TEACHING WRITING AS A PROCESS
OF COMMUNICATION AT THE TERTIARY LEVEL

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Abstract

The way composition is often taught takes no account of the processes by which people produce writing and ignores the primary purpose of writing: communication. Students write only for a teacher whose comments give students the impression that what was said is less important than how it was said. Standardized forms are taught without helping students to see that the content and purpose determine the form. Thus students find the techniques of writing and rules of language use they are taught arbitrary and sometimes irrelevant.

Recently there has been a great deal of research into how ESL/EFL writers compose. However, teachers sometimes find it difficult to translate the latest theories into a course design and day to day teaching practices. At the Chinese University of Hong Kong we have designed a writing course that takes into account research into how people compose and which emphasizes writing as communication. Our course design and the assumptions upon which it is based form the basis of this paper.

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In spite of the findings of researchers who are studying how ESL/EFL writers compose, many teachers of writing continue to hold outdated notions about the nature of composition and how it is best taught to students at advanced levels. This is reflected in course designs which place undue emphasis on grammatical accuracy or which are organized around rhetorical patterns of idea development. Overemphasizing grammatical correctness and teaching rhetorical patterns as containers into which ideas must be made to fit both suggest to students that concern with form is more important than concern with content. In addition, such course designs tend to provide little specific and practical guidance on how to go about writing: how to get ideas, develop and shape them, and examine them critically with a purpose and audience in mind.

Teachers at the English Language Teaching Unit of the Chinese University of Hong Kong have put together a writing program which applies the findings of recent research into the composing processes of non-native speakers of English and ways to help them develop writing proficiency. A description of one of our courses, Writing Skills, and the theoretical assumptions upon which it is based may provide some suggestions for others who teach writing to advanced ESL/ EFL students at the university level.

Assumptions

How we view the way people compose, as well as our beliefs about how writing is best taught and learned, determine how we plan writing courses for our students. Viewing writing as an act of communication with readers to accomplish specific purposes has a profound effect on course design, as does being aware of the complex processes involved in writing.

This notion contains three important assumptions about writing that need to be broken down and considered separately:

1) People write to communicate with readers.
2) People write to accomplish specific purposes.
3) Writing is a complex process.

Writing is an act of communication since we usually write to be read by others. As with other types of communication, there is, as Morrow (1981) suggests, an "information gap" as writers are trying to share with readers some information or a way of thinking that they presume readers don't have. In fact this is particularly true of writing because normally readers are unwilling to use time and effort reading things that contain nothing new. At some point writers and their work get a response of some kind: an interview, action, agreement, a smile — or perhaps a rejection, a feeling of disgust, or failure to read all the way through.

McKay (1979) discusses the importance of helping students to become more aware of writing as an act of communication, and describes writing assignments which contain a target audience. She explains that including a description of the audience in assignments ensures that communication of meaning is the goal of student writers. If a teacher's purpose is to enable students to write after finishing a course, this seems more realistic and preferable to a classroom situation in which very little communication takes place. Less learning takes place in situations in which the only reader is a teacher who is very little concerned with content but only responds to how a piece is written. This is especially true when the response merely consists of pejorative comments about surface correctness and perhaps whether or not students followed the assignment. In such a situation students come to see writing as merely an exercise, not as an act of communication.

Failure to make clear to students the second point, that writing is usually done for a purpose, also leads to them feeling that writing is only meaningless drudgery. They will lack motivation to write because they will not see its relevance to their lives. But writers usually write to have some effect on readers,

and this intent shapes how they present what they say. This is especially obvious when the purpose of the writing is to accomplish something concrete, such as a job application letter written for the purpose of being asked for an interview. But it is no less true of writing that aims to inform, convince, or amuse readers.

Asking students to keep an audience and intent in mind has the effect of making our instruction more meaningful and relevant — and more practical. Techniques of writing, notions of correctness, language form, rhetorical form, and style are thus taught as tools for writers to use to help them achieve an intent. Writing is then evaluated on how successful it is in achieving the writer's intent. An advantage of looking at writing in this way is that teachers are free to address student needs as they arise while writing, and students will be more motivated to learn about these technical matters in the context of writing something they care about and that they know will be read by others.

