In the Classroom
En Classe

This section presents descriptions of teach-
ing techniques or practical classroom
activities.

*Cette section est consacrée à la description
de différentes techniques ou activités
d'enseignement.*

TALK-WRITE IN THE COMPOSING PROCESS: FROM PREWRITING TO WRITING[1]

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The process approach to teaching written composition concentrates on the activities a writer goes through to produce good writing, a good product. Although different people working in the process framework break down "process" into various subprocesses, it is generally agreed that there are three basic, recursive activities — prewriting, writing and rewriting.

Prewriting refers to the activities a writer undertakes primarily at the initial stages of the process, the period of motivation and initial planning of the writing task. It may also occur at other times during the writing process, since writing involves the back-and-forth movement of reading and reflecting upon what is there before further text is generated. In prewriting, the writer draws upon his immediate experience and stored knowledge based on previous experience and on reading. Prewriting is predominantly mental and vocal in nature; however, it can be linear and scribal, as in cases where the writer plans through scribbling and jotting down notes.

Writing refers to the formation of the first draft. It represents an initial attempt to find out what it is the writer knows or does not know; through the act of writing, he/she finds out what it is he/she wants to communicate to the particular reader. The first draft is very tentative and highly exploratory. By way of the first draft, the writer may find new/other information, or a need to change the focus, thereby modifying the original framework into something quite different. The language in the first draft is typified by ambiguous or vague referents, by words and phrases with special meanings to the writer that are not precise to the reader, and with ideas not particularly appropriate to a certain mode of writing. It needs to

be "revised" in order to be communicative, in order to convert its writer-based prose to reader-based prose.

Rewriting, in the process framework of teaching written composition, is subdivided into separate and distinct tasks, viz. a) revision for meaning and b) editing for mechanics and grammaticality.

In responding first to the message/content at the revision stage, we provide a positive attitude towards revision; we set up procedures demonstrating the needs of the reader to the writer and help to shape writing that is in progress/process until the intended meaning is clarified.

Once the message is communicable, i.e. once there is shared meaning between the writer and his reader, we respond to the imperfect use of the language — this is the final editing stage in writing as a process.

Those who teach writing as a process subscribe to the belief that, if they are skilful in teaching the process, the product will ultimately be acceptable and will represent the best that a student can achieve.

Defining Traditional Product-Oriented Writing

Interest in teaching writing as a process has grown partly as a result of limitations seen in the traditional product-oriented approach, defined by Zamel (1982) as "read-analyze-write" after a model product. The approach puts emphasis on the model, involving students in studying particular grammatical units from the model, analyzing the model and getting these students to imitate writing the structural and rhetorical forms therein.

There is in product-oriented writing an inordinate attention to form — form provided by the model which is to be studied and which is to be cultivated in the student's product. Students, though not having anything compelling to say, are regularly asked to write to demonstrate mastery of the form. Many of us probably recall a unique practice in ESL writing called the teaching of controlled composition, for which we have used texts/exercises by Spencer, Moody, Arapoff, Hill, written in the 60s and by Lado, Paulston & Dykstra, Gallingane & Byrd, etc. written in the 70s.

According to its critics, the product-oriented approach is a limited and limiting experience, failing to provide for the understanding that writing involves producing a text that evolves over time, and that composing constraints such as audience and purpose can affect writing performance.

Why is it a limited experience? First, it provides little time for prewriting and planning activities. It restricts the practice of planning to simple outlining, popularizing unwittingly the notion that one knows from the outset what it is that one is going to say (in writing). Students, therefore, tend to regard writing as a neat, linear, well-defined activity, believing (falsely, of course!) that writers produce perfect essays in one sitting.

In addition, product-oriented writing is a limited experience in the sense that the range of topics in classroom-assigned, school-sponsored writing is narrow and unchallenging, as criticized by Raimes (1979) and Taylor (1981). Taylor commented that rarely was a teacher-imposed writing assignment compelling enough to give students an opportunity to immerse themselves in the topic to the extent that they had something important to say.

Teacher-imposed, school-sponsored writing has persisted despite adverse research findings about it. For example, Perl (1979) found that writers wrote both quantitatively more and qualitatively better when they composed on topics that engaged them. Judy (1980) found that students' writings could be motivated if they were allowed to express feelings about, and respond to, a topic with which they had some experience.

Besides being limited, restrictive and prescriptive in nature, advocating the use of models, the approach is a limiting experience. Shaughnessy (1977) observed that an approach which emphasized the final product — form and correctness — could be seriously inhibiting. This has been corroborated by Rose (1980), who found that his undergraduates at UCLA experienced writer's block because they felt restricted by rigid, inappropriate writing rules, and inflexible and confused plans instilled by composition teachers and textbooks.

