Is the process-oriented writing instruction really process-oriented?

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Ryu, Hoyeol. 2006. Is the Process-oriented Writing Instruction Really Process-oriented? *The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal, 14*(1), 203-221. Process-oriented writing instruction is not a new idea in the field of teaching composition. Although it is more than thirty years old, it still has many advantages in teaching English composition in Korean educational settings. This study emphasizes that the very basic principle of process-oriented writing instruction is to provide students with opportunities to experience the process of finding solutions to problems they meet during the course of writing. Eight popular ESL writing textbooks in Korea and worldwide are randomly selected and reviewed to examine whether they are written truly based on what process-oriented writing instruction advocates. The review clearly shows that the textbooks are pretty superficial and fail in bringing to students many advantages the process approach has. One notable phenomenon that consistently appears in all of the reviewed textbooks is the overemphasis of pre-writing activities that may prevent students from having opportunities to experience the process in a real sense. Writing learning activities presented in the textbooks are divided to each stage of writing and examined with pedagogical suggestions.

Key Words: writing instruction, writing process, textbook analysis

1. Introduction

Process-oriented writing instruction has gained unparalleled popularity in writing instruction among many first and second language writing instructors during the last part of the twentieth century. It carries the opposite meaning to product-oriented writing instruction in terms that finished written products alone cannot provide any information regarding what to teach and how to teach writing in the classroom. Instead, they

have proposed that, by looking at what problems students face and how to solve the problems, writing instructors can reach a clear understanding of the nature of writing itself and how to help their students become proficient writers.   This process view of writing instruction is not new, but it is pretty certain that the it can bring to students many advantages for their development of writing abilities. With the emergence of genre approach to writing instruction, the overzealous adherence to the process approach has decreased (Matsuda, 2003).   However, it should be interpreted as this is not the total discard of the approach, but the integration of a new paradigm into the field as well as the pursuit of more balanced understanding of writing and its instruction.

   Many ESL writing textbooks have been written based on the sequence of writing process and their authors have tried to take advantage of the benefits process-oriented writing instruction   has. Each unit of the textbooks consists of three parts: pre-writing, writing, and revising.   Students begin their writing process with pre-writing activities in which students are asked to collect and organize ideas to write about.   This pre-writing activities are followed by writing and revision activities. However, close examination of the textbooks discloses that they are pretty superficial and fail in giving students a clear understanding of what writing process is and how they should deal with it.   It is quite doubtful that writing learning activities from the textbooks greatly helps students develop their writing abilities. Writing learning activities should be more elaborated enough to provide students with opportunities to experience real writing process as well as to improve their writing abilities based upon the understanding of writing and its process.

2. Review of the Related Studies

2.1. Nature of Writing Process

   The shift of attention from product to process in writing instruction

comes from the frustration that paying attention to students' written product alone does not provide any insight to teaching writing. In this regard of the limit of the product approach, Murray (1980) clearly stated "The process of meaning making can not be understood by looking backward from a finished page." (p. 3) The process advocates maintained that the product approach in which writing skills are believed to develop by imitating well-written models could not explain the discrepancy between the provided models and students' own written products (Shannon, 1980). Murray (1978) also pointed out that writing instructors' traditional emphasis on product over process in writing had created serious misconceptions regarding how writing was produced. The process advocates firmly believed that this misunderstanding of writing lead writing instructors to insecure positions regarding what and how to teach writing in the classroom.

The process approach is based on the idea that writing is a process of meaning making. Instead of the traditional view of writing as a finished written product, writing has been viewed as a procedure to create the writer's intended meaning. Taylor (1981) defined writing as "a creative discovery procedure characterized by the dynamic interplay of content and language." (p. 6) That is, writing is not the act of transcribing what is already in the writer's mind, but the act of exploring and clarifying meaning. With respect to writing as a process of meaning making, Murray (1980) used the term, drafting, instead of writing, stressing its nature as a process to reach the intended meaning. The approach has shifted our attention from form to content. Taylor (1981) pointed out that writing instruction focusing on form was likely to be blind to students' need to explore and clarify their intended meanings through the very act of writing.

