

An Empirical Study on the Application of Process Approach in Non-English Majors' Writing

Dongmei Zhou¹

¹ School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, China

Correspondence: Dongmei Zhou, School of Foreign Languages, China West Normal University, No. 1 ShiDa Road, 637002 Nanchong, Sichuan, China. Tel: 86-133-5027-6709. E-mail: zhoum9@163.com

Received: October 16, 2014 Accepted: December 23, 2014 Online Published: February 13, 2015

doi:10.5539/elt.v8n3p89 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n3p89>

Abstract

Process approach has been introduced to China for more than two decades. This approach which views writing as a recursive mental cognitive process is one of the most popular methods for teaching writing. It attaches more importance to a series of activities in the process of writing and the interaction among the student writers. Meanwhile, it emphasizes that writing should be learned in the writing process. This paper aims at exploring the influence of process approach on non-English majors. The author first made a questionnaire to investigate how the non-English majors accomplished their writing tasks and then did an experiment to explore the influence of process approach on their writing ability. The research findings show that non-English majors tend to employ the traditional product approach in writing and that process approach has positive influence on their writing ability. This study sheds light to non-English major teachers in teaching writing.

Keywords: non-English majors, process approach, product approach

1. Introduction

Writing, as a skill of output, is one of the four basic skills in English study. But it is considered the most difficult of the four basic language skills to master. Although college English is a compulsory course for college students in China, writing is only one part of college English teaching. Though not majoring in English, all freshmen, sophomores and first-year graduates have to learn English in classroom in almost all universities. The normal writing practice for non-English majors follows a routine: the teacher assigns a topic, the students begin thinking about it individually and put down their thoughts into words and then hand in their final drafts. Although they practice writing in this way again and again, they find it still difficult to improve their writing ability. On the one hand, many teachers devote much time to teaching writing but achieve little; on the other hand, the students generally reflect that it is hard to write a composition. Many college English teachers and students have been plagued by how to effectively carry out college English writing and improve students' writing ability.

Many Chinese researchers and scholars have done many researches on writing in order to improve Chinese English learners' writing ability and their researches mainly focus on the following aspects: first, writing teaching, including the introduction to the textbook and different writing methods; second, writing product, including the error analysis and the contrast analysis; third, writing process, mainly on students' writing process such as their thinking in writing and some writing characteristics in writing process; fourth, the influence of different factors on writing; fifth, readers' feedback, including teacher's assessment, peers' review and self-evaluation and so on (Qin, 2009). Although many researches on writing have been done, the present situation of English writing teaching is unsatisfactory.

So in order to find a good way to improve non-English majors writing, this paper has made a questionnaire to investigate how non-English majors accomplish their writing tasks and then introduced process writing approach to non-English majors and applied it in their writing. Then it mainly discussed the results from the questionnaire and the experiment, expecting it will be helpful to non-English majors and their teachers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Product Approach

In China, product approach has been employed in the traditional English writing teaching in which compositions are judged as final products and the evaluation of writing skills is done on the basis of timed production of

grammatically and lexically accurate texts (Porto, 2001). In the product approach, writing is seen as being primarily about linguistic knowledge, with attention focused on the appropriate use of vocabulary, syntax, and cohesive device (Pincas, 1982). Writing is just another way of practicing grammar and the teacher's job is simply to design, assign and evaluate writing (Reid, 1993, p. 23). The tasks are those in which the learner imitates, copies and transforms models provided by the teacher and/or the textbook (Nunan, 1991). Learning to write generally has four stages: familiarization, controlled writing, guided writing and free writing (Badger & White, 2000). Product approach reflects a traditional, teacher-centered approach which emphasizes what to write. In short, this is a one-way communication mode between the teacher and the students: In the four stages, the students write individually and the teacher reviews individually.

It is clear that product approach has its defects. First, it only offers opportunities for students to mechanically imitate and practice the sentence patterns and structures; second, it does not provide plenty of practice before writing, so they can not share their views with their peers; third, it does not offer opportunities for students to interact and communicate with each other. So when they are in trouble or encounter difficulties, they cannot get teacher's just-in-time help and peer's response. Due to such defects, this traditional writing approach has been challenged.

