16 Developing Process Writing Strategies in Grade 6

Maryam Mohammed Al-Jardani
Muscat Region

1   INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is process writing. This approach to writing concentrates on the way texts are produced and not just on the final written product. One benefit claimed for process writing is that it helps learners develop the skills and strategies which writers need to write successfully (Tribble, 1996). In this study, I investigated the impact of teaching process writing on my learners' writing development. I was motivated to examine this issue by the literature I read about process writing but also because my learners struggled to write well in English and I wanted to see if introducing process writing might help them write more effectively.

2   PROCESS WRITING

Much has been written about the teaching and assessment of writing. Below I briefly discuss issues which are specifically relevant to process writing.

2.1   Product vs. Process

Traditionally, writing has been taught as a product, with a focus on the formal correctness (e.g. spelling and grammar) of the final piece of writing. Although this approach to writing can help learners to reinforce their knowledge of language, it does not seem to help them become more skilled writers (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998; Hyland, 2002; Zamel, 1987).

An alternative view of writing is one that focuses on the writing process. This approach concentrates on "the means whereby a text is produced. It includes all the preparatory work a writer does before beginning writing as well as the work that he or she does while writing and during revising and editing" (Tribble 1996: 161). Process writing focuses on what the writer does to produce a written text (Johns, 1990).

2.2   Writing Strategies

2.2.1   Planning Strategies

According to Harmer (2004), these refer to everything the writer does before starting to draft, which is also called the pre-writing stage (Tribble, 1996). Planning involves making notes, outlining, brainstorming and chatting with others to generate ideas about the topic.

2.2.2   Drafting/Composing Strategies

Tribble (1996: 112) points out that through these strategies the writer "moves from thinking about writing to doing it". He adds that they represent the activity of translating the plans and the ideas into provisional text. It is claimed that good writers produce more than one draft of a text.

2.2.3   Revising and Editing Strategies

Revising involves making changes to ideas and content to improve overall clarity of meaning and purpose; editing focuses more on writing conventions such as spelling and grammar. Good writers, Harmer (2004) points out, often use revising strategies to focus on general meaning and overall structure before using editing strategies to concentrate on detailed features such as spelling and grammatical accuracy.

2.3   Teaching Process Writing

There is some evidence that teaching process writing can improve learners' writing (Holst, 1987 cited in Hyland, 2002; Scott & New, 2005). Following the strategies described above, three stages for teaching process writing have been proposed (e.g. McDonough & Shaw, 1993; Tribble, 1996). I describe these below.

2.3.1   The Pre-Writing Stage

During this stage, teachers can help learners to plan the language they need and to think about the content and organization of their writing. Steele (2005) and Stanely (2005), for example, suggest encouraging learners to brainstorm either with their teacher or with their friends to help them to generate ideas for the topic.

2.3.2   The Drafting Stage

One way teachers can encourage learners to produce their first draft is by using the fast writing technique; learners are asked to write without stopping and their goal is to say what they mean as directly and quickly as they can using the ideas they generated in the pre-writing stage (Stanely, 2005). This technique can help learners to focus on the flow of thoughts, which can develop their fluency in writing.

2.3.3   *Revising Stage*

In this stage teachers can encourage learners to edit and revise their writing by using checklists (Brewster, Ellis & Girard, 1991), which may contain questions or statements to guide learners as they work through and check their text (e.g. Have I checked my spelling?) Also, learners can be encouraged to get feedback on their writing from one another or from the teacher and to use this feedback to revise their work.

2.4   Measures of Writing Development

To assess writing development, we need criteria for measuring it. Three that are commonly used are fluency, accuracy and complexity. According to Wolfe-Quintero, Inagaki, & Kim (1998), fluency refers to how the ideas seem to flow or link together and how fast the writer can produce the language. Accuracy refers to the correctness of the language in terms of grammar, lexis and organization, while complexity refers to the presence of sophisticated language (in terms of grammar and texts) and ideas. Different ways of assessing these criteria have been proposed. The strategy adopted here - rating scales (see below) is suggested by Tribble (1996) and Krest (1987, in Hyslop, 2005).

3   METHOD

3.1   Research Questions

This study investigated whether teaching writing process strategies can help my learners to develop their writing. It addressed the following research questions:
1. What strategies do my learners make use of to accomplish a given writing task?
2. What techniques can I teach them to improve their process writing strategies?
3. Do these techniques contribute in developing their process writing strategies?
4. In what ways does my learners' writing develop?

3.2   Data Collection

Data were collected in a class of Grade 6 learners (12-14 years old) in a Basic Education school. It was their fifth year of learning English. Three learners were chosen to represent good, average, and low ability in English and the study focused on the writing they produced during the study. The study was organized into three stages, with learners producing a piece of writing at the end of three consecutive units of their coursebook, as described below.

