Investigating the Process Approach to Writing

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This paper reports on six case studies of a 16-hour process writing program. The purpose of the research was two-fold: (a) to investigate the processes used by the students in composing and revising their essays as they applied the process approach to their writing, and (b) to evaluate the effects of this approach on the quality of the students' writing. The research involved six first year full-time students at tertiary level. They were native Cantonese speakers who were introduced to the process approach to writing, and were required to write two expository essays for practice and assessment. In each case, they wrote an outline and four drafts before turning in the final copy. Initial drafts showed changes in content and organization, while later versions were marked by revisions of language use and mechanics. A comparison of the first and second writing assignments indicated numerical gains in content and organization scores. Qualitatively, both researchers agreed that the students' improvement in content and discourse organization was substantial, but improvement at the sentence level was minimal. A gain in writing readiness was also noted, a view which was echoed by the students themselves. The implications of the research are that the writing program described here helped to develop confidence and fluency, while improving content and discourse organization, but failed to effect major improvement at the sentence level.

英作文学習の過程（プロセス・アプローチ）を研究する

　本稿は16時間にわたる英作文学習過程の６つのケース・スタデイを報告する。研究目的は２つある。１つは、学習者が小論を書き、修正する時に適応する過程を考察すること、第２には、この学習法が書かれたものにどの位効果的に作用しているかを評価することである。

　調査の対象は、全授業に出席する第３レベルの１年生６名である。彼等は、広東語が母国語で、英作文で初めてプロセス・アプローチを学び、練習と査定のために２編の解説文的論文を書くことが必修とされた。６つのケースすべて、学習者は大要を書いて最終原稿に到達するまでに４回の草稿を経過しなければならなかった。初期の草稿は内容と構成に変化が見られ、回を重ねるごとに語法や創作技術に修正が目立った。

　第１課題と第２課題を比較すると、内容と構成の面での学習効果が大きい。質的には、学習者が内容とデイスコース構成の面で実質的に上達したが、文章レベルでの進歩は最小である点で本研究者２名の意見は一致している。又、学生が以前より英作文を進んで学習しようとするようになったことも研究者はあげているし、学習者もこの意見に共鳴している。

　この研究は、前述したプログラムが英作文の内容とデイスコース構成を推敲するだけでなく、学習者の自信と流暢さを促進するのには役立つが、文章レベルでの大きな進歩には影響しなかったことを含意するものである。

1. Introduction

The research reported in this paper is based on certain assumptions from the writing literature: (a) some writers are more skilled than others; (b) the processes used by these skilled writers are learnable; (c) the processes have to be evaluated by detailed investigation; and (d) case study is an effective way to carry out such investigation. Although the literature provides no adequate support for a clear and distinct dichotomy between skilled and unskilled ESL writers (Raimes, 1985), it is reasonable to identify some writers as more skilled than others. The research reported here was motivated by the belief that "the processes used by skilled writers can be described and taught in the classroom" (Raimes, 1985, p. 229). To strike a resonant note with Zamel (1983), the authors believe that only by studying these processes in detail can the appropriateness of teaching methods and approaches be evaluated. In this respect, case study is an effective investigative tool.

Studies of writing programs have been carried out by Zamel (1983), Raimes (1985), and Mohan and Lo (1985). These studies all shared a common focus with the studies reported here, namely, process writing in ESL class-rooms. Raimes's (1985) study found that less proficient writers need more of everything: time; opportunity to talk, listen, read, and write in their L2; instruction and practice in generating, organizing, and revising ideas; attention to the rhetorical options available to them; and emphasis on editing for linguistic form and style. "Attention to process is thus necessary but not sufficient" (Raimes, 1985, p. 250). Explicit instruction in the composing process is also needed in order to ensure successful writing.

Zamel's (1983) case studies of six advanced ESL students attempted to discover what advanced students do in the process of writing. The research showed that generally the students devoted most time to the creation of the first draft. The less skilled writers were determined not to commit errors and therefore attended to them prematurely; on the other hand, the more skilled writers devised strategies which allowed them to pursue the development of their ideas without being diverted by lexical and syntactic considerations.