2.2 Process Approach

In the 70s of the 20th century, compared with product approach, process approach was proposed by western linguists. Graves (1978) gives a definition of process approach which emphasizes students' writing process, not the final product. He thinks students should understand and take in the process, including: information collection, making plans, writing stage, peer evaluation and peer editing and so on. Tribble (1996, p. 160) defines the process approach as an approach to the teaching of writing which stresses the creativity of the individual writer, and which pays attention to the development of the good writing practices rather than the imitation of models. Process approach emphasizes the composing processes writers make use of in writing (such as planning, drafting, and revising) and which seeks to improve students' writing skills through developing their use of effective composing processes (Richards, J. Platt, & H. Platt, 2000, p. 364). These definitions about process approach, in fact, focus on the process of writing in which students were encouraged to explore a topic through writing, to share drafts with teachers and peers, and to use each draft as a beginning for the next (Reid, 1993, p. 31). Process writing represents a shift in emphasis in teaching from product of writing activities (K. John & H. John, 2002, p. 257). It can help learners realize the transformation from passive to autonomous learning (Jiang, 2003).

In a word, process writing approach is a student-centered approach which views writing as a recursive process in planning, drafting and revising that overlap and intertwine. In the writing process, students can freely discuss the topics with peers or in group, share ideas, communicate with peers and the teacher and get feedback from them. Students, even those who are not good at writing, can learn how to write.

2.3 Stages of Process Approach

There are different views about the stages that writers go through in the writing process. The typical stages of process approach were proposed by Tribble and White and Arndt.

Tribble (1996, p. 9) proposed a typical four-stage model: pre-writing, composing/drafting, revising, and editing. This is a cyclical process in which writers may return to prewriting activities, for example, after doing some editing or revising.



White and Arndt's (1997) diagram of process writing (arrows added)

White and Arndt (1997) described the process writing in a diagram which was based on Tribble's four-stage mode. This diagram clearly stated how process approach in writing works. It offers teachers a framework which tries to capture the recursive, not linear, nature of writing. Activities of generating ideas (e.g. brainstorming)

helps writers tap their long-term memory and answer the questions, ‘What can I say on this topic?’ Focusing (e.g. fast writing) deals with ‘What is my overall purpose in writing this?’ Structuring is organizing the text to answer the question: ‘How can I present these ideas in a way that is acceptable to my reader?’ Drafting is the transition from writer-based thought into reader-based text. Multiple drafts are produced, each influenced by feedback from the teacher and /or peers. Activities such as reformulation and the use of of checklists in guiding feedback develop essential evaluating skills. Feedback focuses initially on content and organization. When these are satisfactory, comment on language is given on penultimate drafts for final amendment. Reviewing is standing back from the text and looking at it with fresh eyes, asking ‘Is it right?’ During the writing process, collaboration between learners and with teachers is essential. The complex and recursive nature of writing is developed in this model.

White and Arndt (1997, p. 7) also listed a typical sequence of activities in the process writing like this:

Discussion (class, small group, pair)

Brainstorming/making notes/asking questions

Fastwriting/selecting ideas/establishing a viewpoint

Rough draft

Preliminary self-evaluation

Arranging information/structuring the text

First draft

Group/peer evaluation and responding

Conference

Second draft

Self-evaluation/editing/proof-reading

Finished draft

Final responding to draft

The activities listed by White and Arndt are represented in Tribble’s model, such as brainstorming, discussing, evaluation, etc. In this study, the author employed the activities of process writing proposed by White and Arndt.

2.4 Previous Studies about Process Approach

From 1980s to 1990s, many western linguists and scholars (Flower, Hayes, 1981; Horowitz, 1986; Keh, 1990; Krashen, 1984; Miller, 1992; Reid, 1982; Silva, 1990 and etc.) have done researches on process writing approach. Their research results demonstrated the theoretical and practical significance of process approach in writing. Also, many Chinese scholars and teachers have done many researches on process approach. Hu (2003) explored how to employ process approach to motivate students’ interest to write and finally improve students’ writing ability. Tong (2007) conducted a comparative experiment by employing product approach and process approach among 120 students of Grade two in senior high school and found that process writing approach has positive effect on the students. Wu (2013) carried out an experiment among 175 non-English majors and found that peer review could significantly increase students’ self-efficacy in writing.

In any case, the researches abroad and at home aim at exploring an effective writing method to promote writing teaching and improve learners’ writing ability. And their researches proved that process approach can increase student writers’ interest, self-efficacy and motivation to write and etc.