3.2.1   *Stage 1*

At the end of Unit 1, I asked the learners to write a text about the topics and activities they covered in the unit, focusing on what they learned and liked. The learners did not receive any process writing input prior to this first piece of writing.

3.2.2   Stage 2

In Unit 2, I introduced the strategies for planning and drafting writing. In the first lesson of the unit, I modelled how to brainstorm ideas about a topic by thinking aloud and demonstrated this process in front of the class. I also introduced techniques for planning content, language and organization by using mind maps and outlines. Here I modelled how can we use these strategies to make associations between ideas and organize them into subheadings. I also showed them how to plan the language they need by searching for it in the coursebook or asking one another. I then asked my class to plan their writing task by using the new techniques. In the second lesson, I modelled how to use the plan I produced in the first lesson to help me to draft. I introduced 'fast writing' techniques - writing as quickly and directly as possible without stopping and leaving space for words we do not know. Then I asked the learners to use their plans to write and I encouraged them to discuss their writing and ask each other for more ideas if they got stuck.

3.2.3   Stage 3

In Unit 3, I used a draft text to model how to revise and edit it at different levels. I first considered meaning and the overall structure of the text, then I read the text and made some decisions about moving ideas from one paragraph to another. Then, I edited the text for grammar, spelling, handwriting and punctuation. Moreover, I introduced how to use a checklist to revise a text.

I next set the writing task and encouraged the learners to use all the strategies I had taught them. In terms of revising and editing, I encouraged learners to read through their texts and to revise and edit them by using a checklist. I also encouraged learners to exchange texts and get feedback from their peers (what Harmer, 2004, calls 'peer response').

These learners also participated in a retrospective think-aloud protocol after each stage. A retrospective think-aloud protocol is a method used in writing research where researchers elicit verbally the writers' thoughts and ideas after doing a writing task in order to identify the strategies they used while writing (Tribble, 1996; Hyland, 2002). The think-alouds were conducted in Arabic and were audio recorded.

3.2.4   Data Analysis

The recordings of the think-aloud protocols were transcribed. Learners' comments were classified according to the kinds of writing strategies discussed earlier. I then counted the number of times each strategy was mentioned in each of the think-aloud protocols.

To assess the learners' writing, I drew on Reid (1993) and Tribble (1996) to design holistic scales to measure fluency, accuracy and complexity (see the Appendix). All learners' texts were given a mark for each of the three criteria on each of their three pieces of writing. To enhance reliability, I worked with a colleague who also analyzed the texts; we discussed our assessments and agreed on the marks to be awarded in each case.

4   FINDINGS

As noted earlier, the three learners I focused on represented good, average, and low levels of ability in English. I now discuss the findings for each learner in turn.

4.1   The Good Learner

Figure 1 shows the frequency with which five writing strategies were mentioned by the good learner in the three think-aloud protocols (one after each piece of writing). The figures show a steady increase in both the number and range of writing strategies mentioned by the learner.
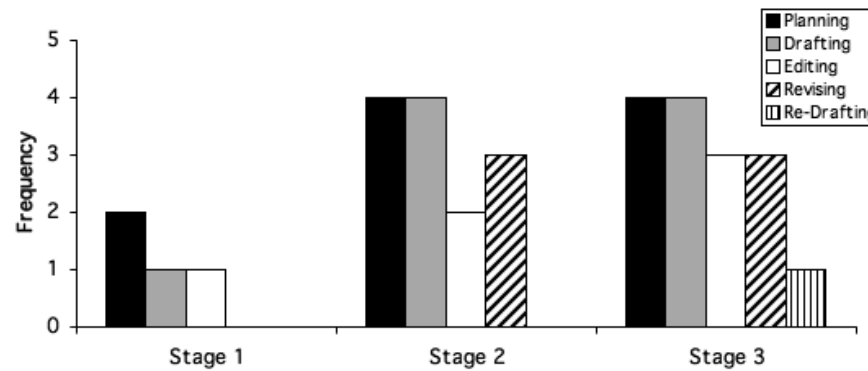

Figure 1: Frequency of writing process strategies - good learner

Table 1 summarizes the scores given to the good learner's three pieces of writing, using the rating scale mentioned earlier. Overall, the learner improved their total score from 7 to 14 (out of a maximum of 15). On the individual criteria, significant gains were achieved between Stage 1 and Stage 3 in both fluency and complexity.

