

**What Can We Learn From  
the Writing Process  
Approach ?**

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**Abstract**

This article considers the process-oriented approach to writing and the extent to which, and ways in which, its issues have been addressed in second language classroom. The traditional product-oriented approach to writing has overemphasised the linguistic aspects of writing and the result of the composition, that is, the composed product of writing. It fails to see the complexity of the act of composing. This failure is redressed in the process-oriented paradigm which regards writing as a messy process leading to clarity. Building upon these assumptions characterising the writing paradigm shift, the article discusses the relevance of the current process approach to EFL writing classes.

**Keywords:** *writing, composition, cognitive processes, process /product approach, EFL, L1 – L2 writing pedagogy.*

**Introduction**

Over the last three decades there has been a paradigm shift from product-oriented composition teaching to process-oriented paradigm in the field of ESL writing. Advocates of the current process approach considered that the traditional product approach failed to account for the complex nature of the act of writing. Efforts to redress this failure have been made to understand the nature of writing process with focus on what writers do when they compose a piece of writing.

The process-oriented approach to writing: Underlying assumptions and relevance for L2 classes

The process approach defines writing as "a non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (Zamel, 1983:165). Research on the composing process has encouraged teachers to look for a model which defines writing as a complex process whereby the writer discovers meaning instead of merely finding an appropriate structure in which to package ideas already developed from the outset (Chang, 1998). As Hairston (1982) indicates, teachers in this paradigm evaluate the written product by how well it fulfills the writer's intention and meets the audience's needs. In this context, it is suggested that less emphasis should be given to surface-level errors and correctness in the writing class.

Another assumption of the approach is that writing is a non-linear process. In the traditional product paradigm, writing moves in one direction from beginning to end. Views associated with the new paradigm believe that pre-writing, drafting and revising are important activities, which overlap and intertwine. In this context, focus is given to the writer's cognitive structures and the process through which s/he goes to create text. One of the most commonly cited characterisations of the writing cognitive structure is Flower and Hayes' (1980:10) model which shows how cognitive operations produce complex actions in the writing process. According to Flower and Hayes, the writer's world (figure 1) includes three main parts: *the task environment*, the writer's *long-term memory*, and the *writing process*.



