

# Teaching process writing to Japanese university ESL students.

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## Abstract

Unlike a traditional product based approach to writing, the process approach puts major emphasis on the process of writing itself. Here students are guided through each stage of the writing process including planning, writing and reviewing. However, this approach, which is gradually gaining ground in Japan, needs to be carefully adapted for it to be effective in ESL classes.

### 1. The product based approach

Traditional approaches to teaching writing have typically focused on the content and accuracy of produced texts. Emphasis is placed on criteria such as correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary and structure (Hedge, 1988).

Classroom activities usually focus on composing practice and feedback is given on correct grammar usage, forms and structures. This approach has some disadvantages. An overt focus on grammatical accuracy often does not carry over into a student's ability to write (Kim and Kim, 2005). Similarly even if the students develop a large vocabulary they often cannot apply this in real world writing situations. The over emphasis on the final product can also impact students ability to edit and rewrite. Kim (2000) points out that this lack of flexibility can negatively impact their composition skills.

### 2. The process writing approach

The process approach to writing is based on principle that writers go through a creative process made up of planning, writing, reviewing and refining (Flower and Hayes, 1981). Process writing encourages students to understand the writing process and develop their independence. Specific activities include various pre-writing tasks such as brainstorming, reading and free writing. This is followed by multiple drafts where the students review and revise their work. Peer editing is a major source of feedback since it adds authenticity

and develops independence. In the early stages this feedback will focus more on content, format and organization than grammar and vocabulary. When students finally submit their work they are encouraged to think of it in terms of publishing and sharing; this may include exhibiting their work in the classroom or reading their piece out aloud.

### 3. Applying the prewriting stage

This is the stage where students use activities to begin to generate ideas and organize their thoughts. However, for university students who are doing academic writing, free-writing is not such an appropriate activity. Academic writing is less about the creative process and more about research. Hyland (2009) questions the appropriacy of using freewriting in an academic situation, arguing that time would be better spent on research. Therefore priority should be given to reading and exploration of their topic.

### 4. The drafting stage

In practice students found it difficult to move from prewriting to the drafting stage. While for advanced language learners L1 writing skills may transfer more easily to L2 (Zamel, 1983) other levels have difficulty transferring skills. With the Japanese university students this was remedied by taking an idea from the traditional product based approach. Students were provided with an organizational framework relating to a specific genre; for example a problem/solution essay. Here they were given concrete guidelines for each section as well as useful language. Additionally grammatical structures common to that genre were provided. This helped to scaffold the initial move from prewriting to the drafting stage.

### 5. Feedback and editing

Peer feedback is seen as an essential part of process writing since it adds an authentic social context (Mittan, 1989). However, in a Japanese

classroom environment students were both unwilling to share their unfinished work with peers, and to offer feedback on their peer's work. Firstly, students had no experience of doing peer editing in traditional Japanese classrooms so they lacked the specific skills. Secondly, they had no confidence in their language ability and did not feel qualified to judge a peers work. Finally, they had no confidence in their peer's feedback. This was remedied in part by providing the students with a checklist based on the framework given at the drafting stage. This included check boxes that students could use to help them go through the editing process. This helped somewhat but students still needed additional training in peer editing for it to be effective.

At the submission stage many final drafts still contained multiple grammar and vocabulary errors. While structural frameworks and checklist are useful they need to be supplemented with explicit teacher input at the review and editing stages. This is particularly important for academic writing where the students will be graded on structural and grammatical accuracy as well as vocabulary (Hyland, 2009). Teacher feedback should highlight errors but encourage students to self-correct. Fathman and Whalley's (1990) research reveals that students can improve grammatical accuracy when teachers highlight grammatical errors which helps students to be aware of grammatical structures.

## 6. Summary

In summary the process approach to writing is a useful approach to help build fluency and confidence with writing. However, for teaching writing to Japanese university ESL students certain modifications need to be made. These modifications take into account that non-advanced language learners lack the language and skills necessary to undertake the tasks effectively. Furthermore it recognizes that academic writing has specific content and structural needs. Borrowing strategies from the traditional product approach can help to make the process orientation more effective in ESL classes.

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