

Problems with Peer Response of Writing-as-a-Process Approach in an EFL Writing Classroom

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Abstract: This paper is the result of reflection on personal experience in teaching writing using the process approach at the Department of English, State University of Malang, Indonesia. It firstly describes the current practice of teaching writing courses at the Department. Following this, ESL writing literature is explored to show how process approaches have been accepted in ESL composition. Then, the paper discusses some problems in teaching writing at the Department using the approach, referring more specifically to peer response activities. Finally, it offers a pedagogic proposal in the form of training strategies for peer response through classroom action research.

Keywords: ESL/EFL writing, process approach, peer response, strategy training.

As a foreign language (EFL), English in Indonesia is only taught in schools as a subject of instruction. It is a required subject in secondary schools in the Indonesian education system. However, very limited school time is devoted to teaching this subject. Time in this case becomes one of the most precious resources, and a constraint at the same time, of both teachers and students. As that is the case in English teaching, many

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secondary teachers are tempted to put writing as one of the first things to be cut back or relegated to homework.

Writing thus receives insufficient attention in secondary education; developing writing ability is considered to be the most difficult task for secondary teachers as it involves many aspects of writing, such as the content, the organisation, the language use, the vocabulary, and the mechanical aspects. Additionally, the general objective of EFL in Indonesia that gives strong emphasis on the development of students' reading skill has created a situation where the teaching of other skills seems to have been neglected. The current syllabus has even placed the development of writing skill at the last order of priorities of the language skills (Huda, 1999).

At university level, at Departments of English, writing means expressing ideas in acceptable written English for a particular purpose, such as explaining events or phenomena, telling a story, describing an object/a process, and persuading other people. Many students are not ready to do such hard work due to their limited amount of language to produce a piece of writing. In EFL environment, where the situation for learning is more dominant than that for acquisition, it is difficult to begin a composition course with an active writing assignment because the learners do not have adequate intake to write with. Writing courses, consequently, become a burden and are generally among the least favourite subjects for both the students and the lecturers.

This paper begins with a brief description of the current practice of teaching writing courses at the Department of English, State University of Malang, Indonesia. It then presents a survey of ESL writing literature to show how process approaches have been accepted in ESL composition. Some challenges in teaching writing at the Department using the approach are discussed, referring more specifically to peer response activities. The paper finally offers a pedagogic proposal in the form of strategy training for more effective peer response.

TEACHING WRITING AT THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, STATE UNIVERSITY OF MALANG

The Department of English, State University of Malang, provides the students with four sequenced writing courses (Writing I, Writing II, Writing III, and Writing IV), which altogether comprise 14 semester

credits out of the overall 154 credits in the curriculum. The general objective of the courses is to enable the students to communicate in written English with different specific objectives and emphasis for each course level. Writing I is an introductory course designed to develop students' ability to write good English sentences; Writing II aims to develop students' ability to write good English paragraphs; Writing III focuses on developing students' ability to write various types of English essays and helping them to develop coherence and progression in the organisation of their texts; and the primary aim of Writing IV is to develop students' ability to write English essays laying much stress on argumentative essay writing, analysis and judgment, reason and support. Each course level is a prerequisite for the subsequent one.

Every writing class is split into two groups. Such a policy is enforced by the Department under the assumption that the smaller the number of the students in the group, the more effective the teaching and learning of writing will be. In other words, in every semester, there are a number of writing groups in parallel classes offered at the Department. In spite of the enforced policy, most of the research findings concerning the students' writing quality, as surveyed by Mukminatien (1997), indicate that the students' writing achievement is not satisfactory.

In terms of teaching techniques, there is no suggestion available for the lecturers. The classroom activities vary depending on the lecturers' styles; we are told *what* to teach, but not *how* to teach it. So, there are as many techniques as there are lecturers of writing courses. However, there appear two things in common in the teaching and learning process. Mukminatien (1997) describes that the classroom activities are dominated by a lot of assignments given to the students and by discussions dealing with the students' problems related to the assigned topic. The discussions usually cover the organisation, word choice (vocabulary), language use, and mechanical aspects. Content is considered less important than language use and organisation because the prime goal is more on the correct use of the language than on the quality of the content. Feedback comes in the form of error correction by the lecturer, seemingly treating a piece of writing as a source of language errors.

Of the four approaches or orientations to ESL writing described by Silva (1990), the classroom activities belong to controlled composition, especially for the earlier writing courses, and current-traditional rhetoric for the later ones with the classroom as the primary writing context.