Mohan and Lo's (1985) study showed that the compositions of Chinese Hong Kong students were largely directed toward sentence-level accuracy. Many teachers believed that the most serious problem of their students was incorrect English usage. As Mohan and Lo noted:

> It is generally recognized that many second language learners have difficulties with academic writing in English. Some of these difficulties are sentence-level problems with grammar and vocabulary. However,

a special feature of academic writing is the importance of discourse organization. (p. 515)

While Mohan and Lo's concerns with academic writing in ESL were shared by the students in the present investigation, the present researchers have additional considerations as listed below:

1. *Genre:* Hong Kong students have the least practice in expository and argumentative writing (Mohan & Lo, 1985, p. 527).
2. *Source of Feedback:* Feedback comes, more often than not, from the teacher alone, who acts as the authority; this may be detrimental to the students in their attempts to become independent writers.
3. *Timing of Feedback:* Most feedback is given after the product is submitted; feedback of this nature is, in general, more for assessment, but "feedback during writing is much more helpful" (Cramer, 1985, p. 4).
4. *Priorities of Feedback:* Teachers' feedback may be misleading: when they seemingly focus on problems of mechanics, usage, and style, their students may have a rather limited notion of composing and as a result falsely prioritize the treatment of local errors (Butturff & Sommers, 1980).
5. *Accuracy:* Grammatical accuracy does not necessarily follow from students' preoccupation with the issue.
6. *Multiple Drafts:* Students may have the misconception that writing multiple drafts is a waste of time, without realizing that "instruction in and guidance throughout the composing process will lead to a better written product" (Barnes, 1983, p. 139).

2. Method

2.1 Objectives

This study has two objectives. One is to investigate the processes used by the students in composing and revising their essays as they applied the process approach to their writing. To accomplish this objective, the following emphases were built into the writing program to address the six problems encountered by local learners, as discussed above:

1. *Genre:* Special attention in the form of mini-lectures and notes was given to the discourse organization of expository writing.
2. *Source of Feedback:* Cramer's "collaborative approach" (1985) was adapted for use in the classroom, resulting in the students working either in pairs or in groups of three. Students edited their own work before editing the efforts of others.

3. *Timing of Feedback:* As comments should be "intended to motivate revision" (Sommers, 1980), editing sessions were held at various times during the composing process. Each student gave and received feedback from peers after outlining, and after each drafting/revising stage.

4. *Priorities of Feedback:* Feedback sessions addressed content and discourse organization before sentence-level concerns. Instructions were given out in such a way that the students were constantly reminded to prioritize global over local concerns, while not discouraging them from "correcting" sentence-level mistakes if necessary. Any attempt to stop the students from treating local mistakes was considered artificial and adverse to the efficiency of the feedback sessions.

5. *Accuracy:* With the belief that "form grows from content and is inseparable from it" (Judy, 1980, as cited in Zamel, 1982, p. 206) on the one hand, and that the students perceived they needed grammar guidance on the other, the researchers decided to give grammar quizzes to be completed at home.

6. *Multiple Drafts:* It was brought to the students' attention that the writing processes involved in drafting and redrafting contributed to the improvement of the product, and that ultimately time would be saved.

The other objective is to evaluate the effects of this approach on the quality of the students' writing. The aspects of writing investigated under this objective were:

1. An evaluation of two writing assignments focusing on writing readiness, content, organization, vocabulary, language use, mechanics, and syntactic complexity. The following constitute the evaluation: (a) changes between essay drafts were identified, and (b) changes between the first and second assignments were noted.

2. A matching of students' perceptions of needs and their expectations before the writing program with their perceptions after completing the program, as expressed in two writing tasks.

3. A matching of students' perceptions of their writing problems at the beginning of the program with their evaluation of the effectiveness of the program in solving these problems, based on their responses to two questionnaires.

