



Optimizing the Process Writing Approach to develop KS2 children into independent writers

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Understanding of Writing

Grabe and Kaplan (1996), who have researched into both the first and second language learning, have pointed out that writing is a complex process. Students are not born with writing abilities. Instead, these abilities need to be ‘culturally transmitted’. It means learners need to be frequently exposed to the language environment, in which the idiomatic ways of expressing ideas using the target language could be transmitted. The process of acquiring writing skills involves ‘conscious effort and much practice’. In other words, writing abilities need to be taught and learnt systematically.

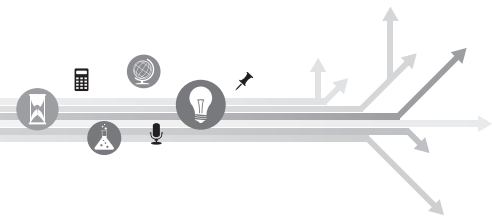
Adopting the Process Writing Approach

Bearing this in mind, teachers of TWGHs Yiu Dak Chi Memorial Primary School began to look for a way to improve their students’ writing abilities. The Process Writing Method (Heald-Taylor, 1986), which focused on elaborating the writing process to help learners to compose, was adopted. It allows ESL learners to write with plenty of room for errors through the cycles of brainstorming, drafting, editing, revising and publishing. It is true that the Method did benefit students much in inputting more ideas and building students’ confidence to write through the editing-revising-publishing cycle. Yet, in reality, the whole process is very time-consuming. It took nearly one whole week to finish a writing task! To address the issue of practicality, we put our minds together to work out our school-based writing programme for the KS2 kids.

Working on a three-year writing programme in KS2

In the first place, writing was viewed not merely as a task to be completed in 2 to 3 lessons. It was seen as a continuing process of writing practice in three years. The prolonged process writing method enabled teachers to integrate a variety of writing genres into the curriculum. And the more popular text types like narrative writing had a more systematic development among the students in KS2. For example, the story structure of setting-problem-action-solution/ ending was taught in P.4. Students were then provided with opportunities to sharpen their story writing skills with the variety of language structures learnt in P.5 and P.6. Therefore, we were not hurry to change everything overnight. We mapped out the developmental process into three phases, in which the components of the drafting-editing-revising-publishing cycle were given different attention. Teachers found this beneficial in creating space for providing adequate and useful feedback to the students in the different stages of writing development.





To start off, input of ideas came under spotlight in the First Phase. Teachers reflected that a number of students left their exam writing papers blank because they could not think of anything to write. Some of them even said they had no idea as how to start composing a piece of writing. In this regard, we began to put effort and time on the Drafting stage. We aimed at helping students to form writing frames in describing a person, an object and an event. Sets of guiding questions were provided so that students obtained enough practice in the first year. Teacher demonstration and controlled practice through joint writing were two key features in this stage. Students modeled on the class writing piece and built their writing frames.

Ample practice laid the foundation for a take-off. When students were found to be able to write reasonable length, we found their works very robotic. There lacked creativity or language variety in their writings. Then, we decided to shift our attention to allow more space for students to create. This was done, in the Second Phase, by abandoning the use of guiding questions while introducing different forms of graphic organizers to help students brainstorm ideas. The pre-writing demonstration was minimized to make way for more student creation in the Drafting stage. Alongside with the renovation on the design of the writing tasks, learning modules were re-structured to accommodate writing tasks as final productions. Learning tasks were carefully scaffold to equip students with useful vocabulary and structures for writing.

The time for teacher-led brainstorming sessions was further shrunk after listening to students' voices at a year-end focused group interview in the Third Phase. The students, especially the more able ones, demanded more freedom and space to create. Their passion for genuine creation moved the teachers to minimize the pre-writing time and this allowed teachers to focus more attention to helping students to edit and revise. Students were given opportunities to appreciate their peers' work. They were guided to see how the ideas could be enriched with supporting details. Teachers also demonstrated how to add variety to the basic structures to form compound and complex sentences by using those patterns students learnt, such as the use of 'when' and 'while' to show the sequence of actions in a narrative text, and the use of 'so' to tell the cause-and-effect relationship of two incidents.

Reflecting on students' progress in writing

The three-year developmental programme was a painful yet fulfilling process for both the teachers and students of TWGHs Yiu Dak Chi Memorial Primary School. Teachers will share with you the strategies they used to renovate their writing programmes to enhance their writing abilities and the problems they encountered. Teachers will also share with you how they were moved by the improved performance shown in their students' daily and exam writing. As seen in the two extracts below from the same student's writing in the final exams in P.4 and P.6, the student had more ideas to write and was competent to develop these ideas by providing more supporting details. His P.4 writing included



merely a list of ideas while there was much more elaboration of the main ideas in his P.6 exam writing. He could provide evidence (turns off fans even he wasn't the last to leave the classroom) to support his judgment that he is a 'responsible' person. Besides, it is apparent that the student's P.4 writing was much shorter (49 words) than his P.6 writing (114 words), even though there was a list of guiding questions provided in the P.4 exam. Last but not least, the student was able to add variety to the sentences. For instance, he used a gerund to make up a noun phrase in 'I thought making silly faces to each other is our best thing to do!'.

Student A's performance in the 2nd Term Exam 2009/2010

The job is policeman. He works at police station. He wears a blue uniform. He works seven in the morning to seven in the evening. He works for twelve hours a day. He patrols on street and catch thieves. I think he is careful because he seldom makes mistakes.

(49 words)

Student A's performance in the 2nd Term Exam 2011/2012

My best friend is Vincent. He is never late. He is punctual. He is also responsible because he turns off fans even he wasn't the last to leave the classroom! He is quite handsome – just because of his glasses! I thought making silly faces to each other is our best thing to do!

We met in primary three. He is nicer, better than I thought a at first. Sometimes I tought him homework. But unbelievably, he tought me to draw too! We treat each other great! I remember that we always draw "clown face" at paper, even at books! It's not important that what he do, we were just best friends.

(114words)

References

1. Grabe, W., & Kaplan, R.B. (1996). *Theory and Practice of Writing*. New York: Longman.
2. Heald-Taylor, G. (1986). *Whole language strategies for ESL students*. Carlsbad: Dominie Press, Inc.