Table 1: Assessment of writing - good learner

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Fluency	2	4	5
Accuracy	3	4	4
Complexity	2	3	5
Total	7	11	14

4.2   The Average Learner

Figure 2 shows the frequency with which five writing strategies were mentioned by the average learner in the three think-aloud protocols. Again, the results show an increase both in the overall frequency with which the strategies were mentioned at each stage as well as in the range of strategies used (e.g. three strategies in Stage 1 compared to five in Stage 3).
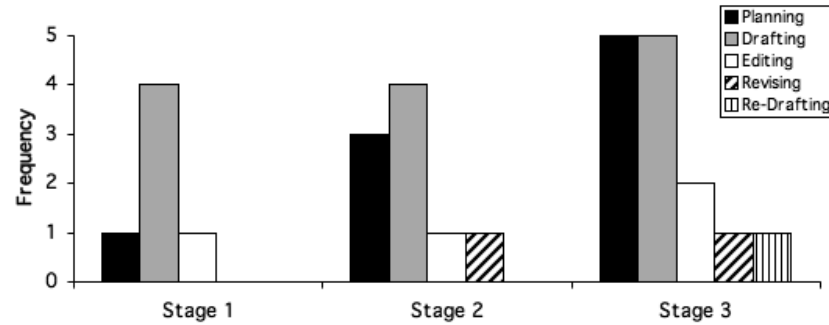

Figure 2: Frequency of writing process strategies - average learner

Table 2 summarizes the scores given to the average learner's three pieces of writing. The scores on the first two stages were the same, while on Stage 3 this learner improved their score by one mark on each criterion.

Table 2: Assessment of writing - average learner

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Fluency	2	2	3
Accuracy	2	2	3
Complexity	2	2	3
Total	6	6	9

4.3   The Weak Learner

Figure 3 shows the frequency with which five writing strategies were mentioned by the weak learner in the think-aloud protocols. Interestingly, the range and number of strategies the learner said they used in Stage 2 was fewer than for Stage 1; on Stage 3, too, while the learner reported using a wider range of strategies, planning and drafting were mentioned less frequently than they were on the previous stage.
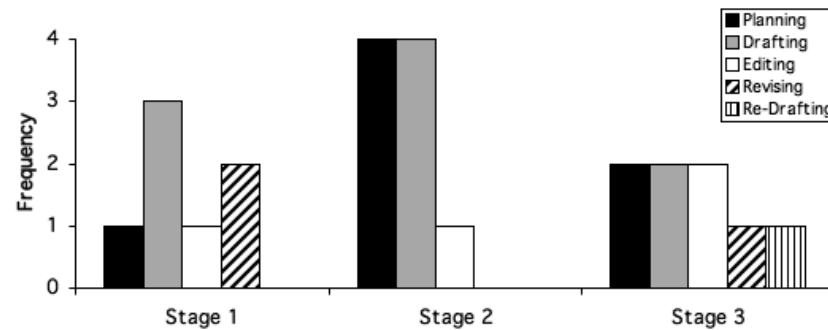

Figure 3: Frequency of writing process strategies - weak learner

Table 3 summarizes the scores given to the weak learner's three pieces of writing. This learner's total score doubled from 5 on Stage 1 to 10 on Stage 3. On the individual criteria, the major gain was in fluency (1 on Stage 1 to 4 on Stage 3).

Table 3: Assessment of writing - weak learner

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3
Fluency	1	2	4
Accuracy	2	2	3
Complexity	2	2	3
Total	5	6	10

5   DISCUSSION

All three learners used some writing process strategies (planning, drafting and editing) in the first stage of this study, before I taught them about these strategies. Some awareness of these strategies, therefore, may have already existed for these learners. However, using these strategies did not mean that learners produced good quality writing; in Stage 1, for example, the weak learner, reported the widest range of writing strategies yet produced the weakest piece of writing. A knowledge of process writing, on its own, therefore, cannot overcome all of the writing difficulties learners will encounter (Hyland, 2002).

Overall, if we compare Stage 1 and Stage 3, the range of writing strategies used increased for all learners; the frequency of process writing referred to in the think-aloud protocols increased for two learners when Stages 1 and 3 were compared. All learners' writing scores also increased when we compare Stage 1 and Stage 3, with fluency being the specific criterion on which most improvement was recorded. There is evidence here, then, that as learners used process writing strategies more often, their writing scores also improved. The good learner was the one whose writing scores improved most, and this may be because she had a superior knowledge of language and was able to apply this more effectively through process writing. However, some benefits resulted even for the weak learner.