In contrast to the traditional understanding of writing process that students begin writing with a clear blueprint of writing, Perl (1979) discovered in her study of five unskilled college writers that her subjects began writing without a secure sense of where they were heading. At the center of the process approach lies the discursive nature of writing. Perl (1979) cast a strong doubt on the neatness of

writing process and summarized this discursive nature of writing as:

> Composing does not occur in a straightforward, linear fashion.   The
> process is one of accumulating discrete words or phrases down on the
> paper and then working from these bits to reflect upon, and then further
> develop what one means to say.   It can be thought of as a kind of
> "retrospective structuring"; movement forward occurs only after one has
> some sense of where one wants to go (p. 18).

Many seem to have an understanding that, once the writer establishes a
clear and thorough plan for writing during the pre-writing stage, he or
she is able to move on to the writing and revising stages quite
comfortably.   However, many studies pointed out that it is not the case.
writing does not always go in that way.   It is very essential to
understand that writing process is full of unexpected problems the
writer must deal with.

  Process-oriented writing instruction must begin with the clear
understanding of how students proceed. in their writings.   Unless we
understand what problems they face and how they solve the problems
during writing, it is very unlikely that we can reach a solution to
improve students' writing abilities.   Flower and Hayes (1977) pointed
out that many writing problems were actually thinking problems, so
poor writers usually turned out to be poor thinkers in dealing with
problems related to writing.   Odell (1983) also reported that maturity in
writing could be defined in terms of a writer's cognitive development
and his or her ability to meet the reader's expectations.   Flower and
Hayes (1977, 1980) found that poor writers usually had limited
repertoires available to dealing with writing-related problems.   Since
their repertoires were quite limited, they could not effectively deal with
the problems and their failure in dealing with the problems consequently
led to poor written products.

  Unless we do have a clear understand of how writing actually
proceeds, it is quite unlikely that our writing instruction really helps
students improve their writing skills.   In this light, we have to
understand that writing does not proceed in a linear, neat fashion.

Writing process is quite discursive, implying that its process is decided by the problems the writers meet. Therefore, writing instruction that imposes the strict, clear-cut three-stage writing process on our students is highly likely to mislead our students in their attempt to create meaning. Another important point is that writing process really consists of the process of facing problems and finding solutions to them rather than the three stages of prewriting, writing, and revising. In this problem-solving process of writing, what writing instructors need to do is to define and analyze the problems and provide their students with helpful instruction regarding how to handle the problems. Overall, writing instructors should be aware that writing and its process is a quite complicating matter and their students should be ready to meet this complicacy.

2.2. Process-oriented Second Language Writing

The view of writing as process rather than product had came from the deep-rooted frustration that there were little writing instructors could do to help their students develop writing abilities. The examination of first language writers' writing process really revealed what had went wrong in the instruction (Emig, 1971). The impact of process writing studies on writing instruction was so influential that they changed the whole direction of writing instruction. Second or foreign language writing researchers could not be ignorant of this new wave of writing studies and writing instruction practices. Instead of comfortably remaining in the old paradigm, second or foreign language writing researchers actively examined the legitimacy of process writing studies and actively applied the findings of the first language writing studies to their areas.

Zamel (1976) was the first scholar who noted the importance of first language process writing studies on the research and instructional practices of second language writing. She advocated that second language writing researchers needed to eagerly transfer the findings of the first language writing studies to second language writing research

and instruction. In her study of six advanced ESL learners' writing process, Zamel (1983) found some important points regarding ESL writers' writing process. First, despite the belief that their advanced English proficiency enabled them to progress their writing in a neat, linear manner, their writing processes were quite discursive. In the study, poor writers' major concern was local problems such as grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation. Besides, they did little revision, spending most of their writing time on the first draft. On the other hand, skilled writers more focused on global problems such as overall content and organization related to exploring and clarifying their intended meanings.

