

The Process-Writing Approach: An Alternative to Guide the Students' Compositions

El enfoque de escritura como proceso: Una alternativa para guiar las composiciones de los estudiantes

Ana Virginia Ariza Martínez

anavirginiaarizama@yahoo.es

Institución Educativa Distrital República del Ecuador

With this report I intend to share an experience about the use of some strategies of the process oriented approach with which I guided 9th graders at República del Ecuador school in 2004. This was a group of low-achieving teenagers whose writing was the least developed of the skills. Connecting ideas and getting coherence in a text was a daunting task for them. It was not really very difficult to guide the learners to write. The best products were those in which pictures were involved. In general they showed great interest and better outcomes resulted from pictures than from words. The simpler the task given, the better the written results. The teacher's role was essentially that of a model and facilitator.

Key words: Process writing approach, writing skills, writing tasks

Con este informe pretendo compartir una experiencia acerca del uso de algunas estrategias de la escritura orientada como proceso, con la cual guíé a estudiantes de noveno grado de la I.E.D. República del Ecuador en 2004. Se trata de grupo de adolescentes con bajo nivel de inglés cuya habilidad de producción escrita era la menos desarrollada de todas. Conectar ideas y dar coherencia a un texto era para ellos una tarea titánica. Realmente no fue difícil guiar a los estudiantes hacia la escritura. En general, los estudiantes mostraron gran interés; hubo mejores producciones a partir de imágenes que de palabras. Cuanto más simple se mostrara la actividad, mejores resultados se obtuvieron. El papel del profesor fue esencialmente el de modelo y facilitador.

Palabras claves: Enfoque de escritura por procesos, habilidades de escritura, tareas de escritura

INTRODUCTION

Writing for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students is not an easy matter, especially when the students' English competence is not very well developed. On the other hand, there is reading, which entails out a big problem in comprehension. Students are not used to "thinking" in English, they are not used to inferring meanings from context and they forget vocabulary, structures or chunks which had supposedly been learned. As reading and writing are two hand-in-hand processes, it makes the writing process even more difficult. However, since the human being has the capability to think, the possibility to write exists.

The purpose of this project was to show how teachers of English can guide their students to develop this written communicative competence. I found White and Arndt's proposal (1991) an interesting, relevant and not difficult alternative which is not a linear but a cyclical process, and which offers a great variety of activities for each of the stages proposed.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Although I was conscious that the most important principle of process pedagogy is that writing is the result of a very complex, highly individualized process, the need to investigate or innovate regarding this topic was significant because the more time passed, the poorer the EFL students' production at school was.

Santoyo and Morales (2000) connected written production to their project on reading. They stated relevant aspects to count on in the process such

as teamwork, motivation, vocabulary and the practice of writing down ideas before speaking. Their project is proof that listening, speaking, reading and writing must work in an integrated way. They got interesting results in interaction, motivation and oral and written production from reading.

I found some other interesting proposals such as Ortega and Rodriguez's (2000) titled "Improvement of writing proficiency through creation of homogeneous groups in the classroom", where they state that there is a lot of theory about writing skills, but these do not bear in mind the learners' likes, interests, problems, age, attitude, etc., and I agree with them. It was interesting to create different working groups to establish the kind of work that functions better. However, it is noticeable that all the activities carried out based on a controlled writing situation provided good results, while freer compositions did not.

Silva (2003: 28) presents an overview of ESL (English as a Second Language) writing throughout time in his article, "ESL Writing: Past, Present, and Future". He focuses on the four most influential approaches, controlled composition, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach, and English for academic purposes. In his article he refers to the process approach as a "non-linear, exploratory and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" according to Zamel (1983: 165).

Precisely this research was based on this approach, the process-oriented one. White and Arndt (1991) propose this framework in which there is a brief explanation about each stage.

Diagram 1. A model of writing (White and Arndt, 1991, p.11).



The focusing stage has to do with the purpose for writing, the real reasons for writing. Structuring deals with the organization of ideas in an acceptable way for the reader. Drafting shows the transition from writer-based into reader-based text because multiple drafts are produced and each one has feedback from the teacher or from peers. Re-viewing means standing back from the text and looking at it with fresh eyes and asking oneself: "Is it right?" Evaluation is given during the process to assist students permanently and not merely at the end. Finally, it should be pointed out that generating ideas is the most important stage when the process is starting. Here the writer looks for a topic and considers a purpose to initiate the writing task.