The third broad assumption was that writing, in any language, is a complex process. This is borne out by the work of a number of prominent researchers such as Zamel (1982, 1983), Raimes (1985), Lay (1982), and others. Zamel (1982) discusses important research into composing processes of native speakers of English. She also identifies a shift from focusing on the products of writing to being concerned about the process and talks about implications of this for the teaching of composition to non-native speakers. One important finding of researchers who have studied how people compose is that writing is a process that involves discovery of meaning as one writes. (See Emig 1971 and Hairston 1982.) Zamel (1983), Taylor (1981) and others have discussed the inappropriateness of teaching techniques such as outlining, beginning with a thesis sentence and rewriting solely for the purpose of correcting grammatical and usage errors, saying that these are contrary to the notion of writing as a thinking, discovering process.

Most researchers in this area attempt to define stages or elements in the process of writing. Murray (1978) explains that prewriting, writing, and rewriting are the terms most often used. Flower and Hayes (1981), however, caution that these are not linear steps. They propose a hierarchical structure for their process model. In it they emphasize writing as a thinking process, mention sub-processes, and show how these interact in the total process.

Zamel (1982, 1983, 1984) describes how ESL writers compose: how they generate ideas, write out and develop them, and then revise their work. Through observing ESL writers as they composed, interviewing them, and examining their work, she came to the conclusion that ESL writers experience the same kind of processes as native speakers do.

In addition to assumptions about the nature of writing itself, there are two additional assumptions about teaching writing. The first is that writing is best taught by having students write as much as possible. Lectures on grammar or techniques of writing, at least for advanced students, should be kept to a minimum so that as much time as possible can be used for students to write and discuss their writing with classmates. Corder (1977) talks about the effectiveness of learning by doing. He describes learning tasks in which the ability to use the language is achieved through using the language. By having students learn to write by writing, the writing becomes both the end and the means.

Another assumption about the teaching of writing is that students should be encouraged to keep separate the times when they are working with creating meaning and the times when they are thinking about how best to present their meaning to their readers. Perhaps it is possible for experienced writers to both think of what they want to write and look critically at their writing as they are producing it, but inexperienced writers such as ESL/EFL writers can do both things more efficiently if they do them at different times. This especially means that concern with grammatical accuracy

must be postponed until ideas are developed.

These assumptions, then, form the basis for the design of the Writing Skills course offered by the English Language Teaching Unit of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. How they are put into practice will be discussed in the section on Course Design, below.

Students Needs and our Goals

Language courses are often made up of heterogeneous groups of students. The Writing Skills course is made up of students with a common mother tongue, Chinese, who have all studied English for more than 12 years. But they may have very little else in common: They have different majors, are at different stages in their university career from freshman to senior, have differing levels of English language proficiency, and have varying attitudes about how much effort they should devote to an elective course such as this one. Thus they will have different needs and interests, making it impossible to teach specific types of writing, such as the research paper or the job application letter. These constraints, in addition to the number of hours per week (3) and the length of the term (14 weeks) make it necessary to aim at rather general goals for the course.

Another constraint is class size. Although our class size of 15 to 20 students may seem small in comparison with class sizes elsewhere, we depend to a great extent on small group work and try to train students to give each other feedback and response to their writing. Students have to get used to not being dependent on the teacher alone for guidance and learn to trust their classmates. This is necessary so that lots of writing can be worked through the various stages in the writing process.

What we want students to gain from the course can be simply stated, but many things are involved, as will be made clear in the description of the course design. In general,

however, we want students to gain the ability to write well for any audience they encounter, for any purpose they may have. We hope that by giving them general guidance, as well as an abundance of practice and opportunities to get responses, they will be able to do these things.

Course Design and Classroom Techniques

All of the aspects of good writing talked about in class are immediately practiced in short in-class assignments, and also in two longer, more formal, writing assignments. At the beginning of the Writing Skills course, students start work on the first of these major assignments, each taking about six weeks to finish. These projects are to be approximately 800-1,200 words in length, and no topic or form is specified, though recently we have experimented with requiring that the topic be descriptive in nature so that students can learn to use specific details to develop their ideas fully. Students have chosen topics such as the following:

— an experience as a member of the Hong Kong Air Cadet Corps
— the 1985 international dragon boat races
— the reality of technical schools
— a story about what would happen in Hong Kong were a nuclear war to break out
— Chinese funerals in ancient times
— the fitness craze
— cooking and eating dog meat

With topics in mind students are asked to clarify their intent or purpose by writing a topic proposal. An example is given to them:

I want to present the thesis that boredom is one of the major problems facing old people in Hong Kong today. My intent is to give reasons why I consider this problem so serious so that I can convince readers to be