The similar results to those of Zamel's study (1983) were found in Raimes' study (1987). In her study, advanced writers frequently used such cognitive strategies as planning, rehearsing, rescanning, and editing, indicating that they had some understanding of how writing progressed and how they could apply the understanding to actual writing practices. On the contrary, less skilled writers spent more time on pre-writing and less time writing and revising. Their main focus was on local problems such grammar and spelling, so they spent a considerable amount of time on solving those problems throughout the whole writing process. Both Zamel's and Raimes' study clearly showed what writing strategies good and poor writers employ and how writing instruction should be practiced for ESL writers. In addition to identifying writing strategies of both advanced and poor ESL writers, Arndt (1987) compared Chinese ESL learners' English writing process with their Chinese one. In the study, regardless of what language they used to write, their writing behaviors were pretty similar. Rather, differences in writing behaviors were observed among different writers. That is, although we have to keep in mind that first and second language writing are qualitatively distinct (Silva, 1994), it is not possible to ignore the striking similarities in writing behaviors between first and second or foreign language writing. Arndt's study (1987) suggested that second language writing abilities development not be entirely dependent on second language development, but strongly influenced by

the writer's writing skills originated from his or her first language writing abilities.

The studies of second language writers' writing process has provided us with invaluable information regarding the nature of second language writing process and the instruction of second language writing.   They identified both good and poor writers' writing behaviors, telling us which writing behaviors should be recommended and which should be avoided.   This discovery can be directly led to the instructional practices.   The studies also identified similarities in writing behaviors between first and second language.   This can be interpreted in terms of the limited contribution of second language proficiency to the development of second language writing abilities.

2.3. Application of the Process Theory to ESL Writing Instruction

Process writing studies have disclosed many important points related to writing instruction.   Among them is the importance of revision.   As it has been clearly disclosed in many process writing studies that writing cannot progress in a neat, linear manner, we have to re-evaluate the importance of revision in writing process.   Murray (1980) distinguished revising from editing, stressing the importance and extensive scope of revising in writing process.   He told that the writers automatically became involved in revision as soon as they began writing.   Perl (1980) also stressed that writing is recursive in nature, meaning that a writer constantly needs to move back and forth to make a progress in writing.   Those studies make it clear that revision should not be considered as that which follows the completion of writing, but as that which should be integrated throughout the whole writing process.   Moreover, it should be kept in mind that revision really determines the quality of one's writing.

The process approach has highlighted the importance of revision and provided writing instructors with opportunities to reflect the ways of how to integrate revision into their writing instruction.   The most popular way of teaching revision in the classroom is peer review.

Pedagogically it has important advantages.   First, instead of writing for being graded by the teacher, students are situated in a real context for writing where they have real purpose and audience for their writings. Mendoca and Johnson (1994) maintained that, unlike our expectation that peer review has little value for improving students' writing abilities, it turned out to have many positive effects.   White and Caminero (1995) also reported the advantages of peer review and multiple revision.   In their study, students who went through writing process accompanied by peer review and multiple revision came to understanding the nature of writing process better and produce better products.

Another important impact the process approach bring to writing instruction can be found in the implementation of group work.   Instead of the traditional method of having students write individually, they are grouped either to produce individual papers or to perform group assignments.   Lee (1997) confirmed the positive effects of group work in doing revision.   White and Caminero (1995) also reported its positive effects throughout the whole writing process.   Boughey (1997) documented South African college students' notable improvement in their writing abilities in group work where linguistically equivalent peers were grouped together throughout the whole writing process.   While they wrote, they were encouraged to provide feedback to other peers' writings as well as necessary assistance to solve writing-related problems.   Group work has turned out to help students be aware of the nature of writing process.   Instead of being asked to fill a sheet of blank paper, they are encouraged to interact with other peers to discuss their problems and build a sense of a community as writers.   This positive experience in collaborative atmospheres certainly contributes to the improvement of students' confidence and writing abilities.