To summarize, I will mention the following advantages offered by this approach:

- It focuses on the process (not on the final product).
- It is reader-based (not writer-based).
- It finds a real audience.
- It offers a variety of techniques.
- The teacher plays the role of guide, facilitator, and reader.
- The student's role is one of sharing and collaborating.
- Grammar is a tool (a means, not an end).
- Meaning is essential (not form).
- It is a creative process.
- Evaluation and feedback are given permanently (not only at the end).

Some of the literature found deals with the process approach itself. Now I will report some findings about works based on it.

As the current teaching practice at my work place is based on the communicative approach, I will mention Calvache (2003), who explains important aspects of the communicative approach, the task-based approach and the development of competence in foreign languages. I liked Calvache's article and agreed with the point of view that the learner is the center of the process, so, for any educational action, we must keep in mind his/her previous knowledge, daily struggle, needs and

interests, abilities and attitudes, which are aspects to take advantage of.

Task-Based Instruction (TBI) has also a lot to do with the development of my project since my work is focused on tasks, where learners interact and cooperate continuously to learn by doing.

I found a reflection and proposal for L2 writing in Ortiz (2003), where she demonstrates that questions can be used in writing activities to generate ideas. The topic and the kind of texts will depend on the students' ages, interests and levels. She probably based her innovation on White and Arndt's (1991) suggestion in order to focus on the concept of "shared knowledge" between reader and writer. She asked questions related to friends, families, relatives, teachers, etc. in order to generate short texts about these specific topics. I think her proposal is interesting, but I would like to go further than merely writing as a "response" product.

Holmes (2004) in his article, "The use of a process-oriented approach to facilitate the planning and production stages of writing for adult students of English as a Foreign or Second Language" identifies some features of this approach and provides some suggestions to develop activities in order to humanize and make a more positive and effective experience from writing. He also brings up White and Arndt's (1991: 5) remark that "activities include pair and group work, not to mention discussion and collaboration, so that the writing class becomes, in a very genuine sense, a communicative experience in which much more than skill in writing is practiced and developed."

We can find lots of information about the writing process and specifically the process writing approach. I have found different aspects which I think would work based on the characteristics of my students and there are some others that would work with higher-level students or with students from a different culture. I have found that process writing offers a positive, motivating and collaborative atmosphere for students to write in. It focuses on reader-based texts instead of writer-

based texts. Besides, this approach gives extreme importance to the learners' needs, interests, problems, ages, motivation, and so on, which makes the student the center of the process. It requires real or authentic context and real readers.

METHODOLOGY

This action research study involves the use of a series of activities related to the generation of ideas and focusing stages from the process writing approach. It was carried out with a group of 9th graders from República del Ecuador school in 2004.

About the participants, there were important aspects to bear in mind. First of all, we, as teachers, are not used to writing, so we cannot expect so much from students unless there is substantial change, mainly when we have not even adopted a systematic process for writing lessons. With those former aspects and the reality of large classes, so little interest in learning, so few hours of English classes a week (2 or 3), the waste of time because of different activities, and discouragement, among others, the result was obvious. Students were low-achievers in general, and the least-developed skill was writing.

I selected a group of 36 students from 9th grade (901) to work on the project. They were boys and girls aged 14 to 16. From this group I took a sample of five pupils who were average students but rarely missed classes, who worked in class, and made big efforts to improve. Fortunately, this group was collaborative. The students accepted suggestions positively and worked in class as well as at home. The other participant was just me.

The process began to be carried out in June when I started to identify and formulate the problem. Later I got information about the topic and started to read and select relevant information.

Once I had identified the process-writing as the approach that would be the basis of the project, I introduced this to my students. They were asked to take an active part in the project development, and a consent form was sent to their parents. The activities with the students were carried out from

September to October. Some activities to guide the students to write were systematically presented and strategies were applied, beginning with the ones White and Arndt (1991) suggest to generate ideas such as brainstorming, using pictures and cartoons, etc. During the process I was expected to be circulating among, focusing, structuring, drafting, re-viewing and evaluating permanently. However, I only tested the generation and focusing stages because of the lack of time. I selected them as the starting point because I think they are the basis of this process mainly to help students to establish writing habits. I hope the other stages can be progressively applied in the future.

Data were gathered from the collection of drafts and final products. The teacher played the role of observer, guide and facilitator.