3. Research Design

This part will elaborate the research design, including research questions, subjects, research instruments and procedures.

3.1 Research Questions

This empirical study intends to test the efficacy of the implementation of process approach upon Non-English majors. However, as a requisite for the study, it is necessary to justify that before the experiment process approach is not employed. Thus, to be exact, two questions are raised:

- 1) How did the students accomplish a writing task before the experiment?
- 2) What is the influence of process approach on students’ writing ability?

3.2 Subjects

This research was carried out among sophomores of Grade 2012 from 28 classes who answered the questionnaire for the students. All the students are non-English majors. The experiment was conducted in two of the classes taught by the author, one was the experimental class, and the other was the controlled class. All the subjects were chosen from a university of Sichuan Province, China. In this university, students were divided into Class A and B, according to their English scores in the National English Entrance Examination. 'A' stands for the top students, 'B' means average. Both the experimental class and the controlled class were chosen from Class B.

3.3 Research Instruments

Two instruments are employed in this study. The first is a questionnaire for the students in the two classes. It is intended to find out by what approach they are taught writing, which serves as a precondition for the experiment. Because, if process writing was employed, the study can not be conducted. 9 questions in the questionnaire were designed by the author, based on the activities of the process writing proposed by White and Arndt (1997, p. 7).

The second instrument was one test paper. There was no pre-test paper in this study. As was mentioned above, the two classes were parallel classes based on their English scores in the National Entrance examination. So the internal consistency can be guaranteed. The test paper was used after the experiment to explore what the influence of process approach was on students' writing ability.

3.4 Procedures

The whole study took three stages. The first is the questionnaire survey. 280 copies of the questionnaire were distributed but only 213 copies were collected and valid. And then the author analyzed the collected copies of the questionnaire to justify whether the students accomplished their writing tasks with process approach.

The second is the writing teaching experiment. After the analysis of the questionnaire, it was found that the students accomplished writing tasks with product approach, not process approach. Then the experiment was carried out in the two classes. The process approach was employed in the experimental class, and the traditional product approach in the controlled class. In the controlled class, a topic was given to the students and they finished writing it after class, then turned in their compositions. Finally, the teacher graded the compositions with a score or few comments on their sentence structures or grammar mistakes. In the experimental class, a sequence of activities in process writing proposed by White and Arndt's (1997) was employed in writing teaching. The author first introduced process writing approach to the students, and then guided them to participate in the writing activities: discussion, brainstorming, fastwriting, rough draft, self-evaluation, peer evaluation and the rest. The students were divided into groups and guided to participate in the activities. And these activities can overlap and intertwine.

The third is the test. After one semester's practice with process writing approach, the two classes attended the final-term English examination. In the examination they were allowed 30 minutes to write a composition about the same topic within 150 words. By collecting their scores in the writing part, the author compared the scores of the two classes and analyzed them to get the following results.

4. Analyses of the Questionnaire and the Test Paper

4.1 Analysis of the Questionnaire

Table 1. The frequency of specific activities of process approach

Variables	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Discussion	213	1.00	5.00	1.9061	.9764
Brainstorming	213	1.00	5.00	2.2066	1.0482
Fastwriting	213	1.00	5.00	2.0423	.9230
Rough draft	213	1.00	5.00	2.4038	1.0490
Preliminary elf-evaluation	213	1.00	5.00	2.5164	1.1760
First draft	213	1.00	5.00	2.2207	1.0829
Peer evaluation & respond	213	1.00	5.00	1.5915	.7754
Conference & second draft	213	1.00	5.00	1.5681	.8017
Proof-reading & finished draft	213	1.00	5.00	2.2113	1.1806

Table 1 shows the frequency of the specific activities the students practiced in the writing process: the frequency varies from 2.5164 to 1.9061. It means that the frequency the students practiced the activities of process approach is very low and process approach is not popular among the students and they are more likely to use product approach when writing.

Table 2. The overall frequency of activities in process writing

N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
213	1	3.89	2.0788	.5993

Table 2 shows the overall frequency of the activities the students practiced in writing. The frequency varies from a high of 3.87 to a low of 1, with the average frequency of 2.0788 (SD = 0.5993), which indicates that in practice the students widely use the traditional product approach and the activities of process approach are not popular among them. So the overall frequency the students practice the activities of process writing are not high.