> *more aware of it and thus more sympathetic towards*
> *old people in their own families. From my perspective*
> *as a member of the Social Work Department, I would*
> *also like to propose some solutions to this problem.*

In this topic proposal students must state what effect they wish to have on their audience: to get the audience to give them information, for example, to do them a favor or to take action of some sort, to get the audience to believe something, to entertain the audience, and so on. Sometimes student writers, perhaps because they don't have the needs of the audience in mind, aren't able to define their purpose, or if they can, it's very vague. Thus the writing they produce is vague, general, or incoherent. No amount of instruction on how to link paragraphs or develop ideas can cure the problem if students don't have a purpose clearly in mind as they write. It may be a bit more difficult to keep in mind an abstract intent or purpose, such as to inform or entertain, than it is to remember a more obvious purpose such as soliciting information or getting someone to take action on a complaint. But in academic situations the purpose is often rather abstract, and thus ESL/EFL writers should become familiar with this kind of writing.

A result of our emphasis on intent or purpose is that when teachers give feedback during the stages of composing, they can talk about both strengths and weaknesses, not in terms of objective standards, but in terms of whether or not the piece of writing is effective in achieving the writer's intent. Areas that we cover in class such as how to write effective introductions and conclusions, how to develop ideas through description and exemplification, how to do persuasive writing, and how to achieve an effective style, all seem practical and comprehensible as techniques to help student writers achieve their purposes. Instruction in points of grammar and word choice also seem relevant in this context.

Along with getting and keeping intent firmly in mind, students must keep in mind to whom they are writing. We

believe that helping students analyze the audiences they will write for is very important. Our students are asked to consider various things:

-- Who is the audience?
-- What are its members' backgrounds, experiences with the topic, interests, opinions, ages, sex, and so on?
-- Will the members of the audience tend to be receptive, neutral, or hostile?
— Are members of the audience general readers or specialists in a field?
— What effect will these facts have on the students' writing?

Although an ideal situation would be one in which many different genuine audiences would be available, it is difficult to arrange such a situation. However, one group of readers that is readily available is the members of the class. Therefore, we ask students to assume that the audience for the things they write for our course is their classmates and the teacher. Assuming this we can confirm the results of the audience analysis. More importantly, perhaps, we can then use classmates to provide feedback for unfinished pieces so that students can rewrite, and to give response to finished work. Students will then know whether or not their writing was effective for their audience. Limitations of giving exposure to only one audience may be outweighed by the advantages of students being able to get feedback and response from a real audience.

Having intent and audience in mind, students are ready to begin to sharpen their ideas and then to write their projects. Because we want to give our students specific guidance about how to go about writing we talk about elements in the process of writing, emphasizing that it is not a linear process and that individuals vary in the order they experience the elements and the amount of time they spend on each. While we are discussing each element, students are working on their own pieces of writing, trying to pay more attention to their own process of writing and keeping the times they are inventing separate from

the times they are being critical.

We first talk about generating ideas and do some group work in this area. This is woven in with the work on intent and audience analysis. A central emphasis is choosing aspects of a topic that will be interesting and thought-provoking to the audience. Students are sometimes asked to get into small groups, and tell each other what their topics are. The group members write down, and then later discuss, what they already know about the topic, and thus what the writer should avoid, and what they would like to know more about on that topic. At this time we also help students to narrow and focus their topics so that they avoid being over general or trying to cover too much. Students also engage in other prewriting activities, such as those mentioned by Spack (1984).

Then students write first drafts, paying attention to content rather than correctness or arrangement of ideas. This is especially important for these students who are not writing in their native language as they tend to over-emphasize correctness or worry about it too much during the early stages of composing. The first drafts are then given to classmates for feedback which can be used when the authors revise their work.

We arrange the feedback in this way. First we give students some preparation in the form of advice on how to give helpful feedback. (See Elbow 1980 and Macrorie 1980.) We also give a checklist of specific points to consider and an old student composition that they can practice giving feedback on and that teachers can use to model giving feedback. Some of the guidelines we give the students are these: look both for things the writer has done well and things that make the piece less effective; be tactful and remember that your comments are only your opinion; remember that it's a draft and not a finished work (so comments on editing conventions will not be appropriate at this point); and most importantly, point to specific places the writer has done something well or failed to, and offer alternatives if possible. Also, writers are encouraged to ask questions about things they have had trouble with.

Questions on the feedback checklist address techniques of writing that have been discussed in class, and aim at getting student readers to be specific in their comments. Here are a few examples of questions · that are asked.

