

Applying Process Theory of Composition to Teach Writing in First-Year Composition Classroom in Bangladesh

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Abstract

My work explores the potential of the process theory of composition to teach writing in first-year composition courses, which are mostly grammar-based and product-oriented at tertiary levels in Bangladesh. Since most students are non-native users of English, while teaching first-year composition courses, teachers generally focus more on teaching grammar and then on producing a finetuned write-up on the first attempt. However, writing is an active and recursive process that takes time to get the shape of a polished product of the formulized thoughts of a writer. When students do not go through the process of writing in a genre, they end up emulating the structure and sometimes plagiarizing phrases and even ideas. In my article, by analyzing the scholarly works of David Murray, Linda Flower, John Hayes, Janet Emig and other writing scholars, I aim at defining, dividing and discussing the process of writing. I intend to share a few pedagogical strategies that treat writing as a process and encourage multilingual writing teachers to develop declarative and pedagogical content knowledge for teaching writing in English in Bangladesh. I believe, my autoethnographic paper will contribute to the knowledge system that works to help multilingual students to develop their writing skills in English language. Though I take Bangladeshi universities context in my paper, I believe, my argument will matter to the rest of the non-English speaking world.

Keywords: *Process theory, composition, writing, declarative knowledge, procedural knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge.*

1. Introduction

In Bangladeshi context, we, English teachers or writing instructors at various universities, teach grammar and composition courses which are core or fundamental courses for the students of all departments in first two or three semesters of bachelor's programs. While teaching our students a grammar-based course, we expect them to produce error-free, less flawed and

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well-structured papers of various genres such as paragraphs, essays and letters, and then assess students' abilities of producing a replica of the samples we provide in the class. The samples we use in the class are generally the polished and finished products of many established and published writers. When we use these samples, we unconsciously choose a rigid and inflexible pedagogy of writing. Students learn, but experience rigidity throughout the process. They learn, but often do not feel liberated. We use the samples to provide structures of certain genres. Students emulate the genre-structure without knowing the genre conventions. They learn to produce a formulized set of predetermined and sometimes imposed ideas without going through the process of writing. In my paper, I argue that writing is a process-based skill which can be taught and learned. It is not a product but a process of composing one's ideas and thoughts.

When teachers expect to get written products from their students, at the end of the semester, students pass the course with good or poor grades, but "The product doesn't improve" (Murray, 1972, "Teach Writing as a Product", 3). It is expected that from a writing course, students will develop a sustainable level of cognitive understanding which will help them enhance their writing skills in further courses in the academic and professional spheres. Often, we experience failure and tend to blame our students for not being able to absorb and retain their linguistic and metalinguistic knowledge that they learn in the first and second semesters. Their failure does not necessarily lie in their laziness, it lies in the pedagogical way of teaching them to write different compositions. We try to make them produce a text, but do not teach them the process of writing. They fail, because we fail to teach writing as a process, not a product. Therefore, in my paper, I will discuss the pedagogical strategies that writing teachers may implement to help students become better and more conscious writers.

2. Literature Review

Donald Murray, in 1972, argues that "Writing is a demanding, intellectual process" because "We work with language in action" (Murray, 1972, p. 4). Writing is a process of discovery through language which is not produced by the rules, but by life itself. We tend to teach students how to produce a finished product but ignore the fact that the product is also produced through several trial-and-error processes. We make students submit their unfinished and fragile work and then grade it as a finished product. With just a few marginal and end comments, we ask them to write another piece of writing which is again flawed,

fragile and unfinished. Barnett clarifies the “vicious” circle by stating, “students submit frankly unpolished papers which teachers treat as final product, encouraging them to offer similar work the next time and to focus most of their attention on surface-level fine tuning rather than on communicating a message coherently” (Barnett, 1989, p. 32). Nonetheless, in Bangladeshi context where most composition and basic English classes are larger in size, we practically cannot afford to encourage students to rework on their flaws.

In most cases, non-literary compositions are of various genres. Students write from memory because they have been doing it—memorizing and writing—since their childhood. If we recall our own childhoods, we may remember getting a list of suggestions of paragraphs and essays and later appear in the examination hall by memorizing a few of them. When we got the desired one, we happily wrote the answer knowing that we would get higher grades for it. Learning got concealed under the greed of grades. Still, it was a cognitive process. No matter how high scorers we have been, memories ultimately betray us. Do we remember all essays we memorized in, let us say, tenth grade? No! It is because cognitive memories are the result of cognitive engagement, not emotional experience. Arthur G. Draper states that writing happens because “experiences are caused to coalesce around an emotionally toned idea” (Draper, 1969, p. 247). When students are tasked with composing essays on subjects of personal interest, they become emotionally engaged and derive pleasure from the writing process. Nevertheless, their ability to skillfully articulate their ideas through written language does not exhibit substantial enhancement when they are required to generate a refined product during their initial endeavors.