4.2 Analysis of the Test Paper

Table 3. The frequency distribution of the scores of the two classes

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
The experimental Class	51	9.6471	1.4398
The controlled Class	51	8.3137	2.1679

Table 3 clearly shows that the frequency of the scores among the experimental and the controlled class. It is clear that the average score of the experimental class is higher than that of the controlled class ($9.6471 > 8.3137$).

Table 4. T-test for equality of means: results of the scores of the two classes

Variables	t	df	Sig.(2 = tailed)	Mean difference
The experimental class & the controlled class	-3.659	100	.000	-1.333

To examine whether there is a significant difference in the scores between the the classes, a t-test was done on the raw frequency count of the scores of the two classes in the test. As Table 4 shows, the results indicate that a significant difference does exist between the two classes ($t = -3.659$, $p < 0.01$), which means process approach employed in the experimental class has positive influence on students' writing ability. The students of the experimental class have made much more progress in writing than those in the controlled class.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Results and Discussion of the Questionnaire

From Table 1, it can be found that the frequency of the activities the students employed in their writing process is not high. From discussing to the finished draft, the mean varies from 2.5164 to 1.9061. This shows that in writing process the non-English majors do not tend to employ the activities of process approach to finish their wiring tasks. Likewise, from Table 2, it can be found that the maximum is 3.89 and the minimum is 1, and the mean is 2.0788 (SD = 0.5993), which demonstrates that in practice the students seldom participate in the activities of process writing approach. So it can be concluded that non-English majors accomplish writing tasks with the traditional product approach, not process approach.

The application of product approach in their writing practice makes it difficult for them to improve their writing ability. And the difficulty to improve their writing ability results from the following factors:

First, owing to some specific conditions and reasons, English writing is not a principal part in college English teaching and writing is one part of intensive reading (Gao, 1999). Meanwhile, the students are not offered time and opportunities to practice writing activities because there are only 4 English classes per week. After a topic is

assigned to them, they begin to write individually and silently, without participating in activities such as group discussion, draft, revision and proofreading.

Second, because writing tasks are finished silently and individually, the students lack communication with their teacher and peers, and they can get no feedback or response about their writing. Without readers (such as the teacher and peers) in front of them, they will really believe that they have elaborated the main points in their writing.

Third, writing tasks without communicative activities makes students very passive in writing. If writing tasks focus on the product rather than the process, they do not help students to develop real writing skills (Wang, 2000). Writing becomes a linear activity between the teacher and students

Fourth, teacher's grading is mainly on sentence structure and writing is an extension or variant of grammar (Chen, 1994, p. 7). There is no doubt that grammar and grammar correction are helpful for students because it can help develop students to express ideas effectively and make what is written more easily understood. But grammar correction should be connected with the intended meaning.

Finally, most students do not re-read the returned paper from the teacher, because they lack adequate vocabulary and grammar knowledge, which result in the fact that students have trouble expressing their ideas and make what is written difficult to be understood.

5.2 Results and Discussion of the Test Paper

Table 3 shows that the average score of the experimental class is 9.6471 and that of the controlled class is 8.3137. So after the application of process approach in the experimental class, the experimental class got higher scores than the controlled class. According to the t-test in Table 4, there is a significant difference between the experimental class and the controlled class ($t = -3.659$, $p < 0.01$), which means the application of the process approach made the experimental class achieve much more progress in writing than the controlled class. Hence, process approach has positive influence on non-English majors' writing and can improve their writing ability.

By participating in the activities of process writing approach, students can communicate with their teacher and peers, share their ideas, get feedback or response from each other and realize what is and is not effective about their writing. They gradually learn how to write by practicing writing in this way. So process approach plays a positive role in non-English majors' writing.

6. Conclusion

This study focuses on how non-English majors accomplished their writing tasks and the influence of process approach on their writing ability. Through the questionnaire and one-semester experiment, the following findings can be got:

First, non-English majors accomplish their writing tasks with the traditional product approach, not process approach. As it is shown in Table 1, the frequency of the specific activities the students practiced in the writing process varies from 2.5164 to 1.9061. In Table 2, the overall frequency of the activities varies from a high of 3.87 to a low of 1, with the average frequency of 2.0788 ($SD = 0.5993$). It is clear that non-English majors seldom participate in the activities of writing process but finish their writing individually without interaction with the teacher and peers.