4. An action plan drawn up by the students.

2.2 Subjects

The six subjects were all Hong Kong Cantonese speakers who were learners of English as an auxiliary language. They were recommended to the English Foundation Program of the City Polytechnic of Hong Kong in year one. They had obtained Grade D or below in HKCEE English[1] or Use of English in the Advanced Level Examination[2] before they started their tertiary study programs, and they could be described as "limited/remedial" learners. Their majors were International Business Studies, Accountancy, or Architectural Studies. After taking general English for two terms, they were assigned to take a 16-hour writing class, meeting for a two-hour class session once a week. For convenience in scheduling, groupings were made by the English Department according to the students' majors.

2.3 Procedure

The 16-hour writing program was spread out over eight weeks in the final term of a three-term academic year, 1991. In the first hour of the program, a needs analysis in two parts was conducted. It included a 10-minute writing task on needs and expectations, followed by a questionnaire on the major problems normally encountered in writing.

In the 14 hours following the needs analysis, the students were introduced to the notion of process writing through mini-lectures, handouts on composing processes, and hands-on experience with brainstorming, mapping, freewriting, quickwriting, steady-writing, editing, and revising. These materials were adapted from Reid (1982). They followed the basic schema of the process approach: brainstorming, mapping, freewriting to get into a topic; quickwriting and steady-writing of drafts; and multiple rounds of peer editing and individual revising.

After this introduction to the process of writing, the students started the first of the two writing assignments. They brainstormed for ideas and topics, generated an expository topic, and wrote an outline, followed by a peer feedback session. They went through a non-stop quickwriting of the first draft for an hour. This was meant to overcome mental blocks[3] in getting into a topic and was also intended to gain time to be more productively spent on generating subsequent drafts. Zamel (1983) noted that her students spent the greater portion of their time on the first draft; however, the present writing program attempted to reverse that situation, that is, to help the students finish the first draft quickly, and then spend the greater proportion of time in revising it and working on subsequent drafts. The students then steady-wrote the second draft for one hour, and after that edited collaboratively in class in groups of two

or three for content and organization. At home over the weekend, they revised their drafts and developed third drafts, which were then discussed during class between peers, focusing on language use and accuracy. The students then revised their drafts again to develop fourth drafts, which were further edited in class and revised to improve content, organization, and language. At the beginning of the fifth week, each student handed in a writing file which contained four drafts and a final copy. The teacher graded the essays holistically while at the same time commenting on various aspects of the writing. The above composing processes and administrative procedures were repeated in dealing with the second expository writing assignment.

In the 16th hour, the students were offered the opportunity to evaluate what they had done in this writing program. They completed a 20-minute writing task on their thoughts and feelings about the program, and filled out a questionnaire on the effectiveness of the course in tackling the writing problems which they mentioned at the outset. They were also asked to fill out an action plan form to set themselves specific and realistic goals for the improvement of their writing in the future. To supplement their composing activities, the students completed 15 take-home problem-oriented grammar exercises. They were encouraged to work at these exercises individually in their own time, and to bring questions to the class for discussion.

3. Analysis

3.1 Holistic Grading

The teacher (one of the researchers) graded the final section of the writing assignments holistically during the eight weeks of class. As Table 1 shows, three subjects (A, B, and F) improved by an intermediate grade (from C+ to B- or from C to C+) in Assignment 2, and the other three (C, D, and E) received the same grades in Assignment 2 as they did in Assignment 1.

Table 1.
Letter Gradings by the Teacher

Subject	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Gain in Assignment 2
A	C+	B-	+
B	C	C+	+
C	C+	C+	0
D	C+	C+	0
E	C	C	0
F	C+	B+	+

+ = Grade improvement
0 = No change in grade

3.2 Analytical Scoring

The final versions of the first and the second writing assignments of the six subjects were analytically marked by two independent readers[4] (not the authors) using Jacobs et al.'s (1981) ESL Composition Profile (1981) on content, organization, vocabulary, language use, and mechanics. The teacher, who graded the assignments holistically during the eight weeks of class, reread the papers using the same profile as the two independent readers to check for interrater reliability. The three readers were given randomly ordered papers with number codes for the purpose of blind rating.

Table 2 presents the average gain scores. Three subjects (A, B, and F) had positive gains, while the other three (C, D, and E) showed losses. The analytical scoring pattern as shown in Table 2 exactly matches the holistic grading pattern as shown in Table 1, in that the three subjects who showed gains were those who were upgraded by their teacher, and the other three were those who had no change of grade in the second assignment.