3. Examination of ESL Writing Textbooks

The purpose of this study is to review whether or not writing instruction practices that claim to focus on the process follow the basic principles of the process approach and are helpful to developing

students' writing abilities. Eight ESL writing textbooks are selected for the purpose. They are selected because their learning activities are organized following the routine writing process and designed to develop skills necessary for each stage of prewriting, writing, and revising. Further, it is undeniable that instructional practices are strongly influenced by the content and organization of textbooks. Therefore, although there are differences between what appears on the textbooks and actual instructional practices in the classroom, it is assumed in the study that the analysis of the textbooks is a legitimate way to examine actual writing instruction practices in the classroom. This study has many inherent limitations in its method and scope, but it is quite certain that the analysis of the textbooks provides us with helpful information for understanding and improving ESL writing instruction practices.

3.1. Pre-writing Activities

Pre-writing activities are quite helpful to enabling student writers to establish an overall plan as well as getting their writings started. However, the overemphasis of and excessive dependence on pre-writing activities give students difficulties in dealing with unexpected problems. As it has been discussed in earlier parts of this study, writing does not proceed exactly in the way the writer plans in advance. Therefore, pre-writing activities should be designed to reduce ambiguities students may have at the beginning and help them start writing. If pre-writing activities are overly complicated and thorough, it is likely to impede students' attempts to integrate new ideas that may occur during the later stages and to cope with unexpected problems flexibly.

Reading comprehension activity is the most common way to begin an instructional unit. Of the reviewed eight ESL writing textbooks, six introduce model texts accompanied by reading comprehension activities. The model texts play two functions. The first function is to make students familiar with the topic they are going to write about. By providing them with background knowledge in advance, it is hoped that

they can deal with the writing task more comfortably and effectively. The second function is to give students an opportunity to preview what their complete writing should look like.   With respect to the second function, there should not be great difference in quality between the model text and students' expected written products.   The gap between the two is likely to lead to the frustration of their writing abilities and to give them considerable difficulty in expressing their ideas clearly and effectively.   The accompanied reading comprehension activities can be problematic too.   Reading comprehension activities are totally devoted to checking students' comprehension of the meaning of the text in some of the textbooks.   Although they make a little sense in terms of giving students background knowledge about the topic they are going to write about, they provide little information about how to organize their ideas in writing.   Considering that this knowledge of writing structure is critical in one's writing abilities development and the text provides students with a good opportunity to build the knowledge, reading comprehension activities should be expanded to include questions and activities that provide them with opportunities to build the structural knowledge.   However, it should be kept in mind that students should not be forced to apply this knowledge to their writings immediately, but it should function as a reference relevant to the upcoming writing task.

Other notable pre-writing activities include brainstorming and idea mapping.   Brainstorming can be a good starting point for one's writing. Not only does it collect ideas related to the topic, but also it gives students a feeling that writing has begun.   The feeling is critical in meeting unexpected writing problems.   Five of the reviewed textbooks include the activities that organize the collected idea into proper categories.   In many cases, students are asked to use this organized ideas in their writing tasks, resulting in giving them considerable difficulty in changing the direction of their writings when they meet the unexpected problems.   Idea mapping activities are also useful for helping them organize ideas collected through brainstorming.   However, since the ideas are organized visually, it is much more appealing to students.

For that reason, students may well depend upon it completely regarding the content and structure of their writings. They are forced to meet writing problems totally based on the mapping and there is no room for new ideas to come into play in the later stages. This leads to quite limited writing behaviors and make it difficult to meet the unexpected problems flexibly. Again, pre-writing activities should function as a mere starting point and they should not be seen as a blueprint for writing.

