A Process Approach to ESOL Writing Instruction: The Basics *by Tanya Conover*

Unlike speaking, writing is not natural to the human species. It is a relatively recent invention. Though writing is key to the maintenance and progress of human civilization, precisely what goes on inside the human brain as a person creates text to express language is unclear. Research conducted in the 1960s and 70s began to provide insights about writing, describing it as a highly complex process comprising many sub-processes (Caudery, 1995). Those researchers observed that fluent writers pass through recursive stages in order to first construct, organize, and then express thoughts in the written word (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Crystal, 1997). Furthermore, research in second language acquisition suggests this process of thought occurs not only among first language writers, but also among those writing in a second language (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Peregoy, 2005).

Informed by the research that writing comprises a progression of thought and communicative events, many instructors employ a process approach to writing instruction. Those language instructors focus on writing as a journey of internal and external "discovery." Their approach to writing instruction includes **pre-writing** activities to activate the author's schema (background knowledge) on a topic**; drafting** of ideas to construct knowledge and to communicate meaning through writing**; revising** to clarify meaning following peer feedback on drafts**; editing** to correct English spelling, punctuation, grammar and usage**;** and ultimately **publishing** students' polished works in order for authors to connect with and share their "voices" with a wider audience.

Many ESOL instructors embrace a process approach to writing instruction not only because it inspires writing. The process approach also provides students with multiple opportunities to engage in authentic oral communication, even as it focuses on improving writing skills (Peregoy, 2005). Evidence suggests that one of the best ways for an ESOL

program to facilitate authentic, communicative language instruction is through a *process approach to writing instruction* (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Peregoy, 2005).

- **Pre-writing**

During **pre-writing,** the initial phase of process writing, students generate ideas. Small or large cooperative group interaction provides fruitful, communicative experiences that help students develop ideas for subsequent compositions. Brainstorming, reflecting on meaningful pictures, creating timelines, experience sharing, journal writing, singing, reading newspapers, engaging in class discussions, or any number of schema activating strategies can inspire students to write**. During pre-writing, students identify a purpose for their writing, think about who their audience will be, single out a main idea, and generate details that may be included in their work** (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Peregoy, 2005).

- **Drafting**

Ideas gleaned from any number of pre-writing resources and activities can begin to take root and propel the writer on to the next phase of the writing process, **drafting. During the drafting phase, students pour out their thoughts and ideas without stopping to think about mistakes.** Motivation and freedom of expression boost production. When students are not worried about grammar or spelling, stress is reduced allowing students to focus more productively on organizing and expressing their thoughts and ideas (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Richards, 1998). At this stage instructors encourage students to use invented spelling, incomplete sentences, and even pictures to express their thoughts. **The ultimate goal is to get thoughts written down in any way the student is able.**

- **Revising**

The next stage in process writing is **revising. It is very important for the teacher to first model this stage with the whole class before students meet in small groups.** Once students understand how to do a peer review for revision, they meet in cooperative groups to share their work. At this point, students give one another **positive feedback and suggestions** to help the writer strengthen their work, clarify expression, and improve organization. Peers **ask questions** to help the writer clarify meaning and their purpose for writing (Peregoy, 2005). Peers and writers still do not focus on spelling and grammar mistakes at this point unless it interferes with meaning (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005).

- **Editing**

The next step in process writing is **editing.** Once writers have conferred with peer-response groups and the instructor, they make final revisions, now focusing not only on expression of ideas but also on spelling, grammar, punctuation, mechanics, and on other prescriptive linguistic elements (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Peregoy, 2005). Many resources can be used during this stage including peers, dictionaries, thesauruses, grammar books, computers and especially instructors. Checklists or rubrics are good tools to help students focus on specific editing points.

- **Presentation**

Once the writer's work has been revised and edited, the writing process culminates in the ultimate purpose for which it began, to be shared with a wider audience. Writers should be encouraged to share their final products with the class and receive positive feedback. **Without the clear goal of a final product to present to a wider**

audience, the strength of process writing is diminished (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Brown, 2001). Students can also publish their works in a class magazine, newsletter, or newspaper. When efforts and accomplishments are recognized and celebrated, students become motivated and empowered to grow as writers.

Incorporating process writing in ESOL instruction is a worthwhile goal. Research substantiates the merits of key learning activities incorporated throughout a process approach for second language learners (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Peregoy, 2005). When ESOL instructors utilize process writing to transform the classroom into a writing workshop, in addition to improving writing fluency, overall second language acquisition can also enhanced.

Process writing encourages:

- **Comprehensible input** – listening and reading that students understand
- **Communicative interaction** – speaking, writing, listening and reading in order to exchange authentic, real-world information
- **Cooperative leaning** – constructing knowledge through group interaction
- **Output** – producing meaningful language in written and spoken form
- **Feedback** – receiving information about one's second language production
- **Increased Motivation** – having a meaningful goal and purpose for communication
- **Positive classroom community** – understanding the value of learning and working together
- **Personal agency** – confidence and ability to take action and "make a difference" in one's own life and in the wider community
- **Personal growth –** learning how to plan and execute specific strategies that will allow the learner to increase in knowledge and ability on many levels.

When implemented well, a process approach to adult ESOL writing instruction provides fertile ground for creating an authentic, collaborative, communicative ESOL learning

community where student's at all levels can develop skills in writing as well as in speaking,

listening and reading (Boyle and Peregoy, 2005; Herrell & Jordan, 2004).

References

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Herrell, A., & Jordan, M. (2004). *50 strategies for teaching English language learners*. (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Peregoy, S. (2005). *Reading, writing, and learning in ESL. A resource book for K-12 teachers.* NY: Pearson.

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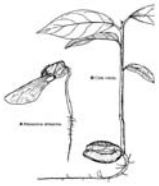
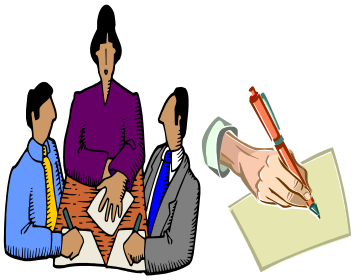
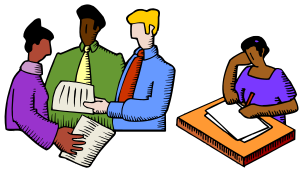
A Process Approach to Writing

1. Ideas are like seeds. 	**Getting Ideas** 	**Prewriting** – getting ideas for writing.
2. The ideas sprout. 	**Expressing Ideas** 	**Drafting** – beginning to organize thoughts and put them on paper.
3. The ideas take root and grow. 	**Making Ideas Clear** 	**Peer Review and Revising** – sharing written work with classmates (peers). • Is your meaning clear? • What can you do to improve your paper?
4. The ideas are expressed clearly and powerfully. Ideas reach out to the community. 	**Making Sure Your English is Correct**  **Publishing Your Work** 	**Editing** – working with the instructor and peers to **correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation.** **Publishing** – sharing your "voice" with the community through writing.