These results indicate that teaching learners about process writing strategies can influence the extent to which they use these in their work; this was most obvious for planning strategies, as all learners said they used these more in Stage 2 (I taught learners about planning strategies at the end of Stage 1). I also conclude here that it is possible to raise learners' awareness of the strategies involved in the writing process through classroom techniques such as modelling in front of the learners (Tribble, 1996; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Zamel, 1987; Harmer, 2004)

5.1   Limitations

Some limitations of this study need to be noted. One is that I worked with a very small number of learners. A second is that retrospective think-aloud protocols cannot capture what learners actually did but their reflections on what they did. Additionally, because the think-alouds were guided by my questions, I may have influenced learners' responses, particularly given that I was positively predisposed towards process writing and its benefits for learners.

6   CONCLUSION

This study suggests there is value in making learners aware of process writing strategies and giving them opportunities to use these. The learners in this study were able to apply strategies that I taught them and to produce writing that showed improvement in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity. Doing this research has also been of benefit to me personally in several ways; it has developed my own knowledge and understanding of the writing process and how we can teach it in our classrooms; it has helped me understand how I can stand back and look at my teaching in order to find solutions for problems I encounter; finally, going through

the process of doing this research has made me aware of the importance of research for teachers and given me the confidence to conduct further research in future.

REFERENCES

Brewster, J., Ellis, G. & Girard, D. (1991). *The primary English teacher's guide.* London: Penguin.

Dudley-Evans, T. & St. John, M. (1998). *Developments in English for specific purposes.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Grabe, W. & Kaplan, R. (1996). *Theory and practice of writing.* Harlow: Longman.

Harmer, J. (2004). *How to teach writing.* Harlow: Longman.

Hyland, K. (2002). *Teaching and researching writing.* London: Longman Pearson.

Hyslop, N. (2005). Evaluating student writing: Methods and measurement. Retrieved 11 November 2005 from www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/digests/d50.html.

Johns, A. (1990). L1 composition theories: Implications for developing theories of ESL composition. In Kroll, B. (Ed.). *Second language writing: Research insights for the classroom.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McDonough, J. & Shaw, C. (1993). *Materials and methods in ELT.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Reid, J. (1993). *Teaching ESL writing.* New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.

Scott, V. & New, E. (1994). Computer aided analysis of foreign language writing process. Retrieved 10 September 2005 from https://calico.org/html/article_573.pdf

Stanley, G. (2005). Approaches to process writing. Retrieved 3 March 2005 from www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/write/process_write.shtml

Steele, V. (2005) Product and process writing: A comparison. Retrieved 3 March 2005 from www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/write/approaches.shtml

Tribble, C. (1996). *Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wolfe-Quintero, K., Inagaki, S., & Kim, H. (1998). *Second language development in writing: Measures of fluency, accuracy, and complexity.* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Zamel, V. (1987). Writing: The process of discovering meaning. In Long, M. & Richards, J.C. (Eds.). (1987). *Methodology in TESOL: A book of readings.* New York: Newbury House.

APPENDIX: WRITING ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Fluency

Score	Description
5	Using fluent expression, with variety of ideas which are clearly stated and well organised in a logical sequence.
4	Uneven expression, with some variety of ideas, which are less organised but the main ideas stand out. There is still a logical sequence.
3	Very uneven expression with little variety of ideas which are difficult to follow.
2	It is difficult to follow the logical sequence of the ideas. Lacks fluent expression, ideas are very difficult to follow. There is no variety of ideas and no sense of logical sequence of them.
1	Fails to address most of the aspects of this component.

Accuracy

Score	Description
5	Confident handling of appropriate structures. Hardly any errors of agreement, tenses and word order. Accurate word choice and use. Demonstrates full command of spelling, punctuation, capitalization and paragraphing with good handwriting.
4	Acceptable grammar but problems with more complex structures. Some errors of agreement, tenses and word order. Occasional mistakes in word choice and use. Occasional errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization and paragraphing and still with good handwriting.
3	Insufficient range of structures with control only shown in simple constructions. Several errors of agreement, tenses and word order. Several errors of word choice and use. Several errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization and paragraphing with poor handwriting
2	Major problems with structures. Frequent errors of agreement, tenses and word order. Frequent errors of word choice and use. Frequent errors in spelling, punctuation, capitalization and paragraphing, with illegible handwriting.
1	Fails to address most of the aspects of this component.

Complexity

Score	Description
5	Demonstrates a wide range of complex structures (more than one clause attached with conjunctions). Uses a wide range of vocabulary. Communicates a variety of complex ideas.
4	Demonstrates an adequate range of complex structures. Uses an adequate range of vocabulary. Communicates some complex ideas.
3	Demonstrates a limited range of complex structures. Uses a limited range of vocabulary. Communicates few complex ideas.
2	Demonstrates very few complex structures. Uses a small range of vocabulary. Communicates very few complex ideas.
1	Fails to address most of the aspects of this component.