Other types of pre-writing activities include asking students' opinions or personal information related to the topic. In this case, there is no further pre-writing activities and students are asked to move onto writing based on their answers. In this case, the content of their writings is decided from the beginning. The textbook author becomes the person who decides the content, not the student writer him or herself. In addition, questions are arranged in certain order, taking away students' opportunities to consider the structure. Although it can be said that this type of pre-writing activities are appropriate for beginning writers in terms that they greatly reduce the burden of their writing tasks, it can also be said that they take away students' opportunities to create their own meaning.

Along with those pre-writing activities, many ESL writing textbooks include lessons based on the classical rhetoric view of writing. The textbooks regard a paragraph as a basic unit of writing and present some tips and exercises to write a paragraph effectively and fluently. Eventually the entire volume of those textbooks is devoted to presenting various types of paragraphs and exercises to build a paragraph effectively. This can be interpreted as the focus shift of writing instruction from a sentence to a text, implying that the paradigm of writing instruction has moved from the product to process. Although this approach seems very helpful to beginning or intermediate students writers, it may well lead to the danger that their way to deal with writing problems is quite limited. For example, when students are a writing a paragraph that can be defined as a comparison and contrast paragraph, instructions on linguistic and rhetoric features of this

paragraph type is presented to write it effectively. However, this type of paragraph writing activities may fall in the danger of stereotyping all writing activities into a few paragraph types and limiting students' strategies to deal with the problems considerably.

Grammar and vocabulary learning practices are also presented in the pre-writing part of the unit in three textbooks. The obvious purpose of such grammar and vocabulary learning practices is to provide them with linguistic tools to write. However, in some cases, those grammar and vocabulary learning practices do not have any relationship with the writing task, making them meaningless and giving students faulty ideas rthat writing is actually linguistic realization of what has been already in the writer's mind.

3.2. Writing Activities

The whole process of writing should be well orchestrated, so each stage of it should have clear meaning and purpose. However, in some cases, students are asked to simply perform the linguistic realization of the ready-made content and structure. Ideas related to writing topics have been already collected and organized to form the structure of writing. Even, in one of the reviewed textbooks, students are asked to follow the given guidance regarding what and how to write in a certain order. Besides, in two textbooks, students are asked to apply the structural, grammatical, and lexical knowledge they have learned during the pre-writing to their writing. These ways of writing exercises does not provide students with any opportunities to deal with the problems during writing. Although these writing activities may be designed to help students face writing tasks with facility, they are actually misleading students. When we consider the situation where these scaffolding activities are removed, it is likely to be a catastrophic experience for students to face the problems alone.

In contrast to too tight control of the writing stage, there are some cases where writing is not supported by any other activities in the unit. In two of the reviewed textbooks, the activities are sequenced

following the order of the routine writing process. However many of the activities are disconnected to each other, making each of them meaningless and hardly helpful to practicing other activities. Another case is that writing tasks are given at the last of the unit, which are irrelevant to the rest of the activities practiced in the unit in terms of the topic, structure, and language. Although they can be given as assignments, they still leaves students the feeling of vagueness and helplessness. In these cases, there is nowhere students find assistance to help them write. Pre-writing activities should be designed to help students begin writing and face writing problems to a moderate extent.

3.3. Revision Activities

Many advocates of the process-oriented writing instruction have contended that revision is the most critical stage of writing process in determining the quality. However, in all of the textbooks, pre-writing activities are given the most attention, followed by revision, and writing ones. Even, in one of the reviewed books, no revision activity is not provided at all. The situation of the other textbooks does not look better either. Revision activities are usually left marginal and limited to mechanical error correction activities. When it is considered that revision activities can be as various as pre-writing ones, giving students less opportunities to practice their revising skills can be interpreted as the textbook developers' ignorance of what the process approach ultimately pursues.