Table 2.
Average Gain Scores

Subject	Content	Organization	Vocabulary	Language Use	Mechanics	Total
A	2.3	2.0	1.3	1.3	(0.3)	6.6
B	0.3	1.7	0.7	0.7	(0.3)	3.1
C	(1.0)	(0.3)	(1.3)	(0.7)	0.3	(3.0)
D	(3.0)	(1.7)	(1.3)	(2.7)	0.0	(8.7)
E	0.0	0.0	(0.3)	0.0	0.0	(0.3)
F	1.7	0.3	1.0	0.0	0.3	3.3
Total	0.3	2.0	0.1	(1.4)	0.0	1.0
$\bar{X}$	0.1	0.3	0.0	(0.2)	0.0	0.2

Note: A score in parentheses indicates a negative value.

In numerical terms, Subject A gained the most and Subject D gained the least. The performance of these two students thus stood out from the rest of the group. After discussion between the researchers, it was found that the first and the second topics written about by each subject, except for those by D, focused on the same field (A—Business; B—Hong Kong Social issues; C—Art and Design; D—Architecture and Social Problems; E—Hong Kong Social Issues; F—Business). Subject D's second assignment was significantly worse than the first one. The difference in scores between the two assignments might have been magnified by the switch of topic, from one related to his major field of study, architecture, to an unrelated one, social problems. Subject A's second assignment was significantly better than the first one. The difference in scores between the two assignments might be attributable to the

more intensive teacher supervision she received. Subject A was the only student in the writing class for International Business majors, and thus had to pair up with the teacher for "peer" editing.

3.3 Post-rating Discussion Between the Researchers

After the rating by the three readers (the teacher and the two independent readers), the researchers (the teacher and the co-researcher) read, in the order in which they had been submitted, the two writing files submitted by each subject. They discussed the quality of the papers and noted the major changes between drafts and between the final versions of both assignments. The researchers also counted the number of words written in the first drafts as a measure of writing readiness.

The results of word count are reported in Table 3, which shows that all (except Subject F) wrote more in the first draft of Assignment 2 than in the first draft of Assignment 1. Discussion between the researchers focused (a) on Subject E, who showed the greatest gain in writing readiness; (b) on Subject F, who was the only one in the group who wrote less in the first draft of Assignment 2; and (c) on the performance of all subjects in the essay drafts of the first and second writing assignments.

Table 3.
Number of Words in First Drafts

Subject	Assignment 1	Assignment 2	Gain in Assignment 2
A	827	940	113
B	444	590	146
C	472	624	152
D	552	661	109
E	430	741	311
F	675	479	(196)

Note: A score in parentheses indicates a negative value.

Subject E showed the greatest gain in the number of words written in the first draft of Assignment 2. At the end of the writing program he offered a direct and explicit evaluation of his gain in writing readiness in terms of the number of words written. He wrote that he could "write more word [*sic*] than before within a certain period of time." Subject E's gain in the second assignment was especially noteworthy, as he had written the least among the subjects in the first assignment.

Subject F was the only student who wrote less in the first draft of Assignment 2 as compared with Assignment 1. The drop in the number of

words written might be attributable to the fact that she was thirty minutes late to class and had only half an hour to write the draft.

Taking all the subjects into consideration, the following observations can be made about the essay drafts:

1. There was substantial gain in writing readiness.
2. There was substantial improvement in content and discourse organization.
3. There was little improvement at the sentence level.

4. Discussion

4.1 The Essay Drafts

Although the students were led through the various writing stages in a systematic manner, some did not restrict their thinking and development of ideas to the initial pre-writing stage. Interestingly, they all reported that they went through an ongoing process of thinking, writing, and revising throughout the various drafts.

The students reported that the preliminary outline they had prepared before the actual writing was useful, and most of them used it as a guideline when they began to write. A few students, however, indicated that they changed their outline during the writing process, or at least did not stick rigidly to it. The brainstorming of ideas occurred even after writing had begun. While the preliminary planning was necessary to help them think and develop their ideas, the students were eager to change directions during their writing as they felt appropriate or necessary.