Furthermore, the approach has failed to demonstrate that writing is a process of discovering meaning, as pointed out by Zamel (1982). That is to say, the act of putting words on paper can serve as a thought facilitator and help generate more ideas and change one's perception of what one wants to communicate.

In product-oriented writing, students tend to think that the point of writing is to get everything right the first time, and that the need to change/rewrite is the work of the amateur. They are not aware that writing is a recursive, a back-and-forth movement in which writers think, write, reflect upon, change and develop their ideas, as pointed out by Perl (1979) and Sommers (1980).

Such fallacies or misconceptions of writing are due to the fact that the product-oriented approach to writing does not provide time for rewriting, just as it does not, for prewriting. There is, therefore, little awareness that writing involves rewriting, and that several drafts may be needed before intention and expression become matched in written composition, which is really organized communication.

In product-oriented writing, teachers have responded to initial writing as if it were a final product (rather than as work-in-progress). Many of us have systematically used our bloodred pen and marked heavily and meticulously on form, for traditionally, editing and proofreading tasks have been confounded or synonymous with revising.

According to Smith (1983), a dual demand to revise and make meaning changes, and to edit for mechanics puts a cognitive overload on the second language learner, and could interfere with one's development in writing. Perl (1979) and Sommers (1980) also found that a premature concern to edit truncated the flow of ideas; too much attention to form jeopardized content/meaning.

The Talk-Write Method: Background

Prompted by research findings and cognizant of the limitations of the product-oriented approach as outlined in the foregoing, the writer has developed a classroom practice, called Talk-Write, in teaching writing within the process framework.

The rationale is that a classroom approach in teaching writing as a process, which allows students a choice of writing tasks/topics, and which offers them an opportunity to communicate meaningfully and collaboratively with their peers, in an atmosphere where stress and anxiety are minimal, is likely to help them to get at that first or initial draft, and, thereby, exploring through meaning and interaction, revise and make it a better final piece of writing.

Talk-Write, as a method of getting a first draft, has been tried at Vancouver Community College with students at the beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. Through regular end-of-term testing, the classes are fairly homogeneous in skill or ability. Each class on the day shift meets for two and a half hours, five days a week and for three months. The night classes meet four times every week, but they receive the same total hours of instruction. At the end of each term, there is an assessment to determine promotion to the next level.

Procedures

It was Zoellner who introduced the term talk-write in L1. The primary impetus behind Zoellner's method was that nearly all L1 students came to the classroom with talking/speaking skill far superior to writing skill. Working with college students, he found that writing assignments from his sophomores only "feebly represent what they communicate orally"; somehow in writing, ideas got short-circuited. He found that they wrote better when they were given a chance to think aloud, i.e. talk and bounce off ideas, before they wrote.

In Zoellner's method, the writer "saw" a vision, talked about it to another person, viz. his peer, thus getting a chance to sound the idea out, and he ultimately set out to write about it. It should also be remembered that Zoellner's method was rationalized within the bounds of operant

conditioning, the theory in learning and in psychology prevalent at that time.

How is our ESL TALK-WRITE at Vancouver Community College different from Zoellner's?

First of all, it represents one of our classroom practices in obtaining initial writing, or a first draft, in teaching writing as a process. The procedure is as follows:

Students in the class are paired by themselves, or with their teacher's help, if there is a benefit in intervening. One student in each pair is the "talker" by choice, and the partner is the "writer" for that particular composition period/session, which may be 30 - 45 minutes. The talkers tell "tales" of their own choice (from their experience or reading), while their partners listen, asking for clarification whenever necessary, as in a conversation.

Once the oral/vocal act is over, the listeners set out to capture the tale in writing, using the first-person narrative, for two reasons: one, Talk-Write is a means of ensuring that something concrete (in the form of draft 1) gets back to the talker, based on his/her content, and two in the rewriting segment of teaching writing as a process, the talker has to revise draft 1 into a fully developed and composed product, a piece of formal writing.

As the listener writes the first draft after hearing the spoken version, what does the talker or speaker do?

In our directions to the students, we simply tell them that at this stage/phase, they are to be available and make themselves useful to their partners. Each pair find their comfort zone and their own strategies for sharing the work. We have found that some listeners prefer to read quietly alongside, as the writer writes, giving suggestions on ideas (adding to or subtracting from them), checking to verify that the oral version is matched in written expression; some even offer help in grammar and the mechanical aspects, for example, spelling, thus combining help in revision for meaning and editing and proofreading.

There are variations of the procedure outlined above. For example, instead of "listening first and writing it afterwards," some students write down the speaker's tale verbatim, very much in the manner of dicta-comp, or write it down section by section, or take notes as they listen. The primary goal of doing Talk-Write is to obtain that first draft in a non-stressful way.