There are also some instances that no relationship between the writing and revision activities can be found. Although many revision activities are provided to students to exercise their revision skills, they are not asked to revise what they have written during the writing activities. In this case, there is a possibility that students cannot find any relationship between the learned revision skills and the revision of their own writings. One basic principle of process-oriented writing instruction is that students should be provided opportunities to go

through the whole process of writing as well as to experience the process of solving problems.   Therefore, imposing on students the irrelevant revision exercises to their writings clearly has limited value to the development of their writing abilities.

Peer editing activities are found in only two textbooks out of the eight reviewed ones. Even, in one of the two textbooks that includes peer editing activities, revision activities are not provided consistently, leaving many units without any revision activity at all.   When it is considered that peer editing clearly brings to students many advantages in developing their revision and overall writing abilities, there should more rigorous inclusion of this type of revision activities in the textbook.   Further, concrete and explicit instruction on how to practice peer editing should be provided to enable students to practice the activity with a clear sense of purpose and direction.

One notable thing to mention is that there are two textbooks that include the checklist for revision. Questions regarding content, organization, and other things of writing are provided in one case and it can be regarded as having the same function with the checklist. Checklists are pretty helpful to assure students of what they need to focus on during revision.   However, ESL writing textbook writers should be aware that, if the checklists are overly thorough, students become completely dependent upon the list alone in doing revision activities.   Therefore, the checklists should be loose enough to accommodate students' fresh insights regarding what need to be revised and how they can be revised.

There are some textbooks that differentiate revision from editing or proofreading.   This division is truly helpful to enabling students to understand the nature of revision and what they need to take care of in doing revision.   When he stressed the importance of the meaning-making aspect of writing, Murray (1980) also makes a distinction between revising and editing.   By asking students to focus on content, organization, and other global problems during revising and to deal with mechanical and local problems during editing or proofreading, textbook writers can provide them with a clear sense of what has priority to

others in doing revision.   Consequently, this understanding can clearly lead to improved performance in their written products.   Another beneficial activity discovered during the review is the introduction of multiple drafts in one textbook.   This is quite important in that multiple drafts show the very basic nature of writing process.   As writing is a process where unexpected problems can come out at any time, writers always need to reread what they have written so far and make necessary revisions.   Activities asking students to write multiple drafts is highly likely to give students a clear understanding of what writing process is really like and it can lead to the improvement of their written products.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

Process-oriented writing instruction is not a new paradigm for teaching writing.   The reason for reminding English writing teachers of this more than thirty-year old writing instruction paradigm lies in its effectiveness in developing students' writing abilities.   Despite criticisms against it, including difficulties in preparing writing instructors for implementing activities based upon the approach as well as their improper understanding of the approach, it has been widely accepted that the approach can bring many positive impacts to students' writing ability development (Susser, 1994).   As it is discussed in this study, there are many confusions in implementing the approach.   Eventually, some of activities in the reviewed textbooks do not follow what the process approach intends to pursue.   If writing instructors and text developers really want to correctly implement the process approach in the classroom, they should possess the clear understanding of the approach first.   Unless they have this understanding, they may give students great confusions and their efforts turn out to be of little value in developing students' writing abilities.

The examination of the eight popular ESL writing textbooks in this study discloses many important points regarding the implementation of the process approach in actual writing instruction situations.   First,

pre-writing activities tend to be overly emphasized so that students' writing and revising behaviors become quite limited. This study clearly points out that pre-writing activities should be designed to allow room for students to write and revise independent of what they have done during the pre-writing stage. Another problem noticed in the review is the lack of revision activities. When it is considered that revision is the most important stage of writing process, there should be more rigorous efforts to present a variety of revision activities in the textbooks. The lack of the relationship between pre-writing and writing activities as well as between writing and revision activities are also pointed out as a serious problem. This study report the cases that pre-writing activities do not have any relationship with those of writing in terms of content, organization, other aspects of writing. The same problems are also observed between writing and revision activities. This study proposes that, if the textbook writers really want students to improve their writing abilities through their textbooks, they should provide students with sufficient opportunities to go through the entire writing process and establish close relationship among learning activities throughout the process.

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