Intent -- What do you think was the writer's intent or purpose, that is, what effect was he or she trying to have on you, the reader? (Please choose one from the list below and explain if necessary.)
— to inform you about _____
    For what purpose? _____
— to amuse you _____
—to convince you to change your thinking about _____
— to get you to take action _____ What? _____
— to make you feel something _____ What? _____
— other — explain _____
Did the paper have the effect on you that you think the writer intended?
    yes _____ no _____ somewhat, but needs work _____
If you answered "yes," please note on the draft places you think the writer has done a good job in achieving his or her intent.
If you answered "no" or "needs work," please offer suggestions (on the draft) about how the writer could strenghen the piece so that the intent can be achieved.

Idea Development — After you have finished reading the whole piece do you have any questions? Please write them here:

Try to express the main point in one sentence:

If you are unable to do so, can you explain why?

Were there enough details and examples to support the main idea?
    yes _____   no   _____

If your answer was "yes," *from memory* please write as many of the writer's details, examples, reasons, arguments, as you can (in any order):

If you answered "no," could you suggest any supporting points the writer might use?

Are all of the supporting points relevant to the topic?
yes ＿＿＿ no ＿＿＿
If your answer is "no," please indicate on the draft any irrelevant parts.

Other areas mentioned on the feedback checklist are topic choice, idea arrangement, and style, each with several specific questions. Students are put into groups of three to four members, asked to exchange copies of their drafts and then make comments at home. They later discuss each other's work in class with the feedback checklist as a guide. Afterwards they can give the completed feedback checklist to their group members to use as reference for revision work.

Some students have questioned this feedback procedure. They have had some difficulty at first with accepting the advice of their classmates. They doubt that their peers are qualified to give them helpful advice, and they are in the habit of looking only to the teacher for judgements about the quality of their writing. However, they come to realize that since their classmates are the target audience, their comments about the effectiveness of the writing are extremely valuable. And indeed classmates are able to be more objective about their writing than are the student writers themselves. However, to help to relieve their doubts, teachers also read the drafts of the first assignment and make comments. To ensure that the student writers take the advice of their peers seriously and that they are able to examine their own work and identify problem areas, we have them enclose lists of questions about their drafts. Teachers, then, will only address the questions

asked by the student writers and will restrain themselves from commenting on anything else. A good question might be something like this: "My group members said that the section on dieting is not relevant for a paper on fitness. Do you agree?" A question that would not be allowed would be, "Are there any problem areas in this paper?"

Some students have also complained that this feedback process is unrealistic since later they will have no one to give them feedback. But we inform them that the second writing project will receive no teacher input, though classmates will again be asked to give feedback. We also explain to them that by giving feedback to others they are learning skills that will help them to examine their own work more critically. In addition, we remind them that they are free to accept or reject advice given by peers or teacher.

After receiving feedback students turn their attention to revising and working toward completed pieces. This is not to say that revision only occurs late in the process, for revision may be constantly going on, even in the writing of the initial draft, since people work in different ways. But we want our students to try to wait until the initial, idea-generating step is finished before they start being critical of their work, and we also want them to learn that revision can sometimes mean extensive rewriting -- something different from the editing that goes on at the end.

Sometimes students have trouble seeing that there are many ways of expressing the same idea. In order to make that point we do a simple exercise in class. Students are given a topic (recently, for example, I asked them to explain to me why lately in Hong Kong there had been so many cases of mothers committing suicide and killing their small children at the same time). In this activity students write for five or ten minutes on the topic, and their papers are collected. Then, they are asked to write once again *on the same topic*. Often I have them do it for a third time. Afterwards, we discuss the differences between the three drafts and which was better. Sometimes I ask

the students to take the papers home and revise them into one perfected draft. Thus they begin to understand that even though words have been put down on paper, there is nothing final about a piece of writing until a writer decides to stop working on it. For both the revision and the editing stages we give the students advice and exercises of a traditional sort, and for the discussion of editing we provide some guidelines which mention some recurring problems of Cantonese speakers writing in English, as well as standard editing conventions. Class time is used for student peers to help with the editing.

Finally comes the response. On the day when final drafts are due the class time is used for class members to read papers they have not already read and then to write responses. A short list of questions is attached to guide the students' response. The questions are these:

— What was the writer's main point, and what was his or her intent? (Answer something like this: The writer's main point was that the problems of the elderly in Hong Kong should not be ignored or minimized with the excuse that the old people's families will take care of them. His intent was to give us more information about the problems that old people face so that we'll be more aware of the problem and try to help old people more.)