In both vocal and scribal acts, though two roles have been delineated/ designated, there is, in actual fact, a lot of back-and-forth movement of ideas, a great deal of collaboration. This give-and-take brings about some "oral revision" but the content is still largely provided by the speaker, and the initial revised to communicable, reader-based prose.

The give-and-take situation, arising from the interaction, reflects the recursive nature of composing within a good/experienced writer who, now and then, pauses to read the text generated, evaluating it critically and thereby gaining momentum to generate further text. The big difference is that the two roles are played out by separate persons in ESL Talk-Write.

In our Talk-Write, the two students stay as partners for all subsequent Talk-Write sessions because in alternate writing periods/sessions, the two roles, as defined earlier, are reversed. That is to say, the speaker in the first Talk-Write session becomes the writer in the second session, and vice versa. If one of the two partners is absent, the remaining/odd member has the choice of becoming a co-writer in another group or of writing a journal on his/her own, or of revising any of his/her earlier drafts.

The Talk-Write sequence and the variations in the sequence, mentioned in the foregoing, may be represented by means of a chart as follows:

TALK-WRITE:

VARIATIONS	PHASE ONE	PHASE TWO
I. ORAL/VOCAL:		
a. Student 1	Talks (about any experience/reading).	Makes himself useful &helps in any way, e.g. checks content & form.
b. Student 2	Listens; may seek clarification by raising questions or points.	Writes, using 1st-person narrative.
II. VOCAL & SCRIBAL:		
a. Student 1	Talks (as above)	Makes himself useful, (as above).
b. Student 2	Listens (may seek clarification, as above) i. AND takes notes; ii. OR writes in segments; iii. OR writes verbatim.	

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Findings and Discussion

The findings on Talk-Write have been interesting and enlightening, in terms of what seemed to interest or engage the students, based on the writing titles or topics, and in terms of the growth and development of topics for an individual student over a period of time.

Initially, at all levels, students' first drafts on Talk-Write tended to deal with "big chunks" from their past, i.e. events spanning many years, such as how they came to Canada, either as landed immigrants or refugees, how they met their spouses, life in their country of origin, their work experiences, their past experience in a particular leisure activity or sport, etc. Later, these "chunky, lumpy events" were replaced by shorter events from their recent past, but given in more detail, for example, a recent holiday trip, the purchase of a car or a house, an accident, a new job, a birthday party, a long weekend, Expo 86, or a newspaper story or a news item on T.V.

One factor contributing to the growth and expansion of topics was that the partnership in Talk-Write was permanent for all Talk-Writes. The listener did not tolerate the speaker's re-cycling of the same "tale/theme"; the speaker, therefore, in response to his audience (the listener-writer), moved to other worthy topics, and events or incidents which were still fresh in his/her memory lent themselves readily as conversational topics.

At the beginners level, most Talk-Write drafts were on real, concrete things rather than abstract ones, and these students wrote in narrative and/or descriptive modes. The initial drafts tended to be short, about 6-10 sentences.

At the higher levels, though the same narrative and descriptive modes might prevail, students, in their accounts, began to generalize somewhat from their experiences, and very often their conclusions had a "clincher." Furthermore, at the advanced level, there were students striking out in expository and argumentative modes. Their drafts also became progressively longer.

Through observations and interviews with students, we founds that not all the speakers started off Talk-Write with a definite intent, i.e. they might not know what they really wanted to communicate, or what the written version was going to focus on. For example, a student in upper intermediate started off by mentioning what he saw or observed at that moment — the ceiling lights in the classroom, and lights in the offices and apartments across the classroom. Prompted by his partner, he recalled lights he saw earlier — in his house, in the garage, in the hospital, on the way to school, etc. It started off as a series of random thoughts, ideas without a particular focus. With the help of his listening/writing partner,

he finally found a voice and a focus, and his revised draft was an amazingly coherent piece of persuasive writing about how useful light was, elaborated with supporting details and examples. Moreover, in his conclusion, he incorporated the literal and figurative meanings of light, comparing a person without light to someone without knowledge.

Another interesting finding was that at the beginners level, the first draft might be without a title, but the student would have found one for the revised draft, prompted by interaction with peers. However, in intermediate and advanced, we never saw a draft without a title. In these levels, it was interesting to note that some students might come up with a title first, and then proceeed to talk about things not related to the proffered title or to what they professed to tell their listening partner. For example, an advanced student told his partner at the outset that he would like to speak about his job. He gave a few details about what he did at work, but he proceeded to describe other jobs he had held prior to the current one. At the end of the oral/vocal session, both he and his partner came to the conclusion that they should strike out the original title, which had been written down at the beginning of Talk-Write; it was replaced by a more pertinent title, "My work experiences."

Another finding on Talk-Write was that beginners, as a rule, did not talk about what they read. In intermediate and advanced, students' drafts on Talk-Write often involved nondirected reading, or something they saw on T.V.