Quite similar to the four stages of learning to write in the product approach: familiarisation, controlled writing, guided writing, and free writing (Pincas, 1982 as in Badger & White, 2000), introduction of new modes of discourse and methods of developing ideas usually begins with the lecturer explaining and discussing a model essay from the recommended textbook. Exercises relevant to the new topic are given covering grammar review and other aspects of writing. The students are then assigned to write a paragraph or an essay by choosing the topics available from the textbook or given by the lecturer. It is obvious that students begin to learn writing by analysing the structures of a discourse including the structures of the sentences. Right from the beginning, they are made aware of the rhetorical convention and the grammatical rules. Such habit-forming teaching methods are meant to prevent errors from occurring.

Our emphasis in teaching writing seems to contradict recent research findings on writing pedagogy. Research evidence suggests that focusing on language errors in writing improves neither grammatical accuracy nor writing fluency (White & Arndt, 1991). At the Department, many studies that have been done indicate that within the four-year learning time, students' grammatical errors decrease very slowly despite the fact that correct language use is emphasised. Higher class levels did not guarantee better grammatical competence as shown in students' essays (Latief, 1990), and the most problematic grammatical features consistently appeared in students' compositions (Mukminatien, 1997).

The fact that no suggestion on teaching techniques is available indicates that our teaching practice is actually not regulated. We are free to decide how to teach what the writing course requires. The freedom we enjoy in our classroom has allowed some of us writing instructors at the Department to introduce the writing-as-a-process-approach to our students. The introduction has been generated by a lot of reflection about our own teaching after observing a number of English primary classrooms implementing the process approach and reading theoretical and empirical evidence from studies on English-as-a-second-language (ESL) writing. Analysis of much writing literature has shown how the approach is accepted for application to ESL composition.

THE PROCESS APPROACH IN ESL WRITING INSTRUCTION

In the teaching of writing, the process-oriented approach has become a very influential teaching methodology. The paradigm shift in the teaching

of ESL writing from the product-oriented to the process-oriented approach seems to have been motivated by dissatisfaction with controlled composition and the current, traditional approaches (Silva, 1990). The approach seeks to shift emphasis away from an endless stream of compositions assigned by the teacher, written by the students, handed in for marking by the teacher, and handed back to the students with marks on mistakes. The emphasis, instead, is on understanding and assisting students in developing the process of writing. Brainstorming, journal writing, multiple drafting, feedback practice, revision, and final editing are then all the steps in the process during which the teacher and students can read and respond to the writing as it develops into the final product (Reid, 1994; Susser, 1994).

Following Susser's (1994) examination, process writing pedagogy has two essential components: awareness and intervention. This approach, as highlighted by Raimes (1991), pays much attention to help students develop their ideas in the process of meaning making, that is, attention to the writer as language learner and creator of a text, and thus helps make them aware that writing is a process. In place of analysis and correction of the written product has come an awareness of the process of writing, which involves pre-writing work to generate ideas and the writing of multiple drafts to revise and extend those ideas. This thereby decreases the focus on surface-level errors and achieving correctness.

Such recommendation of treating ESL writing as a process was made by Zamel and Raimes (in Krapels, 1990), basing it on developments in first language composition theory, practice, and research. Much literature has shown the influence of the first language discussion of process writing on ESL writing instruction. ESL practitioners have frequently been advised to adopt practices from first language writing. The underlying assumption is that first and second language writing are practically identical or at least very similar, both employing the recursive process.

The second element of the pedagogy is intervention. Teachers and other students can help writers in the process of writing, thus applying Vygotsky's recognition that there would be a difference between students' ability to write as individuals and their ability to write with intervention from their teacher and classmates. As the process itself is recursive rather than linear, generally characterised by the procedures of pre-writing, drafting, evaluating, and revising (White and Arndt, 1991), intervening is to

occur throughout the process (Zamel, 1983a in Susser, 1994). It is useful when it is done during the writing process, that is, between drafts; it is not useful when done at the end (Krashen, 1984 in Susser, 1994).

As a recursive model, the process approach focuses on how to revise in response to feedback from the reader, whether the reader is the instructor, an ESL peer, or the author him- or herself (Zhang, 1995). This emphasis implies the need to provide feedback and constructively respond to the feedback in ESL writing classes adopting the approach. Feedback is seen as essential to the multiple-draft process, as it is 'what pushes the writer through the various drafts and on to the eventual end-product' (Keh, 1990 in Muncie, 2000:47). In the process-oriented approach, various types of feedback are possible. The instruction reflects a growing appreciation of peer response in addition to the teacher's feedback. In other words, peer response has gained its popularity in writing classes partly due to an emphasis on processes in the teaching of writing.