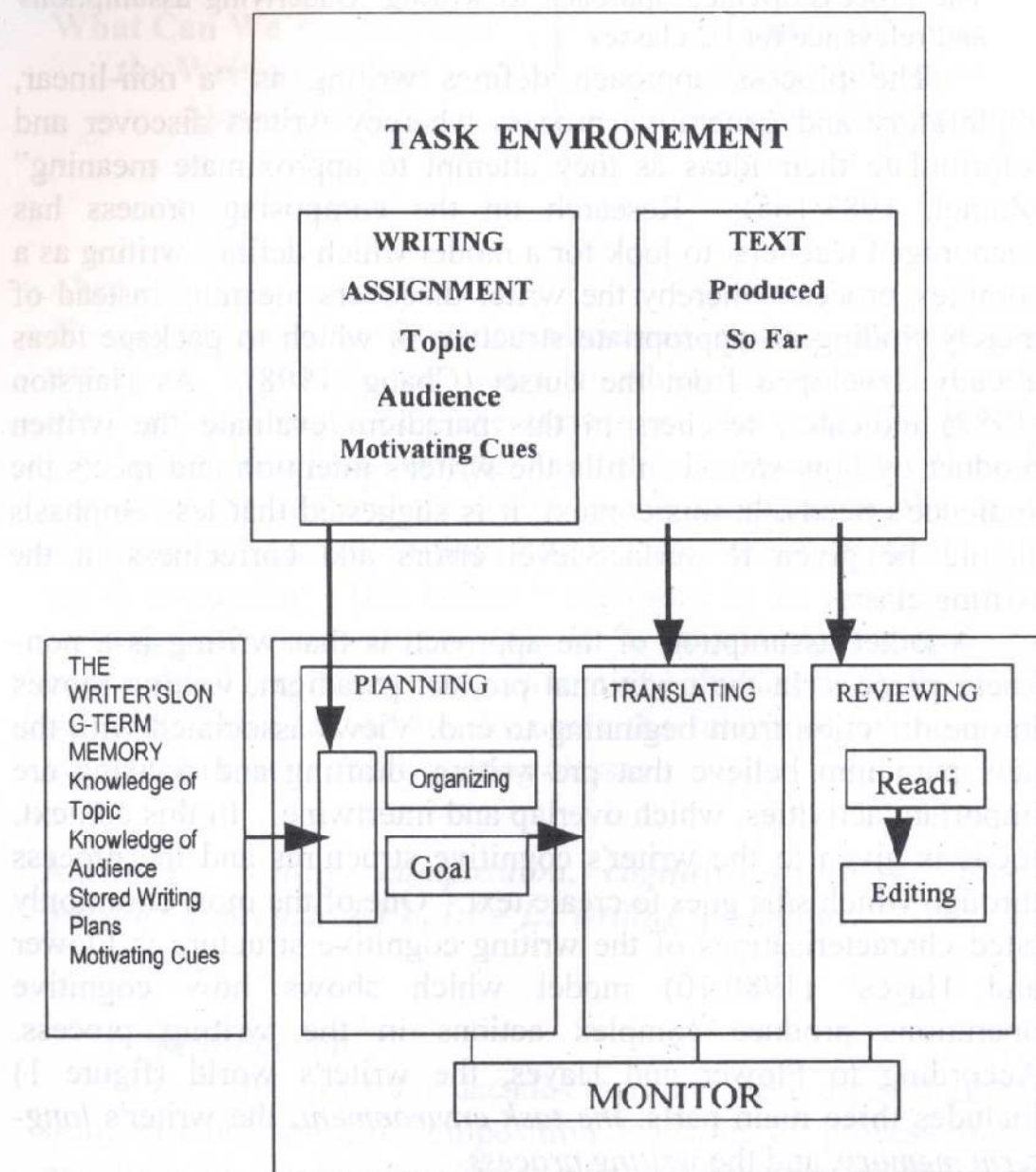


Figure 1. A Model of the Writing Processes

**Source:** Flower, L. S. & Hayes, J. R. (1980). Identifying the organization of writing processes. In L. W. Gregg & E. R. Steinberg (Eds.) *Cognitive process in writing* (pp.3-30). NJ : Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

These three components interact within the cognitive model. The task environment and the writer's long-term memory are the context in which the model operates. The writing process is subdivided into three major processes: *planning, translating and reviewing*. In the writing process the writer is involved in such sub-processes as *generating ideas, discovering a 'voice' with which to write, planning, goal-setting, monitoring and evaluating* what is going to be written as well as what has been written. The cognitive model suggests that writing processes are not linear but rather recursive where major processes and sub-processes of composing interact to produce a piece of written text.

### **Second language composition: Principles and models**

Early ESL writing research stemmed from a rich and substantial body of L1 writing research on composing processes. L1 composition research and teaching theory had a great deal of influence on opening new developments in ESL composition research and teaching. From a process perspective, it is said that writing is a complex, recursive, and creative process that is similar in its broad outlines for L1 and L2 writers.

Johns (1990) makes the point that most of the research and pedagogy has been drawn from research in L1 composition. The last two decades have seen a growing body of literature on L2 writing research. ESL writing researchers (e.g. Zamel 1976; Raimes 1985) have conducted investigations of L2 writing processes and have concluded that the composing processes of L2 writers are similar to those of L1 writers. A number of studies on



L2 writing find that the composing processes of unskilled L2 writers are similar to those of unskilled L1 writers. It is also reported that the composing processes of skilled L2 writers are similar to those of skilled L1 writers. Zamel (1982 & 1983), for instance, reports that skilled L2 writers revised more and spent more time on their writing than unskilled writers. Skilled writers delayed editing until the end of the process, while unskilled writers edited from the beginning to the end of the process. Zamel's skilled L2 writers' attitudes toward revision were identical to those of skilled L1 writers. These findings echoed those of native-speaker writing studies on the writing strategies of skilled and unskilled L1 writers (e.g. Perl, 1979; Pianko 1979; Sommers 1980). It may be assumed that skilled writers regarded revision as a means of discovering ideas, while the unskilled writers were concerned with local problems from the very beginning. The latter change words and phrases but rarely produce changes that affected meaning.

