

Process Approach in Writing: Issues and Implications for Teaching in Pakistan

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Abstract

The article discusses the problems involved in teaching of writing in Pakistan and offers suggestions for improving writing instruction. Trend of writing in Pakistan is based on product-oriented approach to writing. Lack of research in this area has pushed it at the secondary place. Teaching to reading is a much focused area not only in schools but also in teacher training workshops. There is no any systematic program of evaluating the written product. Rather non standardized scoring guides are used to evaluate the written pieces of the students. That is why error is considered a mistake inspite of a way to learning. The article also discusses different types of writing evaluation that are also mal practised.

Even in 21st Century, no serious attention has yet been paid to the research in writing processes. since, 1947, none of the governments has paid heed to include teaching of writing among those generously funded areas whose eligibility is like those orthodoxies never questioned. Although the Higher Education commission has been funding various research projects but the research in the areas of writing processes is treated like step child. Almost all of the universities in Pakistan, lack mature decision regarding research in the area of writing process. In foreign universities sessions on writing processes during educational conferences is not unusual now. But unfortunately in Pakistan research in writing process is hostile by inequitable academic structure which is hostile to new ideas. The present government has launched many programs for the professional development of the teachers. But not even a single project is launched to promote the culture of writing. Consequently a lot of experienced teachers feel uncomfortable while talking about writing and process of writing. Condition is also not different in the other areas but when we discuss the level of expertise in the other basic skills for example, reading, listening and speaking, during the teacher training the area of reading is focused too much. But a little stress is put on the teaching of writing during teacher training programs.

The worst of all is that all of our examination boards have not yet produced a unanimous scoring guide lines for a writing sample. This unanimous writing sample helps solving the existing issues of contradictory and scattered results in the evaluation of writing. In most of our schools reading skills are focused and taught throughout the year. Schools are full of experts who can help the students in the areas of reading difficulties but experts in the area of teaching to writing are very few. If a few are present they know little about writing difficulties faced by the students. In the area of academic writing there is deficiency of consensus about standardized instructional methodology that might help how to teach writing. At first glance, the discussion that directly focuses on teaching attracts the reader and seems practical and helpful. The early studies focused unnecessarily on product and form. The inconclusive response and views about writing made it confused and complex.

The confusions which lie in our society regarding teaching of writing pertain, topic sentences, outlines, and word choices, syntactic or grammatical accuracy. These confusions further give birth to some more assumptions which are basically the part of these above mentioned confusions for example: the basic purpose of teaching to writing has become that we need only discover what is missing from students writing. Unluckily, we compare the writing product of students with those of either good writers' product or the pre-conceived aspirations of the teachers themselves. And engage in building such plans and projects that might be helpful in filling the gap of those missing units. This so called attention to teaching of writing is called improvement in writing instruction. Whereas, it is mere a new notion that stresses on form and error free written product. We can discover the proponents of this view from the text books and reference books of composition for the teaching practices which are commonly used by the teachers. Today when there is a powerful shift away from a focus on the end product to a concern with the writing process, some of the text books and reference books for composition teaching practice are providing such typical guide lines for example: Begin your paragraphs with a topic sentence."

I think this is a result of our conventional and typical approach of teaching to writing and a so called conventional wisdom about good writing (Applebee 1978). Practice text and reference books used by conventional and typical teaching very clearly emphasize on outlining, an old fashioned and conventional technique. In a study Zamel (1980) found that most of the skilled wafers negated the use of outlining before writing the studies for example Zamel (1980) has shown that a very few among the successful writers make an outline and that if ever they do, they just use it as a reminder of things to do rather than a listing of organized headings and subheadings and a lettered and numbered format. As a working teacher I have observed that most of typical composition teachers put an undue stress on outlining that consequently, shackle the whole process (Zamel, 1980). According to Flower & Hayes(1981) writing process has some distinctive stages. Because language is a way to express thought but we following conventional teaching practices overlook the importance of these writing processes which can help us generate new ideas at the point of utterance (Applebee, 1978).Until we recognize the distinctive writing processes and sub processes we shall remain deprived of examining the real class room practices.

It is interesting to note that conventional composition class rooms like ours in Pakistan both the teacher and students never tolerate errors. The teacher does not compromise on error in written product. They demand a hundred percent perfection in work. This is an ideal and conventional demand. We lack the tendency to errors as a natural part of learning and it often indicates that it is not mistake but a progress. There is need to enhance the understanding of errors. There is no need to gain only the knowledge about error but a perception that every error has reasonability. This is the notion that can transmit our typical product oriented class room into process oriented situation where each and every individual must be considered and a unique individual. Applebee(1978)has stressed upon the difference of approach in regard of errors. The two philosophies of product approach and process approach deal with errors in two different ways for example. In one the error is considered without reasonability, while the other approach finds a reasonability in error (process approach).In our country error is mere encircled and is considered as a severe mistake that should be penalized.