RESULTS

Since getting started is the most difficult part of any process, this research was just a starting point of the complex process of writing.

Most of the activities presented here have to do with the generation of ideas. Some of them are guided and some are not. There is one more activity which has to do with the focusing stage.

Brainstorming (an unguided technique), first modeled by the teacher, then by the students, was useful to produce many individual ideas or words related to a specific topic quickly. I modeled this activity with the word "love" (because of the month –September). The students gave many related ideas (most of them in Spanish) which were written on the board, and emphasis on their spelling was made. Later on, they were involved in a kind of snowball activity for brainstorming, then, it was enlarged through cooperative work. The aim was to create a poster based on the most interesting topics for teenagers according to what they had brainstormed. This was the first part of the following class with a more productive activity based on reading. This time the objective was to create charts on their topic of preference using the newspaper "El Tiempo". They had to read the

text and produce a text on their own. Some of these productions were fantastic, but others were just copy of parts of the news. For most of them, the cooperative work functioned. Some of them learned from others, they respected their roles and there was interaction. Students showed a positive attitude towards these activities. They had fun and showed great creativity. However, English language was not used at all and there was difficulty in developing ideas. When students perceived that the task was getting complicated, most of them gave up and started getting bored, frustrated or unable. They did not make much effort.

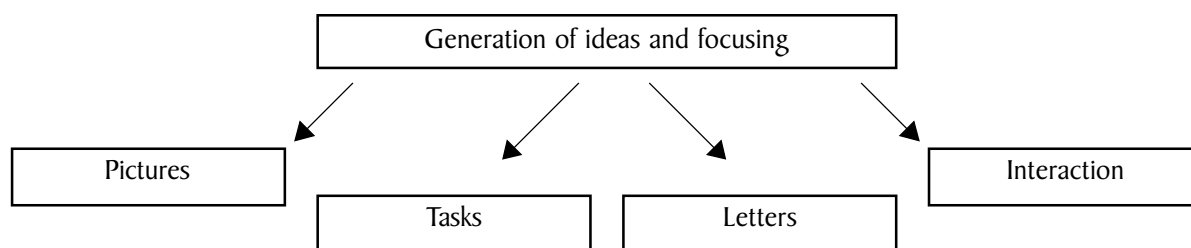
On the other hand, the other activities, I mean, using picture sequences and cartoons, fostered personal expressions since each student perceived

As it can be seen, errors in grammar, syntax and coherence were frequently made (*The last Monday Camilo wants to call at 2:00 pm to his mother*) but I did not focus on them, but on the process itself. It was hard for me because I was always trying to correct mistakes at first sight.

Regarding the focusing activity, I could notice that the students really understood that everybody writes with a specific purpose. With the pool of letters taken from “El Tiempo” newspaper, they could observe the different purposes, the different writers’ attitudes, and the different language devices the writer uses to make his/her letters really effective.

After analyzing the students’ written production and my observations, I could establish the following categories:

Diagram 2. Categories found when analyzing data on writing strategies.



and interpreted these visual aids differently. There was a great stimulus for vocabulary development.

Learners liked the activities where they did not have to write so much. These were creative and they could express their feelings and emotions without having to write very much. They expressed ideas, but it was not easy to develop them. If they were not pressed, they did not make any effort, or simply avoided doing things.

Some activities for the generation of ideas provided more successful results than others. It was necessary to implement the ones where students had to exercise their creativity and imagination since it was quite difficult for them, although they were interested. They were used to following patterns and it was hard for them to go beyond. In general they showed great interest and better outcomes from pictures than from words (see sample 1, in Appendix 1).

Within the application of two strategies to foster and focus on writing, I found the following four important categories:

Pictures Help More Than Words: For the generation of ideas, several activities were posed. From these, students showed much more interest, creativity and production of ideas when the starting point was a picture or a sequence of pictures or cartoons, than when the starting point was just words.

The Simpler the Task, the Better the Written Outcomes: The students’ attention span is very short. About 15 minutes after starting an activity is enough time for them to get tired if they have not finished. They get bored or frustrated or feel unable and they simply give up. So, tasks must be short, clear and simple, appropriate for their proficiency. In this way the students will work with

a positive attitude, they will feel confident and encouraged to write their own ideas (see sample 2, in Appendix 2).