The process writing pedagogy has been accepted by many ESL/EFL writing teachers as it can be used with a variety of writing theories, is applicable to both academic and personal writing, and is concerned with final products as well as students' writing processes (Susser, 1994). There is no theoretical conflict between the process pedagogy and instruction in grammatical and rhetorical forms. The pedagogy would not emphasise fluency at the expense of accuracy. Nor does it lead to merely personal narratives as studies have shown how the pedagogy is useful for teaching ESL students how to write academic reports and for preparing such students to write exam papers. Additionally, Zamel (1984a in Susser, 1994) points out that a process approach is by its very nature concerned with product.

Such exploration of how process approaches have been accepted in ESL/EFL composition has generated a lot of reflection about my own teaching. Emphasising form, that is students' correct use of the language, over meaning, that is expression of ideas, seems to contradict recent trends in second language instruction. As Raimes (1991) points out there are parallels between process writing and current communicative, task-based, and collaborative instruction and curriculum development. Furthermore, "we do the writer harm if we are interested solely in the product and not in the process of writing" (Raimes, 1979 in Susser, 1994:37).

Motivated by personal dissatisfaction with the current practice of teaching writing and by the need to continuously improve teaching practice, some of us writing instructors at the Department began using the approach

in 1997. As we implement the approach, we are convincing ourselves as White and Arndt (1991) assert that it is through attention to meaning, and not just form, that language -and writing- improve. This is also in quest of reasons why negative attitudes about writing spread among students that writing courses are dull, dry, boring, and too difficult.

PROBLEMS WITH PEER RESPONSE ACTIVITIES

As to my own writing classroom, I would say that getting started with this new approach has been painful. I have to create an atmosphere of a writing class which is different from what my students are used to enjoying. The phases of the writing process now involve pre-writing, writing, and revising, which should be viewed as overlapping and inter-connecting stages. These characteristics have led to an increased use of peer response sessions in the classroom, permitting students to use other students' comments while revising their texts.

Furthermore, in addition to the classroom tasks based on the syllabus, I offer the use of journals. Students can write anything they want to in their journal books, and written responses are provided depending on what they have written down. In this way, I hope the students learn that writing can be used as a genuine way of communication and expect that the advantages of using the process-oriented approach would apply to my classroom.

A closer look, however, suggests that many of my students do not like participating in the peer response activities. Some of students' journal entries and their responses to my informal interviews with them reflect negative attitudes toward peer response. They look upon my response as a teacher more favourably. It seems that the problems here lie more in the process of building up mutual trust among the students, that is, creating an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect, and a commitment to learn from each other.

In trying to understand the problems of implementing peer response activities, two different perspectives, field- and theory-related, are examined. The former refers to the data obtained from personal observation and interviews, while the latter refers to what research evidence on ESL writing has shown concerning peer response activities.

Empirically, there are at least three challenges in implementing peer response activities. The first seems to deal with language proficiency.

The students have doubted the value of peer response because they thought that their peers were approximately of the same, or perhaps lower, English proficiency and that they were similarly still in the process of learning English. It appears here that it is not an easy matter for the students to differentiate the problem of lack of language proficiency in English from the ability to express ideas. They mistrust their classmates' responses based on their reason that English is not their native language. In other words, the challenge here is to convince the students that lack of English proficiency does not necessarily prevent someone from offering fruitful ideas.

The next problem refers to culturally-related roles of students and teachers. Based on personal experience, the practice of students responding to the writings of other students might be considered culturally unusual. Students generally view the teacher as the possessor of all knowledge and the one who is responsible for responding to their work. Such an attitude is likely to result in students' difficulty in accepting their peers' responses. Similar cultural characteristics in classroom techniques are found in China, where the teacher is traditionally viewed as an authority figure (Hudson-Ross & Dong, 1990 in Nelso & Murphy, 1993). There should be an attempt to change such an attitude and to develop students' awareness that peer response is a worthwhile activity.

The third problem relates to the changes of the teacher's roles. In the process approach, the teacher facilitates the students' writing. In addition to the more traditional teacher role, the teacher, as Muncie (2000) cited, is involved in different roles, such as the role of 'audience', 'assistant', 'consultant', 'reader', or 'collaborator'. My students, however, might find it hard to accept this. They know that the fact remains at the end of the semester we EFL teachers play the role of ultimate evaluator. This brings an authoritarian dimension to the teacher's role (Muncie, 2000) so that students are likely to favour teacher response more than peer one, as also suggested by Zhang (1995).