3. Methodology

To offer my contribution to the language and writing studies in Bangladeshi context, I have chosen to conduct qualitative research. I have textually analyzed the works of the writing scholars of the West to impart the knowledge to Bangladeshi scholars. I am aware of the contextualization of the research work. So, I have found and analyzed the course objectives and learning outcomes of the foundational and basic English courses of three leading Bangladeshi universities. I found these contents on the websites because these are available to public like students themselves and guardians who can look at the course objectives and see what contents are being taught in these English departments.

I appreciate these universities and the English departments for conducting courses by focusing on grammatical aspects because most or all students are multilingual and non-native users of English. However, my purpose is to encourage the teachers to strategically incorporate the process theory of composition into their practice while teaching these courses. Before that, I would first find out what these three English departments have been offering in their basic level English courses. I have chosen two leading private universities: ULAB and Brac University and one public university: Dhaka University. My choice is based on the country-wide reputation of these universities and their widely celebrated contributions to the knowledge system. While I focus on only three, I applaud other public and private universities of Bangladesh for their efforts to help students become better academicians and professionals.

In my paper, I have analyzed the web contents of the English departments of the selected universities. I focused on the syllabus and flyers of the writing and fundamental English courses which are offered to all students regardless of their major areas of studies. Later, I provided a few pedagogical recommendations for the writing teachers who can implement the process theory of composition in their writing classrooms and help their students succeed as better writers.

4. My Study/Analysis of the Curricula

The Department of English and Humanities of University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh offers three basic level English courses: ENG 101: Basic English and Learning Skill, ENG 102: Fundamentals of English I and ENG 103: Fundamentals of English II. As far as the information found on the website is concerned, ENG 101 focuses on “basics of English grammar for developing integrated language skills, that is, Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing” (course catalogue) whereas ENG 102 focuses not only on grammar “but on language usages such as formation of proper sentences and paragraphs as the basic units of good composition” (course catalogue) and ENG 103 offers students “clear and useful suggestions for strengthening their speaking and writing skills by emphasizing on writing different types of expository essays” (course catalogue). Overall, all these three courses start with grammar and lead to more “intensive” writing tasks such as paragraphs and essays through compare-contrast methods and various sentence constructions. The pedagogical method is not mentioned.

The Undergraduate English Courses on the Brac University website have more detailed lists of course descriptions. From this list, I have found one non-credited and three credited basic level English courses. The non-credited course ENG 091: Foundation Course in English is for intermediate level of students to improve their overall language skills in English. So, it is sectionalized based on productive and receptive skills. The contents are developed based on students' present knowledge and needs. ENG 101: English Fundamentals is for the upper intermediate level of students and focuses on "Writing academic papers, analyzing reading materials and grooming students' listening and speaking skills" (Undergraduate English Courses). ENG 102: English Composition is for advanced level students and focuses on "developing their capacity of critical reading and academic writing skills" (Undergraduate English Courses). The pedagogical strategy is also mentioned on the website. It says that it leans on "learner-centered and task-based teaching methodologies" (Undergraduate English Courses) to help students become critical readers and writers. ENG 103: Advanced Writing Skills and Presentation is for the students having proficient level of academic language skill and focuses on uplifting "students' reading, writing and analytical skills to a higher standard suitable for future university work and teach them the ways to incorporate original research into their writing" (Undergraduate English Courses). Overall, English department of Brac university offers different levels of English grammar and composition courses to the learners by developing student-centered contents for the courses. From the materials found on the website, the purpose of these courses is to prepare students as better writers and researchers so that they shine in further academic and professional careers.

Finally, the English department of Dhaka University offers two basic level English courses in first and second semesters. ENG 101: Developing English Language and ICT Skills combines linguistic literacy with information literacy. The purpose is to help students "write with accuracy at sentence and paragraph levels" (Curriculum and Courses) while being able to apply many reading strategies. ENG 102: Developing Essay and Writing Skills is to help students "generate ideas, plan and develop a sequence of paragraphs into an essay" and "construct topic sentences and supporting details to craft a coherent paragraph" (Curriculum and Courses). The pedagogical methods are not mentioned. Also, the website only shows the course learning outcomes which indicate the goals that are to be achieved upon the completion of the courses. Being able to construct paragraphs sequentially requires cognitive involvement

of the students to understand the concepts of cohesion and coherence. However, sequencing paragraphs is different from going through the process of composition.