Letters: A Good Resort to Make Complaints: When learners receive news about decisions that can harm their life, they immediately react. Letters help them to express their disagreement, and they know that most letters are effective when the language is used properly. It was a good activity to enable the students to understand what focusing means (see sample 3, in Appendix 3).

Interaction: Teacher's Role: The teacher must essentially be a model and a facilitator. A model because students need examples to be able to do something for the first time, and it is the teacher who must guide them with clear instructions; and a facilitator because students will need help either with vocabulary or any other aspect of organizational competence (cohesion, syntax, coherence, etc.)

Working with White and Arndt's proposal usually implies that the students are high achievers and that they are competent in the English language. However, the group of students of this study are neither high achievers nor have a good English level. In the end, things turned out positive. This proposal can also function with low achievers. Obviously, it would be nicer and better if things were different.

This study helped to create a willingness to learn in the students, most of them wished to be able to deal with a great deal of vocabulary, structures and coherent elements. They, as well as I, noticed how low their achievements had been so far, due to lots of circumstances that had affected the learning process.

CONCLUSIONS

This was a project concerning how English teachers can help or guide their students to write or to improve their compositions in this foreign language. As I have said, writing is the most neglected of the language skills and I have wanted to return to its practice. Consequently, I have planned the use of different strategies and activities that White and Arndt pose in their work about the writing process.

In spite of the short time I had to implement this study, I managed to try two of White and Arndt's proposed stages: generating ideas and focusing.

With these two strategies and other activities carried out, I could realize that it is not really very difficult to guide the learners towards a good output. For the generation of ideas, I applied several activities where I could notice that the best results were those in which pictures were involved to help the students generate ideas. Students began to get bored or discouraged when the activities proved too long or when they had to write a lot. So the activities for these types of groups should be short, visually aided and clear. For the focusing stage, it was important to get students to realize that nobody writes without a specific purpose or for a specific audience. With the use of community letters from a newspaper they understood that the writer's attitude and the different tones of language he/she uses is very related to his/her purpose. The teacher's role is also an important one. We must be guides and facilitators instead of judges or linguistic elements correctors. This type of correction should be left for subsequent studies.

In summary, everything is a matter of creativity and the assignment of motivating activities in a step-by-step pace. The students' reactions in general were quite positive. They liked the activities and did their best even when giving ideas in Spanish. Motivation was clear in some activities in particular. I observed an increase of interest in writing, and the idea of the work being for research helped a lot.

LIMITATIONS

I had some difficulties especially with material because of little support from the principal. Another difficulty was the students' low level of achievement. I ended up with a very short time to apply all the activities I would have liked to. Data analysis is not an easy matter to work with, so I had some problems understanding how to analyze the data.

POSSIBLE FUTURE ACTIONS OR RESEARCH

It would be nice to be able to try all of White and Arndt's proposed strategies in a school year. I mean, not only for generation of ideas or focusing but reviewing, structuring, drafting and evaluating. An interesting aspect would be digging into the results of this proposal with high achievers and with students of other social levels. Another important aspect to study in the future would be the way of correcting and/or evaluating students' written compositions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ana Virginia Ariza Martínez holds a B. Ed. in philology and languages, English-Spanish, from the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 1987, and a B.A. in pedagogy of language from the Universidad El Bosque, 2001. Currently she works at I.E.D. República del Ecuador, in Bogotá - Colombia.

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APPENDIX I: SAMPLE I

Activity: Generation of ideas through a sequence of pictures.

1. Order the pictures in a logical sequence.
2. Explain what happens in each picture.
3. Write a story based on the pictures.

Name: Jhon Erick Cabra H.

Grade: 901



The Telephone.

The last monday Camilo ^{tr.} wants to call at 2:00 pm ^{w.o} to his mother. He had waited in the row five minutes. After half hour Camilo was desperate, Then Camilo arrived to telephone and he looked his pocket. but didn't find coin ^w for call. Finally Camilo went to change money ^w for call his mother. "she was sick."

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE 2

Name: Name: Jhon Erick Cabra H.

Date: 20-10 -04

Use your imagination to complete the speech bubbles.



APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE 3

The Scorn of light meal

Mr. Principal:

The light meal is a help of an enterprise of I.C.B.F, this enterprise than helps this school. Now the students receive the light meal for avoid the hungry in more Colombian homes where exists the poverty. The students don't value the light meal, and they do this a waste, they launch it to the garbage as if it was nothing.

I think than you chastise only the students than launch the light meal.

sincerely
Ivan Pabón