Meanwhile, theoretical and empirical evidence from studies on ESL writing has shown the need for preparing the students for more effective ways to use peer response activities in the process-writing course. ESL students need extensive preparation and direct instruction in ways of participating in peer response activities and evaluating other students' writing (e.g., Berg, 1999; Kuswando, 2001; Lane & Potter, 1998; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Stanley, 1992). Irrespective of the context of writing

classes - EFL, ESL, or first language - responding to writing effectively is not a skill with which most students, whether ESL or not, have had extensive experience. They need to be appropriately prepared in order to participate skilfully in peer response and perform appropriate revisions of their texts. The literature above might explain my observation revealing that the students' questions or suggestions to each other are often superficial. They focus on mechanics or small details of the piece than on more valuable feedback.

Thus, regarding my own classroom, it is challenging for me as a novice to the approach to equip my students with the extensive experience to offer effective response. This has motivated me to propose a study which focuses on training students in the use of strategies for peer response in an EFL writing classroom.

PEDAGOGIC PROPOSAL: TRAINING STRATEGIES FOR PEER RESPONSE

Employing one kind of classroom action research, the study has a two-fold purpose. The first is to train EFL students in strategies for effective peer response, which is meant to create a context conducive to involving them in peer response activities. The second purpose is to investigate the ways in which peer-response preparation affects students' attitudes toward peer response, the ways in which it affects their ability to respond constructively to someone else's writing, and the ways in which it supports or not their writing development.

Training strategies for peer response aims to prepare the students for more effective ways to use peer-response activities in the process-writing course. The procedures for strategy training in this study have been developed based on the works of Berg (1999), Hafernik (1983), Lane and Potter (1998), and Stanley (1992). More specifically, the training has the following chief goals: to convince EFL students that peer response is a worthwhile activity, to help them focus discussions on particular aspects of writing, to suggest appropriate language to use in their responses, and to help them constructively react to a response to their own writing from a peer.

The training, during which time the students are expected to discover rules for effective peer response, spans five weeks at the beginning of the 16-week course. At the same time, the students will also learn about

writing English academic essays and receive specific instructions about their assignments. As the writing course meets two times a week for a 100-minute session each time, the intensive training will be offered for approximately fifteen hours during the semester. However, when considered necessary, the review of peer-response principles will still be offered in the remaining weeks of the semester, during which time the students put the strategies they have learned in the training into practice when writing the five essays assigned for their writing course.

The training is divided into a set of 10 guidelines, which have been modified based on the works of Berg (1999), Hafernik (1983), Lane and Potter (1998), and Stanley (1992), to meet the needs of the student population and the learning environment.

The introduction to peer response will begin during the first week, in which the idea of peer response in a writing-as-a-process approach will be briefly introduced in the form of a short lecture with examples of how peer responses have been given and used. The training activities will from then on be in the forms of demonstration, discussion, and role play. The peer response sheet to be used in this study includes such questions as follows: *What is the focus/point of this essay?; Can you find the thesis statement?; Do all the paragraphs support the thesis statement?; Please read the essay carefully and underline everything you don't understand; Would you add more details in the paragraphs? Put an "A" where you would add details; What are the best aspects of this essay? What do you think is especially well done?; What questions, comments, and/or suggestions do you have for the writer?*

The peer response sheet is provided both in an English version and in an Indonesian one, which is meant to prevent the students from being unable to offer suggestions because of language problems. This sheet is to be used by the students to comment on each other's papers prior to coming to the writing group. The students will be required to make copies of their writing for group members. The grouping of peer-response sessions will remain the same throughout the semester for effective and consistent collaboration within the groups.

CONCLUSION

The paper has discussed that given a working environment which offers the flexibility of the teaching techniques has allowed us to implement

the process-oriented approach in teaching writing, hoping that our teaching practice will be closer to recent research on ESL writing. Since this approach has been only recently put into practice, attempts still need to be made to create a context conducive to involving students in the process of writing and more specifically in working collaboratively in the form of responding to each others' texts. Theoretical and empirical evidence from studies on ESL writing has indicated the need to teach ESL students how to participate in peer response activities. The challenges I face in my classroom have generated the study which will focus on training students in the use of strategies for effective peer response. The training itself functions as an action which will be implemented to develop students' positive attitudes toward peer response, students' ability in reading and responding to someone else's writing, and students' reaction to a response from a peer. This is all expected to minimize students' resistance to the innovation, which might not appear to bear immediate benefits to them.

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