— What do you think were the *specific* strong points about this piece? (The title that attracted interest? The strong conclusion? The useful examples? The style? The clear arrangement of points? The new and thoughtful aspects of the point that were emphasized? And so on ...)

— What is your response to this piece? (Answer more fully, but something like this: I agree that the elderly have many problems that their families are not helping them with. I suggest that the government should implement some sort of financial aid scheme and/or re-examine the mandatory retirement age. My grandmother sounds a lot like the example you have given.)

Then final drafts are given to teachers to evaluate. Zamel (1985) raises issues and gives suggestions for responding to student writing. In the Writing Skills course we try to ask questions about areas of content we don't understand or that we wonder about. We offer suggestions about how to make the writing more effective, keeping in mind the students' intents. We collect both first and final drafts and comment about the number and effectiveness of revisions. Some of our teachers have tried having conferences with students, as Murray (1979) suggests, and others make comments only on what has been recently discussed in class. In any case we try not to overwhelm students by mentioning every area in which there are problems, and certainly we will make as many positive comments as possible.

One way we have tried to make the teachers' more systematic is to have a checklist of points, with points being arranged roughly in order of importance, depending on the type of writing being done. With the idea of effectiveness (or lack of it) in communicating meaning in mind, teachers make comments going down the list, only moving to the next item if there are no major problems in the previous ones. This might be the order of points for an academic essay:

— *content* topic choice, idea development
— *idea arrangement* introductions, conclusion, titles, transitional devices, format)
— *style* word choice, sentence structure)
— *grammar*

It should be clear from the preceding description of the Writing Skills course that a large amount of the class time is devoted to working on the large writing projects: getting ideas for them, receiving feedback, revising them, getting response to them. Along the way, as has been mentioned, techniques for making writing more effective, such as use of descriptive details, are discussed, and short in-class writings are assigned. For example, in the unit on developing ideas through descrip-

tive details, students might be asked to close their eyes while the teacher takes them on an imaginary trip, across the water to a small island, through the jungle, and up the mountain in search of the wise old man who will answer a question if he can be found. At the entrance to the old man's cave, the teacher will stop and ask students to complete the story and then write the ending, being as descriptive as possible. We believe that encouraging students to have fun with their writing is a way to motivate them and we believe that helping students to have confidence in their ability to write is essential.

The Writing Skills course features another kind of writing, though it is not generally done in class. To provide regular practice in writing, which will enhance fluency, and also to provide a balance to the formal writing assignments and in-class writings we ask students to do, we also ask them to keep writing journals. An excellent article on the benefits of using the journal in the ESL classroom is by Spack and Sadow (1983). Our use of the journal is a bit different from theirs in that we allow our students to write about whatever they like rather than just what goes on in class. We ask students to keep an exercise book and write a page in it three times per week. These are not meant to be diary entries but records of observations, responses to class, things they have read or to daily life, descriptions, and so on. These entries can often provide ideas for other writing activities. Students are asked not to be concerned with accuracy as much as fluency. The purpose of the journals is to give students whose experience with English has been mostly passive absorption of knowledge about the language a chance to use it and even to experiment with it. Students report that at the end of the term they can write much faster and with more ease.

Teachers evaluate the journals mainly for effort, thoughtfulness and correct number of entries. Perhaps because of the emphasis on content, the journals may be the most genuinely communicative aspect of the course. Teachers respond to the ideas and experiences related, expressing their agreement or

disagreement, sharing similar experiences, expressing surprise, or even confusion, and so on. Dialogues between teachers and students are established, and this aids in building rapport. Students also are able to make comments about the course that they might hesitate to make in front of the class or even privately to the teachers. Some of the teachers of the course also keep journals which they make available for student inspection.

Conclusion

The intent of this article has been to describe our Writing Skills course at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and the assumptions upon which it is based so that other teachers may see how current ideas about communicative language teaching and composition can be applied to course design for students at this level. No formal study has been done to see if this course has been able to produce student writers who write better and with more ease than students who have taken more traditional courses, but intuitively we feel that it has and that we are moving in the right direction. One drawback of trying to assess students' improvement in writing skill is that it seems to come slowly and may be more apparent at some time in the future. But we would like to think that our students leave the course with a greater understanding of how to go about writing and how to write effectively for whatever purpose or audience they may need to write for in the future.

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