As one student wrote in the introduction to his first draft about the problems of Hong Kong people living in "cage" flats:

> Most people may come to Sun Shui Po & Mon Kok they will find the building in crowded formed. This is the "cage" flat. It means the people living in the flat with small area and there is wire around the bed. It is a serious problem in Hong Kong. Why are people living there? What problems will they encounter? How to improve these problems?

In his second draft, the introduction became:

> When you go to Sun Shui Po or Yau Ma Tei, you will find some old buildings in which windows are broken and surrounded by wires like cage. If you go up to the building, you will also find it has many crowded small flats. These flats are called "cage" flats. These *flats basically are composed of beds in which they are surrounded by*

> *chains of wires. In a flat, there is not one but two people living upper*
> *bed and lower bed. Each bed is only for a people since it is very small.*
> *These people living in "cage" flats like a bird which is trapped in a*
> *cage.* Not only do they has small area to live, but they also face other
> problems. It is a serious social problem in Hong Kong. Why are they
> living there? What problems will they encounter? How to improve
> these problems?

Obviously, the student developed several ideas about the physical conditions
inside the "cage" flat (as italicized above) as he was writing the second draft,
and felt the need to explain the term more fully.

The brainstorming and addition of ideas was still evident in the later drafts
of the students' writing. In another instance, one student wrote about the ways
a company can motivate its employees. After discussing several ways of
motivating people, she concluded her essay in the following way:

> In conclusion, if a company motivate their employees wrongly, it
> will seriously affect the performance of the employees. A poor
> motivation system may lower the efficiency of the company or even
> a strike would take place in the most serious case.

This was the way she concluded the first and second drafts. But when it came
to the third draft, she was not totally satisfied with this conclusion. In the third
draft, adding to the original conclusion as reproduced above, she wrote:

> ... Therefore, the importance of a good motivation system cannot be
> ignored. The advantage of having a good system of motivation the
> employees is that the companies can have a high working efficiency.
> It is the main gate leading a company to become successful.

This additional point in the new conclusion constituted a better round-up of
the whole paragraph, and enabled the student to end her essay forcefully.

The above extracts of students' writings illustrate that the writing process
of these Hong Kong students, like other writers, is recursive and non-linear,
and that "planning is not a unitary stage, but a distinctive thinking process
which writers use over and over again during composing" (Flower & Hayes,
1981, p. 375). In every rewritten draft, the students' minds were constantly
interacting with new ideas which were generated in the whole writing process.
As Zamel puts it, "revising ... occurred throughout the process and generally
meant composing anew" (1983, p. 173).

In the various drafts, the students rewrote chunks of work, and each fresh
draft turned out to be different. Throughout the process of writing new drafts,

original ideas were kept, new thoughts were added, and revisions were made. It is noteworthy that the initial drafts showed changes on the global level. When they proceeded from the first draft to subsequent ones, the students concentrated on the ideas and their arrangement, in other words, on content and organization.

One student chose to write about the development and significance of photography:

> Photograph is a kind of art in our world, it acceptes part of our lives, and capture the instantaneous moments for permanent record.

This idea was actually written in the first paragraph of the first draft. The same idea (as italicized below) was moved to the third paragraph of the essay in the third draft. Instead of being an introductory idea, the idea was further enriched and read as follows:

> . . . A lot of people fall in love with photograph because there are a plenty of attractions and meanings. *This is a kind of art in our world and it captures instantaneous moment for permanent record in part of our lives.* This is the special and typical character of photograph. Art is our society. Photograph is a kind of art which use light as color and camera as pens to draw our world.

Likewise, in another student's work, the development and rearrangement of ideas were constantly at play throughout his initial drafts. This student started writing about the effects of a tax increase on tobacco products. In his first draft, he greeted his readers with the main purpose of his essay and wrote:

> Today's topic I am going to talk about is effects of tax increases on tobacco products. Tax increases on cigarette had been announced a month ago by the Treasurer. In order to make the youth to give up smoking, the govt increased a 200% tax on cigarette. . . .