All three websites of course curricula mainly focus on helping students develop their overall language skills. Since students are multilingual and non-native speakers of English, the curricula emphasize grammar lessons more. The composition part includes general and common compositions like paragraphs and essays. Pedagogical strategies are not informed. Since these websites are visible to the public, I think the inclusion of pedagogical methods would have clarified the FAQs of many aspiring students and their students. I will now theorize the process theory of composition by drawing upon the scholarly works of different writing scholars.

5. Theorizing the Process Theory of Composition

To help students go through the process of reaching the bar of a finished work, writing teachers need to teach them the process of writing first before setting an expectation of reaching a sustainable level of producing polished compositions. The process is developmental and divided into stages. Donald Murray suggests that the “writing process itself can be divided into three stages: prewriting, writing and rewriting” (Murray, 1972, p. 4). Linda Flower and John R. Hayes also discuss the “stage model of writing” in which they explain these three stages of writing clearly. They write, “Pre-Writing” is the stage before words emerge on paper; “Writing” is the stage in which a product is being produced; and “Re-Writing” is a final reworking of that product” (Flower and Hayes, 1981, p. 367).

Prewriting takes place before the actual writing begins. Barnett claims that in the prewriting stage, “Writers find ideas and begin to organize them. As we all know from our own writing, ideas generally do not go onto paper in a coherent or elegant fashion the first time we try to express” (1989, p. 34). In prewriting, “The writer focuses on that subject, spots an audience, chooses a form which may carry his subject to his audience” (Murray, 1972, p. 4). Prewriting itself includes a few sub-stages.

To think of the subject, it requires brainstorming and planning. Planning involves generating and organizing ideas in various ways. Organizing ideas is a complex process which leads to a goal-setting phase which, as Flower and

Hayes suggest, “a little-studied but major aspect of planning” (Flower and Hayes, 1981, p. 372). When student-writers set goals of writing, they can plan to proceed to the next planning level which is to determine and understand the audience.

To understand the audience or reader, it takes a writer to imagine and daydream the situation. Janet Emig writes that “with writing, the audience is usually absent” (Emig, 1977, p. 124). Therefore, one needs to imagine an intended audience or reader before determining the tone and style of writing a composition. Most composition and writing courses do not acknowledge the idea of having intended groups of readers for the genre. Kevin Roozen claims that writers always, “even unconsciously”, make rhetorical choices to address “the needs and interests of a particular audience” because “writing is a social and rhetorical activity” (17). No matter how isolated the writing process appears, the process involves many people at different levels of consciousness. After determining the intended audience of the composition, students choose a style of putting the words down on the page which is another prewriting task. In this case, listing and mapping the ideas help. Prewriting itself is a wholesome process which takes about “85% of the writer’s time” (Murray, 1972, p. 4). Students sometimes take notes and use sticky notes while researching on their topics. It helps them remain on track and kickstart their writing process smoothly.

After prewriting, the writing begins, which is the “fastest part of the process, and the most frightening, for it is a commitment” (Murray, 1972, p. 4). Flower and Hayes call this stage “Translating” as it is the “process of putting ideas into visible language” (1981, p. 373). This process is faster when the prewriting is meticulously done. The information generated in “planning may be represented in a variety of symbol systems other than language” (Flower and Hayes, 1981, p. 373). Then the student-writers need to translate their thoughts into wordy language while they begin the actual writing process.

This stage takes only one percent of the writer’s time. However, the first writing is always the first draft which is unfinished, flawed and requires a lot of improvement and improvisation. Writing opens a new opportunity to revise and rethink the subject, readers and purpose of writing. At this point, the final stage: revising and rewriting begins. When students write the first draft, they tend to edit their draft first before showing it to their teachers. Barnett writes

that “self-editing approach requires all students to write a first draft which will be revised into a better, but not the perfect, composition before the teacher sees it” (Barnett, 1989, p. 37). Students also need to know how revision works. They need to be aware of their own learning and writing processes. After revising primarily, students submit their writings to their teacher.