Figure 1. approaches to Error*

ISSUE	PRODUCT APPROACH	PROCESS APPROACH
Why study errors?	To produce a taxonomy of <i>what</i> errors learners make.	To produce an explanation of why a learner makes an error.
What is the attitude towards errors?	Errors are “bad.”(interesting only to the theorist.)	Errors are ‘good’.”(interesting both to the theorist and to the teachers, and useful to the learner as active tests of hypotheses.)
What should we do about errors?	Attack the individual errors and eliminate them through drill to produce over- learning.	Understand the source of errors: the rule-based system that produces nonstandard forms; provide data for new role formation.
What can we discover from errors?	The source of failure: those items on which the learner or the programme failed.	The strategies which led the learner into the error.
What can we account for errors?	Error is the failure to learn the correct form.	Errors are a natural part of a language; they arise from a learner’s active strategies;overgeneralization,ignorance of rulerestrictions,incomplete rule application,hypothesizing false concepts.
What are the goals of instruction?	Eliminate all errors by establishing correct, automatic habits; mastery of the target language.	Assist the learner in approximating the target language, support active learning strategies, and recognize that not all errors will disappear.

Adapted from Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer.”The Development of ErrorAnalysis and Its Implications for the Teaching of Composition”. Paper presented at Conference on College Composition and Communication, Kansas City, Missouri, March 1997.ED145-482.One of the most critical problems of teaching to writing is the variation in the evaluation of a written product.

Still there is no identical consensus in my knowledge that might be called a real evaluation. For example, if two or more than two educated, well experienced raters are asked to evaluate an algebraic problem, science quiz, a general knowledge test or a vocabulary test/quiz, the grades given by them will be identically unanimous. On the contrary, the result of all of them, will be identically different from each other in regard of a writing test of the same students. This variation in results is influenced by some important factors which influence the judgment of evaluators in case of writing (Applebee, 1978).

- The ideas expressed (richness, soundness, clarity and relevance.)
- Mechanics (usage, sentence structure, punctuation and spellings.)
- Organization and analysis.
- Wording and phrasing (vocabulary maturity and breadth)
- Flavor or style (sincerity, forcefulness, dogmatism, sentimentality and pretentiousness)
- Handwriting.

The reason of the scattered results of written product is that all of the above mentioned factors have relative importance for all of the raters. Mechanics for example, tenses, spellings, form and structure, is the major focus of the conventional and typical product oriented approach to teaching of writing. Grammatical structure, form, sentence structure and other linguistic conventions are some of the major factors that influence results of writing assignments. These factors are a big hurdle in the way of standardized assessment of writing assignments etc. This problem can be solved with the help of standardized scoring guidelines, for example holistic scoring, analytic scoring, objective test etc. These tests are not a hundred percent solution to the problem yet they can help consolidating the scattered results and rate of differentiation in judgment. The measurement of higher level skills which are involved in the development of ideas and in the organization of written piece of text, is not possible with such tests. Further, These tests can pull away both the teacher and students from writing itself to mere the usages because these tests are mere usage tests not writing tests.

Common practice in our classrooms is the undue attention to Mechanics which are the major focus of our writing teachers and even students themselves. They give priority to mechanics rather than meaning.

The analytic approach to writing is very popular in the whole world, in Pakistan it is not widely adopted, focuses on the objective features of a piece of writing and counts all of the features for essay. In this approach the rater can count spelling errors, can measure the breadth of vocabulary used by the student, can rate a paragraph having or not having a topic sentence. Although these approaches are highly reliable yet they leave the question of good writing unanswerable.

Further, the standard based tests are also very popular among the raters in our country, good writing has become what the individual rates or rarely a group of experienced raters considers it good writing. Although thus scores to some extent reliable yet do not tell any thing about the characteristics of particular performance of writing skills even these scores do not tell any thing about the class room practices that how are they are performed or how well they are programmed. Unfortunately, in our country no such a scoring rubrics is provided to the raters for evaluating the piece of writing. In conventional typical product oriented instructional programs every individual instructor applies their own scoring guidelines. According to Applebee (1978) the scoring guidelines must be developed each time whenever the essay topic(s) is changed. In our country the focus of evaluation is product rather than the process of writing itself.

It must be noted that the basic purpose of evaluating a piece of writing is not to label it better than other, rather it is to understand the different strategies that students use in approaching a writing task (Flower & Hayes, 1981; Bereiter & Scadamalia, 1987; Applebee, 1980). We must realize and understand that each and every strategy used by individual is a unique strategy because it might be inappropriate for one task but may be ideal for another. Our evaluation system has failed to make a distinction between what the student seems to be doing is separated from the judgment of whether that strategy is best or not.

Now there is need to pace with the modern world and to shift from product approach to process approach of writing. If our government is really interested to the teaching of writing and wants improvement in the schools and colleges she must devote tremendous energies to curriculum reforms. In the following section I would share some suggestions that might help us shifting from product to process oriented curriculum for teachings of writing.

- Teachers must be involved in developing the curriculum and modifying the material already available in existing text books on composite teaching .
- The structure of the curriculum must be based on the needs of the students, analysis of the processes rather than the subject are or the analysis of knowledge.
- Sharing opinions must be benefited and the teacher must be prepared to go through the process itself
- Instructional model must be simple and easy to implement.
- It is supposed that the best ways to learn about the writing processes is to reflect while writing.

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