Then, in his second draft, he revised and repositioned this point to read:

> Do you feel that there is fewer people smoking in the street? Also, do you find your family's members smoke lesser than before recently? Since tax increase on cigarette had been announced a month ago by the Treasurer of Hong Kong Government, smokers' behaviour may have a little bit change. . . .

It is clear that the student felt that the first draft was stylistically inappropriate and removed the first sentence in the original draft, which gave the impression of a public speech. In place of this, he raised two questions to lead the reader

into the theme. However, he was still not completely satisfied with this second draft. The same point was further reorganized in the third draft and read:

> Since tax increase on cigarette had been announced a month ago by the Treasurer of Hong Kong Government, smokers' behaviour may have a little bit changes. In order to make the youth to give up smoking, the government increased a 200 percent tax on tobacco products. This action may arouse different effects on different classes of people.

In the third draft, the student came to feel that his thesis should be immediately apparent at the start of the composition. To highlight this idea, he rearranged his material and removed the two questions that he had included in the second draft.

While substantial changes were found in terms of content and organization in the students' initial drafts, editing work also took place in the subsequent drafts through peer editing. Most students considered peer editing helpful and effective because it contained comments on both the global and local aspects of the essay. Critical comments such as pinpointing major problems or noting the inadequacy of a certain point or paragraph were given. This was a useful process in editing, because when the students went through one another's work to spot grammar mistakes or problems of mechanics, they realized that the objective eye of another student was useful in detecting careless errors.

In the whole process of writing, the students came to appreciate the value of revision, and learnt to attend to the main ideas of the essay first before considering more specifically the language used in the writing. This observation confirms what Wiener (1980) and Zamel (1983) believe: first, that it is more important to address the issues of content and meaning early on, when constructing one's ideas in a piece of writing; and, second, that it is wrong to assert the priority of language skills right from the start of the writing, as language is of concern only when the ideas to be communicated have been expressed.

4.2 The First and the Second Writing Assignments

4.2.1 Post-rating discussion between the researchers: The following observations were made when comparing the essay drafts:

1. There was substantial gain in writing readiness.

> During the close comparison of the first drafts of both assignments, it was found that the students generally wrote more in the one-hour non-stop quickwrite for the second assignment. In other words, the practice with process writing had improved their writing

readiness in terms of the number of words written in the first drafts within the one-hour limit (see Table 3). Despite their initial worries that they did not have enough ideas to write about and that they were not able to express their ideas appropriately, the students were able to write at great length and, through the various stages of writing, the content of their writing assignments was more substantial than they had expected.

2. There was substantial improvement in content and discourse.

Both researchers felt that the organization of the students' writing had shown great improvement. For example, in student A's first writing assignment, the essay topic was a case study which discussed communication problems between the sections in the Investment Operations Department of a company. This discussion called for a detailed analysis of the whole case, and some good examples. In this essay, the student had used only one long example to illustrate the problem she was discussing. However, one example was not sufficient to fully develop the essay. Indeed, it was felt that if this student were given a chance to practice writing this type of essay more than once, she might become more skilled. This improvement did emerge in her second writing assignment, in which she analyzed the role of culture in helping or hindering a company manager's work. In terms of content and organization, the second essay showed a more substantial development of ideas. Most impressive was the student's adequate use of examples to illustrate the major strands of her thoughts.

3. There was little improvement at the sentence level.

The students' vocabulary, language use, and mechanics did not show any marked improvement. Little change was found at the sentence level. The comparisons between the students' first and second writing assignments did not show much difference in syntactic complexity in that the students preferred simple and compound sentences over complex sentences in both writing assignments. Some interesting questions are thus raised for further consideration: Were the grammar exercises given to the students in the course of this program ineffective? Would it have been better if grammar had been treated explicitly in class and with teacher supervision? Was timing a factor? In other words, should these grammar exercises have been given to the students before they started any writing task?