Then the final stage of the writing process starts after getting their teacher’s feedback. At this stage, a writing teacher only evaluates and gives her feedback by not grading the drafts. Then students conduct rewriting tasks which imply “researching, rethinking, redesigning, rewriting and finally line-by-line editing, the demanding, satisfying process of making each word right” (Murray, 1972, p. 4). It takes the rest of the 14% of the writer’s time because the student-writers start finetuning their first or second drafts and turn them into the polished final works for submissions. Barnett believes that students should be allowed to prepare at least two drafts before they can submit the third draft, which is the final draft of their paper (Barnett, 1989, p. 38). In our context where we must handle a large size classroom, sometimes it becomes difficult for the teachers to allow students to prepare a second draft. Nonetheless, at least one chance to revise the writing and then rewrite the composition enhances the writing skills of the students.

6. Pedagogical Recommendations

Now, the problem is that most language teachers are not trained to think of a language or writing classroom in this way. Also, for multilingual writers, learning to write in English involves other grammatical and linguistic issues which do not appear to a non-native learner naturally. Brewer and Gennero, in “Naming What We Don’t Know” write that teaching writing “is connected to teaching language” (2022, p. 410). One very practical joke can be mentioned here. L2 learners often get confused between the usages of third person singular verbs and plural nouns. For example, I have an apple, we have an apple and Nasih has two apples: these sentences indicate that Nasih has more apples than me and us. However, I jump, we jump and Nasih jumps: these action verbs create problem and may raise a question: Is Nasih jumping more than me and us? It has to be systematically, pedagogically and grammatically taught to the second language learners that verb and noun take an –s suffix for different purposes and to function differently. So, teaching grammar becomes a vital job of a composition teacher. Barnett argues that “teaching writing takes time whether in a first or second language” (1989, p. 36). Therefore, teaching writing

needs to be started early in the academic lives of the students. Since the tertiary level teachers cannot dismantle the prevailing educational system in the elementary, secondary and high school levels, they can design a composition course which will include these processes of writing, inform the students of the process and benefits of the process of writing and empower them to become self-directed learners which ultimately leads them to become better and skilled writers.

Nonetheless, a well-designed composition course does not work if the teachers are not oriented in such a way. Teachers' pedagogical choices matter too. Donald Murray claims that teaching writing as a process does not require a special education or reduced course load. It requires a mindset to accept writing as a process and not a product (Murray, 1972, p. 6). This sort of mindset is created when teachers are also self-oriented instructors. Murray writes in the fourth implication of teaching process for the composition curriculum asking the teachers to remember that they are "teaching a process, not a product" (Murray, 1972, p. 6). This can be a good way for the teachers to keep on reminding of the pedagogy of process-writing.

Since the process of writing is a personalized and individualized process, students go through it at their own pace. In the process, they require collaborative support from their peers and a positive learning environment from their teachers. Steve Graham and Karin Sandmel write that in the writing process which promotes students' ownership of their writing, "students work together collaboratively, and teachers create a supportive and nonthreatening writing environment" (2011, p. 396).

To create this kind of positive learning zone, instead of expecting students to respond to a set of suggested paragraphs or essays, teachers can give the students the freedom to choose their own topics, work on them and then write the first drafts. The idea of collaborative work also helps students to become more supportive towards their peers. When they write their first draft, they can show it to their peers and get a peer-reviewed assessment. This collaborative work will enable students to become more intellectually involved and develop a sense of belonging to the knowledge system. When they review their peers' works and give feedback, they will know that they are contributing to someone's growth. All the collaborative activities may take place outside of the classroom when peers are on their own and can learn from each other in rather less formal learning environments.

Since students, in the process of writing, are encouraged to choose their own topic and write in their own way, they become responsible for the words they produce in the process of writing. Donald Murray's writes, "The students are individuals who must explore the writing process in their own way, some fast, some slow, whatever it takes for them, within the limits of the course deadlines, to find their own way to their own truth" (Murray, 1972, p. 6). In this case, teachers must keep patience and individualize each learner's progress. Treating everyone equally sounds good, but it is equitability that matters more in a writing class.

Moreover, writing teachers need to develop the mindset of a facilitator and not a judge. Teachers, when they know that the students understand the process of writing, are less likely to be concerned about the final product. It sets realistic expectations, and teachers are less likely to be angry with the flawed written works of students. To be more patient and less intimidating, teachers, as Draper suggests, can "individualize writing assignments so that each of his students finds a topic about which he can write honestly" (Draper, 1969, p. 248). When the process becomes individual, students become self-directed learners who are aware of their own mistakes and know that their unpolished works and efforts will not be judged but facilitated by their teachers.