A student in advanced talked about how she had read, in a magazine, that adults spent one-third of their time working, and one-third of their time sleeping. Her Talk-Write draft 1 was "The remaining one-third"; she did not merely reproduce the content of her reading, but developed her own focus. By the second draft, the title was changed to "The remaining one-third for me." Reading gave her knowledge/facts and Talk-Write gave her an occasion to respond her critical ability and brought about a more appropriate title for her draft.

Another student in advanced read an article "Living a long life" prior to Talk-Write. He shared what he had read with his partner, informing him of three groups of people known internationally for their longevity, and explaining the factors given in the article that contributed to longevity. Here, as in the case mentioned earlier, the student did not merely repeat given facts or reproduce the article read. In his Talk-Write draft, he posed questions not raised in the article, for example, he wondered how these long-lived people felt about surviving so long, when their peers were all gone. He concluded by taking the position that a lot of people could do something to promote longer and healthier lives. His revised draft was quite different from the descriptive article he had read.

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Talk-Write gave these students an opportunity to respond to their experiences and to their reading. Some of the drafts suggested to us that they had interesting ideas to talk and write about, given the opportunity and encouragement. Talk-Write also provided an opportunity for them to strike out in different modes, which grew logically from a need to write, a written response to reading and to other composing constraints such as audience and purpose. That is to say, form or mode for the students, arose from a need to communicate.

In general, we found that most initial drafts from Talk-Write, regardless of level, were short and imprecise, characterized by sweeping statements. For example, in a narrative, the story would be sketchy and fuzzy, so much so that the reader couldn't visualize the events mentioned. In a description or exposition, the initial draft would be terse and bare, with unconnected, generalized observations or points. There would be few examples or supporting details. These initial drafts revealed that there was a need for the authors to learn how to elaborate — that procedure is documented in the article, "Responding to product in the composing process" (following).

In addition to these measurable or visible products in the form of drafts, and by-products as mentioned in the foregoing, other incidental benefits of Talk-Write were equally gratifying and enlightening. Students got a chance to practise their skills of listening, speaking and reading in a meaningful/communicative way — an integrative approach to ESL learning which our program encourages. Video segments of Talk-Write showed that a lot of the physical and verbal interactions were not reflected or captured in the product, i.e. process could not be inferred from product any more than a pig could be inferred from a sausage roll.

In both the vocal and scribal acts, Talk-Write drew out the strengths in the partners: at the vocal level, the listener was a live audience, constantly responding and serving as a "clarifier" and "encourager," drawing out content and the speaker's intended message. At the scribal level, the act was a social event; the setting was different from the traditional isolated and stressful activity with classroom writing.

The collaborative nature of Talk-Write was of great help and comfort to the nervous or blocked writer. In Talk-Write, that same student would learn, with a partner's help, to capture the written version of his/her tale in a fun/relaxed way.

Generally our experience as students and our earlier experience in teaching writing in the product-oriented tradition, mentioned earlier, make us think of classroom writing as an isolated and onerous task, associated with lots of negative feelings. Talk-Write on the contrary, tends to promote a healthier, and more positive attitude towards writing in

class.

In addition, one should also remember that in product-oriented writing, the task is usually imposed by teachers on all students, some of whom, in a lot of instances, may find it irrelevant to their lives, except those planning to go to college, or those contemplating writing as a profession, or those who enjoy writing as an alternate form of communication.

Talk-Write provides a real or live audience in the form of a listening partner, someone who responds to the speaker's meaning or intended message; the listener helps the speaker to focus on meaning; for example a nod, a frown, or a smile are useful signals in the interaction. When the speaker sees that the message is not hitting home, she/he sees a need to try and modify it, until the intended meaning becomes shared meaning. Through this need to convey meaning, the student use structure/form, thereby gaining proficiency in form through use/communication.

More systematic research in Talk-Write is warranted. Some of the issues that need to be addressed are:

1. Does it have a role in our college preparatory program, where writing is more academic?
2. Can it be used in a multi-level class?
3. Is it applicable to classes for ESL children?
4. Can it accommodate more directed reading from the teacher and become Read-Talk-Write?

A final question, and an important one, is how will this approach help to contribute to the development of the "maturity" that one finds in good or experienced writers, who can play a dual role as reader-writer and produce acceptable, reader-based prose?

In conclusion, our Talk-Write practice seems to provide us with a viable alternative for motivating students to produce initial writing. This and other classroom practices, which we attempt to devise in implementing teaching writing as a process, seem to heighten a dual role in us as investigative teachers, thus making the teaching/learning of ESL writing an interesting one, as we constantly look for new ways to solve old problems.

ENDNOTE
1. The writer would like to thank two colleagues, Donna McGee and Dennie Rothschild, for their response to an earlier version of this article. A reference list for this and the next article is found at the end of the next article.