4.2.2 Holistic grading and analytical scoring: In addition to the teacher's holistic grading and analytical marking of the papers using Jacobs et al.'s (1981) Profile, an independent assessment of the students' two writing assignments using the same Profile was conducted. Interrater reliability was demonstrated in two ways:

1. The grades assigned by the teacher correlate well with the average scores of the three readers (see Tables 1 and 2) in the sense that the higher grades for Assignment 2 over Assignment 1 correspond to the gains, and no change in grades corresponds to the other scores.
2. The analytical scores of the teacher and the two independent readers for each piece of writing were close to the extent that they did not exceed a difference of ten points, which is allowed in the Jacobs Profile.

4.3 The Program as a Whole

The students were very interested in the design of this writing program. They were enthusiastic and involved in trying out the process of writing for the first time.

In their evaluations, the students found that the emphasis on non-stop, quick writing of the first draft of each writing assignment gave them a new and inspiring writing experience. They had never expected that they could write so much about a topic within an hour in class. A major advantage of this innovative experience, as one student reflected, was that ideas flowed out in the quick-writing process and that everything in the mind could be readily written down. The non-stop, quick writing was highly productive and generative, and undoubtedly helped the students' otherwise serious problems with initial mental blocks.

In addition, the students' evaluations are categorical about the effectiveness of writing various drafts in overcoming problems such as the use of illogical structures and the inclusion of irrelevant materials. Some of the comments by the students are

... had a clear concept of writing ...
... increases my confident to write everything I want to write ...
... gives me a new organization in my essay ...
... gives me a new idea and experiment in writing; so we gain the
    techniques ...
... can write more words than before within a certain period ...
... know how to organise and construct a passage ...

As these comments indicate, the students were, in general, positive about the effectiveness of the program.

In addition, the students' indication of the concommitant effectiveness of this program in dealing with grammar mistakes should not be overlooked. This finding echoed what the researchers had noticed in their post-rating discussion. Further, in their action plans drawn up at the end of the program, the students emphasized a strong need to improve their language at the sentence level. Undoubtedly, this area calls for particular attention in future writing programs.

5. Conclusions

Despite limited time and other administrative constraints, the students were successfully led through the various stages involved in the process of writing. Overall, they showed a qualitatively significant gain in the content and discourse organization of their writing. This implies that the program helped improve the students' skills in developing and rearranging their ideas. The program also helped the students develop confidence and fluency in writing. This is evident in their readiness when writing the first drafts of Assignment 2 (longer first drafts than those of Assignment 1) within a one-hour time limit. The students themselves were aware of their gain in fluency. As one student indicated in his evaluation, he could "write with more fluency than before."

However, the program failed to effect major improvement at the sentence level. The comparisons between the students' first and second writing assignments showed small or no numerical differences in the vocabulary, language use, and mechanics scores. Little difference was also noted in terms of syntactic complexity. The students preferred simple and compound sentences over complex sentences even in the second assignment. Therefore, the present investigation does not support Judy's belief that "form grows from content and is inseparable from it" (1980, as cited in Zamel, 1982, p. 206). The short duration of the program could be a factor here. The findings could, then, point to one or a combination of the following options for future programs of this kind:

1. A different treatment of grammar (to deal with grammar explicitly in class with teacher supervision, or to introduce it at the beginning of the program to compensate for the students' limited proficiency and knowledge of it).
2. A longer course duration.

3. Wide reading for a broad exposure to the language system. This last consideration could possibly be the most important factor in leading to improvement at the sentence level. As Smith (1981) indicates, it is wide reading rather than writing alone that allows one to become familiar with all the systems that must be acquired to write successfully.

Notes

[1] HKCEE is a public examination organized by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority for Form Five graduates (equivalent to Grade 11 in a U.S. school).

[2] The A-Level Examination is a public examination organized by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority for all Form Seven students (equivalent to Grade 13 in a U.S. school).

[3] "Blocks" here refer to the inability to write, that is, "writer's block" (Rose, 1984), as in the phenomenon of students taking more than two hours to write the first paragraph of an essay (Phinney, 1991).

[4] Both readers majored in English in their Postgraduate Certificate in Education at the University of Hong Kong. They have been teaching English in local secondary schools for eight years and six years respectively. They were also official HKCEE markers between 1985 and 1990.

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