Second, process approach has positive influence on non-English majors' writing ability and is effective in improving their writing ability. It is clear that in Table 3 the experimental class got higher scores in writing than the controlled class after the experiment ($9.6471 > 8.3137$) and Table 4 also indicates that there is a significant difference between the two classes after the experiment. Thus, process approach can help students achieve a lot in writing so that students' writing ability can be greatly enhanced.

Of course, process approach is not the only effective method to teach writing. So it is necessary for teachers and students to learn more about how to make progress in writing and in other aspects in English study.

References

- Badger, R., & Goodith, Wh. (2000). A process genre approach to teaching writing. *ELT Journal*, 2, 153-160. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/54.2.153>
- Chen, J. Y. (1994). Analysis of English writing teaching. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 2, 12-18.
- Flower, L., & Hayes, J. R. (1981). Plans that guide the composition process [A]. In C. H. Frederiksen, & J. F. Dominic (Eds.), *Writing: The nature, development, and teaching of written communication* [C]. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Gao, S. K. (1999). Research report on university English writing. *Journal of Sichuan Normal University*, 1, 100-102.
- Graves, D. H. (1978). *Balance the basics: Let them write*. Ford Fountain: New York.
- Horowitz, D. M. (1986). Process, not product: Less than meets the eye. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20, 141-144. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3586397>
- Hu, X. Y. (2003). Process approach and its application. *Foreign Languages and their teaching*, 9, 59-60.
- Jiang, B. S. (2003). Further research of process writing approach In English writing teaching. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 11(4), 13-16.
- John, K., & John, H. (2002). *Applied linguistics*. UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Keh, C. L. (1990). Feedback in the writing process: A model and methods for implementation. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 44, 294-306. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/44.4.294>
- Krashen, S. D. (1984). *Writing: Research, theory, and application*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Miller, S. (1992). Writing theory: Theory writing. In G. Kirsch, & P. A. Sullivan (Eds.), *Methods and methodology in composition research*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1991). *Language teaching methodology*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Pincas, A. (1982). *Teaching English writing*. London: Macmillan.
- Porto, M. (2001). Cooperative writing response groups and self-evaluation. *ELT Journal*, 1, 38-46. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/55.1.38>
- Qin, Z. X. (2009). English writing research status in domestic universities and the analysis of the development trend. *Modern Foreign Languages*, 2, 195-203.
- Reid, J. (1982). *The process of writing*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Reid, J. (1993). *Teaching ESL writing*. London: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Richards, J. C., Platt, J., & Platt, H. (2000). *Longman dictionary of language teaching & applied linguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Silva, T. (1990). Second language composition instruction: Developments, issues, and directions in ESL. In B. Kroll (Ed.), *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom* (pp. 11-23). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139524551.005>
- Tong, H. (2007). The contrast experiment of product approach and process approach. *Journal of Basic English Education*, 9(4), 58-81.
- Tribble, C. (1996). *Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wang, Q. (2000). *The Course in English language teaching*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- White, R., & Arndt, V. (1997). *Process writing*. London: Addison Wesley Longman Limited.
- Wu, Y. H. (2013). Effects of peer review on self-efficacy: An empirical study of college English. *Shandong Foreign language Teaching Journal*, 6, 68-72.

Appendix A

Questionnaire for the students

This is a questionnaire about non-English majors' writing. Please read each statement and circle the appropriate number (1, 2, 3, 4, 5) which fits your actual condition.

1 = never; 2 = seldom; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often; 5 = always

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Do you discuss the topic given by the teacher with peers or in group? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 2. Do you brainstorm the given topic with peers or in group? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 3. Do you fastwrite and establish a viewpoint about the topic? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 4. Do you make a rough draft about the topic? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 5. Do you evaluate the rough draft by yourself? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 6. Do you finish the first draft based on the rough one by adding information and structuring the text? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

- | | | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7. Do you discuss the the first draft with peers or in group? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 8. Do you finish the second draft based on group discussion about the first draft? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 9. Do you finish the final product after proof-reading the second draft? | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Appendix B

You are allowed 30 minutes to write a composition on *Does Advertisement Play a Positive or Negative Role in Our Society?* You should write at least 150 words following the outline given below:

- 1) Some people think advertisement plays a positive role in our society?
- 2) But others hold the view that advertisement plays a negative role in our society.
- 3) Your opinions about advertisement.

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).