While facilitating the students in their writing process, instead of showing and providing them with polished and finalized samples, teachers can choose to show unpolished samples too which require rigorous editing to come to a final state. Showing how to edit an unpolished work also helps students take the process of writing positively. In one of her interviews, Janet Emig suggests that writing teachers should share their writing as samples while sharing their writing process too. She says, "I think teachers should be active members of writing groups. Just as in many schools' students have never seen anyone reading and so do not know the value of it because they don't have adult models, the same is true of writing" (Emig, 1977, p. 13). Using personal anecdotes while teaching anything relevant to the genre is a useful pedagogical tool. If teachers become more like writers, they can actively take part in the writing process discussions.

In such a case, writing teachers, who are active writers, must be in possession of both procedural and declarative knowledge. Brewer and Gennaro write, "Declarative knowledge, or propositional knowledge about something, is

above the level of consciousness, and thus, it can be articulated. Procedural knowledge, or knowledge of how to do something, is mostly unconscious knowledge” (2022, p. 414). The writers claim that “Writers use procedural knowledge but writing teachers need declarative knowledge” (Brewer and Gennaro, 2022, p. 414). When teachers possess a strong understanding of declarative knowledge and know the way of proceduralization, they become better guides to show students the same procedural way to become better writers. Declarative knowledge enables a writing teacher to focus on the metalinguistic aspects of composition whereas procedural knowledge helps him/her unconsciously understand the process of writing in different genres. When these two forms of knowledge are combined in a writing teacher’s pedagogical framework, he/she understands students’ needs better and guides them more appropriately.

In Bangladeshi context where learners are second-language users of English, these two sets of knowledge become vital in a writing or composition course. However, the contradictions happen mostly. Brewer and Gennaro point out the truth: “While often used in studies of second language acquisition, the concepts of declarative and procedural knowledge, as defined in applied linguistics, are rarely applied to the teaching and learning of composition” (2022, p. 415). Tertiary level teachers are expected to be researchers and writers who actively contribute to the knowledge system of the country. In that case, it is commonly expected that teachers would orient themselves in both declarative and procedural knowledge.

Since most of the English teachers, in Bangladesh, are oriented in literature stream, as Hairston states that they “tend to value expressive and reflective writing far more than we do practical and working writing” (Hairston, 1986, p. 450). In the composition courses, students are expected to learn to write non-literary texts like paragraphs, essays, letters, applications and reports. If the literature-oriented teachers curb their expectations from the students to produce reflective and expressive pieces of composition and focus more on practical and purposeful compositions, students will feel more confident and learn more. Teachers just need to allow students to go through the process of writing so that they can learn from the process itself. However, as soon as the final stage of the process is completed, students should be able to articulate their writing and revising process. This is called reflective writing which allows students to take a pause for a while and reflect on their own learning. This way they become more conscious writers.

7. Benefits of Teaching Writing as a Process:

Teaching writing as a process has twofold benefits: first, it helps the students become self-directed learners by developing a sense of learners' autonomy in them and secondly, it helps the teachers play the role of more friendly and supportive facilitators, not judges, who can remain calm and peaceful in the entire teaching-learning process. When students understand that their teachers are curious to know about their topics, they become more engaged in writing about it. Bennett writes, "When students realize that teachers read their writing to understand what they are trying to say rather than to judge their grammar and usage, they write more interesting compositions" (Barnett, 1989, p. 39).

When we treat something as a process, we unconsciously become aware of its flaws, limitations and shortcomings. Also, we know that these limitations are to be overcome by walking through and enjoying the process. It is "Perhaps awareness that writing is a process related to the growth of students could help teachers become more patient with their students and feel less personally liable for their products." (Draper, 1969, p. 247). Draper writes, "The teacher who regards only the product of his students behaves mechanically and statically toward their writing and gets angry with the flaws" (248). So, he suggests, "If he relates to the process within the students' writing, he allies himself with the growth aspect in his students and does what he can to encourage that. He actively collaborates" (Draper, 1969, p. 248).

8. Conclusion

To conclude, writing teachers hold enormous power in a power deferential relationship with their students. They have the choice to either judge their students' writing as a final product or help them understand that writing is a process, and it requires their emotional engagement to walk through it. First-year university students are the most vulnerable beings in a tertiary level academic system. They enter the university premises to learn sustainable skills for a better academic and professional future. When they learn writing as a process, they ultimately develop the skills of doing larger writing works like a synthesis paper or a whole research paper. A multilingual classroom like ours has so many challenges to implement the idea of writing as a process. However, it is high time we incorporated the idea and let our students become self-directed learners.

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