Arguing for a process approach some L2 studies have investigated the influence of the first language on the L2 language writing process. They found that L2 writers use of their first language in L2 writing was a common strategy among second language writers. In Lay's (1982) study, for example, the essays whose writers utilised more native language switches were of better quality in the light of ideas, organisation and details. According to Galvan (1985), his subjects' writing in L2 was generally affected by both their L1 and L2 thinking and culture. Advanced-level L2 writers in Hall's (1987) study used both L1 and L2 knowledge and experience while revising. These findings support Raimes' (1987) assumption that L2 writing has no definable types. It is generally accepted that L2 writers represent a variety of types, backgrounds and needs. More importantly, the observation on L2 writing has made the investigation of L2 writing processes so critical. Only a more close and rigorous investigation may lead us to a clear understanding of the unique nature of L2 writing, of how and to

what extent it differs from L1 writing. Silva (1990) shows that, even though L1 and L2 writers have similar processes that include the same steps of planning, drafting, editing and revising, they are very different at each of these phases

### **Relevance to EFL writing classes**

There is a consensus among researchers into writing in L1 and L2 on one essential feature – that writing is a process, a complex process with a number of operations going on simultaneously. It is asserted that we, as language teachers, need to know about and to take into account the process of how learners produce a piece of writing. It is certainly useful to understand the process approach so that we can reflect on the difficulties it may present to our students. Only then will we be in a better position to develop classroom practices. Translated into classroom context, the process approach to writing calls for a model based on three key features:

#### ***Writing and the writer***

From the findings of various studies, it is suggested that students should be encouraged to attend to content revision at first, and delay editing changes until the last draft. According to Flower (1979:36), to delay editing lowers the writer's cognitive load, allowing her/ him freedom to generate a breadth of information and a variety of alternative relationships before locking her/himself into a premature formulation. It is assumed that over-concern with grammatical rules may prevent writers from concerning themselves with meaning and from discovering new ideas while writing. However, the emphasis on fluency in communicative writing does not diminish the role of editing in a classroom; rather it should act as an aid in the process, not as an end in itself.

The process approach suggests that teachers should help the student build an awareness of her/himself as a writer and encourage her/ his sense of confidence. In the writing process approach, the



teacher and student face the task of making meaning together: "they start on a trip of exploration together. They find where they are going as they get there" Murray (1980: 13). Smith (1982) points out the danger that too rigid a prior specification can interfere with the creativity of a writer. Following these assumptions, (Zamel (1987) indicates that teachers need to adopt the pedagogy which takes into account and acknowledges students' attempts to create and negotiate meaning. This implication has turned much of researchers' and teachers' attention to the individual writer, while the traditional approach pays more attention to the written product. The process approach has considered what the traditional paradigm failed to consider: what writers in fact do to produce a text. It explores the underlying constraints that writers juggle and orchestrate to produce a text (Silva 1990). This attitude towards the writer urges us to become more concerned with an individual's purpose and desire for writing, for the act of composing is the result of a genuine need to express one's personal feeling, and reaction to experience (Zamel 1982).

