the method, the students write in stages. Planning and thinking of what to write are the main focus. With such treatment, students learn to take control of their writing with the help of others, while knowing that their work will be read and find response from others.

3. Though being time consuming, the process-based teaching can possibly be integrated in an English course. However, time is an issue that needs to be taken into consideration, especially the time that the teacher of writing has. The consideration may include the adjustment of lessons assigned to be taught in one course, so that enough time is available for a writing conference in a classroom.

4. Feedback is also a very crucial element in the students’ writing, either feedback from peers or teacher. Feedback can come in the form of, for example, peer reviewing, teacher’s paper marking, and teacher’s verbal comments. Good feedback must be clear and specific and encouraging so that it will motivate the students’ learning.

Suggestions for Future Research

1. A large number of students with a different language ability across the discipline should be targeted as subjects for the future research.

2. The use of technology for teaching writing, such as, the Internet or computer, could be used as part of the process-based teaching of writing in order to find out to what extent the benefits of the teaching to students could go.

3. More research on feedback to writing should be done, especially in the context of low-proficiency level students.

REFERENCE


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