#### *Writing as a recursive process*

Most of the studies emphasised the cyclical nature of writing during which writers move back and forth discovering, analysing and clarifying ideas. Shaughnessy's (1977) points to this tendency defining writing as "a messy process that leads to clarity". The schema of the process approach is the continual and overlapping operations of pre-writing, writing and rewriting, and editing. Hedge (1988), describes the process of writing as the overlapping and intertwining of those activities ( Figure 2):

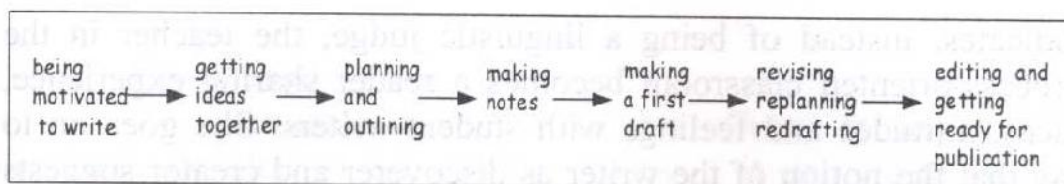


Figure 2. The Complex Interplay of Activities Involved in Writing

**Source:** Hedge, T. (1988). *Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press;

The model of writing in the above figure, though simplified, shows the overall stages involved in the writing process. In effect, the process of writing is not linear: the writer moves backwards and forwards, between drafting and revising, with stages of replanning in between (Hedge, 1988).

Given this model, it is not surprising that teachers were urged to revise their misconception that skilled writers sit down and write through to the end. This misconception of the act of writing according to Smith (1982: 196) comes from the fact that we only see the written product and never witness or experience planning and revision. Similarly, Krashen (1984) points out that classroom teachers encourage this error when they assign timed compositions in class and require students to finish within the hour. Such assignments give students the impression that extensive planning is not necessary or desirable; and that revision is not part of the writing process. Thus, what we need is L2 writing pedagogy which shows that composition is a matter of producing a text according to a constantly changing plan. In writing, as Widdowson (1983:41) asserts, one so frequently arrives at a destination not originally envisaged, by a route not yet planned for in the original itinerary.

### Writing and the teacher

While the teacher in the traditional paradigm plays the role of an examiner of the student's written work, the process approach suggests that the teacher play more than one role. As Chang (1997)



indicates, instead of being a linguistic judge, the teacher in the process-oriented classroom becomes a reader sharing experience, ideas, attitudes and feelings with student-writers. She goes on to say that the notion of the writer as discoverer and creator suggests that the teacher should provide optimum opportunities to develop the writer's ideas and to engage her/ him in interaction with the reader. In a similar vein, Silva (1990) notes that guidance and intervention are seen as preferable to control in the process approach. Giving help during writing proves far more effective than giving it afterwards (Hedge, 1988: 25). Along with guidance and encouragement, it is suggested that the teacher be aware of individual differences among students in composing. Kantor (1984) emphasises a type of instruction which best meets individual students' needs and abilities. The point is that the classroom needs to provide a supportive environment in which students can experience being writers, having purpose and audience. In other words, students need to be encouraged to take risks, and engaged in creating meaning through planning and replanning a piece of writing, drafting it, revising it, and sharing it with others.

In summary, the role of the teacher in the writing class is becoming more demanding; it is not only limited to that of evaluator of students' written product and supportive of students' engagement in writing, as there has also been demand for teachers to act as classroom researchers. It is suggested that teachers should become researchers themselves and investigate the relationship between teaching and writing development in their own classrooms (Raimes, 1991). Zamel (1987) stresses the benefits of being a teacher as a researcher in terms of bridging the gap between research and practice. According to her, teachers can apply what we have learned from research in the most profound way, for they live with and within the daily situation where writing is taught. In the process of investigating their own practice and the extent to which this practice affects what students do, these teachers are themselves classroom researchers.

### **Conclusion**

To summarise, from the insights offered by the body of research devoted to L2 writing process, it can be said that L2 teachers today understand the nature of L2 writing process. Being a recursive activity in which the writer moves back and forth simultaneously between planning/replanning, drafting and revising, writing is said to be a complex process. As the process is recursive and complex, teacher feedback on student writing is an ongoing process. This means that the teacher, while student writers are engaged in composing, becomes a reader sharing experience, ideas, attitudes and feeling with student writers. L2 writing teachers play a support role and a researcher's role. They should constantly reflect on the composition classroom with the aim of making their teaching more useful and their students more successful writers.

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